AFTER THE MANIFESTO

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THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY—“Retroactive Manifestos”—is also the name of the first entry of *The Dictionary of Received Ideas*, a project I launched in 2006 with the goal of disclosing and recording the “received ideas” at play in contemporary architectural culture. Taking its title from Gustave Flaubert’s *Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, this project examines design operations and conceptual strategies that have been used recurrently over the past decade, to the point of having depleted their original intensity—or rather, have outlived the problems they originally addressed. This essay traces the genealogy of one strategy—the retroactive manifesto—that over the past decade has arguably become a “received idea.”

At the end of the 1990s, Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist interviewed Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. The interview text was published under the title, “Relearning from Las Vegas,” in *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (2001), the second volume of the Harvard Project on the City, a research project led by Koolhaas. In the prefatory remarks to the first question of the interview, Koolhaas claimed that the book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972, revised second edition 1977) was the last manifesto and the first in a series of books on cities that imply a manifesto. In addition, Koolhaas referred to other four books on cities that also imply a manifesto: a book on New York, a book on Los Angeles, a book on Singapore, and a book on Lagos. Interestingly, in doing so, Koolhaas both identified a genealogy and placed his own research projects within that genealogy. The first three books were left somewhat undefined, but I speculate that the book on New York was Koolhaas’s *Delirious New York* (1978), the book on Los Angeles was Reyner Banham’s *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971), and the book on Singapore was Koolhaas’s long essay “Singapore Songlines (1995).” Koolhaas admits in the same prefatory remarks that the book on Lagos was his own book, *Lagos: How It Works* (still unpublished), the third installment of the Harvard Project on the City. In short, three of the four books that Koolhaas referred to in his genealogy of books on cities that imply a manifesto were his own.

In the 1960s and 70s, the genre of the architecture manifesto came under critical scrutiny. Most manifestos had by then fallen apart, some as arguments, some for lack of evidence. In addition, the manifesto proved to be at odds with the practice of architecture, for a manifesto is elaborated before and independent of the specific conditions of a project, and in turn often clashes with them. Moreover, when a manifesto and a project do not clash with each other, the manifesto ultimately condemns a project to being merely its illustration.
It is no coincidence that both Venturi and Koolhaas attempted to divert the manifesto genre. Venturi introduced *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966, revised 1977) with the term "gentle manifesto"—a paradox, for a manifesto is never meant to be gentle. And Koolhaas introduced *Delirious New York* with the term "retroactive manifesto," also a paradox, for a manifesto is never meant to be preceded by evidence, but actually precedes (and compels the production of) evidence. It is also no coincidence that both Venturi and Koolhaas had obliquely theorized "the brief," that is, the series of constraints that converge into a project and on which an architect usually formulates the problem that drives its design. Both Venturi and Koolhaas elevate that convergence of constraints to a critical position in the practice of architecture. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi claimed that, since a brief is by definition complex, a project is by the same token contradictory. Architectural design inevitably entails the negotiation of conflicting constraints into a "difficult whole," to use Venturi's term. In the introduction to *S, M, L, XL* (1995), Koolhaas claimed that since a brief is instigated by others, usually a client or a competition, a project can never be the outcome of a predetermined agenda. For Koolhaas, coherence is at odds with architectural design, and the result of either self-censorship or cosmetics. In other words, architectural practice cannot be subjected to an agenda. Koolhaas had already voiced his skepticism of working on a predetermined agenda or manifesto, when he described his practice of architecture through the notion of a "surfer on the waves"—an architect can simply choose which wave to surf (and, of course, even if a wave is skillfully surfed, this would never redefine the nature of the sea).

As Koolhaas claimed, *Learning from Las Vegas* was indeed a turning point, and can in fact be read both as a manifesto and as a book on a city that implies a manifesto. *Learning from Las Vegas* follows the traditional manifesto form, insofar as it is structured upon the identification of a crisis and the formulation of a way out (which in turn is illustrated with a particular architecture). The book entails a critique of a generation of architects who had been trained under the strict design principles of the Modern Movement, but whose work was actually at odds with those very principles. These architects had been taught to produce forms that reflected their functions, while avoiding any resort to ornament. In other words, they were trained according to the manifesto-like maxims of previous generations, "Form follows function" and "Ornament and crime." The argument of *Learning from Las Vegas*—or rather, the implication of the argument of the book—is quite extraordinary. Arguably, the two maxims clashed with each other. Since
in 1968 that gave rise to the book was to formulate new means for representing an urban condition organized by speed—hence their interest in the Strip and its signs (1). The book’s first chapter produces an extraordinary array of documents that attempt simultaneously to grasp Las Vegas and to formulate new means of representation for potentially shedding light on urban sprawl (2).

The second chapter, though, claims that the book is not about Las Vegas, but actually an attempt at a treatise on architectural symbolism. At that point, the first chapter vanishes as if it were a “MacGuffin,” to use Alfred Hitchcock’s term. As it turns out, the book is not about Las Vegas or about sprawl, but actually about the opposition of what Venturi and Scott Brown called the “duck” and the “decorated shed.” The “duck” was coined to diagnose a prevalent design approach among postwar architects trained under the tenets of the Modern Movement: for Venturi and Scott Brown, the conservative followers of the revolutionary pioneers. The “decorated shed” was coined to define a building type that would potentially offer a new lease on life for the project of functionalism, and in turn a definition of architecture as shelter with applied decoration. (Venturi would offer a technological update a few years later with his *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture* (1995), prompted by a trip to Tokyo in 1990.)

As it happens, the decorated shed can be seen as a formulation but also as a finding, one triggered by the very material Venturi and Scott Brown gathered in the first chapter of *Learning from Las Vegas*—in particular their analytical section cut through the Las Vegas Strip, comprised of the highway, the sign next to the highway, the parking lot by the sign, the casino behind the parking lots, and the desert behind the casino. The *decorated shed* was the integration of these elements into a building: the juxtaposition of the (expensive) sign by the highway and the (cheap) building behind the parking lot. The renowned drawing of a sign on top of a building proclaiming “I Am a Monument” exemplifies the decorated shed (3). The building pictured, or rather, the building type, seemingly responds to the programmatic requirements (and in turn to structural requirements) in a straightforward way—whatever its program actually is—and becomes monumental by virtue of a sign that proclaims that the building (the shed) is in fact a monument.

The first edition of the book also contained a third chapter, in which (as with Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*) Venturi and Scott Brown resorted to their own work to illustrate the arguments they had advanced in the book. The lessons they learned from Las Vegas—particularly their finding of the decorated shed—were to be applied

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2 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), new forms of architectural documentation for the unique conditions of the Strip.

3 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), billboard proclaiming “I Am a Monument.”

elsewhere later on. The boldest illustration of the decorated shed is arguably the Institute for Scientific Information (1979) in Philadelphia (4).

Not unlike Learning from Las Vegas, Delirious New York had a peculiar structure as a book when it first appeared in 1978. Delirious New York is a history of New York, though one written by following Salvador Dali’s “paranoid-critical method.” Under the effect of paranoia, the mind is capable of mobilizing any information as evidence of one’s suspicions. For Dali, self-induced paranoia was an extraordinary tool that could suggest relations among objects that would be otherwise unrelated—what he termed a “delirium of interpretation.” In Delirious New York, Koolhaas subjects himself to the claim—or the paranoia—that Manhattan was deliberately designed, that it was the by-product of a manifesto that, in order to be materialized, had to remain secret. What Koolhaas’s self-inflicted paranoia causes him to suspect is a previously unformulated theory for Manhattan—a manifesto that promoted the intensification of the metropolitan experience, which Koolhaas termed a “culture of congestion,” or simply “Manhattanism.” Delirious New York is but a selection of the episodes in the history of New York that give proof that the city was planned and designed according to such a manifesto (5). Koolhaas traces this history from the amusement parks of Coney Island, where all of the techniques of Manhattanism were tested, to the tracing of the grid, from the definition of a park at the very core of the grid to the annexation of the grid blocks by buildings.

The key episode in this history is what Koolhaas refers to as “the reproduction of the site,” the development of a building type triggered by the elevator. Koolhaas illustrates his argument with an image found in a popular magazine (6). The elevator fosters a new form of architecture based on the repetition of sites upward, the ruthless extrusion of all building plots. Each story becomes another site, one whose program bears no relation to the one above or the one underneath. Each floor is virgin land. What gives the illusion of a building is a consistent envelope around its perimeter. For Koolhaas, the inside and the outside become autonomous conditions, independent from each other. The epitome of this condition is Starrett and Van Vleck’s Downtown Athletic Club (1930), a building that is indeed stable on the outside, and unstable on the inside—a homogeneous envelope and a heterogeneous program (7). Anything can happen on any floor: “eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the nth floor” is the very description of metropolitan life in the Downtown Athletic Club. Interestingly enough, the argument underlying Manhattanism (the central finding of the book) is not too different from the argument underlying the decorated shed: the independence of performance and appearance, function and expression.

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8 The “1909 theorem” depicted in Delirious New York (1978), from a cartoon in Life magazine (October 1909).

Just as in the case of Learning from Las Vegas, Koolhaas included an appendix to illustrate, through the work of OMA, the application of Manhattanism elsewhere. "The City of the Captive Globe" (1972) portrays a gridded city where each building is an extrusion of a block, and where each building, according to the doctrine of Manhattanism, celebrates functionalism on the inside and formalism on the outside—an architecture devoted to appearance on the outside, and to performance on the inside. The ultimate application of the retroactive manifesto does not take place in Manhattan, but elsewhere. In the competition for the urban park of La Villette in Paris (1982), OMA was shortlisted for an entry that overlaid

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8 Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Parc de la Villette competition project, Paris (1982).

Ten years after publishing Delirious New York, Rem Koolhaas began a new research project. The Contemporary City (formulated in 1988) entailed applying the method of Delirious New York to the "city with no history." That is, he formulated a new retroactive manifesto for the so-called periphery—an urban condition which was deemed anomalous, and which in turn remained irreducible to the field of architecture. (Koolhaas strategically exploited the term "urban condition" to annihilate the difference—and most important, the hierarchy—between center and periphery. "Urban condition," not unlike our contemporary term "landscape," is all encompassing, and makes no distinctions). The project would also examine the most insurmountable forms of architecture produced in this city. As Koolhaas put it, in a slightly more polemical manner, it would grant "the dignity of a retroactive concept" to the most mediocre architecture or "to each bastard, a genealogical tree". The brief listed a series of cities, or urban conditions: Atlanta, Singapore, the Parisian banlieue, and Tokyo. The research for The Contemporary City was never completed, with the exception of the essays (all published in S, M, L, XL) "Atlanta: Journalism," "Singapore Songlines," and "The Generic City" (which articulated some of the findings from the research on Singapore). This project in turn led a few years later to the Harvard Project on the City (or The Project for What Used to Be the City, as it was originally called), a project devoted to researching the effects of modernization on the urban condition around the globe—that is, all forms of existing and still untheorized urbanism. In the very format of the Harvard Project on the City, and with the interview he carried out on the lessons from Las Vegas, Koolhaas honored Venturi and Scott Brown. And this brings us back to where we began.

The genre that Koolhaas described in his conversation with Venturi and Scott Brown—the book on a city that implies a manifesto, or the retroactive manifesto—is based on the premise that evidence precedes and might in turn promote the formulation of an argument. This is diametrically opposed to the traditional form of the manifesto, where arguments preceded and in turn promoted the production of evidence. The city, or the urban condition, is examined as a repository of potential architectural findings—arguments, conceptual strategies, or architectural types that could be appropriated and applied elsewhere.

The retroactive manifesto not only implies that the evidence precedes the argument, but also that the evidence comes from outside the field. From the sprawling city to the generic city, from the Strip to the
elevator, from the gas station to air-conditioning, from the billboard to the escalator, this is architecture that the field of architecture had excluded from the field. In fact, the city of the retroactive manifesto explicitly must not have been preceded by a theory. In other words, it must not have belonged to the field. Venturi and Scott Brown claimed that *Learning from Las Vegas* was an equivalent of the Grand Tour, a voyage undertaken to learn from urban sprawl and the commercial vernacular just as architects used to learn from Rome. (This is what Venturi himself had done; *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was retrospectively understood as the by-product of his stay at the American Academy in Rome.) But I would claim that *Learning from Las Vegas* and the retroactive manifesto are closer to the Surrealist wandering than to the Grand Tour. The city of the retroactive manifesto is, in its most radical form, not unlike the flea markets of the Surrealists—an irreducible array of objects, some of which might be appropriated toward a finding, potential evidence to articulate an argument. Traveling implies examining a city as much as diverting the material gathered while examining that city, and in turn diverting the city. Under the cobblestones, one might potentially find the beach.

By the time that Koolhaas and Obrist’s interview with Venturi and Scott Brown was published as “Relearning from Las Vegas,” *Learning from Las Vegas* had been disregarded for many years. At the same time, the format of the retroactive manifesto was starting to proliferate. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kajima of Atelier Bow-Wow are arguably the architects who have since exploited its format and contributed to its genealogy with the guidebooks *Made in Tokyo* (2001) and *Pet Architecture* (2001). As it happens, the format proliferated precisely at the moment when Koolhaas identified the genealogy of “books on cities that imply a manifesto.” Paradoxically, though, it proliferated at the expense of a key component—the finding. From then on, the format of the retroactive manifesto multiplies and mutates into books on cities that imply no argument, let alone a manifesto. Eschewing the finding, they become vast collections of evidence—books that capture entire flea markets. That is, the field of architecture has produced a large number of books that document certain urban conditions extensively, but without establishing a finding or advancing an argument. (Reinhold Martin has described these books as “books on cities by architects for architects.”)

But let’s return to the question of this conference: “What happened to the architectural manifesto?” On the one hand, as I have suggested, there is a recurrence of its “retroactive form,” but rendered cliché—without the definition of findings, let alone arguments. On the other hand, there is also a recurrence of its “original form,” but as a kind of revival—without the definition of positions, let alone conflict. The question we should ask instead is: “What happened to the advancement of positions within the field?” Moreover, what happened to the advancement of positions that imply conflict with other positions, a condition that was implicit in the original manifesto form (and arguably in the definition of any project)? In other words, we should revive the problem (i.e., the advancement of positions) and question one of the recurrent ways of addressing it (i.e., the formulation of manifestos). The latter is arguably a solution that has outlived its use and seems no longer adequate to the problem.