

# LOBBY

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# Death of a Mascot

UNSUNG VICTIM OF POSTMODERNITY

Words by Stylianos Giamarelos  
Drawing by Kenismael Santiago



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Architectural history consists of deaths and murders, a relentless succession of 'this will kill that'. It is a story that goes back to the late Middle Ages, when Archdeacon Frolo, the fictional character in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, posited that "the book will kill the edifice". The invention of typography eventually turned architecture into a bare skeletal polyhedron. Surrendering its main symbolic function to the printed page, architectural form degenerated to "the cold and inexorable lines of geometry". Five centuries later, Robert Venturi described cathedrals like Frolo's Notre Dame as billboards with a building attached. The postmodern architect's notion of 'the decorated shed' registered the divide long prophesied by the medieval Archdeacon: the symbolic and the structural were two distinct functions of architecture. This is why Venturi in turn revelled in the gargantuan neon signs of the Las Vegas Strip. Rich in a symbolism separated from their architecture, they showed the way forward for a modernism that was only producing 'dead ducks' at the time. Effectively stripped of this external symbolism, these modernist structures were only self-referential monuments to a dated industrialism and vacant space. However, the story of the relation of the shed to the sign was not as straightforward as Venturi originally thought. Rather tellingly, it involved yet another murder long hidden in the shadows of architectural historiography.

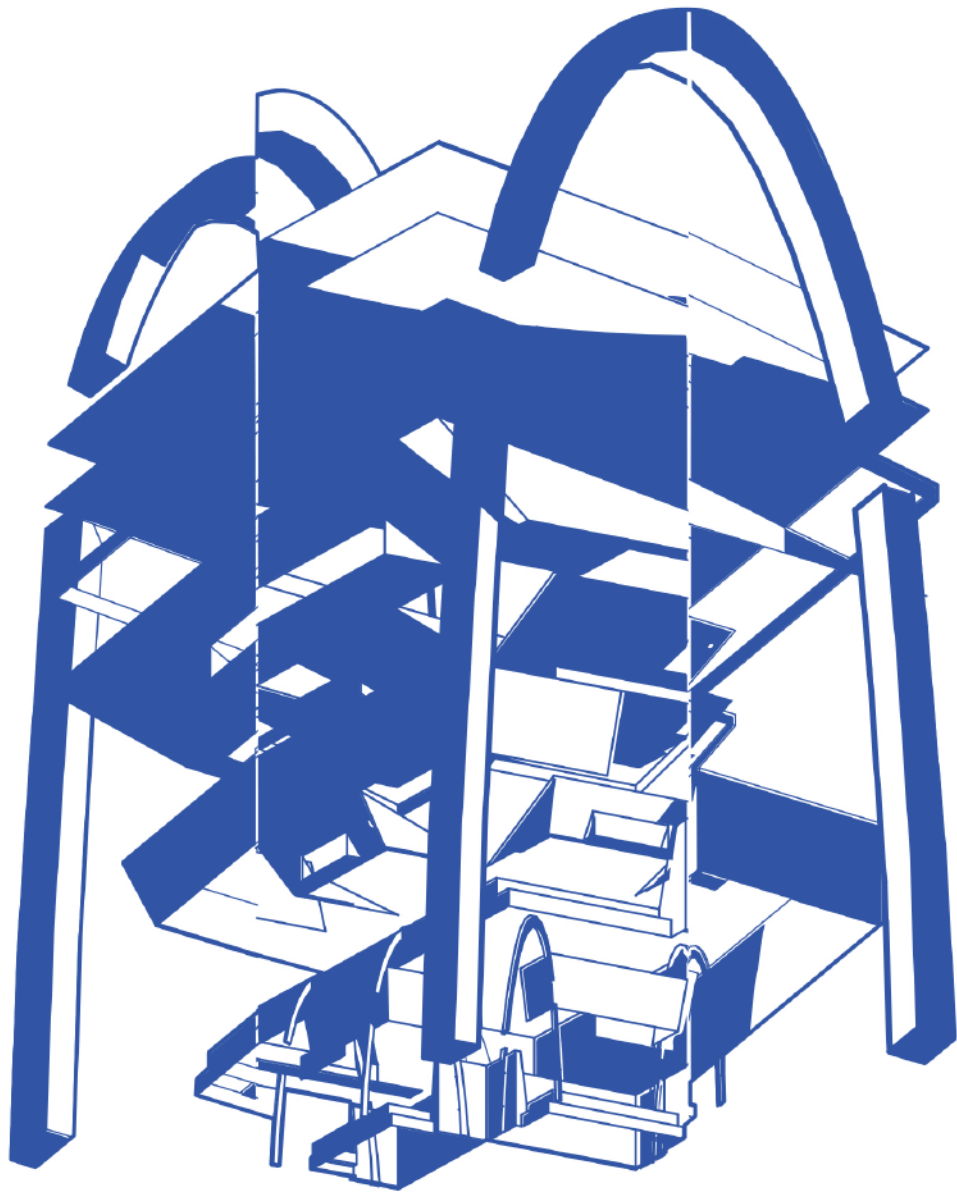
"Boomerang Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney..." The founder of New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, recounts the eye-catching neon signs as he cruises the Vegas Strip in the mid-1960s. Unbeknownst to both Wolfe and Venturi, the McDonald's Parabola is the odd one out in this

series of logos. Thanks to the work of historians like Alan Hess and John Love from the mid-1980s onwards, we now know the minutiae of the Big M story. It is an unconventional tale of architecture with a vengeance, a story that shows that the shed was not as inert as Venturi thought. The architecture of the McDonald's shed actually went as far as killing Speedee, the brand's original mascot, to become the decorative logo in the oversized sign.

It all started in 1948, when a young Richard McDonald (and his brother, Maurice) had a stand in San Bernardino, California. More specifically, they had an octagonal, sparsely decorated drive-in hamburger shed. The two brothers replaced the slower carhop with a walk-up self-service that centred on a few popular items served in paper packages. They knew that this speedy self-service system of assembly-line standards was the key to their increasing popularity. This is why they named their mascot, the chubby character in a chef's hat that featured on the original McDonald's sign, Speedee.

Wanting to revamp the place to mirror their tremendous success, in 1952 the two brothers worked with their architect, Stanley Clark Meston. Capitalising on the two brothers' practical experience, the architect's layout polished and showcased the efficiency of their services. Queuing in the shadow of the cantilevered sloping roof, customers could now witness the clean kitchen with the red-and-white tile walls through expansive glass surfaces.

To render their stand more visible from the high-way, Richard McDonald came up with a first sketch of the iconic golden arches. In the hands of Meston, and his peer Richard Fish, this crude sketch turned into the sophisticated design of the McDonald's parabolas. Design-wise, the arches did not interfere with the efficient spatial



Photography: Rob Corder. License CC-BY-NC 2.0, source bit.ly/2vzrcr9



layout. Appended to the sides, they were also self-supported. In other words, the arches had no structural function. They were architectural elements deliberately conceived as signs that would attract the drivers' attention. The arches soon became a McDonald's trademark. This earned them a place on the sign alongside Speedee. Looming in the shadows, they waited for the right moment to pull the trigger and take the mascot's place.

By 1960, the firm opened its 200th store in the United States. Spreading across the country, all these new stands featured the arches as their distinctive architectural elements. A year later, Ray Kroc, the man behind the success of the franchise, acquired the original McDonald's stands from the two brothers. By the end of 1961, death was speedily approaching Speedee. Market research had shown that, more than anything else, customers identified McDonald's with the golden arches. Thanks to Kroc's exceptional entrepreneurial skills, the giant McDonald's parabola became ubiquitous and synonymous with hamburgers in the North American landscape. Speedee had in turn become redundant. Side by side, the instantly recognisable golden arches formed the familiar Big M logo that took his place.

The arches of the original stand were thus immortalised in the form of the logo. The ultra-modern form of the parabola was behind the postmodern sign of McDonald's at the Vegas Strip. This logotypisation of the architectural element possibly expresses the postmodern *Zeitgeist* more accurately than the explosive demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe. It marks the moment when the modern architectural element can only survive as an empty word, a logo attached as a sign on top of the decorated shed. The McDonald's stand was never a Venturian 'duck' in the sense of a 'hamburger-shaped hamburger stand'. In this case, it was the subtle association of the parabola with the brand that constituted the building's 'duckness'. In other words, the McDonald's stand was an instance of modern design that had not produced a 'dead duck'. From the outset, the golden arches connoted a burger brand, not a fascination with a dated industrialism.

Speedee, the unsung victim of the McDonald's success story, rests in peace ever since. Unacknowledged by architectural historians up to this date, his tragic fate is yet another sign that, to really appreciate architecture, you may even need to commit a murder.☠

