

Robert Venturi 1991 Laureate Essay

Looking at Architecture with New Eyes

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In 1954, a twenty-nine year old architect from Philadelphia went to Rome on a scholarship from the American Academy. In the course of the next two years he traveled through Italy and in the cradle of the classical Renaissance it was Mannerist and Baroque architecture that made the deepest impression on him. Immediately after this he worked in the offices of Eero Saarinen and Louis I. Kahn. In 1966 he published a book in which he worked his thoughts into a theory of architecture which was soon to become extremely influential. The book was called *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the young architect was Robert Venturi.

This heretic, romantic creed, which was a head-on attack on the whole of twentieth century Modernism, found its most enthusiastic followers in the United States of America. The anti-rationalist, anti-Classical and anti-European attitude it expressed struck a chord in the land of the freely-composed cabins and barns of the early pioneers, the Shingle Style influenced by the Pittoresque and above all in a country permeated by the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright's life-long polemic and his "organic architecture" which was intended to provide an alternative to the Beaux Arts school and later to dogmatic functionalism. But in a Europe which was tired of the clichéd, heavy-handed, anti-urban remake of the Modern Movement of the twenties, the liberating *bon mots* of this obviously highly cultivated rebel were also given an enthusiastic reception. When, a short time later, the international Post-Modernist Movement was proclaimed, which after the dogmatism of the Bauhaus doctrine and its successors was to propagate a new unorthodox *laissez-faire* attitude, Venturi was almost unanimously declared its heir apparent and main protagonist.

His impudent aphorisms (the bawdierizing of Mies van der Rohe's famous saying "less is more" into "less is a bore," the provocative assertion that "Main Street is almost all right") were immediately taken up by the advocates of the "new niceness," but they found his articles and books on the whole indigestible. The same fate befell his buildings. For Venturi was not only an architectural theoretician, he was also a designing architect. He had already designed a number of buildings: between 1960 and 1963, Guild House, the older people's home in Philadelphia (where Venturi would later build his own house); 1961–64 the Vanna Venturi House in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania; 1967 the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame for New Brunswick, New Jersey (never built); 1968–1973 the Humanities Building of the State University of New York in Purchase; and from 1970 to 1974 the Dixwell Fire Station in New Haven, Connecticut. All the buildings which he designed with his wife Denise Scott-Brown, who represented the social and political commitment in the group around Venturi, became widely-publicized, widely-discussed milestones in the history of Post-Modernist architecture—and yet they seemed strangely unwieldy and somehow out of place there.

Indeed the brand of Post-Modernism through which Venturi tried to improve the well-being of people and their environment and to reinvigorate a Modernist tradition which was now *de passé* and sclerotic had little in common with the trend which almost everywhere won cheap applause simply by currying favor with populist taste. Some of the proponents of the latter used the favorite images of the contemporary consumer society quite literally, others filtered them through the amusing interpretation which Pop-Art had already provided; some used direct but completely arbitrary historical references, others felt obliged to be ironic in their treatment of historical forms, silently implying that the connection to the original could not be anything but fictitious, some fulfilled the expectations of the user and above all of the client in a very direct way whereas others went along with the client's wishes simply in order to question them cryptically, make good hearted fun of them and gently change them.

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The more Venturi's work developed the more evident this discrepancy became. In 1972, at the latest, it must have been crystal clear to anyone who had closely followed the work of the thought-provoking *enfant terrible*. For it was in that year that two works were created in the Philadelphia studio which were as emblematic as they were provocative. One was the design for Franklin Court and the other the book, *Learning from Las Vegas* co-authored with Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour. For the first work he took the site where the good citizens of Philadelphia had asked for a dignified and prestigious memorial to their illustrious son and traced on it in a mildly mocking spirit the banal outline of Benjamin Franklin's demolished house, whilst banishing the actual memorial below the ground. The second turned polemically against the negation of what was misguidedly considered to be the ugliness of North American everyday life and present it instead as an artistic stimulus, even an iconographic model which one could perfectly well learn from.

Both manifestos (which is what they in fact are) shocked not only the North American middle class, whose aesthetic needs Venturi pretended to champion, but also the majority of international architectural critics. For the Modernist they were too impure, for the Post-Modernists, too prosaic. This is exactly what Venturi wanted. Had he not confessed programmatically six years earlier "...an architecture of complexity and contradiction ... must rather be a realization of difficult uniformity by integration than easy uniformity by elimination?" Now he had reached this stage himself: he integrated all manner of things into his architecture and architectural theory and thus eluded any attempt to put him into a category.

Consequently, each of his subsequent works had a new surprise in store: the extension to the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin College, Ohio (1973-1976), the Faculty Club of the Pennsylvania State University (1974), the Basco Showroom on the edge of Philadelphia (1978), the Molecular Biology Building at Princeton University, New Jersey (1983-1985), and the Art Museum in Seattle, Washington (1988-1991). Each building was different, each was adapted to its surroundings like a chameleon, interpreted it and its function in an unexpected and each fascinating way and yet each building was unmistakably a "real Venturi."

The totality of peak of contemporary architectural knowledge was put into practice by Venturi and Scott-Brown in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London. The comparatively small, low-profile extension adopts the proportions, the facade articulation and the material (wonderful, generously laid Portland stone) of the neo-Classical main building dating from 1837 and the pilaster rhythm of its subtly curved front creates a kind of precisely worked paravant: the play of imitation and interpretation, reality and mask, has been taken to the limit of virtuosity. Inside the building a massive entrance staircase with a spectacular view of Trafalgar Square and a spaciouly designed sequence of rooms, accommodating service of the museum such as entrance foyer, book shop, restaurant and auditorium, work together to form a completely new type of museum building, whose functional and architectural quintessence nevertheless remains the exhibition rooms for the collections on the first floor. Sixteen rooms lit by clerestories (here the Sir John Soane Museum, which was originally his own house, was clearly the inspiration) are arranged in three suites and are also connected to each other by cross corridors. These rooms are designed specially to ensure that the particular pictures they exhibit are shown in a spectacular setting to their best advantage. The impression made by masterpieces such as Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, placed in carefully worked out axial positions on pale gray plaster walls with surrounds and skirtings of *pietra serena*, and lit by a wonderful, indirect natural light, is simply overwhelming.

Rarely can the same be said of paintings of equal quality which hang in galleries designed by famous and talented colleagues of Venturi. The whole museum genre, which has become the experimental field (cynics say playground) favored by progressive, contemporary architects, has also become the place where their failings are shown up. Those buildings whose function has misguidedly been made to play a subordinate role often bear the clear marks of the brute force with which either a particular form or a particular ideology has been imposed on them.

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Venturi's oeuvre passes this test with flying colors. "Uniformity by Integration" has proved its worth. It makes it possible to do justice to the imminent complexity of architecture without breaking its radicality. The fact that practical needs and higher value have been so well combined in the Sainsbury Wing has nothing to do with an act of force but with the underlying concept. This concept allows Baldassare Peruzzi's *Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne* to be integrated just as naturally as Le Corbusier's *promenade architecturale*, and the dignified opus rusticum, into which the names of great artists of the past have been cut, can be left untouched and placed unobtrusively next to the Micro Gallery with its "visual encyclopedia" which can be called up on computer screens. The fact that the result of a contradictory collage like this is not a pastiche but an original, self-contained creation is due to the intellectual caliber and design skills of its authors.

But this does not make it light fare. For his masterpieces Venturi used without exception familiar ingredients but combined in a way which is constantly surprising. This not only produced astonishing end results but also re-interpreted the individual ingredients. Terms such as Classicism and Romanticism, drama and prose, the festive and the mundane are stripped of the comfortable but sloppy clichés surrounding them and returned to their original intellectual essence, ennobled by a new, unrelenting stringency. Does this make Venturi a Post-Modernist architect? Or is he not a modern architect in the new sense of the word demanded by the new circumstances of our times? But these categories themselves have also fallen victim to Venturi's intellectual purges and in the light of his actual buildings the question becomes futile and redundant. The fact that this happens is what singles Venturi out as a truly great architect: because he refuses to be labeled, because he questions the very principle of labeling, because he forces us, as his mentor Louis Kahn did before him, to completely re-thing traditional categories of architecture or even those which we have created ourselves. And above all because he teaches us to look at architecture, all architecture—not just his own—with new eyes which may have lost their star dust but are certainly better focused.

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