


ARTICLE

Learning from Steinkopf

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Abstract This paper contributes to the deliberations around the future of modernist architecture in the Modern Heritage of Africa (MoHoA) initiative. As creative practitioners and academics, our work has focused on considerations of architecture and urbanism, variously designing, theorizing, and photographing cities and structures. Our work is very much a critique of architectural photography, an approach to visualizing and thinking about cities that is analytical. Our collaborative work is set in dialogue with conventional forms of architectural scholarship and photography. For 12 years we have been working to examine the questions of 'apartheid's modernities'. Our current project is to document architect Roelof S. Uytendogaardt's buildings. Uytendogaardt died in the late 1990s. His papers are lodged at UCT Libraries' Department of Manuscripts and Archives. We have been collecting and constructing our own archive and have recorded a large percentage of Uytendogaardt's public buildings, projects and sites in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

We architects can learn from Rome and Las Vegas and from looking around us wherever we happen to be.

(Venturi et al., 1977, p. xvii)

When Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenour and their students went to the desert town of Las Vegas, they produced a book that documented the architecture they found in new ways. Writing in the preface to the revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, Scott Brown playfully claimed that architects can learn from wherever they find themselves, be it Rome or Las Vegas (1977, p. xvii). In August 2018, we visited a small desert town in the Northern Cape of South Africa. Our interest was in a building known to be designed around the same time in the 1970s by prominent

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Cape Town architect and Professor of Architecture and Planning at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Roelof Uytenbogaardt. The building for a new community centre was published in the Union of International Architects' Special Edition on *Southern Africa* in 1985 under the title of the practice of Roelof Uytenbogaardt and Norbert Rozendal (Beck, 1985, p. 12–13). This paper documents our learnings from Steinkopf, inspired by the Venturi et al. project and associated publication.

As creative practitioners and academics, our work has since 2002, focused on considerations of architecture and urbanism, variously writing, theorizing, and photographing cities and structures. Our work together is a critique of architectural photography, a visualizing and thinking about cities and structures that is critical and analytical. Our collaborative work is set up in dialogue with conventional forms of architectural scholarship and photography (Josephy, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020; Murray, 2010, 2013b, 2018). In *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi et al. (1977), while discussing architecture, make continuous references to pop art, photography, conceptual, and other forms of contemporary art and they cite artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Claus Oldenberg, Victor Vasarelli and Ed Ruscha as often as they reference architects like Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn and Walter Gropius. In their writing and thinking there is a porousness between contemporary art and architecture, which we as an architect and artist have been sad to see disappearing over the last decades, as architecture as a discipline has moved away from art towards a technicist approach, and the aspects of its location in the engineering and built environment clusters of disciplines in South Africa especially. We have been trying to deliberately and self-consciously revive this thinking at the intersection between art and architecture in our projects and collaborations in an African context. The framing of the discourses of modern art and architecture in the Western canon is well established, and our work in this projects and beyond consciously seeks to demonstrate how place and experience in an African project enables the reconceptualisation of the modern in heritage discourse.

The work that we presented at the Modern Heritage of Africa (MoHoA) Symposium's session titled Past and Present in Heritage had, as its central focus, the question of the place, form, and future of modern architecture as heritage (or not). Drawing on the "tropes of space" of "the Modern" in architecture suggested in the Introduction to *Desire Lines: Space, memory and identity of the post-apartheid city* our project emerged through dialogue and in relation to the concept of 'apartheid modernities'" (Fisher et al., 2003; Murray et al., 2007, p. 5). The Steinkopf investigation continues our collaborative work with the documentation – through photography and archival research – of Uytenbogaardt's buildings. Uytenbogaardt died in the late 1990s and his papers are lodged at UCT Libraries' Department of Manuscripts and Archives in the collection catalogued BC1264 (Murray, 2010).

Since 2009 we have been collecting and constructing our own research archive, and we have visited, photographed, and documented a large percentage of Uytenbogaardt's public buildings, projects, and sites across South Africa. These include the Crown Mines Project (Murray, 2018), the Welkom South Nederlandse Gereformeerde church, the University of Cape Town's Sports Centre, the Werdmuller Centre (Murray, 2013b), the Salt River Community Centre, the Bonwitt Factory (now the Hilton Double Tree Hotel), the Garden of Remembrance (Simonstown) and the Steinkopf

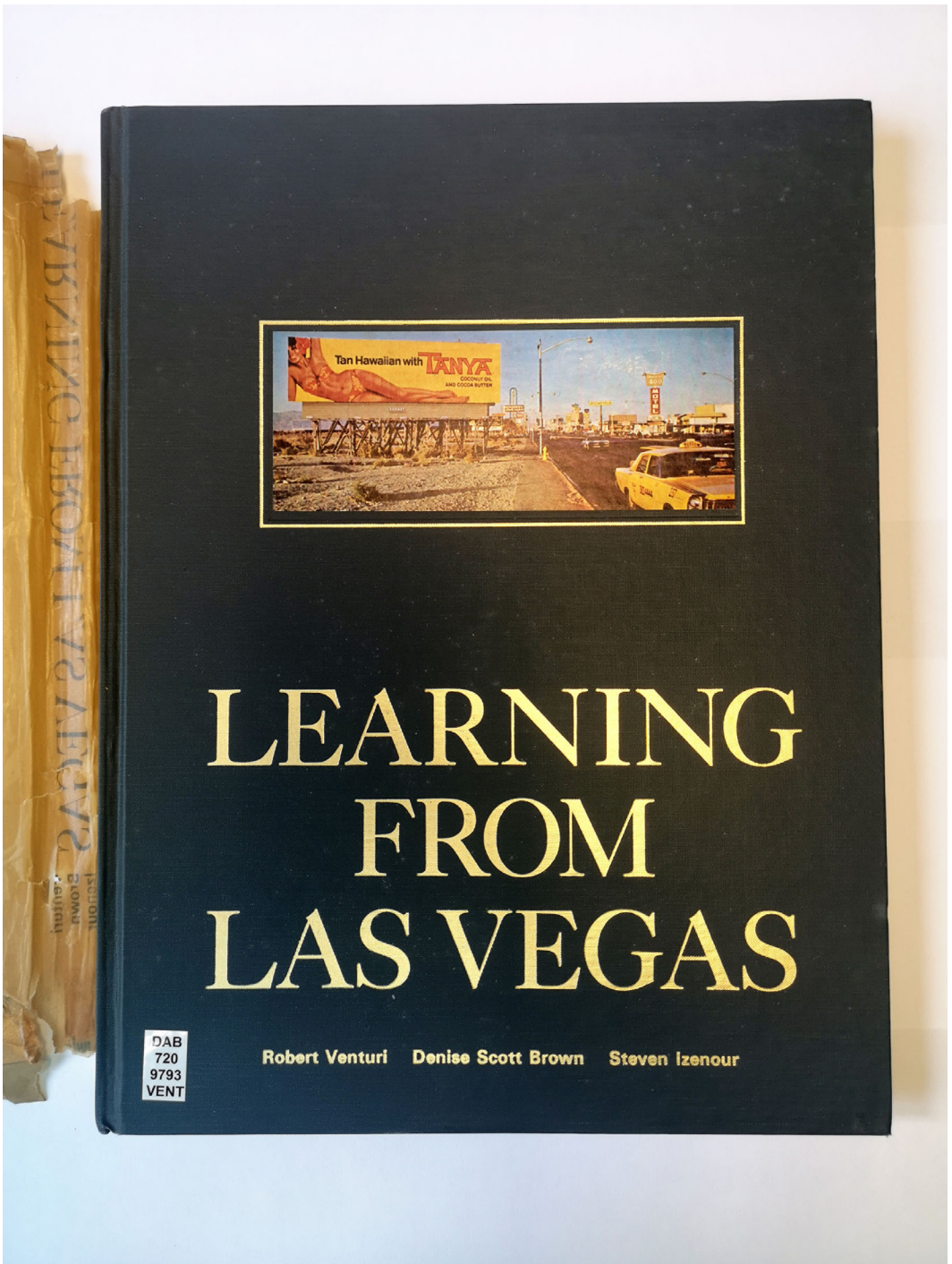


Figure 1. *Learning from Las Vegas* 1972 edition, UCT Architecture Library, 2022. Source: Josephy, 2022. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

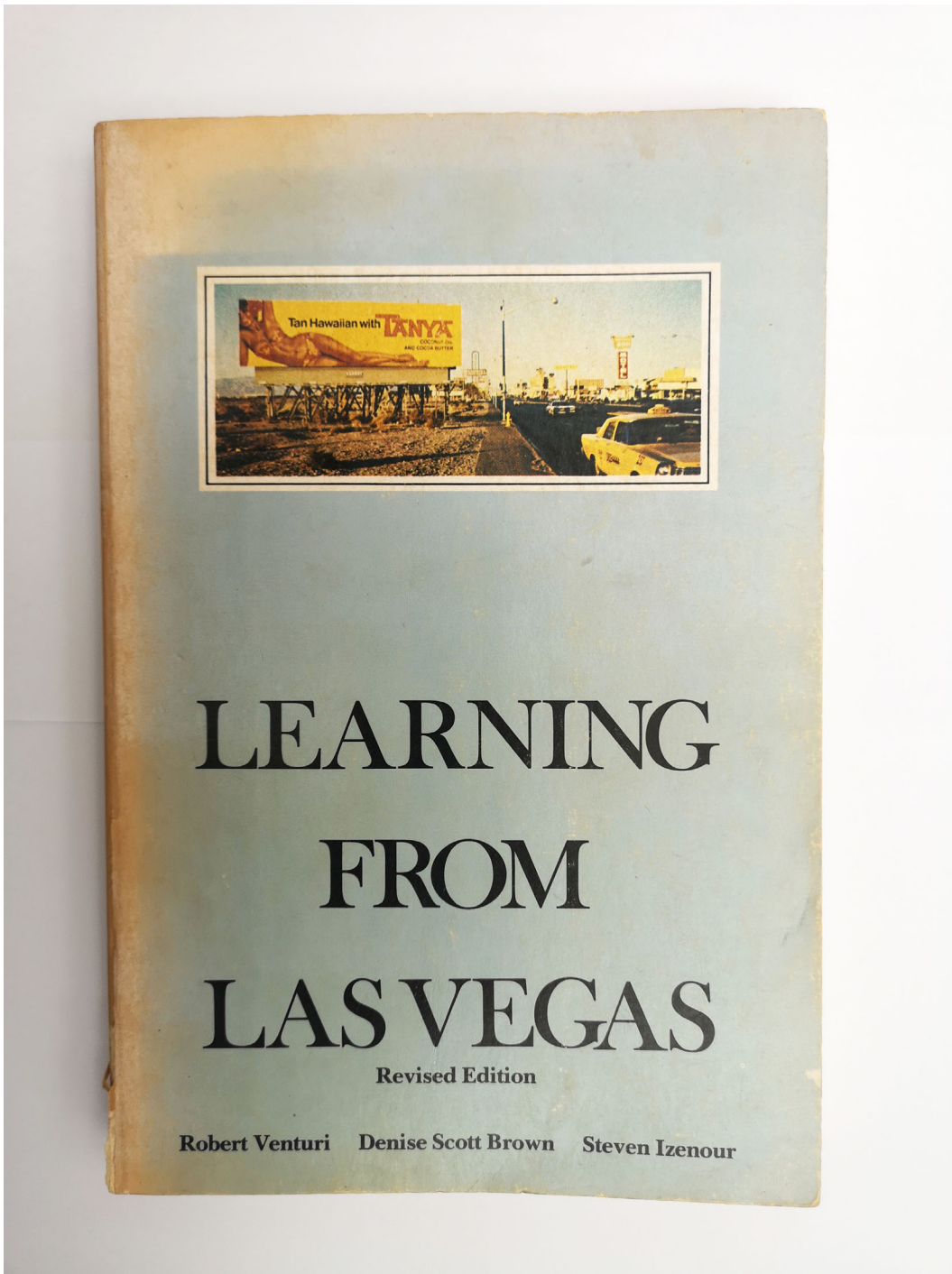


Figure 2. *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1977 edition. Source: Josephy, 2022. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12515)]



Figure 3. The Steinkopf Community Centre in panorama. Source: Josephy and Murray, 2021. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cum.12515)]

Community Centre. The Steinkopf Community Centre is the topic of this paper *Learning from Steinkopf* to reference Venturi and Scott Brown's contribution to thinking about architecture and heritage differently (Figures 1 and 2).

MAKING STEINKOPF

Steinkopf, a small mission settlement of the London Missionary Society later taken over by the Rhenish Mission, is now a post-apartheid town, 70 km short of the South African border with Namibia. The Northern Cape province has been mined for diamonds and minerals since the boom in Kimberley in the 1870s, and large tracts of land were owned by the De Beers Corporation (Carstens, 2001). Steinkopf Community Centre, completed by Uytendogaardt in 1978 and situated on the site of what was previously a community vegetable garden, was commissioned by De Beers as a contribution to the upliftment of the residents of the settlement – a parting gift at around the time the mining company was leaving the area (Beck, 1985).

During apartheid, the Surveyor General's Office now known as the National Geo-Spatial Information agency (NGI), regularly photographed settlements across South Africa from the air for population management control and other surveillance purposes. The archive of images emerging from these activities from 1964 and 1985 shows the spatial transition and growth of the town into which the Steinkopf Community Centre scheme was inserted (NGI, 2019; Figure 3).

Uytendogaardt's award-winning community centre was, from its inception, hardly used by the community for whom it was imagined. By 1985 – the year in which the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) conferred its Award of Merit and the building was featured in the United International Architects' Special Edition – the deterioration of the building was visible (Beck, 1985).

The project and building are described in an entry by architect Bell (2012), writing in *Artifacts of the Built Environment of Southern Africa*, that “makes information of interest about the Southern African Built Environment readily accessible”:

The Steinkopf Community centre is a notable design in South Africa's Architectural history and was awarded an SALA Award of Merit. Only Phase 1 of a more ambitious project was ever completed. The Louis Kahn influences are clear in the design. Its multiple flying roofs were justified as shade making devices but sometimes derided as the designer's folly. The centre point of the programme is the main hall attached to an extended spine. It was built partly from community labour.

Sadly, the building fell into disrepair and later no longer used. Although it has been significantly vandalized the basic structure is still largely intact.

Its only function now is the play place for the local children and an escape from Steinkopf's harsh sun.

It remains arguably Uytenbogaardt's most pure design (Bell, 2012).

The imposing forms and austere finishes that rise out of the small-scale fabric of mission housing dominates the landscape and contributed to the community centre's poor reception by residents. Very soon after its completion the building was run down and derelict; by the late 1990s it had been abandoned. A more conventionally recognizable community centre was developed close by and residents gravitated towards the new structure, which was deemed more central, practical and usable, with its unassuming façade and ample parking, and a hall that could be decorated for festivities like weddings, funerals and other events (Murray, 2013a).

MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN RUIN

In learning from Las Vegas, we are particularly concerned with the photographic work by Denise Scott Brown, as she has often been less visible than her husband and more famous partner Robert Venturi. The authorship of her photography is, at times, difficult to discern as images were not always directly credited to her, and many are those of her colleagues – “faculty and students” in *Learning from Las Vegas*, as the book is the result of a collaborative process (Venturi et al., 1977, p. 190).

While Denise Scott Brown is best known as a teacher, architect, theorist and thinker, less is known of her practice as a photographer, which she used to document, record and most significantly, think critically through her various projects. From her early years at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in the 1950s, to the present, she has created many photographs. These have rarely been seen as photographs in and of themselves. The 2018–2019 exhibition titled *Denise Scott Brown Photographs, 1956–1966* in New York, was one of the first attempts to foreground her work as a photographer. Her photographs, taken on color-slide film, most probably to be shown in lectures,



Figure 4. Experimenting with materials and form for the photobook *Steinkopf*. Source: Josephy, 2021. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

are an extraordinary collection of structures, buildings, and landscapes by a South African trained woman photographer, in a time when few women photographers were acknowledged. However Scott Brown did not necessarily see herself as a photographer and said “I’m not a photographer. I shoot for architecture – if there’s art here it’s a by-product” (Carriage Trade Gallery, 2018). While Scott Brown’s intention was not the making of art, these photographs nonetheless have much value when considered as art. Much like renowned South African photographer David Goldblatt’s series of photographs contained in the photobook *South Africa: The Structures of Things Then* (1998), Scott

Brown's images in *Learning from Las Vegas* and elsewhere document South African, European, and American structures as a form of critique of these societies.

Scott Brown was living in Los Angeles and teaching at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1966, the year that pop and conceptual artist Ed Ruscha (also living in LA at the time) published *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Ruscha, 1966). This publication reinvented the photobook and artist's book in concertina form, offset printing and foregrounding of the concept, reflected simply in black and white photographs and with minimal text. Ed Ruscha was particularly influential on Scott Brown's photographs and ideas about the strip. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Scott Brown, Venturi and their studio created a similar panoramic image of the Las Vegas strip, referring to it as Ed Ruscha's "elevation of the Strip", saying "Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We imitated his for the Las Vegas Strip" (1977, p. 32).

PHOTOBOOKING STEINKOPF

The town of Steinkopf, also a desert town, is less obviously strip-like, yet its dusty roads and modest buildings are in stark contrast to Uytendogaardt's community centre, which towers over the settlement. This overriding presence is distinctly ironic as the building, intended as the focal point of the community, is abandoned and in ruin. Our experience on site in Steinkopf cemented our desire to represent this structure in photographs. Not merely through the valuable task of documentation (after Scott Brown and her colleagues), we wished to think about the irony of modern architecture in ruin and to produce this in the form of a photobook. The genre of the photobook, we suggest, offers a space for contradictory and conflicting narratives, for documents and archive to co-exist in a way that the visual essay or monograph cannot accommodate. The Steinkopf photobook is a rough-cut of the fieldwork images that we have made of the Steinkopf Community Centre.

Photobooking our work from our archive of field trip images has been a process of selecting material, mocking-up publications, drawn from photobooks in-progress created in 2021 as a record (Figure 4). This shift to working with the photobook came out of an engagement and partnership between the photography section at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT and *Hydra*, an educational and photobook platform in Mexico by the artist Casas Broda.

In the *Photo book! Photo-book! Photobook! A Research exhibition* by Sean O'Toole at the A4 Arts Foundation in Cape Town (2022), writing about the South African photobook, O'Toole suggests:

Over the last two decades photobooks – printed books principally devoted to showcasing photographic practice and ideas – have been the subject of scholarly research, publishing and exhibitions. In spite of its rich tradition of photographic practice and publishing, the photobook remains largely overlooked as a site of enquiry in South Africa.

In *Steinkopf* (2021), the publication *Learning from Las Vegas* has been influential and significant to us visually and intellectually. Photobooks are composed primarily of photographs with little text. Conventional academic monographs are predominantly text and little image. Architecture books can be anything from coffee table promotional publications, to the academic journal to the engineering or technical manual or textbook. What *Learning from Las Vegas* provides is text, image, materiality, drawing, sign, symbol, photograph, art historical reference, contemporary art reference, architect's drawing, archival material, advertisements and maps. We have similarly used archive, drawing, photography, signs, and the modes above in our (re)presentation of *Steinkopf*. Conceptually we have been drawn to the modes proposed by Scott Brown and Venturi in the sense that the purpose and function of the book is multifaceted: part academic writing, part pedagogy, part reflection on popular culture, part photobook, part art historical and contemporary art publication, part architectural study. The publication is interdisciplinary in its purpose, articulation and application.

While *Steinkopf* is by no means *Las Vegas* nor even directly comparable to *Las Vegas* in its urban form, the notion of learning, or allowing a town and its structures to teach us, is central to our engagement. Venturi et al.'s (1977, p. xvii) call for architecture to be "socially less coercive and aesthetically more vital than the striving and bombastic buildings of our recent past" is relevant in a space in which a striving and bombastic modernist building dominates the skyline of the small Northern Cape town. What appeals to us about Venturi et al.'s reading of *Las Vegas* is its irreverence, humor, and ironic reading of both great works of architecture, and casinos and gas stations, alike. In *Steinkopf* the heroic modernist work of Uytenbogaardt lives alongside the corner spaza-shop, OK Foods, PEP Stores, Standard and Capitec bank automatic teller machines (known as ATMs), the New Apostolic Church, and the Exel Fuel Stop near the strip of the N7 national road. In doing this research our intention is to place the building back into its visual and historical context as Venturi et al. did in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Our work is concerned with the life of these modernist buildings and the people who have been subjected to their overriding designs (Murray, 2010). Uytenbogaardt is considered as one of the masters of South African modern architecture. Our interest is less about the narratives of "Great Men and Great Lives" as so often portrayed in monographs and through architectural and art history, where it is a trope of both (Murray, 2010).

The way we work is through visiting the sites celebrated as instances of modern architectural heritage. Very often what we find is that buildings have changed over time and comparing these changes to the original vision is part of the archival documentary research that we undertake, alongside our contemporary investigations. The vision for *Steinkopf* in the mind of Uytenbogaardt, was to create an oasis of sorts in the arid landscape of the town. It was envisaged as much as an urban design scheme, as it was a provision of facilities. The functional programme for the centre was for a community hall, daycare facilities, a swimming pool, and a community garden. It was conceptualized as both a refuge from the hot sun and an inspiring structural form that used natural light and natural materials in sculptural and organic flourishes of modernist form (Figure 5). The scheme as described by the architect was romantic in the sense of the western tradition in art and architecture, echoing the



Figure 5. Arch in the Steinkopf community Centre. Source: Josephy and Murray, 2021. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cura.12515)]



Figure 6. Exterior of the Steinkopf community Centre. Source: (Josephy & Murray, 2021). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/camr.12115)]

materiality and shape of the rocky stone outcrops, known as *koppies* (small hills in Afrikaans). The materiality extended into the very construction of the building as the bricks and cement were made locally with the sand from the area. The building was instantly revered by architects and celebrated in the UIA Special Edition on Southern African Architects in 1985, at the height of apartheid (Beck, 1985).

Uytenbogaardt's experiences as a Rome Scholar documenting the Italian hill towns is important to his design of the Steinkopf Community Centre. There is also evidence in his plans of the romance he experienced of the Grand Tour and in Rome, central to which is the idea of the ruin. Abbé Lavigier's famous etching in 1755 of the merging of nature and architecture signals the beginning of this romantic tension with the classism of ancient Rome. Uytenbogaardt brought this romantic sentiment into many of his designs and urban schemes (Silverman, 2000). Yet the irony of what we found in the contemporary landscape was only a ruin, in place of the romantic building (Figure 6). The trajectory of the passage of the building into ruin is paralleled by the claims and calls for Uytenbogaardt's work to be celebrated in the category of modern heritage (Murray, 2013b).

In the study and practice of photography there has been a fascination with what Siobhan Lyons and others have called ruin porn. In the collection titled *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, they argue that abandoned buildings and sites of trauma have become the objects of opportunistic photographers capturing urban decay and structures in decline (Lyons, 2018). Often photographed in black

and white and shown on Instagram, modernist and brutalist buildings are staged and emphasized as derelict, abandoned and accompanied by calls to conserve and repair as tragic losses of heritage. This practice often uses lighting, tone, and depressingly overcast skies to foreground the demise of structures that were once grand. Routinely there is a nostalgia for these and similar building where the images are filtered, toned or manipulated to underplay the material deterioration (Matthew, 2021). As Josephy (2017, p. 81) identifies in an article about the modernist tower Ponte City in Johannesburg, these “ruin porn tropes” have become familiar in South African photography, as well as globally.

We have followed this phenomenon with interest and discomfort, as ruin porn constructs and manipulates the viewer and the image alike. So, the question as to how we were to approach photographing the remnants of modern architecture as we found it in Steinkopf was debated as we returned to the building at different times of day. Architectural photography, as we have written elsewhere, seeks to display buildings at the moment of their completion to showcase the realization of a project's vision. These architectural projects are almost always promotional and not seen in their context (Murray, 2010, p.149). In other words, the aim is to portray the work of architecture in its best possible light.

In our approach, we too seek to show the buildings as we encounter them in their best light, using natural light on the forms of the buildings, and we time our visits to photograph according to the light. Yet as these photos of Steinkopf show, the polish of the finished product has disappeared over time. Our images determinedly seek to show the buildings without consistently emphasizing them as ruin, so showing the decay of the building but also showing tenderness and care. In our broader thinking and work over the last few years we have considered questions of the social, physical, political and environmental spaces in which these buildings exist in towns or landscapes. Specifically, we have deliberately asserted the colonial and apartheid conditions that were so noticeably absent in the portrayal of buildings in architectural photography from the 1960s onwards.

Rather than the singular image that is the hallmark of the ruin porn photographer, we are making photobooks. We believe the photobook offers the opportunity to present visual argument (alongside our conventional academic writing) that allows us to work with multiple responses to visiting the sites. As we emphasize above, this includes giving attention to locality, drawn from archival and published material in the form of journal articles, as well as albums of photographs, drawings, site-notes, building plans where these exist in whole or in part.

Heritage documentation, of course, also does this within a formal format. Our photobooks are positioned in relation to this practice of the heritage report or documentation entry, where we raise questions about the selection, role, and classificatory modes of heritage practice, both locally and internationally.

These photobooks are collections of our creative interpretations and critical research. Whereas heritage is set up as preservable, restored, fixed, we are attentive to the used, discarded, appropriated,

eroded. We are interested in the post work of architecture – in its dematerialisation, preservation, or domestication. We are, moreover, interested in issues of decontextualization, not so much the singular great award-winning celebrated structure, or what Venturi et al. (1977, p. 118) would call the “heroic and original” building in contrast to the “ugly and ordinary”. In our reading of Steinkopf we focus on rereading the relationship between the building and its context that appears ‘ugly and ordinary’. So, while aficionados have celebrated this award-winning work of architecture, it was in no way useful or practical for the constituents of this town who rejected it in favor of a the ‘ugly and ordinary’ (un)decorated ‘shed’ of the new community centre (Venturi et al., 1977). As Venturi et al. argue:

When Modern architects righteously abandoned ornament on building, they unconsciously designed buildings that were ornament. In promoting Space and Articulation over symbolism and ornament, they distorted the whole building into a duck.
(Venturi et al., 1977, p. 163)

Venturi et al.’s notion of the “duck and the decorated shed” has become a short-hand reference to the different ways in which ordinary buildings present themselves in the landscapes of cities (Venturi et al., 1977, p. 13).

Our photobook is a musing on a building that has become a sitting ‘duck’ in Steinkopf, now stripped down to its structure. It is a visual and textual investigation of a building that was not built as a folly but quickly became one, a building inspired by the landscape in ruin and the hilltop village and built almost as ruin. Our response is also, in the spirit of Scott Brown, a gendered critique of *machismo* in great architecture (Scott Brown, 2000; Murray, 2010). *Learning from Las Vegas* is a call for humility, not arrogance, on the part of the architect, a call to learn from the humble gesture, the ordinary and the banal, as much as from the large civic buildings of the past.

The final reflection in our presentation showed images (which are not reproduced here) that we photographed during the tragic events that unfolded on 18 April 2021, when much of the Jagger Reading Room on the University of Cape Town’s upper campus was destroyed by a runaway bush fire. Held in the basement was the Roelof S. Uytendogaardt collection of papers, drawings, and photographs, including those for Steinkopf. Over the following weeks we found ourselves involved in the emergency recovery of these materials and the question of the future of heritage, posed by the ruin of the archive itself. This provided the impetus for the assemblage of our books, as a way to think through documentation and ruin in a practice-based manner.

Returning to the idea of learning from Rome and Las Vegas as suggested by Scott Brown, and circling back to the desert town of Steinkopf, we are reminded of Uytendogaardt’s romance with Rome. As a Rome scholar in the 1960s, his time spent at the British School, sketching the arches, vaults and domes of classical antiquity and the hill towns of rural Italy, comes through in powerful yet abstract ways in his modern architecture in Africa. He also studied the public buildings that were constructed during the golden age of Rome, meant to instill civic pride and built as displays of power. So too in Steinkopf – in a desert in Africa, where De Beer’s Corporation commissioned the Steinkopf Community Centre, intended as a display of corporate generosity and, of course, power.

The consideration of heritage past and present, in relation to the award-winning modernist architecture in ruin, poses the question of what heritage should be preserved and what should be let go of in a time of growing inequality and a global pandemic – and once again – what are the politics and ethics of African heritage?

PRIMARY SOURCE

Roelof Sarel Uytendogaardt Collection. Architectural Collections. BC1264. Manuscripts and Archives Department, University of Cape Town Libraries. **END**

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