
Interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

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Interview with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi

Phillipe Barriere and Sylvia Lavin

L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui:

Your practice has gained considerable acclaim for having introduced an historical dimension to the matrix of modern architecture. But of the many ideas of history, not much has been said of the one you have in fact introduced, nor of how you came to develop your particular conception of the past.

Robert Venturi:

Let me begin by saying I think the recent past is the hardest thing to understand. You have to try and remember now, how out of fashion history was among architects when I was young. I have always loved history, and if I hadn't been an architect, I would have been an art historian.
—no more dealing with contracts, public relations, marketing, insurance, partners, codes, bureaucrats, lawyers, clients, and meeting the payroll. I was just born with an interest in the history of architecture. I studied at Princeton—by accident but also by luck—where history in the architecture curriculum was OK, unlike Harvard, which at the time was the place to be. Going to Harvard in those days was like going to Divinity School—a place where you got the Word, and once you had the Word, you had to go out and propagate it. But at Princeton, we studied Modern architecture and everyone agreed Modernism was the appropriate current style—of course we didn't use the word "style" then, but "Modernism" was understood in the context of history. The Department of Architecture was even within the Art History department.

You've probably never heard of Donald Drew Egbert, who is the biggest hero of my life. He taught the history course in Modern architecture at Princeton. Unlike Sigfried Giedion, who used history to prove a point, Egbert implied that Modernism, within the context of history, could evolve into something else: it was not an end in itself, but a phase within an evolution. I think this is the reason why innovators came out of Princeton in my generation and after.

Also, at the American Academy in Rome, I had two years to just look at history. In our day we had a bias toward the Baroque and piazzas. And we looked at form and space rather than symbol and meaning. But during my last months in Rome, I realized that Mannerist architecture was what really meant most to me, and I reexamined a lot of Italian historical architecture for its Mannerist qualities. This was important when I came to write *Complexity and Contradiction* in the following years.

To this day Denise and I essentially look at old architecture and everyday architecture. We don't look much at what other architects are doing, and don't keep up much with what's going on.

AA: How did you come to meet Louis Kahn?

RV:

Well, when I got out of school, [REDACTED] and didn't find myself until I wrote *Complexity and Contradiction*. In a way, I did find myself relatively early, but in another, I haven't found myself yet—you shouldn't find yourself entirely until the moment before you die. I had a summer job with Robert Montgomery Brown, who was a local modern architect. Louis Kahn—whom no one had heard of—was in an office on the floor above. I would see him in the elevator. [I also saw the five or six young people who worked for him. They never talked to me because I was young and naive, but Louis Kahn did; he was very kind.] And when I returned to Princeton to finish my Master's thesis I asked Kahn to be on the jury along with George Howe.

AA: Was that when you won the Prix de Rome?

RV:

I got that several years later. Kahn was on the jury and I think he liked what I had done, so he took an interest in me. I then went to work for Stonorov, who was one of the few Modern architects in the city at that time. I worked there for a year, mainly designing an exhibition of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, which was to open in Philadelphia and then to go to the Strozzi Palace in Florence. Louis Kahn also recommended me to Eero Saarinen, whose office I was in for 2-1/2 years. I was not particularly at home there, but I made some nice friends and I learned a lot about the running of an office. Then I came back to run my family's fruit and produce business because my father had become ill. For a year and a half, I worked in the family firm—horrified that I might be caught in the business for the rest of my life. At that time, I would visit Kahn's office for sus-



Sometimes I wish I had been an art historian

I was unsure of myself

I felt I had to leave things out

nance, and he was a good friend. Then I did win the Rome Prize. I applied for it three times and the third time, I got it. People said, "Why do you apply a third time, don't you know when you're not wanted, can't you take a hint—have you no pride?" But the secretary in the New York office at that time, Mary Williams, was a very nice person and encouraged me to reapply.

AA: When did you start the research that led to "Contradiction"?

RV:

That was in 1954, when I went to the American Academy in Rome for two years. When I came back I worked for Louis Kahn and also taught at the University of Pennsylvania as his assistant. Later, probably in '61, Holmes Perkins, the Dean of the Architecture School at Penn, asked me to teach a course in the theory of architecture. In a way that course was a preparation for *Complexity and Contradiction*. Denise helped me with the course and the notes evolved into the book. It was finished in '64 and published in '66. In one sense the book was a reaction to the ethos at Penn at the time. Under Holmes Perkins, Penn was an orthodox, Harvard-oriented, Modern school. [REDACTED] of the course for fear of being accused of corrupting the morals of minors. So I decided that what I was leaving out of the course I'd put in a book.

AA: Denise described your course as a professional architect's view of theory. She said you discussed your own theory briefly at the end of each lecture, and that this became the book itself. Where did the material in the first part of the lectures come from?

RV:

Ironically, from Holmes Perkins; so he was instrumental in promoting the book. He must have sensed that no one from Harvard had the background in history or theory to teach this course, while someone who had been to Princeton probably did. But even at Princeton I had not had a course on theory; I had no idea what to do. It was Holmes who suggested I look at Guadet and use his system of dividing architecture into elements for the purpose of analysis. And that's just what I did. I put together a course with fifteen lectures, each devoted to an element of architecture: space, details, form, structure ...

Denise Scott Brown:

... scale, decoration, light ...

RV:

I did not include symbolism. No one mentioned symbolism in those days—not even at Princeton. Denise and I did that later. And as she said, at the end of each lecture I added my own twist—on scale, light, or whatever.

AA: Tell us about Jean Labatut.

RV:

Jean Labatut is very important in my background, and when I had him as a critic I would have said he was more important than Egbert, the historian. Labatut's background was Beaux-Arts; he had placed second in the Prix de Rome in the mid-20's. He had a wide, though not formal, knowledge of history. [The most wonderful thing he did was to teach by analogy.] He would say something was like something else, employing a rich range of historical examples.

But it was Egbert who was amazing. He deserves more recognition. At the time, he was working on a book on the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. It seems an obvious subject now; in fact, it was very "in" only a few years ago, but in the 40's no one dreamed of taking the Beaux-Arts seriously: it seemed outrageously irrelevant and reactionary. [Sigfried Giedion ignored the Beaux-Arts, except in his references to Labrouste, who used cast iron; for Giedion, the Beaux-Arts was not a "constituent fact" of history, but only a "transitory fact."] Sadly, Egbert eventually stopped work on this book and never finished it. He went on to another book, *Social Radicalism and the Arts*, which is well known in Europe but less known here in the USA. But Egbert's writings on the Beaux-Arts were published after his death by his former student, the distinguished historian David Van Zanten. In choosing to be unfashionable, Egbert had been heroic.

AA: So during that period of time did you have conversations with Kahn regarding your research and your own theory of architecture?

RV:

Yes, we did talk a lot.

AA: What was his reaction?

RV:

Well, Kahn respected the Las Vegas direction Denise and I took, but could not accept it for himself. Also, although his later historicism may have derived from his Beaux-Arts training with Paul Cret at Penn, I think a lot of it came from me. Someone should consider the subject of students influencing masters.

DSB:

It was certainly true with Louis Kahn. I watched him over the years, first as his student, then as his colleague, and I saw ideas I had suggested incorporated in his work, and heard things I'd said repeated by him.

AA: Is that good or bad?

DSB:

Well, it would have been nice to have been acknowledged.

RV:

It isn't good to adopt the ideas of a young person who has no standing and to present them as your own—without acknowledgment.

AA: That's what happens, though, when you're working in an office sharing ideas on the same project.

RV:

There's nothing wrong with that kind of give-and-take; in fact, it's wonderful, but there should be proper attributions in the end. Especially if you're dealing with young people who are original, because they already have a terrible fate before them. To be original is punishable. In the end, of course, the older person can't forgive the younger person.

AA: There's always something that strikes me about the Philip Exeter Library. The refectory building is very much a Venturi design. It comes directly from Vanna Venturi's house, a slanted roof on both sides of a central chimney.

RV:

I don't remember that aspect of it. I don't want to talk about this too much because [REDACTED] and I want to be positive.

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DSB:

Perhaps one difference is that our designs distort the systems that they're based on. It's interesting to compare Lou Kahn's work with his students' works. There's a huge difference. The students impose Kahn's system from the outside in, whereas Kahn grows the system from the inside out—it grows out of his particular problem. [REDACTED] In our work, the system that grows from the inside is distorted in some way; it gets broken or squashed, to meet some extraneous need or pressure. As an urbanist you must develop a sense of where the system exists, where it breaks down, where it distorts, and how all this should fit together. Lou did not have that sense, although later, he did become interested in Roman plans where some of these combinations did exist; where there was, for example, an arcade surrounding a cortile, and different types of space connected to the arcade and related to it in different ways.

AA: You both grew up in families that were very much aware of architecture.

L...

DSB:

Bob knew when he was 4 years old—maybe before—that he was going to be an architect. And I too, at the age of 5, wanted to be an architect, because my mother had studied architecture. But the next year, I decided to be a teacher, then a writer—in the end I have done all that. People who are "this and that" are very difficult to define. The heart surgeon becomes a hero; the general practitioner—though brilliant—does not. [REDACTED] mine is not.

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AA: Perhaps we should discuss the period of your early research, the pop art influence in your work, essays that were never published and about feminism in architecture.

RV:

Those are very big subjects.

AA: They could be a beginning.

DSB:

Well, let's take the last one, feminism: architecture has been an upper-class male club and, in many ways, still is, although architects don't intend it to be; but old habits die hard. I think the wave of the future is upon the profession now, but at the top, it's still hard to be a woman in architecture. At least, [REDACTED]

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AA: Very difficult for any woman in architecture.

DSB:

For instance, when people come to interview us they usually say to Bob, "Tell me about your work," and to me, "Tell me about your woman's problem." That in itself is sexism. You did not do that, but at this stage in the emancipation of women architects, the woman is seen as having the problem.

It has even been suggested that the articles I wrote were in fact written by Bob using my name. Of course, it wasn't so. But the perception has been a big problem for both of us. There's a strange psychology around the guru in architecture, particularly because architectural design ability is supposed to be an inborn talent, not possessed by all; hard work is a necessary but not requisite ingredient for achieving good design.

The unmeasurable side of architecture—design—is the part that scares people, the more so because it's the part we most honor in this profession. If you are not a good designer, forget it. And there's no way to be a good designer except through talent—that's the mythology of architecture.

AA: The development of detail in working drawings is also very important.

DSB:

That is very important, but the profession doesn't see it that way, what's more, the world doesn't see it that way. [Architects, inside themselves, honor most the part they cannot measure.] Saying, "I'm not a good designer," is like saying, "I'm not a good architect." Because of that, we architects can't use science to validate ourselves. The parallel is with crossing the ocean. When nautical compasses were invented, sailors stopped putting a beautiful lady on the front of the ship. Once they had science, they didn't need magic to steer them to their destination. Architects still need magic in the part of architecture which involves design, where science cannot help. And so they make gurus. They get the latest journal, where pictures of the latest guru's latest building will help take them across the frightening ocean. But there's no room for a mom and pop guru. And because architecture is still mainly a man's profession, there's no place for a woman guru.

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AA: If you had been a man, would you have teamed up with Robert Venturi?

DSB:

It's interesting to consider what would have happened had Bob and I both been men. Greene & Greene have an identity as two men. Hardy, Holzman and Pfeiffer seem to have an identity as three people. It's hard to tell. I think if I were a man, things may have been different but I can't say for sure, partly because the subjects I bring to architecture are unfamiliar to many architects, and uninteresting to them as well.

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One reason for this is that Americans don't know much about the influences on me that come from Europe (including the European-Jewish origins of my family) and Africa. I have had an intellectual life in three countries; areas of my thought derive from





I felt a sort of shiver; I couldn't tell whether it was hate or love.

You don't quite know; you're always surprised

a childhood and youth in Africa and student years spent in the England and Europe of the 50's. American architectural critics know little of these places and times. The second axis of my thought, which counted a lot when I came to America, was my training in "town planning," as they call it in England, where it was a field strongly allied to architecture. In the City Planning Department of the University of Pennsylvania, I found I was studying social sciences more than architecture. This was just as the civil rights movement was starting. The people I learned from at Penn became my colleagues and greatly influenced my way of being an architect. I brought their perspectives to my collaboration with Bob, finding him to be the only architect in the school sympathetic to what was going on in the Planning Department, and who could understand its relevance to architecture. Perhaps Bob had this insight because his mother was a socialist.

The others seemed to side with Louis Kahn who said the sociologists were interested in 2.5 people; therefore, you shouldn't listen to them. But Bob felt, as I did, that we could learn from the sociologists' critical, skeptical, and disagreeable views of architecture, which were challenging and a goad to architectural creativity (in fact, it was criticism of CIAM's city planning). Every now and again architects and urban designers have to become their own sociologists, because there aren't enough sociologists and those there are aren't interested in architecture. But most of the time I think what we've tried to do is use social insight in an architectural way, and as an aid to artistry. For example, although our discussions at Penn on urbanism and popular culture were largely intellectual and conceptual, [my first reaction to Las Vegas was artistic.] I didn't analyze it as a sociological phenomenon; [The strength of the feeling lay in its mixture of both.]

I've always agreed with the Modernists and Brutalists who felt that the shiver you get from looking at something ugly can be artistically important. It gets you out of an aesthetic rut. It makes your eyes fresh. I think that's what Le Corbusier meant when he said "eyes that will not see." And Ed Ruscha "just looked." But it was great art to look, in the way he did. The freshness of the shiver was what I felt when I first saw Las Vegas. It made me want to interpret and understand the shiver. That's why I invited Bob to visit Las Vegas with me. Later, with the help of Steve Izenour and our Yale students, we used many ways to analyze the strip, based on the sum of our past experiences. This was an exciting time in our lives. Here was a whole new field of discovery. It opened up so many new ideas. Yet it was equally exciting because we could apply traditional ideas to new phenomena, and incorporate the new into the existing body of architecture.

RV:

America is a place where there is a great diversity of taste cultures—and of architectural juxtapositions, combinations, and distortions that should discourage an emphasis on homogeneity. These come together are a beautiful phenomenon and one of the reasons they're likeable is that they diminish ideology—the idea that there's only one way to do things. Art and ideology don't mix: ideology is the enemy of vitality in art. But ideology is convenient, especially for journalists. It simplifies their job: it's the equivalent of the sound byte.

AA: Some people have said that you're the standard-bearers of Postmodernism. And it's true that your names have served as a reference if not a backing for this movement.

DSB:

There are many reasons why we aren't Postmodernists. One is Bob's interest in architectural history that dates from his childhood and makes his knowledge more profound than that of the Postmodernists. Another is my training in the social sciences and my experience with the social planning movement of the 60's, by which I learned to think in sociologists' terms and to relate social imagination to architecture. A critic of the writer Jerre Mangione said that, as an artist, Mangione has always sought the truth but, because he's a *real* artist, he has made sure never to find it. Postmodernism found truths too quickly; so did some (but not all) Modernism before it.

AA: You think there is a truth to be found?

DSB:

Well, their definition of truth maybe. Modernism cut out history again through indiscriminate borrowing. We try to make our borrowings relevant ones, contextually and culturally, then break with context to meet new needs and to ensure we don't limit the truth by overdefining it.

RV:

When *Guild House* was under construction, around 1965, Vincent Scully came to Philadelphia. He had some other business here but he made a point of coming to look at the building, which was almost complete. Later that afternoon we met Penn's Dean of Architecture, Holmes Perkins, by chance on the street. He said, "Vince, what are you doing in Philadelphia?" Vince answered: "I came to see Bob Venturi's *Guild House*." Holmes' jaw dropped. I loved Vince for that.

Then, about 5 years ago, I drove past the Guild House with an architect of my generation who said: "You wonder now what all the fuss was about." That made me sad. The building was outrageous then; it's ordinary now. But maybe that's a compliment.

AA: How has the structure of your office changed since you built Guild House?

RV:

At this stage we're completing a series of relatively large buildings that got started all at once. This made for a strain, especially during the working drawings stage, which is so labor intensive. Our office had to get quite big. It's smaller now because the construction administration phase requires fewer people. This sequence of work also means that we have completed no large buildings for some time now. We're lying low and people are forgetting about us, which is all right; I rather like it. But presumably the buildings will all be completed about the same time. We're also starting design on new projects and completing construction on a few houses.

AA: It's funny to note that the Laguna Gloria and Seattle Art Museums and the National Gallery Extension show a kind of similarity in the way the layout and the functions are organized inside, yet they all have different skins. In fact, their skins define the difference between the museums rather than the function, which should be exactly the same.

RV:

Context affects the design of the outside. The design of the Sainsbury Wing of course evolved out of the existing National Gallery building next to it. A recent issue of the English "Architectural Review" referred to our facade on Trafalgar Square as "picturesque mediocre slime"; you just can't mind such eloquent criticism. The same magazine said in an earlier editorial: "instead we are to be given a vulgar American piece of Postmodern Mannerist pastiche." We are truly hard to place ideologically, and this makes our architecture hard to take. The Modernists, the Neo-Modernists, and the Deconstructivists don't like us because we're not modern, and the Traditionalists don't like us because we're not explicitly traditional. It's good to be in an ambiguous position, I think. It's nice to be not easy to place. It's good not to be ideological.

AA: Yes, but you've always dealt with ambiguous positions. And you're not the first architects to have looked to the past. Plecnik did it too - beautifully. And there is even a certain similarity between Plecnik's striped bank in Vienna - do you know it? - it was the first curtain facade ...

RV:

Yes.

AA: ... and the striped Seattle Art Museum, with its facade treated like a curtain material.

RV:

I hadn't thought of it that way. Yes, like a curtain with an ornamental fringe.

AA: That is also true of other ornament in your architecture, which defines very strong symbolic elements. Could you say more about the relation between pattern, color, ornament, and texture, how they come through in your design and how they become symbolic elements of a building?

RV:

Denise and I have written about this. Do you know my Gropius lecture at Harvard in 1982? It describes some ideas behind our most recent work. One was on the use of ornament all over - on architectural expansion derived more from surface than from spatial quality. This relates to the decorated shed, a notion Denise and I learned from Las Vegas. The Harvard article described a kind of ornament I called "representational." Others have taken up that word in different ways but, as we use it, representational ornament refers to historical symbols and how we feel they should be used today. As an architect Your classical columns shouldn't be structural.

Describing ornament reminds me how difficult it is to create it. I think it's because of my age. When I grew up you didn't use ornament; you didn't even make an issue of not using it; you didn't even think of it. Texture maybe, but not ornament. So, even though I think I have been good at conceptualizing the new relevance of ornament—good at analyzing it—I find it difficult to design. Young people do it more easily. I think Cesar Pelli produced wonderful brick ornament for his **Rice building**.

DSB:

Maintaining the concept of a building through all its details is one of the most difficult parts of architecture. I think Mies' statement is an inversion of one by Nietzsche, "The devil is in the details." This may be more true than Mies' statement for architecture today. I think the Modern revolution led to a loss of skill in architectural detailing. The first generation of Modernists were trained in traditional methods; they could transfer their skills to the new architecture and evolve construction and detailing techniques suitable to it. But new techniques for Modernism couldn't be developed overnight—think how long it took to evolve the tradition of Classicism. So several generations of Modernists had neither the training in new methods nor the rules of traditional detailing to help them.

RV:

To some extent, detailing was really forgotten. When Modernism took over too, almost everything became flush; also, the aesthetic of mass production and repetition reduced the demand for variety of detail. In 50's buildings, there are relatively few details. At Princeton, Fisher Bendheim Hall is next to Robertson Hall, designed by Minoru Yamasaki in the early 60's. Although both buildings are about the same size, our set of working drawings contains about 200 sheets, while there are only about 40 for the 60's building. The number and the complexity of details and the degree of ornamentation make the difference. Good details contribute tension to the composition—and also scale. In traditional architecture big scale and little scale are often juxtaposed. Modernism more or less abandoned this idea: almost everything was medium scale. Modernism tended to diminish the differentiation of little and big, yet it was by using this opposition that architects like Michelangelo achieved true monumentality. Detail and ornament are used in traditional architecture to achieve tension, depth of scale, and monumentality. I think our way of using these elements—flattened and abstracted for representation—is significant in achieving a rich referential dimension for our buildings. Plecnik and others at the beginning of this century did just that.

AA: And Asplund?

RV:

Asplund did it. The Secessionists did it too. I think the detailing of our buildings now going up at Princeton and Penn is going to be good. This is unusual for me. I'm usually the one who doesn't stop worrying about details.

AA: You're not sure whether you like it until it's built?

RV:

You always find details that went wrong, that haunt you. I say I've never made a mistake greater than 4 inches in a building. You can understand the massing and proportions via models and drawings, but the depth of a window reveal can devastate the whole building, and you with it.

AA: How should the strong similarity of positions and proportions that the front facade of the Villa Schwob has with that of North Canton Hall be interpreted?

RV:

The blankness of the front facade of the Villa Schwob was inspiring to us. It took a long time for us to achieve this effect in the design of the **Laguna Gloria** facade, partly because we were enamored of an earlier design, with a kind of giant order in the front. Eventually, this front had to have no windows and the blank facade evolved. We also learned from the Mannerist facades of the Villa Pio IV and the **Acqua Paola**. Very simply, the **Villa Schwob** is an example of taking a blank wall and making it positive; achieving at the same time a kind of generous, if not monumental, expansiveness.

AA: It's surprising that you never used that flat side as an example in "Complexity and Contradiction."

RV:

I should have. Of course, there are other examples: I have mentioned the Acqua Paola in Rome, where the great framed panel above the arches has an inscription—a beautiful Latin inscription that George Santayana loved to read on his walks on the Janiculum. I like it also because it does sort of involve representation. It's like a piece of paper with writing on it. Our panel at LGAM is a blank page; a blank page where something could be said. The North Canton Town Hall project was not quite that because it did have a very big opening in it. North Canton simply acknowledged a contradiction between the back and the front, the monumental and the circumstantial; it contained a big scale within a small building: Louis Sullivan's great and poignant banks inspired me there. The great-scale detached facade also allowed us to contain all the fuss inside—as in the Villa Savoye too.

AA: Yes, but surprisingly, in the North Canton Hall you have the blank square in the middle: it is a real tri-dimensional void. In the Villa Schwob the blank square in the middle is only a void of representation. So rather than "avoid" the issue, you replaced the blank of representation by the blank of materiality, and pushed the transgression of representation to its limit. Which is pretty daring in a front elevation!

RV:

That is a very good interpretation. I forgot about that. I had not thought that way at all.

AA: Would it be correct to say that your influences are Sullivan, Furness, Louis Kahn, and the historical influence of Palladio; and that while your main influence is cultural relevance, you are subject to no contemporary influence?

DSB:

Well, that's putting more meaning into the term cultural relevance than we would have put, and there were many other historical influences. But what you've said about a main influence being Palladio is true. Palladio is an important influence on us because his architecture had great influence on America.¹⁰ There is cultural relevance in that.

AA: So he has the first place in your heart simply because he is important here?

DSB:

Not only for that, but it is one good reason.

RV:

Well, speaking of influence and Palladio, one of the most thrilling and relevant experiences I ever had was reading Rudolph Wittkower's book on Palladio. There are two parts to that work. One is focused on the issue of proportion, which does not interest me at all—it never has, not the golden mean nor Corb's modular. But Wittkower's interpretation of Palladio as a Mannerist, and not the orthodox Classicist that Lord Burlington and his followers made him out to be, that was a great revelation. I also learned a lot from Richard Krautheimer who looked at Roman and German Baroque in a fresh way, when we discussed it in Rome in the 50's. I learned especially from Donald Drew Egbert who taught me

But I learned the most from history in general.

AA: Can your way of treating ornament be compared with that of Sullivan?

RV:

I should be 1/1000th as good at ornament.

AA: Like Sullivan, you have the same idiosyncratic notion of the function of ornament, which appears to be a very North American notion.



you don't *do* it, you *represent* it.

to look at everything.

we don't refer to an ideal



RV:

I don't know. It's an interesting point.

AA: Especially in the Seattle Art Museum where it's almost as if the ornament were disappearing into the skin of the building and yet simultaneously revealing it.

DSB:

I think that in **S e a t t l e** the decoration is maybe doing some jobs that the architecture would do with Sullivan. For example, I think the decoration near the base of the building mediates the scale between the civic and the individual. With Sullivan, decoration fulfilled that purpose perhaps to some extent, but for him I think the equivalent would be the big arch—that is the element that defines the scale in his bank, as the decoration does in our building.

AA: The Modern movement was in part a search for universality through simplicity and abstraction. Whether we think it was successful or not, this search had political ambitions.

DSB:

We think it was very successful, for its time.

AA: Is there any relationship between contextualism and the search for universality?

RV:

As Denise said, we admire the International Style very much. But I would say a difference between them and us is that in the way the Renaissance did, and some of the Modernists did, by implication. In 1590, buildings in France, England, or Italy were different but these were what we would call regional differences. The same universal ideal was good for all time, for all buildings; so the differences were incidental, not intentional, and to the extent that there were differences, the buildings were considered to be flawed. The Modernism of the International Style exploited that idea too—but its universal vocabulary was based essentially on that of an industrial vernacular, not, of course, on Classical orders.

This approach, too, aimed at producing a universal architecture but the ideal was never achieved, owing to the romantic, individualistic, and perhaps egotistic views of its chief practitioners. Within Modernism, Corb was somewhat Indian when he went to India and somewhat Mediterranean when he worked in the south of France. Mies was more universal: the **Farnsworth House** and the **Research Laboratory** were essentially the same, the museums in Houston and Berlin were in the same vocabulary. In those days, each great architect had, and was recognizable by, his own vocabulary: Mies was Mies, Corb was Corb, although they evolved over time. There is indeed this funny contradiction: they held to a universal ideal, but they all had to be individualistic at the same time. One of the ways to define a great architect was through the fact that he used a personal, recognizable vocabulary. I would say that today the definition of a great architect would be the opposite: it would be in terms of adaptability and use of multiple vocabularies. This relates to our era's ideas on taste, cultures, heterogeneity, and eclecticism, and to the preference of richness over unity.

DSB:

But if the building is a decorated shed, the shed part is probably universal.

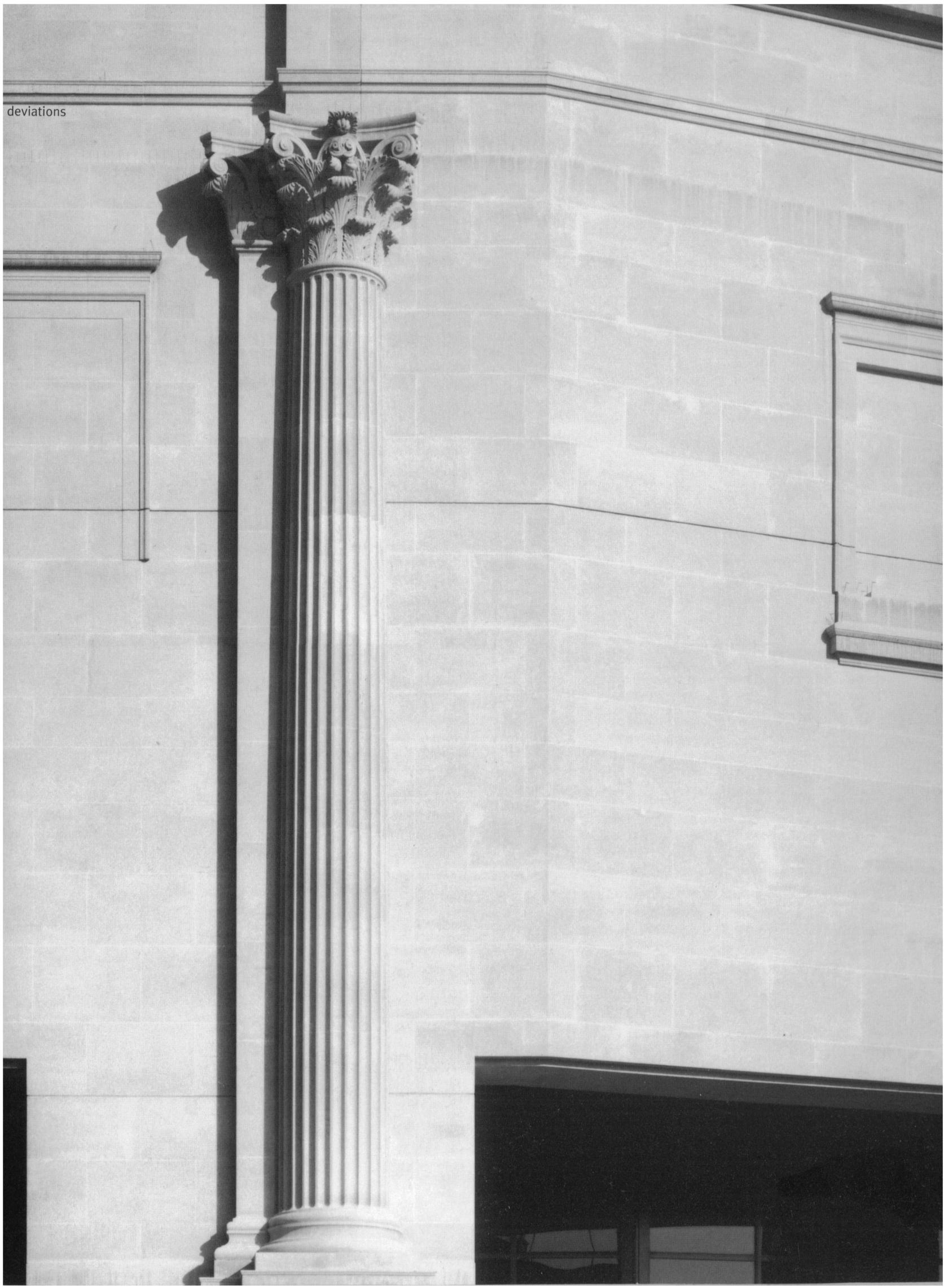
RV:

We try to design that way. And there are other things about our buildings that are constant. Almost every museum has a big stairway.

DSB:

In the **National Gallery** there's an interplay between universal and unique, contextual and contrasting, modern and classical. They are interwoven.

deviations



RV:

That's true. In each case you set up a system, you set the rules, and then you distort them—as Aalto did. And so it's not as if you have no rules, but rather that you combine different sets of rules, and modify them.

AA: That's Deconstructivism; having it both ways.

RV:

In Deconstructivism there seems to be so much breaking of the rules, that in the end you no longer have broken rules, but picturesqueness.

AA: Can you tell us what deviation is?

RV:

Deviation? What do you mean by that?

AA: You said once that today's deviation is tomorrow's convention.

DSB:

The syncopated pilasters and the single column on the facade of the National Gallery are today's [redacted].

AA: Thank you very much.

end of interview

*Interview by Phillippe Barriere and Sylvia Lavin.
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and edited for Perspecta 28.*

preceding pages (photoworks)

126. "I felt I had to leave things out ..." collage, text and photograph
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington
facade detail at entry

131-132. "The specialist's work is easy to define ..." double-page collage, text and photograph
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington
facade view from street

137-138. "You don't do it, you represent it." double-page collage, text and photograph
The National Gallery, Sainsbury Wing, London, England
primary facade from street

140. "deviations" collage, text and photograph
The National Gallery, Sainsbury Wing, London, England
facade detail

SCOTT BROWN, Denise. American. Born Denise Lakofski Nkana, Zambia, 3 October 1931; immigrated to the United States, 1958; naturalized, 1967. Educated at Kingsmead College, Johannesburg, South Africa, 1938-47; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1948-51; Architectural Association School, London, under Arthur Korn, 1952-55, A.A. Diploma and Certificate in Tropical Architecture, 1956; University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, under H. Gans, Louis I. Kahn, D.A. Crane, R.B. Mitchell, W.L.C. Wheaton, W. Isard, C. Rapkin, P. Davidoff and B. Harris, 1958-60, M. City Planning, 1960; M. Arch., 1965. Married the architect Robert Venturi, in 1967; son: James. Worked as a student architect with various firms in Johannesburg and London, 1946-52; Architectural Assistant to Ernö Goldfinger and Dennis Clarke Hall, London, 1955-56; to Giuseppe Vaccaro, Rome, 1956-57; and to Cowin, DeBruyn and Cook, Johannesburg, 1957-58; since 1967, Architect and Planner, and later Partner, with Robert Venturi and John Rauch (associates: Steven Izenour; David Vaughan), Venturi and Rauch, and since 1980, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Philadelphia: Partner-in-Charge of Urban Planning. Assistant Professor, School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1960-65; Visiting Professor, School of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley, 1965; Associate Professor, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of California at Los Angeles, 1965-68 (initiated Urban Design Program). Visiting Professor in Urban Design, Yale University School of Architecture, New Haven, Connecticut, 1967-70 (fellow of Morse College since 1970); Visiting Critic, Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1969; Regents Lecturer, University of California at Santa Barbara, 1972; Chairwoman, Evaluation Committee for the Industrial Design Program, Philadelphia College of Art, 1972; Member of the Visiting Committee, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1973-83; Baldwin Lecturer, Oberlin College, Ohio, 1975; Visiting Professor, University of Pennsylvania School of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1982, 1983. Advisory Committee member, Temple University Department of Architecture, Philadelphia, since 1980; Curriculum Committee Member, Philadelphia Jewish Children's Folkshul, since 1980; Advisor, United States National Trust for Historic Preservation, since 1981; Policy Panel Member, National Endowment for the Arts Design Arts Program, 1981-83; Board Member, Society of Architectural Historians, 1981-84; Capitol Preservation Committee Member, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, since 1983. Address: Venturi-Scott Brown, 4236 Main Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19127, U.S.A.



VENTURI, Robert Charles. American. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 25

June 1925. Educated at the Episcopal Academy, Philadelphia, graduated 1943;

Princeton University, New Jersey, under Donald Drew Egbert and Jean Labatut,

1943-50, B.A., 1947 (Phi Beta Kappa), M.F.A., 1950; American Academy, Rome

(Rome Prize Fellowship), 1954-56. Married the architect Denise Scott Brown,

in 1967; son: James. Worked as a designer for the firms of Oscar Stonorov,

Philadelphia, Eero Saarinen, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and Louis I. Kahn,

Philadelphia, 1950-58; Partner, with Paul Cope and H. Mather Lippincott,

Venturi, Cope and Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1958-61, and, with William

Short, Venturi and Short, Philadelphia, 1961-64; Partner, with John Rauch,

since 1964, and with Rauch and Denise Scott Brown since 1967, Venturi and

Rauch, and since 1980, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Philadelphia (senior

associates: Steven Izenour, David Vaughan). Assistant Professor, then

Associate Professor of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania,

Philadelphia, 1957-65; State Department Lecturer in the U.S.S.R., 1965;

Architect-in-Residence, Academy in Rome, 1966; Charlotte Shepherd Davenport

Professor of Architecture, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1966-70;

Visiting Critic, Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1969; Walter Gropius

Lecturer, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, Cambridge,

Massachusetts, 1982. Member, Panel of Visitors, School of Architecture and

Urban Planning, University of California at Los Angeles, 1966-67; Trustee,

American Academy in Rome, 1969-74; Member, Board of Advisors, Department of

Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, New Jersey, 1969-72, and since

1977; Member, Board of Advisors, School of Architecture and Urban Design,

Princeton University, New Jersey, since 1977, and of the Ossabaw Island

Project, Savannah, Georgia, since 1977. Pritzker Prize for Architecture,

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