Books

Robert Venturi
Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture
New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966, 144 pp., 350 illus. Library of Congress Catalogue No. 66–30001 (no ISBN); 2nd ed., 1977. $24.95, ISBN 9780870702822

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: A Fifty-Year Reception

The first edition of Venturi's explosive little book, written in the period 1962–64, appeared in a new series called Papers on Modern Architecture published under the imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art in 1966. It was preceded by a lengthy excerpt in Yale's journal of architecture, *Perspecta*, the year before.[1] In an introduction written for the MoMA book, Yale architectural historian Vincent Scully hailed it as the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, "one of the few basic texts of our time—one which, despite its antiheroic lack of pretension and its shift of perspective from the Champs-Élysées to Main Street, still picks up a fundamental dialogue begun in the twenties, and so connects us with the heroic generation of modern architecture once more" (16).[2]

Most of the initial reviewers confirmed Scully's opinion of the book's import, although they voiced reservations about

Venturi's methodology, above all his neglect of questions of function and technology and his skirting of social issues. For some, precisely these omissions, along with the author's explicitly subjective point of view ("I like complexity and contradiction in architecture"), were what made his "gentle manifesto" so radical.

Peter Blake, whose image of Main Street Venturi had appropriated from his own book *God's Own Junkyard* of two years earlier to make the opposite point, deemed *Complexity and Contradiction* less original. Writing in *Architectural Forum*, he allowed that "The history of art is bound to be retold in every generation," but he found Venturi's notion of complexity superficial and his formal contradictions to be contrived: " 'accidentalism' has been raised to a discipline.' "[3]

Among other early responses, Colin Rowe, reviewing the book in the *New York Times Book Review* together with Reyner Banham's *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, which appeared the same year, applauded the Philadelphia architect for taking on "the orthodox credo." He appreciated Venturi's forthright challenge to modern architecture's functionalist and reformist pieties and to its pretense of scientific objectivity. While admiring both books under review, Rowe noted that they represented "the polar extremes between which architecture now oscillates."[4] Peter Collins likewise was pleased to see modernism's puritanical value system dispatched, although he felt that Venturi's discussion of the historical evidence for the alternative was superficial.[5] In a symposium titled "Architectural History and the Student Architect" that he edited for the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, he reiterated his criticism that Venturi's historical erudition was based almost exclusively on formal considerations.

Yet he praised *Complexity and Contradiction*'s value for educating future practitioners, commenting that it "raises the issue of the extent to which creative artists really do need historical support for their ideas."[6] Alan Colquhoun ventured that it was possible to accept Venturi's general thesis, yet he deemed the book "highly idiosyncratic" and principally "an apologia for [Venturi's] own work."[7] For Naomi Miller, writing in *JSAH*, it was precisely as an argument for Venturi's own architecture that the book was least successful; what she appreciated was the author's "perceptive eye and mind." She forecast that "for a whole school of young architects and students this book may be adopted as a battle-cry of a new movement."[8]

Almost all the reviewers of the first edition complained about the book's diminutive size; the uncaptioned, postage stamp–sized illustrations made it more like a barrage of 35 mm slides (as Collins put it) than an argument inviting careful visual study. This criticism was taken to heart a decade later in a redesigned edition. Although less elegant in its horizontal layout, it featured a larger format and clearly labeled images. In his "Note to the Second Edition," Venturi acknowledged that *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Form* might have been a preferable title, more accurately describing the book's content—as his mentor Donald Drew Egbert had suggested at the time— but when writing it he had seen little reason for such a predicate, since "form was king in architectural thought" in the early 1960s (14).[9] Moreover, neither the political urgencies of the second half of the decade nor the problems of symbolism that would become central to his second book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, written in collaboration with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour and published in 1972, had yet come into focus.[10] Instead, *Complexity and Contradiction* drew its

principal inspiration from the aesthetic formalism that was dominant in postwar culture in the United States, above all from the literary theory of the New Critics, whose writings Venturi repeatedly invokes in his book and by whom he had been much influenced as a student at Princeton in the late 1940s.

By 1977, however, when the second edition of *Complexity and Contradiction* appeared, the late modernist cultural landscape had changed considerably. The concept of postmodernism was now fully coined in architecture and other fields, and Venturi's book was hailed as one of its founding documents. In *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*, also of 1977, Charles Jencks assimilated many of Venturi's arguments, including the one for an aesthetic of "both–and," a defining feature of the new architecture that Jencks redescribed in semiotic terms as "double coding."[11] The seminal validation of pop culture, more associated with *Learning from Las Vegas*—which also appeared in a new edition in 1977[12]—was recognized in hindsight as having been anticipated in *Complexity and Contradiction*'s dénouement: "Is not Main Street almost all right?" Another review in *JSAH*, by the literary scholar Philip Finkelpearl, welcomed the second editions of both books as further evidence (if any were needed) of Venturi's key contributions as a polemicist and critical thinker.[13]

In the 1980s *Complexity and Contradiction* continued to enjoy widespread currency, becoming required reading for every student of architecture and every theorist of postmodernism. Yet in an interview with Stuart Wrede of the Museum of Modern Art in 1991, Venturi distanced himself from the historicist aesthetic with which his argument had become associated. At this date, the New Urbanism was in its heyday, with Seaside, Florida, its poster project. In Venturi's view, Seaside was in many ways a realization of the Main Street vernacular he had first upheld a quarter century earlier, yet he distrusted the town's cloying prettiness, insisting that his own view of architectural history had always been not only "anti-utopian" but also "anti-nostalgic."[14]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, architecture's newfound preoccupations with digital and global culture largely eclipsed *Complexity and Contradiction*, challenging its canonical status. Venturi's connoisseurial predilection for elite and effete taste-cultures—mannerism, the baroque, rococo,

Lutyens—could only appear dated to many, and, in a return of the repressed, Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* spoke compellingly once again to architecture's desired affiliation with technological innovation. Even the revindicated commercial strip exuded a certain quaintness at this point. Rem Koolhaas drove the point home in an interview with Venturi and Scott Brown titled "Relearning from Las Vegas," published in *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (2000), where he paid tribute to the authors of *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, somewhat left-handedly, as heralds of the architectural shift from substance to sign while illustrating how much had changed in the interim since their books first appeared.[15] By this point, postmodernism was also the victim of its own success. Ever the contrarian, Venturi struggled to dissociate himself from the label, stubbornly protesting his untimeliness. In May 2001 his portrait appeared on the cover of *Architecture* magazine with the declaration "I am not now and never have been a postmodernist."

In the past fifteen years or so, new thematics have come to the fore, instigating still other readings of *Complexity and Contradiction*. For a new generation of pragmatic—or self-described "postcritical"—practitioners, Venturi and Scott Brown's "judgment-deferred" approach to the status quo has resonated. Meanwhile, even if Venturi's book represents only a superficial or metaphorical instance of the complexity theories that prevail today in sciences such as computation, economics, and biology, it nonetheless appears to belong genealogically to the general intellectual shift from simplicity to complexity that crystallized in the early 1960s. In retrospect, it is possible to discover more similarity than difference between his book and other influential architectural writings of the period, among them Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964).[16] The fact that Venturi took his definition of complex systems from Herbert Simon, a pioneering figure in the fields of general systems theory and information science, appears almost as noteworthy now as the literary references on which earlier commentators have harped.[17]

Finally, as postmodernism itself has begun to be historicized by the current generation of scholars, *Complexity and Contradiction*

looms into view again in relation to newer questions about disciplinary autonomy and the meaning of architectural form.[18] To date the book has gone through more than a dozen reprintings in English.[19] It is likely to remain a barometer of changes in architecture culture for some time to come.

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Notes

1. Robert Venturi, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture: Selections from a Forthcoming Book," *Perspecta* 9 (1965), 17–56.
2. Page number cited refers to the first edition of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.
3. Peter Blake, "Books: Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," *Architectural Forum*, June 1967, 56, 57.
4. Colin Rowe, "Waiting for Utopia," *New York Times Book Review*, 10 Sept. 1967, reprinted in Colin Rowe, *As I Was Saying: Recollections and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 2, *Cornelliana* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 77, 78. Surprisingly, while Rowe commended Venturi for his "stimulating visual insights," he failed to mention his own essay "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," cowritten with Robert Slutzky, which had appeared in *Perspecta* 8 (1963), the issue before Venturi's excerpt, and contained a similarly formalist argument on behalf of ambiguity in architecture. Rowe would return to Venturi's book in a more probing and critical vein in his essay "Robert Venturi and the Yale Mathematics Building," *Oppositions* 6 (Fall 1976), 10–19, reprinted in As I Was Saying, vol. 2, 79–101.
5. Peter Collins, "Order in Complexity: *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Robert Venturi)," *Landscape* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1967), 37.
6. [Peter Collins], "Editor's Postscript: Architectural History and the Student Architect: A Symposium," *JSAH* 26, no. 3 (Sept. 1967), 198.
7. Alan Colquhoun, "Robert Venturi," *A.D.* 7 (Aug. 1967), 362. Colquhoun would come back to the book in another essay written a decade later, assessing the difference between *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas*: Alan Colquhoun, "Sign and Substance: Reflections on Complexity, Las Vegas, and Oberlin," *Oppositions* 14 (Fall 1978), 26–37.
8. Naomi Miller, review of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, by Robert Venturi, *JSAH* 26, no. 4 (Dec. 1967), 318–19.
9. Page number cited refers to the second edition (repr. 2008) of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.
10. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972).
11. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).
12. The second edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* was also redesigned, although in its case from a large format to a smaller, inexpensive one. Perhaps

appropriately, both redesigns sacrificed graphic quality for ordinariness. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977).

13. Philip J. Finkelpearl, review of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., by Robert Venturi, and other publications, *JSAH* 38, no. 2 (May 1979), 203–5. Finkelpearl was a close friend of Venturi from Princeton and had been instrumental in introducing him to the work of William Empson and the other New Critics.

14. Stuart Wrede, "*Complexity and Contradiction* Twenty-Five Years Later: An Interview with Robert Venturi," in *Studies in Modern Art*, vol. 1, *American Art of the 1960s*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 148, 153.

15. Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rem Koolhaas, "Relearning from Las Vegas: An Interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi," in *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, ed. Rem Koolhaas et al. (Cologne: Taschen, 2000), 590–617.

16. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964). See, in this vein, Peter L. Laurence, "Contradictions and Complexities: Jane Jacobs's and Robert Venturi's Complexity Theories," *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 3 (Feb. 2006), 49–60.

17. Herbert A. Simon, "The Architecture of Complexity," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 106, no. 6 (1962), 467–82, cited in Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), 89.

18. To take just two examples: Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Emmanuel J. Petit, *Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).

19. According to the official VSBA bibliography online, it has been translated into eighteen languages. VSBA, "VSBA Bibliography—Writings by Robert Venturi," http://venturiscottbrown.org/bibliography/BiblioB.pdf (accessed 14 July 2016).

The Mannerism of Architecture and the City in *Complexity and Contradiction*

Robert Venturi's assertion in *Complexity and Contradiction* that "the examples chosen reflect my partiality for certain eras: Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo especially" (19) stakes a multifaceted claim for the importance of early modern architecture.[1] Quoting Henry-Russell Hitchcock about how the changing interests of architects in certain periods of architectural history reflect their own preoccupations, Venturi proposes that mannerism, baroque, and rococo provide the most apposite historical references for contemporary architecture.

But he also suggests that the "eras" of these three styles share principles that are not specific to a particular moment in history. In the chapter "Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification and Picturesqueness," Venturi affirms that "the desire for a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions," is "an attitude common in the Mannerist periods," which include the sixteenth century, but also Hellenism, and the seventeenth century up to modernism, in the works of "Le Corbusier, Aalto, Kahn, and others" (26). In *Complexity and Contradiction*, early modern architecture represents both a historical body of references and a sample of suprahistorical design principles.

With these claims *Complexity and Contradiction* resembles earlier essays by Colin Rowe and Anthony Blunt that had tested the relevance of mannerism for modernist architecture.[2] It also prefigures later uses of the baroque in design theories and historiography critical of modernism, as in Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* and its uptake of Paolo Portoghesi's monograph on Borromini.[3] But the use of early modern architecture and its description as "Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo" is also specific to *Complexity and Contradiction* in the way it structures the book and articulates its agenda.[4]

Like the predilection for pre-1900 architecture and especially mannerist and baroque buildings, the role of the concept of mannerism in *Complexity and Contradiction*, and in Venturi's built oeuvre, has been emphasized, not least by Venturi himself. His stay at the American Academy in Rome and his European travels of the 1950s developed his interest in historical architecture but also complicated its purport.[5] Venturi has recalled how during his final months in Rome he became less concerned with baroque architecture as a paradigm of architectural "space," in line with Giedion's *Time, Space and Architecture*, than with "meaning" as embodied by mannerism, partly under the influence of the section on Palladio's mannerism in Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*.[6] If, in *Complexity and Contradiction*, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples still outnumber samples from the sixteenth century, conceptually Venturi claims to be interested in the baroque as a form of mannerism. This would change between *Complexity and Contradiction* and

Learning from Las Vegas (1972), in which the baroque becomes the paradigm of a rhetorical architecture imbued with symbolism and power of persuasion, distinct from the mannerist play with form and convention.[7]

But a closer look at *Complexity and Contradiction* reveals that the role of mannerism is not entirely stable throughout the book. Venturi concludes the introduction with the statement that "today this attitude [common in the Mannerist periods] is again relevant to both the medium of architecture and the program in architecture" (26). He discusses the "medium"—forms as they are visually perceived—in chapters 2 to 5, and the "program"—the "growing complexities of our functional problems" (26)—in chapters 6 to 10. While cross-referenced examples tie both sections together, there is a notable distinction in their conceptual frameworks. Venturi's often-noted reliance on literary New Criticism is largely confined to the first part. It is reflected in the chapter titles: "Ambiguity," "Contradictory Levels," "The Double-Functioning Element." In this last instance Venturi draws on Wylie Sypher's *Four Stages in Renaissance Style*, which had applied to literature Rudolf Wittkower's identification of such elements in Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurenziana. Venturi returns the "double-functioning element" to architecture and in the process adopts Sypher's idea that mannerism, "a perennial overgrowth of ornate, clever, strained, abnormal phrasing," is part of a recurring cycle of "baroque, mannerism, rococo" that "repeat[ed] itself during the renaissance and the nineteenth century."[8] Sypher recognizes this cycle in works of art that are contemporary but in different media, as they share similar formal principles, a view that supports Venturi's easy transition between architecture and literature in the first section of *Complexity and Contradiction*.

Sypher's mannerism-as-form, applicable across history, probably assisted Venturi in structuring and legitimating his own "partiality" for a wide range of pre-1900 architectural styles. As such, mannerism may have arrived quite late in the editorial process of *Complexity and Contradiction*.[9] In an excerpt published in *Perspecta* in 1965, Venturi states that complexity and contradiction are a matter of "form and function," but he does not associate the distinction with mannerism or present it as the principle structuring the book.[10] The excerpted chapter, titled "The