ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

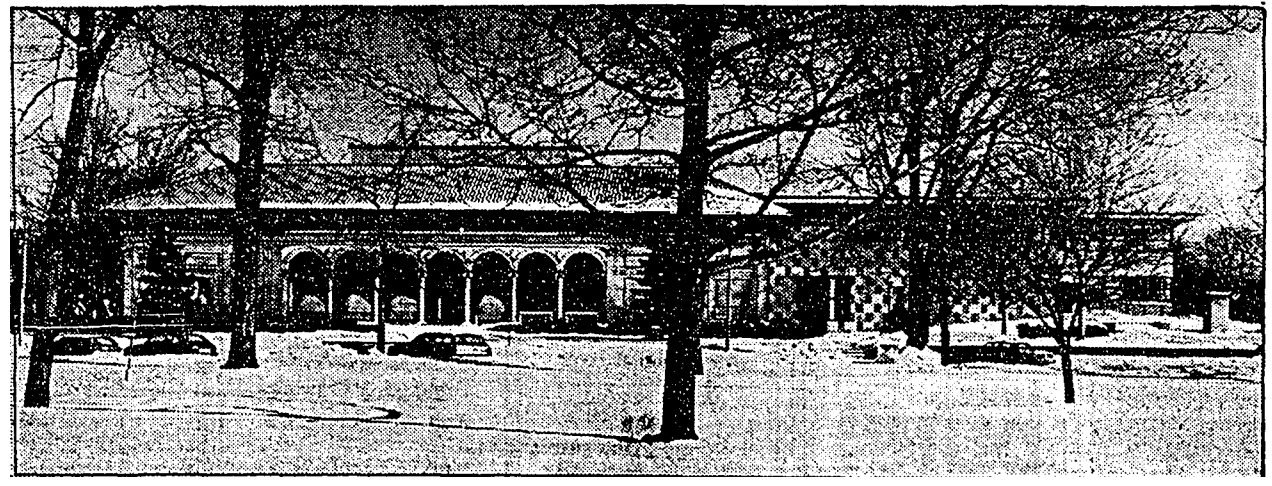
The Venturi 'Anti-Style' Of Architecture

OBERLIN, OHIO

The Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, a Renaissance palazzo out of Brunelleschi by way of Cass Gilbert and the Beaux Arts (1915-17), is a gem of a building for a gem of a collection. It has turned a small Ohio town into an extraordinary place.

When the museum needed to expand, the architectural assignment posed a special challenge. An exquisite Cass Gilbert building is a hard act to follow. Robert Venturi, of the firm of Venturi and Rauch, which was given the job, compares it to "drawing a moustache on a Madonna. A wing on a symmetrical Renaissance villa, like a bowler hat on a Venus, will never look correct." Having thus succinctly stated the problem, he proceeded to solve it.

As would be expected from an architect who has built up something of a reputation as the Peck's bad boy of the environment, the solution is anything but standard. The work he has done with his wife, Denise Scott Brown, on the iconagraphy of the Las Vegas strip and Levittown has made him the apostle of complexity and contradiction and the dumb and ordinary, and the conscious practioner of plain and fancy symbolism.



Venturi's "crisply contemporary" addition to the Oberlin art museum

But the image of the architect as a Pop guru is actually a cliché that serves him badly, and perhaps this building can help set the record straight. The result, in fact, is what might be called true Venturi—urbane, cultured, deeply responsive to history and art and unusually understanding of existing values—a solution of an extremely sophisticated, subtle, sympathetic, and sometimes wry, sensibility.

The new museum wing is only a shocker to those with predetermined ideas of how such a wing should be designed or look. To anyone who examines it carefully, a thoughtful logic unfolds. It is not a statement of dogma or doctrine, although enough of that can be dragged in by the feet to make an interesting argument. The collaboration between the architects (Jeffrey Ryan was the project manager) and the director of the museum, Richard Spear, has been exceptionally happy. The new building has been designed, above all, with a concerned and gentle hand.

The solution is unconventional enough, however, to raise a few hackles on campus, where the Allen Museum is something of an icon, and to fuel the legend of Venturian perversity. (I suppose it is perverse to make one's monuments anti-monumental, or to speak of one's buildings seriously as "decorated sheds.")

The new wing is a stepped-back block that joins the Cass Gilbert building at the side and rear. It connects directly to it without the kind of separating link that is considered a properly respectful signal of transition from old to new. It makes no obeisances to the original structure by repeating patterns of arcades or windows in "updated" versions. It jogs back on the site unevenly. It does nothing expected or obvious.

The facade closest to the old building is a "checkerboard" of rose and cream sandstone with strip windows; the design becomes a "pure" 1930's loft building as it sets back once again and changes functions from a gallery to an art school and convervation laboratory. And although there are "reasons" for all of this—the kind of esthetic and symbolic rationale for a dandy Venturian philosophical exercise that is both edifying and fun—everything works in purely architectural terms. The solution is successful in the justness and appropriateness of its visual, functional and programmatic relationships, which is the test of good architecture at any time. Taste and judgment are the teernal, élite verities that do the job.

Quite properly, use and a restricted site have determined the plan. This led to butting the new construction against the old and placing it toward the back of the land to gain the most space and still keep the Cass Gilbert design as the dominant element. The transitional element is a large new exhibition space, the Ellen Johnson Gallery of Modern Art. Set slightly behind this gallery, the rest of the new wing houses the art school and library and the labs of the Intermuseum Conservation Association.

The addition is crisply contemporary; its "recalls" of the older building are, at best, intellectual and conceptual. A deep roof overhang only suggests the Italianate original; it is equally reminiscent of indigenous Midwestern modernism. The checkerboard wall is almost like a patterned fabric background for the beautiful Renaissance decoration of the Gilbert design in the same rose and cream stone. Asymmetrical windows stop carefully short of the classical structure.

The new building makes a point of its respect for the old one and its conscious lack of pretentiousness. The meticulously detailed strip windows and plain buff brick of the school and lab section deliberately suggest a very classy loft building. It is exactly the kind of building that suits working artists best. (That kind of architectural modesty is probably also perverse.)

Inside, the new modern art gallery is a large, almost square room, 61 by 55 feet and 23 feet high. But this is not the average museum director's neutral, all-purpose, flexible container with anonymous modular lighting and panels. It is an extremely dramatic space flooded with

Continued on Page 36

The Venturi 'Anti-Style'

Continued from Page 27

daylight, that holds contemporary art beautifully. The gallery insists on being architecture at the same time that it serves as a setting, and in doing so, it enhances the total esthetic experience.

The daylight comes from high windows that run around the top of the room, controlled by the roof overhang and translucent Plexiglas panels that also screen out harmful rays. Outside, at a point between the new gallery and the enchanting Renaissance courtyard of the old, there is a consummate Venturi touch—a symbol-sculpture of a giant Ionic column at trompe l'oeil scale. It has been made by applying stylized wood forms to a structural column.

The new gallery fortuitously restates the main space of the Cass Gilbert building, a superb, classical sculpture court 36 feet high. Work in the old building includes the installation of new lighting, air conditioning and security systems, new graphics and paint colors, and the "rehabilitation" of spaces for print and drawing collections.

In this undertaking, as in all their work, the Venturis stress the need to follow simple and familiar models rather than to seek the forced originality of architectural ego trips. What does not come clear in their eclectic rule book, however, is how this kind of logic becomes art, as it does here. How purpose becomes style is the prime lesson of the past. And if this kind of architecture is "anti-style," then the Venturis have made the most of it. ■