

Learning from California City

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In 1970, between a fateful trip to the Strip and their discourse-defining book, Venturi and Scott Brown found themselves deep in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles. In the empty expanse, they confronted the design implications of their theoretical suppositions. While Venturi and Scott Brown appropriated commercial sales tactics, producing designs for a development corporation that were highlighted as imminent development to spark renewed investment, the distinction between client and architect, cultural production and capitalist enterprise, blurred. Venturi and Scott Brown were given relatively free-reign to investigate their post-modern ideas, however, they were absorbed into the corporate structure, becoming heads of a new Department of Design and Planning. The increasingly cozy relationship with the corporation also resulted in the sponsoring of an installation of Venturi and Scott Brown's oeuvre in the lobby of the local Holiday Inn. The exhibition served to introduce the firm and their previous design work while advertising the proposed projects to attract investment. Due to lagging sales, however, the company severed ties with the firm in 1971, but not before sponsoring an expanded exhibition of the firm's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. But while this moment reveals an interdependent relationship between Venturi and Scott Brown and capitalist enterprise through the shared operation of speculation both architectural and financial, it also shows the disciplinary crossings that occurred as a result. The desert location served as the remote site for, among other things, the production of an exhibition installed back in the heart of New York City.

INTRODUCTION

In 1969, Great Western United, a food service conglomerate headquartered in Denver, Colorado with a brash, twenty-nine-year-old CEO, acquired the California City Development Company, along with its three developments: California City, Colorado City, and Cochiti Lake in New Mexico. California City, the flagship development founded in 1958 by sociologist-turned-developer, Nathan Mendelsohn, constituted nearly 200 square miles of the high desert 100 miles north of Los Angeles. Although under development for more than a decade, with tens of thousands of landowners, very little physical building existed beyond an already crumbling road network, an evaporating artificial lake, a browning golf course, and a few scattered houses and shops. Attempting to reinvigorate a languishing land sales operation and cultivate a community that had yet to materialize, Great Western United hired Bob Venturi, John Rauch, and Denise Scott Brown.

California City, a largely blank canvas with an ambitious and amenable CEO, provided the ideal conditions for VRSB to test and realize their theory that proposed to reconcile architecture as a cultural practice with development as a capitalist enterprise, and secure their position as academic/practitioners. However, VRSB failed to build anything, instead producing speculative designs as images. Their "learning from" methodology and discourse, the seeds of which were planted in their 1968 visit to Las Vegas and later developed by them and scholars of their work, reflects an effort to understand the distinction between theory and practice that, in California City, they did not so much collapse but rather reinforce. Despite advocating for the decorated shed, their design for a new city hall was a self-described "monument." Their theoretical separation of sign from building redefined development not as the capitalist "improvement" of the land but as the self-conscious management of ecological resources to mitigate the effects of building. And while their relationship to the corporation began as architect and client, signaling the potential of built work, they were quickly absorbed as employees into the structure of the corporation where they proceeded to initiate a "learning from" project that led perhaps inevitably to an exhibition with the corporation as sponsor. Ultimately, VRSB's work at California City remained representational, relegated to print and display culture; the university and the

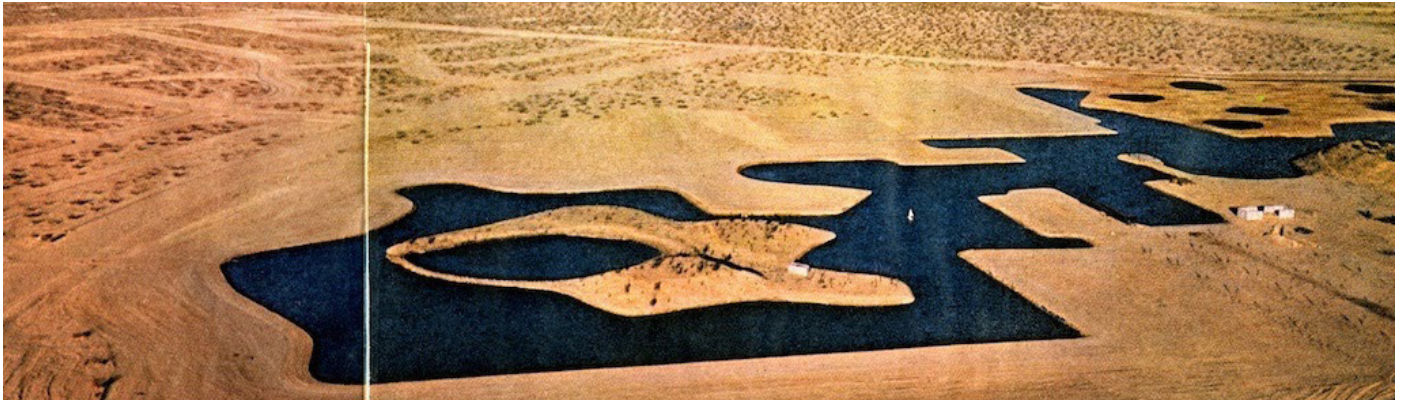


Figure 1: "The Great Shift to the Sands." *Life Magazine*. March 23, 1962, 62-73. Photo by Ralph Crane.

corporation remained in familiar positions, the former as the site of speculative images, and the latter as the sponsor and user of those images to yield value without physical building.

THE MONUMENT

In the spring of 1970, Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown were hired to design a new, phased master plan for California City, several buildings, and signage. The centerpiece, literally and figuratively, was the design for a new city hall and civic center. The design displaced an original design by Konrad Wachsmann from 1966. In fact, Wachsmann was still working on his design, and under the impression that it would be built, when he read about VRSB's design in an issue of *Design & Environment*.

A low-slung, almost imperceptible building designed by Wachsmann became a shimmering golden cube creating a formal and visual center for the sprawling city.

Venturi himself described the design as "not a building but a monument of glass," with an equally monumental price tag of three million dollars, a massive expenditure for a town with just a thousand residents.

Their "Preliminary Study for California City Civic Center" articulates their initial thinking for the design of the city hall: "Must Be: Big Scale; Read as a simple bold form from afar; Read as a simple bold silhouette from great distance; Become a symbol for California City; Be an office building yet a monument; and Reflect or be protected from sun solar radiation." In their initial sketches, the small cube drawing became a modernist box with a gridded façade set atop piloti.

On the roof they placed an antenna-like structure that they copied from an existing lakeside pavilion and congregational church, both designed by the original master planners, Whitney Smith and Wayne Williams with Garrett Eckbo, not so famously photographed by Reyner Banham.

As the design developed, the rooftop symbol disappeared, the façade became a concrete brise-soleil to combat the intense solar

radiation, and the piloti were replaced by a low plinth of desert flowers separating the building from the desert expanse.

Part of VRSB's master plan involved the creation of a 200-acre superblock along the primary commercial boulevard in downtown California City, in which the 90-foot concrete cube was centered as a programmatic, formal, and visual anchor.

Its geographic centrality also produced visual centrality. Located more than 1,500 feet from any street edge or existing development, it lined up perfectly with the 20 Mule Team Parkway, a seventeen-mile spine that extended from downtown to the city limits. The 'view from the road' was redefined not as momentary or fleeting as one drives by, but one that remains fixed as a destination.

The sea of raw desert marooning the building was cut through by a tree-lined access road leading from the primary intersection straight to the building.

The substantial but isolated aberration on the flat, empty desert, however, was only the first phase of development for the superblock. While VRSB took cues from Le Corbusier for the design of the city hall, a later phase reveals the influence of the Garden City movement. A radial organization cut through with linear vistas incorporates a transition from civic to institutional to commercial buildings expanding out from the center.

And while the final iteration of the city hall shed the brise-soleil in favor of mirror glass, which was determined to be cheaper and more effective at combatting solar radiation, the design reflected a desire to centralize and increase the density of the existing sprawling suburban development in California City. In his private notes from his conversations with the CEO, Venturi articulated a spectrum from development to land sales, in other words from architecture as building to architecture as marketable image to sell land. Reconciling the two extremes, California City was hesitantly located in the middle.

While the city hall design, a seven-story office building and anchor institution, constitutes fairly straightforward development, its prohibitive price tag ensured it would remain a representational image.

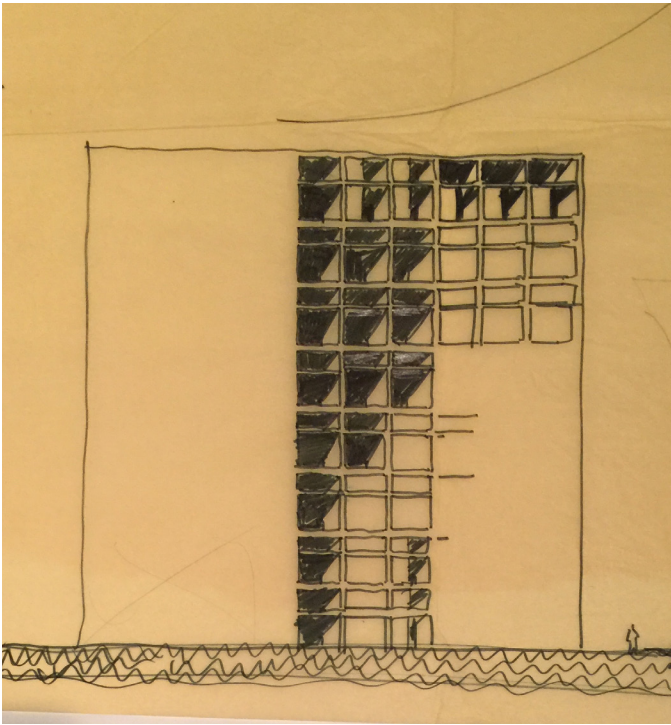


Figure 2: Venturi and Rauch, Architects and Planners. California City Office Building Sketch. 1971. Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

THE SIGN

On the one hand, VRSB responded to the scarcely developed land sales operation by designing a monumental building that would cultivate a community that had yet to materialize, undermining their own emerging theory of the cheap, the quick, and the modest. On the other hand, they appropriated existing commercial tactics employed in California City, encouraging the escalation of land speculation through the design of a series of signs. The division and subsequent eschewing of building from sign created a kind of media environment that redefined development as the management of ecological resources, a countermeasure to the environmental damage of building.

Designed as an aid to salesmen chauffeuring potential buyers around the expansive and otherwise undifferentiated desert, a series of seven signs were designed and sited at regular intervals along the 20 Mule Team Parkway, a new road that was part of the original master plan by Smith and Williams that paralleled the 19th century trail from the borax mines in Death Valley to Los Angeles.

Although double-sided, the proposed signs were located between the new parkway and the original mule path to the south, oriented and accessible only to those leaving downtown, heading deeper into the desert. Each was accompanied with a small tear-drop turnout with parking, landscaping, and picnic tables.

The design of the sign itself went through a number of iterations before settling on the now familiar and widely published version. Sketches reveal several different types of billboards, including a

rectangular widescreen sign on stilts and a grounded tombstone-like sign, ranging in height from eighteen to twenty-four feet.

The content in each design varied, sometimes including information about current or future architectural development, new tracts available for sale, or the history of the area and its 19th-century role in the borax trade. However, all versions included representations of desert flowers unique to the area. This tactic was already in use by the development company, and in fact, one of VRSB's designs is remarkably similar to the cover of a marketing brochure that was given to them.

The flower was appropriated because, according to Venturi: "We know that to hold people's attention these signs must look beautiful and therefore must not resemble billboards – since people don't find billboards beautiful. Their shape and content must be 'uncommercial'." The final iteration not only used realistic representations of flowers, but dissolved the distinction between form and photo.

The outer edge of the sign followed the outline of the flower. With a single support, they resembled giant flowers on which a smaller sign was hung halfway up containing information about the history of the site and future development.

The design of the signs proposed a kind of media environment that highlighted the existing natural beauty of the desert, recasting development as not building on the land, as this earlier iteration shows, but as the management of the desert ecology.

The signs did not merely communicate, but also commune. That is to say, they proposed to transmit information, and in so doing, cultivate a development and investment community centered on the shared belief in the beauty of the desert and the subsequent maintenance of its limited resources, namely water, while undergoing development.

While the billboards promoted the existing environment through large-scale replication of desert flowers, another tactic was employed in a related design for a shopping center located along the commercial boulevard running through downtown California City. The design of a rather conventional strip mall was broken in the middle to reveal a distant view of twin buttes, the only natural aberration in the otherwise flat horizon line, and then reconnected through a large sign overhead, further framing the view. The sign depicted a lush New England landscape that, according to VRSB, would satiate residents' desire for greenery, saving the desert ecology from the devastating effects of development. VRSB's architectural design and its effects on the culture of development away from building and toward management paralleled a shifting role and position for the firm vis-à-vis the corporation.

THE EXHIBITION

In 1968, while Venturi and Scott Brown ventured west to learn from Las Vegas, the CEO of Great Western United was performing due diligence for the acquisition of the California City Development Company. The acquisition marked a significant change in the model

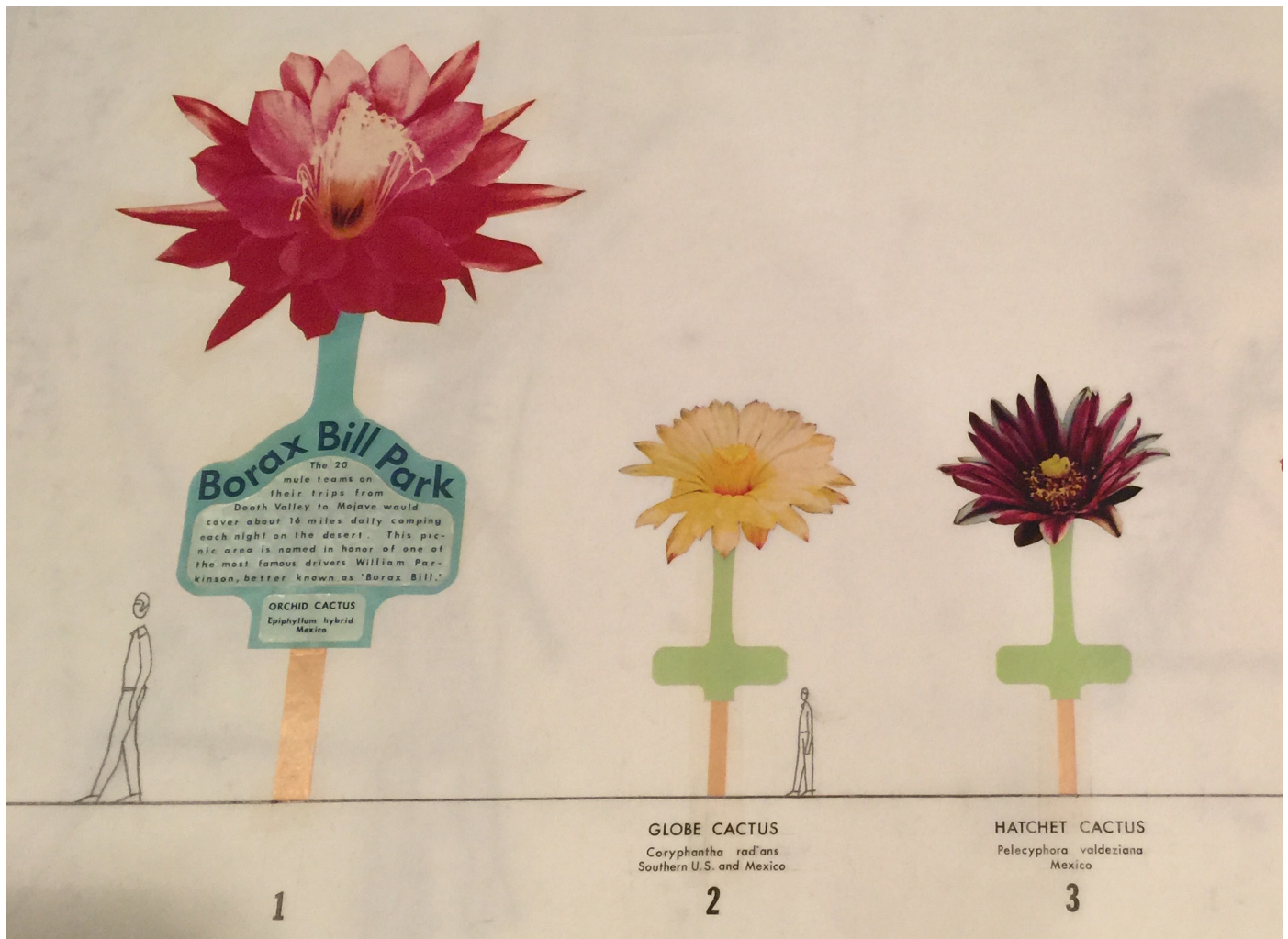


Figure 3: Venturi and Rauch, Architects and Planners. Signs for Twenty Mule Team Parkway. 1971. Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

of ownership and the corporate structure of the development company. Great Western United constituted one of the earliest examples of a conglomerate with wide-ranging business interests, and experimented with a new management style. The young CEO, Bill White, Jr., based his business philosophy on free-form management, a horizontal organization that attempted to capitalize on decentralization and dispersed knowledge by “giving opportunity and responsibility to young, creative people and letting them ‘do their own thing’.”

Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown began working directly for Bill White, Jr. in June 1970 on a new master plan and designs for several buildings. However, just a few short months later, after VRSB had generated schemes for most of the projects, including the shopping center, the city hall, a cemetery, a post office, and a new company headquarters, it was announced that William Rudolph, a Pasadena-based architect would create plans for a new commercial development for California City. Venturi noted privately at the time: “Why aren’t we doing the new comm area? Seems that GWC [Great Western United] is still the developer. Main corner of

Randsburg-Mojave will have a gas station on it. Is this good? Is it good if we’re not the architect controlling it?”

This news paralleled a new focus by VRSB on master planning, and eventually general planning for California City. In a report submitted to the corporation in June 1971, Scott Brown described general planning as dealing with the “pros and cons of different development and financial strategies,” “different patterns of allocation of resources,” “the hiring of consultants,” and “the process and organization for planning.” Scott Brown summarized it as “planning the planning.” The report makes clear though, that before a general plan could be created, one that would eventually impact and direct development and ultimately design, information flow and the capture and consolidation of data would be needed. “Eventually California City will need the extensive data that are found in the files of any city planning agency: information on regional demographic trends, census analyses, highway department statistics, plans of neighboring communities, information on governmental programs, industrial and economic survey, hydrological and soil reports, as well as the plans and reports of its own staff and their consultants – maintained in a usable way...” She continues in a not so subtle way: “It might be desirable, when we come to the hiring of a director for planning, to choose one whose strength lies in the data gathering and

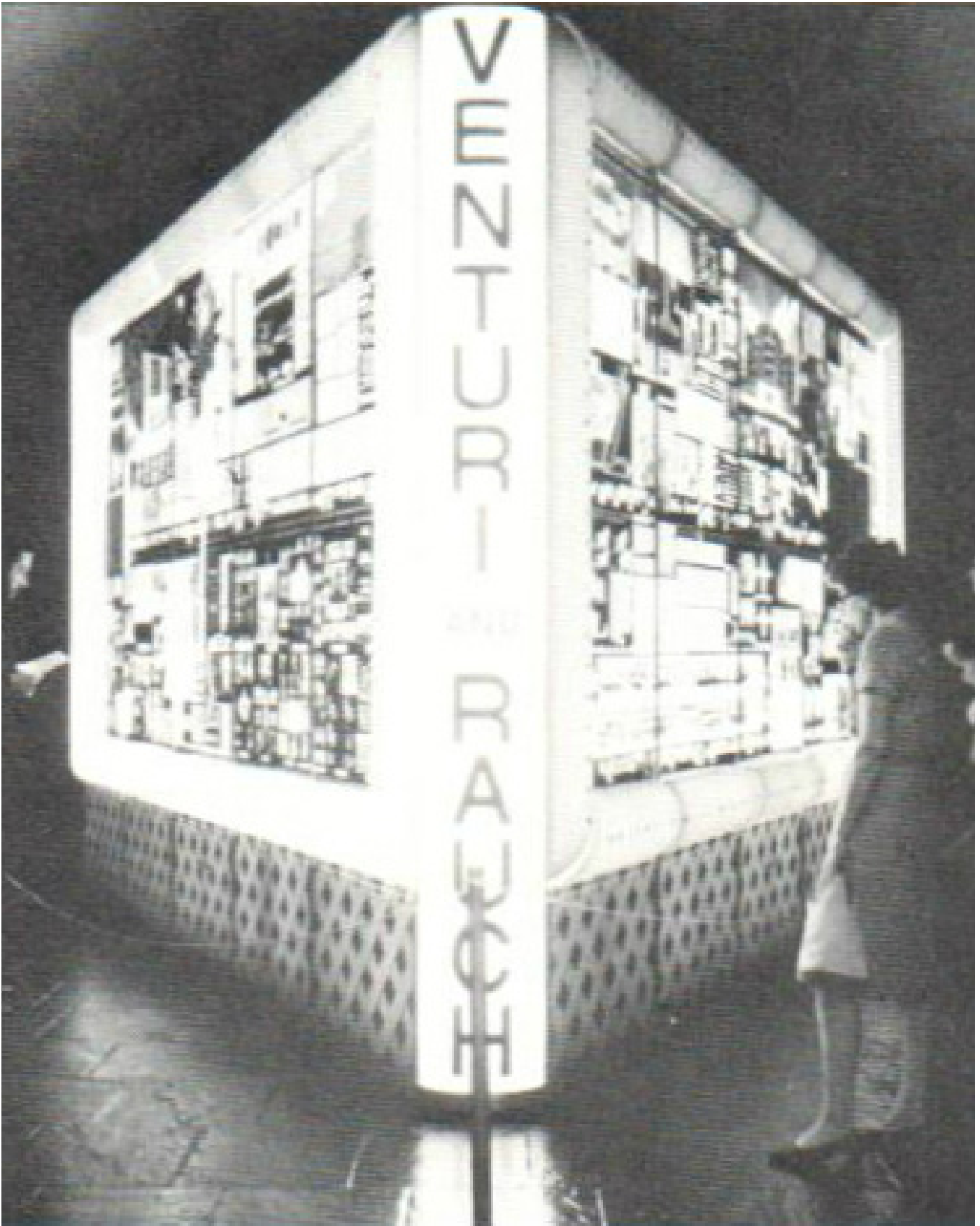


Figure 4: Whitney Museum of American Art. The Work of Venturi and Rauch, Architects and Planners. 1971.

analytical aspects of urban planning, who could bring together a city information system.” Scott Brown successfully leveraged their “learning from” discourse into a high level role in the corporate structure. Soon after her report was released, White created a new department of planning and design that answered directly to White, represented in this sketch by Venturi, and installed Venturi and Scott Brown as its leaders. Venturi noted: “... from setting up there [sic] new depts., we’re reorg the corp.”

In their new role, VRSB attempted to mobilize the resources of the corporation to further learn from, not so much design for, California City, writing that “transportation, marketing and ecological studies are important components of middle-range planning... We would need an extensive photographic survey of urban design elements as they are in California City today.”

The culmination of their design work and research into California City to ascertain what Venturi referred to as the “genius loci” of the city, was an exhibition sponsored by the corporation and installed in the lobby of the California City Holiday Inn. Designed primarily to showcase the work and the firm to convince a resistant city council, the exhibition also operated as a prototype for VRSB’s upcoming retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art installed two months later, also sponsored by the corporation whose CEO conveniently sat on the board of trustees.

A week after the exhibition opened, the CEO regrettably terminated their relationship. The discursive bridge they sought to create between the university and the corporation, between theory and practice, remained a void reinforced by the distinction between their monumental designs, rhetoric of signs, and shifting role within the corporation. None of their designs were realized; even their sign proposal, a manifestation of their theory of cheap complicity and a fraction of the cost of their proposed city hall, was relegated like everything else to articles and exhibitions, signs of signs.