

Flower signs for roadway in California City, a 100,000-acre development, are by Venturi and Rauch, architects-planners

Celebrating 'Dumb, Ordinary' Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The exhibition that opened at the Whitney Museum yesterday is the renunciation of just about everything the architectural profession holds sacred according to the design doctrines of the 20th century, including much of its most suave and serious work. Its symbol is the high-

An Appraisal way billboard and its watchwords are "dumb and ordinary." The work deals heavily in symbols

and images, and "dumb and ordinary" refers to vernacular construction that grows out of realities of cost and function as a spontaneous response to the high-speed road and instant environment.

What is celebrated here is the architecture of the "pop" landscape. These architects do not censure or ignore, with the rest of the profession, the America that everyone—except middle America—hates.

They deal with the highway strip, the resort, and suburban sprawl. The highway strip parallels the comic strip as pop art.

The message they offer is that we can learn from Las Vegas and Levittown. Examine the reasons why these popular cultural phenomena have given millions of Americans what they want and need, we are told; there are lessons in the methods of commercialism.

Looks Like Billboard

Installed to look like a highway billboard, the show is a montage of text, pictures of buildings and projects and chunks of theory by the firm of Venturi and Rauch, architects and planners. It has been designed by Gerod Clark and Steven Izenour, and will run through Oct. 31. The billboard might equally bear the legend "To the Barricades."

The exhibition's importance belies its small size. Everything from the peach, purple and poison-green colors and discreet red slogans saying "Learn from what you don't like" and "In times of change paradox is good," to structures of a stylistic perversity so deliberate that they are hailed as brilliant or attacked as atrocious, proclaims some kind of revolution.

The revolution is no less than the politely polemical overthrow of the established modern movement. (What better place to do it than within the Establishment?)

The response of the architectural profession to the "reality" of America has been the turned back and object lessons in art and taste. The heroic posture, say the Venturis, is a proven environmental disaster. The architect is wearing no clothes.

The Venturis are Robert Venturi, architect, and his wife, Denise Scott Brown, planner. The Venturi and Rauch firm is based in Philadelphia.

Architects in Shock

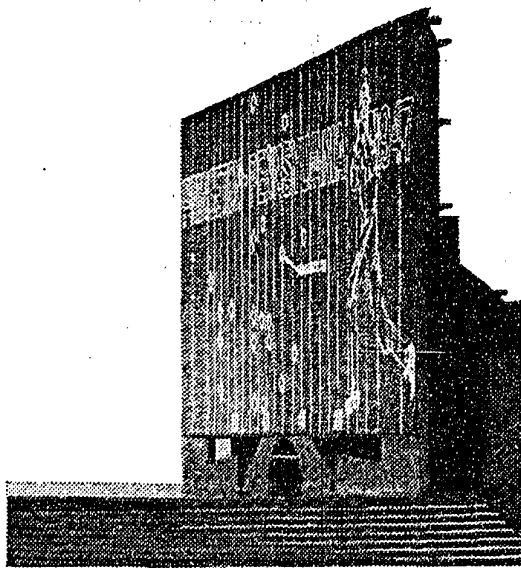
Mention the names of this reserved, unostentatious man in his mid-40's and this steel-thin, pure Pre-Raphaelite young woman, and architects tend to go into shock or rage. The profession is split right down the middle—90 per cent against.

When today's architectural beatitudes are that form follows function and art follows structure, the Venturis offer the "duck" and the "decorated shed."

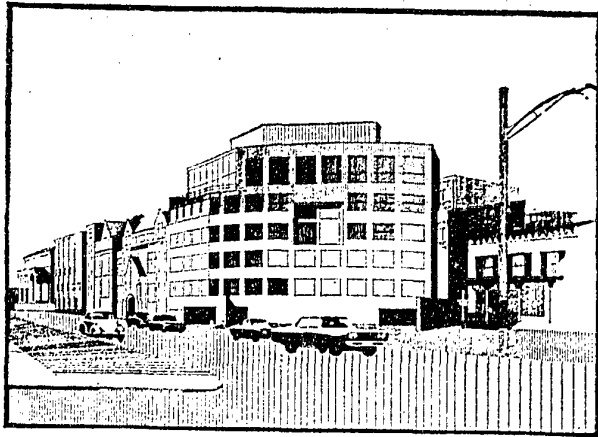
The highway building shaped like a duck becomes in their lexicon, any building in which form is symbol. (The Whitney Museum is a duck.) Dumb and ordinary with trim is the decorated shed.

Filtered through the Venturis' highly developed knowledge and taste, it becomes the sophisticate's dumb and ordinary. Paradox abounds.

The problem is not with the message, but with the buildings. They range from small houses and new university structures such as the competition-winning design for a Yale mathematics building to planning and roadway signs in the shape of giant desert flowers for the 100,-



"Bill-ding-board," was entry in 1967 National Football Hall of Fame competition. Giant billboard uses moving lights.



Design for Yale Mathematics Building competition in 1971 was winner for team. Exhibit is at Whitney Museum.

000-acre California City development 100 miles north-east of Los Angeles.

Conspicuous and controversial competition losers have been the bill-ding-board for a Football Hall of Fame and a proposal for Brighton Beach housing in New York.

Juries have been split bitterly and bloodily; Art Commissions waxed wroth. They find the theories put into practice too dumb and ordinary. Criticism ranges from lack of design talent to gratuitous selection of the very worst elements of vernacular building. Said one

juror, "This is what I have been fighting all my life."

Venturi buildings shock once, because they insist on all the banalities of pragmatic, cheap construction, and twice, because they organize those banalities in the high style of 17-century mannerism.

How far do you turn the screw of taste? Until it hurts, it would seem. A put-on, a spoof, a rip-off, say the architects who are hurt most. But the cutting edge of change is pain.

One comes back, drawn by

the peculiar fascination of these difficult, deviate structures. One is hooked, or totally turned off. Second-glance architecture, the Venturis call it. Look again.

In a curious way, it is also protest architecture. How else to design for the world of the absurd?

Art and Truth

Today, not only art but truth is complex and contradictory, values are inverted and humor is black. Necessary change comes through the shock of recognizing the irrationality of reality.

At a time when architecture is failing the environment, the Venturis offer important and impassioned polemics. They could be catalytic for the decade.

There is both irony and truth in the typical Venturi dictum: "Boring is Interesting and Extraordinary is Ordinary while Interesting is Boring and Ordinary is Extraordinary." Think about that. Think of all those boring, extraordinary architectural statements sitting irrelevantly around the landscape proclaiming the hero-architect while the cities rot.

If you like it, you like the Venturis. If not, this way out.