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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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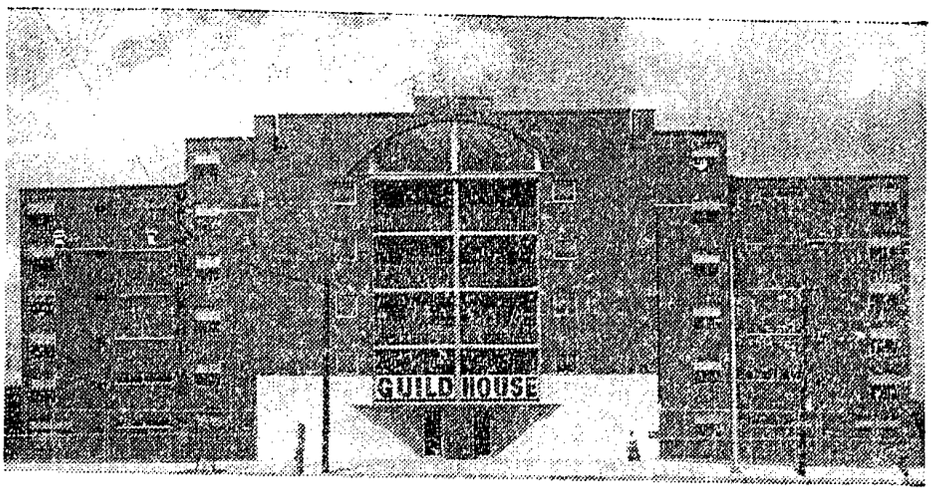

William Watkins

Guild House, housing for the elderly in Philadelphia by Venturi and Rauch.
"A perverse assortment of details that sets other architects' teeth on edge"

I DON'T know if critics are allowed to be ambivalent. We're supposed to have the answers. I am about to express some personal feelings and guarded opinions about the work and theory of Venturi and Rauch that are in large part favorable, due to my conditioning as an architectural historian.

First, I really can't see the uproar the Venturis are creating. The fuss that greeted Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" (Museum of Modern Art and Graham Foundation, 1966), the article "Learning from Las Vegas" with Denise Scott Brown, now his wife, (Architectural Forum, March, 1968), and is currently being repeated for the Venturi and Rauch exhibition at the Whitney Museum (through October 31) is probably due to three things.

Almost everything that the Venturis have to say is heresy, if you have been brought up as a true believer in modern architectural doctrine as formulated in the early part of this century. Everything Venturi and Rauch designs is a slap in the face of the true believers. And to use irony or wit in the pursuit of either theory or design—as a tool to shock awareness or as a comment on the cultural condition—is the original sin.

Architects will tell you this is not so—that they are just appalled by the Venturi brand of design. But then why go into such a rage? There is a lot of work around that people don't like. The answer is that architects do not build the way accountants add up figures; through education and inclination they design from a set of strong philosophical and esthetic convictions, a polemical position, that has the highest place in their scheme of essential beliefs. Attack that, and you've got a religious war.

As a historian, I don't believe in religious wars. What is despised today was enshrined yesterday or will be tomorrow. I believe not only in complexity and contradiction but also in continuity and change. I do not share a good part of the modernist dogma of the modern architects whose work I admire most, at the same time that I recognize and respect its place in the development of modern architectural history. And I think the dogma of the recent past, in the light of the problems of the present, is doing the others in.

The modern architect is a hero figure who sets his buildings in shining isolation. He sees his job as showing a benighted populace, by terribly limited example, how "rational" and "tasteful" things should be. In this anti-environmental, anti-historical stance taught by the modern movement, the architect has become the man clients often cannot get a direct answer from because he is too busy being heroic and original, or the man contractors double their estimates for to take care of the problems of unconventional construction to serve those heroic and original designs.

Now that the "environment" has been rediscovered, it seems that the architect has never been there. Its mixed bag is not his bag at all. And because its mix is exactly what society is made of, the architect is looking more and more like a mastodon than a savior.

Which brings us back to the Venturis. The Venturis tell us that "the world can't wait for the architect to build his utopia, and the architect's concern ought not to be with what it ought to be but with what it is—and with how to help improve it now. This is a humbler role for architects than the modern movement has wanted to accept."

To play this role the Venturis suggest that the architect meet the environment on its own terms, because it is there. And because it is there we might study it, including the despised highway strip and the subdivision, to see what works and why. Their two eyebrow-raising studies in this vein, done as studio exercises with Yale architecture students, are called "Learning from Las Vegas" and "Learning from Levittown."

I will go clearly on the record by saying that I think these studies are brilliant. There are the inevitable blind spots of the totally committed; the fast buck has shaped the scene as much as real need. The big sign often means the big deal. There are false values behind the false fronts. But complexity and paradox are the stuff of which the Venturis are made.

Their insight and analysis, reasoned back through the history of style and symbolism and forward to the recognition of a new kind of building that responds directly to speed, mobility, the superhighway and changing life styles, is the kind of art history and theory that is rarely produced. The rapid evolution of modern architecture from Le Corbusier to Brazil to Miami to the roadside motel in a brief 40-year span, with all of the behavioral esthetics involved, is something neither architect nor historian has deigned to notice. All that has been offered by either are diatribes against the end product.

The Venturis see much of Pop Art in this Pop Scene, and they admire both. This admiration extends to the full range of expediency and mediocrity with which America has housed and serviced itself while the architect looked the other way or for "enlightened" clients. The Venturis vie with each other in the acceptance of the commonplace. And because these are cheap and practical answers, they suggest we use them.

They use them. But with such an educated filtering to suit their own subtle and ironic "pop" tastes that perversity and paradox is the name of the game. When one outraged architect called their work "dumb and ordinary" they said that in a way he had exactly gotten the point and adopted the phrase themselves.

They have a gift for that kind of outrage. Not content to score the "personalized essay in civic monumentality" they add the ultimate insult, "It's a bore." With more-than-candor they point out that the renunciation of decoration has led the modern architect to so manipulate his "structural" forms that the entire building becomes a decoration. Then, with less-than-innocence, they draw an analogy between the building as decoration and symbol and the building in the shape of a duck on the highway. Furious, architects reply that the Parthenon is a duck, too.

The Venturis design "ducks" and "decorated sheds." To them, Main Street "is almost all right." So is history, and it is not surprising that mannerism suits them best. They accord the dumb and ordinary the full 17th century treatment. Piling paradox on paradox, they combine the obvious and the arcane. You can peel off the layers of meaning. Call it Pop Mannerism.

Guild House, a perfectly dumb and ordinary, and incidentally, very satisfactory, apartment house for the elderly in Philadelphia, is a mannerist exercise that uses blatant facadism and a perverse assortment of details that sets other architects' teeth on edge. Like all Venturi and Rauch buildings, it is intensely personal, idiosyncratic and arbitrary, done in an intelligent but totally unsettling way. It is meant to make the educated viewer look twice, to see why the ordinary is extraordinary. Because never doubt it for a moment, the Venturis are determined to make it so.

The results are undeniably extraordinary, and many qualified judges think they are perfectly awful. I have a kind of love-hate relationship with Venturi designs, more for their ideological input, their profound comments on our culture, their intense and often angry wit, their consummate oneupmanship, than for their architectural quality. Yes, I am avoiding the issue of quality.

I suspect that the conscious application of theory always produces noble experiments and abysmal failures. If theory is valid, it usually leads to something else. The ultimate irony is that the cost of building today is making the dumb and ordinary inevitable. The prophecy is self-fulfilling. But this work is eye-opening and catalytic and if my response is complex and contradictory, so are the Venturis, and life, and art.