

Introduction to Denise Scott Brown: Her Valuable Contributions to New Urbanism

Good morning! My name is Ellen Dunham-Jones and I have the distinct honor and pleasure of introducing Denise Scott Brown, an architect and planner in Venturi Scott Brown & Associates here in Philadelphia. Ironically, for someone with an abiding interest in the significance of pop culture and the ordinary, Ms Scott Brown has achieved iconic stature in the architecture and planning professions as a writer, as a designer, as a teacher and as an advocate for Main Streets over mega-structures and popular environments over elite discourses. She has been awarded the Republic of Italy's Commendatore of the order of merit in 1987, the National medal of Arts in 1992, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture and the AIA Topaz medallion in 1996, the Radcliffe institute medal in 2005 and the \$50,000 Vilcek prize for outstanding achievement in the arts and humanities earlier this year. In a few minutes, on behalf of the Congress for the new Urbanism, I will bestow another award upon her, the Athena Medal – given by CNU to those who helped lay the pioneering groundwork for new urbanism.

I never met DSB until I lobbied for the opportunity to introduce her here at CNU. Yet, I've been lecturing on her and assigning her writings for over 20 years in my contemporary architectural theory classes. I feel like I've known her all this time. I've watched waves of students continue to be riveted by her brazen ideas and as inspired by her insistent attention to the contemporary vernacular and the design of ordinary places as I was. Her combination of respect for pop culture, (the now manifested then in the inclusive combination of the high-brow Warhol hipster and low-brow middle-class kitsch) combined with urbanism, continue to make urbanism way cool for emerging generations of urbanists. Let me share with you some of my favorite reasons for why she so deserves the Athena Award.

In 1966, her husband and partner, Robert Venturi published a groundbreaking book entitled *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. It famously derided Miesian modernism and Mies van der Rohe's dictate that "less is more" as "less is a bore." The book focuses on architectural form, but ends up with a conclusion about urbanism. Comparing the high-design architecture of the University of Virginia campus and a generic honky-tonk Main Street, the book says "Main St is almost alright." It is not a coincidence, that Denise's talk this morning is titled "New Urbanism is Almost Alright."

Although Denise Scott Brown's influence is visible in the later chapters of *Complexity and Contradiction*, her voice is loud and clear in their next book, *Learning from Las Vegas* from 1972, co-authored by Bob and Denise and Steven Izenour. It shifts the focus to the relationship between architecture and urbanism - with particular attention to the issue of how architecture communicates to the man in the street. Continuing to challenge the orthodoxy of modernist thinking, the book argued that it was more relevant for designers to operate in the language of the "ugly and the ordinary" than the "heroic and the original." They argued that sculptural modernist buildings distorted their structural systems for the sake of little-understood symbolic forms and called them ducks. They

advocated instead that most buildings would better serve societal needs as “decorated sheds,” functional boxes with explicit symbolic decoration.

These arguments came from the book’s study of the Las Vegas strip. The book documents the results of a Yale architecture studio from 1968, where she and Bob decided that the best way to learn about successful contemporary vernacular buildings was to go to the Las Vegas strip. The book wasn’t titled *Loving Las Vegas*. It wasn’t arguing that Caesar’s Palace and the Flamingo were examples of great architecture. It did however recognize that they were incredibly popular with the public and thought architects ought to understand why. (Not dissimilar in intention to the famous road trip that Robert Davis took with Lizz Plater-Zyberk and Andres Duany to study southern towns before designing Seaside.) Bob and Denise’s rigorous analysis of the developer logic behind buildings where the sign was more expensive than the building box, and the relationship between the speed of the car and the size of the lettering on the signs, etc., demonstrated the highly functional, rational performance of this highly ornate and seemingly “un-modernist” environment. They were equally irreverent about the relationship of this environment to traditional urbanism, likening the billboards along the highway to Roman triumphal arches. Drawing on Denise’s experience in the social science side of planning, the work was anthropological in its ability to expand our thinking about how buildings relate to a broader physical, cultural, and economic context.

They invited us to take this un-serious environment very seriously and followed it up with a research project and an exhibition on *Learning from Levittown*, examining the symbolic content of coach lamps, Versailles door grills, etc. This appreciation for the ability of vernacular design elements to enrich our environments with easily recognizable meanings informs the early urban design, and later campus design work of DSB’s practice.

Instead of “heroic and original” raised plazas, megastructures and overpasses, DSB led the urban design projects in the office to focus on much more modest interventions. The urban design of Main St is almost alright is one of cleaning up ordinary facades, preservation, restoration, extension, and improved signage. Instead of rationally separating out cars and pedestrians, buildings from streets, and different uses from one another as was the practice of the modern urban design palette of the day, DSB’s urban design work at Miami Beach, Jim Thorpe PA, Princeton, NJ’s Palmer Square, and South Street here in Philadelphia; led the way – long before new urbanism - in reuniting people, cars and buildings along ordinary streets.

However, much as she paved the way for new urbanism, she doesn’t agree with all of the directions we’ve moved in and I expect we have much to learn from her reasons why. Her more recent work has focused on campus design where she maintains rigorous attention to the means to keep the physical, social, and cultural contexts very much alive - rather than frozen in time. Insistently inclusive, the work weaves high and low art references, modern and traditional, symbolism and functionalism, attention to users and cognoscenti, attention to spaces and to surfaces, to architecture and to urbanism.

This weaving is only one of the traits DSB shares with the Greek goddess Athena. Athena is known for defending the city and weaving its fabric. For challenging modernist urban design and for opening our eyes to the symbolic richness of the contemporary vernacular and the everyday landscape, the Congress for the New Urbanism is pleased to award Denise Scott Brown a 2007 Athena Medal. Please join me in welcoming Denise Scott Brown to the podium.