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The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture

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# Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture

**Robert Venturi**

with an introduction by Vincent Scully

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

in association with

the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in The Fine Arts, Chicago

Distributed by Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York

## *Acknowledgments*

Most of this book was written in 1962 under a grant from the Graham Foundation. I am also indebted to the American Academy in Rome for the Fellowship, ten years ago, which enabled me to live in Italy.

The following people helped me: Vincent Scully, through his crucial appreciation and criticism when I really needed them; Marion Scully, through her skill, patience and understanding in making the text clearer; Philip Finkelpearl, through his talking with me over the years; Denise Scott Brown, by sharing her insights into architecture and city planning; Robert Stern, through concrete enrichments to the argument; Mrs. Henry Ottmann and Miss Ellen Marsh of the staff of The Museum of Modern Art, through their cooperation in collecting illustrations.

R. V.

## *Chapter*

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## *Introduction*

This is not an easy book. It requires professional commitment and close visual attention, and is not for those architects who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes. Indeed, its argument unfolds like a curtain slowly lifting from the eyes. Piece by piece, in close focus after focus, the whole emerges. And that whole is new—hard to see, hard to write about, graceless and inarticulate as only the new can be.

It is a very American book, rigorously pluralistic and phenomenological in its method; one is reminded of Dreiser, laboriously trodding out the way. Yet it is probably the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*, of 1923. Indeed, at first sight, Venturi's position seems exactly the opposite of Le Corbusier's, its first and natural complement across time.\* This is not to say that Venturi is Le Corbusier's equal in persuasiveness or achievement—or will necessarily ever be. Few will attain to that level again. The experience of Le Corbusier's buildings themselves has surely had not a little to do with forming Venturi's ideas. Yet his views do in fact balance those of Le Corbusier as they were expressed in his early writings and as they have generally affected two architectural generations since that time. The older book demanded a noble purism in architecture, in single buildings and in the city as a whole; the new book welcomes the

\* Here I do not forget Bruno Zevi's *Towards an Organic Architecture*, of 1950, which was consciously written as a reply to Le Corbusier. One cannot, however, regard it as a complement to the other or as an advance upon it, since it was hardly more than a reaction against it in favor of "organic" principles which had been formulated by architects other than Zevi and had indeed passed their peak of vitality long before. They had found their best embodiment in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright before 1914 and their clearest verbal statement in his writings of that period.

contradictions and complexities of urban experience at all scales. It marks, in this way, a complete shift of emphasis and will annoy some of those who profess to follow Le Corbusier now, exactly as Le Corbusier infuriated many who belonged to the Beaux-Arts then. Hence the books do in fact complement each other; and in one fundamental way they are much the same. Both are by architects who have really learned something from the architecture of the past. Few contemporary architects have been able to do this and have instead tended to take refuge in various systems of what can only be called historical propaganda. For Le Corbusier and Venturi, the experience was personal and direct. Each was thus able to free himself from the fixed patterns of thought and the fashions of his contemporaries, so carrying out Camus' injunction to leave behind for a while "our age and its adolescent furies."

Each learned most from very different things. Le Corbusier's great teacher was the Greek temple, with its isolated body white and free in the landscape, its luminous austerities clear in the sun. In his early polemics he would have his buildings and his cities just that way, and his mature architecture itself came more and more to embody the Greek temple's sculptural, actively heroic character. Venturi's primary inspiration would seem to have come from the Greek temple's historical and archetypal opposite, the urban façades of Italy, with their endless adjustments to the counter-requirements of inside and outside and their inflection with all the business of everyday life: not primarily sculptural actors in vast landscapes but complex spatial containers and definers of streets and squares. Such "accommodation" also becomes a general urban principle for Venturi. In this he again resembles Le Corbusier, in so far as they are both profoundly visual, plastic artists whose close focus upon individual buildings brings with it a new visual and symbolic attitude toward urbanism in general—not the schematic or two-dimensionally diagrammatic view toward which many planners tend, but a set of solid images, architecture itself at its full scale.

Yet again, the images of Le Corbusier and Venturi are diametrically opposed in this regard. Le Corbusier, exercising that side of his many-sided nature which professed Cartesian rigor, generalized in *Vers une Architecture* much more easily than Venturi does here, and presented a clear, general scheme for the whole. Venturi is more fragmentary, moving step by step through more compromised relation-

ships. His conclusions are general only by implication. Yet it seems to me that his proposals, in their recognition of complexity and their respect for what exists, create the most necessary antidote to that cataclysmic purism of contemporary urban renewal which has presently brought so many cities to the brink of catastrophe, and in which Le Corbusier's ideas have now found terrifying vulgarization. They are a hero's dreams applied en masse—as if an Achilles were to become the king. That is why, one supposes, Venturi is so consistently anti-heroic, compulsively qualifying his recommendations with an implied irony at every turn. Le Corbusier used irony too, but his was as sharp as a steel-toothed smile. Venturi shrugs his shoulders ruefully and moves on. It is this generation's answer to grandiose pretensions which have shown themselves in practice to be destructive or overblown.

Like all original architects, Venturi makes us see the past anew. He has made me, for example, who once focused upon the proto-Wrightian continuities of the Shingle Style, revalue their equally obvious opposite: the complicated accommodations of inside and outside with which those architects themselves were surely entranced. And he has even called attention once more to the principle of accommodation in Le Corbusier's early plans. So all inventive architects bring their dead to life again as a matter of course. It is appropriate that Le Corbusier and Venturi should come together on the question of Michelangelo, in whose work heroic action and complex qualification found special union. Venturi fixes less than Le Corbusier upon the unified assertion of Michelangelo's conception in St. Peter's but, like Le Corbusier, he sees and, as the fenestration of his Friends' Housing for the Aged shows, can build in accordance with the other: the sad and mighty discordances of the apses, that music drear and grand of dying civilizations and the fate of mankind on a cooling star.

In that sense Venturi is, for all his own ironic disclaimers, one of the few American architects whose work seems to approach tragic stature in the tradition of Furness, Louis Sullivan, Wright, and Kahn. His being so suggests the power of successive generations, living in one place, to develop an intensity of meaning; so much of it is carried in Philadelphia: from Frank Furness to the young Sullivan, and on through Wilson Eyre and George Howe to Louis Kahn. Kahn is Venturi's closest mentor, as he has been for almost all the best young American architects and educators

1. *Nonstraightforward Architecture:*

*A Gentle Manifesto*

I like complexity and contradiction in architecture. I do not like the incoherence or arbitrariness of incompetent architecture nor the precious intricacies of picturesqueness or expressionism. Instead, I speak of a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including that experience which is inherent in art. Everywhere, except in architecture, complexity and contradiction have been acknowledged, from Godel's proof of ultimate inconsistency in mathematics to T. S. Eliot's analysis of "difficult" poetry and Joseph Albers' definition of the paradoxical quality of painting.

But architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness, and delight. And today the wants of program, structure, mechanical equipment, and expression, even in single buildings in simple contexts, are diverse and conflicting in ways previously unimaginable. The increasing dimension and scale of architecture in urban and regional planning add to the difficulties. I welcome the problems and exploit the uncertainties. By embracing contradiction as well as complexity, I aim for vitality as well as validity.

Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than "pure," compromising rather than "clean," distorted rather than "straightforward," ambiguous rather than "articulated," perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as "interesting," conventional rather than "designed," accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality.

I am for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning; for the implicit function as well as the explicit function. I prefer "both-and" to "either-or," black and white, and sometimes gray, to black or white. A valid architecture evokes many levels of meaning and combinations of focus: its space and its elements become readable and workable in several ways at once.

But an architecture of complexity and contradiction has a special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or its implications of totality. It must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less.

2. *Complexity and Contradiction vs.  
Simplification or Picturesqueness*

Orthodox Modern architects have tended to recognize complexity insufficiently or inconsistently. In their attempt to break with tradition and start all over again, they idealized the primitive and elementary at the expense of the diverse and the sophisticated. As participants in a revolutionary movement, they acclaimed the newness of modern functions, ignoring their complications. In their role as reformers, they puritanically advocated the separation and exclusion of elements, rather than the inclusion of various requirements and their juxtapositions. As a forerunner of the Modern movement, Frank Lloyd Wright, who grew up with the motto "Truth against the World," wrote: "Visions of simplicity so broad and far-reaching would open to me and such building harmonies appear that . . . would change and deepen the thinking and culture of the modern world. So I believed."<sup>11</sup> And Le Corbusier, co-founder of

Purism, spoke of the “great primary forms” which, he proclaimed, were “distinct . . . and without ambiguity.”<sup>12</sup> Modern architects with few exceptions eschewed ambiguity.

But now our position is different: “At the same time that the problems increase in quantity, complexity, and difficulty they also change faster than before,”<sup>13</sup> and require an attitude more like that described by August Heckscher: “The movement from a view of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature. But certain epochs encourage this development; in them the paradoxical or dramatic outlook colors the whole intellectual scene. . . . Amid simplicity and order rationalism is born, but rationalism proves inadequate in any period of upheaval. Then equilibrium must be created out of opposites. Such inner peace as men gain must represent a tension among contradictions and uncertainties. . . . A feeling for paradox allows seemingly dissimilar things to exist side by side, their very incongruity suggesting a kind of truth.”<sup>14</sup>

Rationalizations for simplification are still current, however, though subtler than the early arguments. They are expansions of Mies van der Rohe’s magnificent paradox, “less is more.” Paul Rudolph has clearly stated the implications of Mies’ point of view: “All problems can never be solved. . . . Indeed it is a characteristic of the twentieth century that architects are highly selective in determining which problems they want to solve. Mies, for instance, makes wonderful buildings only because he ignores many aspects of a building. If he solved more problems, his buildings would be far less potent.”<sup>15</sup>

The doctrine “less is more” bemoans complexity and justifies exclusion for expressive purposes. It does, indeed, permit the architect to be “highly selective in determining which problems [he wants] to solve.” But if the architect must be “committed to his particular way of seeing the universe,”<sup>15</sup> such a commitment surely means that the architect determines how problems should be solved, not that he can determine which of the problems he will solve. He can exclude important considerations only at the risk of separating architecture from the experience of life and the needs of society. If some problems prove insoluble, he can express this: in an inclusive rather than an exclusive kind of architecture there is room for the fragment, for contradiction, for improvisation, and for the tensions these produce. Mies’ exquisite pavilions have had valuable implica-

tions for architecture, but their selectiveness of content and language is their limitation as well as their strength.

I question the relevance of analogies between pavilions and houses, especially analogies between Japanese pavilions and recent domestic architecture. They ignore the real complexity and contradiction inherent in the domestic program—the spatial and technological possibilities as well as the need for variety in visual experience. Forced simplicity results in oversimplification. In the Wiley House, for instance (1), in contrast to his glass house (2), Philip Johnson attempted to go beyond the simplicities of the elegant pavilion. He explicitly separated and articulated the enclosed “private functions” of living on a ground floor pedestal, thus separating them from the open social functions in the modular pavilion above. But even here the building becomes a diagram of an oversimplified program for living—an abstract theory of either-or. Where simplicity cannot work, simpleness results. Blatant simplification means bland architecture. Less is a bore.

The recognition of complexity in architecture does not negate what Louis Kahn has called “the desire for simplicity.” But aesthetic simplicity which is a satisfaction to the mind derives, when valid and profound, from inner complexity. The Doric temple’s simplicity to the eye is achieved through the famous subtleties and precision of its distorted geometry and the contradictions and tensions inherent in its order. The Doric temple could achieve apparent simplicity through real complexity. When complexity disappeared, as in the late temples, blandness replaced simplicity.

Nor does complexity deny the valid simplification which is part of the process of analysis, and even a method of achieving complex architecture itself. “We oversimplify a given event when we characterize it from the standpoint of a given interest.”<sup>16</sup> But this kind of simplification is a method in the analytical process of achieving a complex art. It should not be mistaken for a goal.

An architecture of complexity and contradiction, however, does not mean picturesqueness or subjective expressionism. A false complexity has recently countered the false simplicity of an earlier Modern architecture. It promotes an architecture of symmetrical picturesqueness—which Minoru Yamasaki calls “serene”—but it represents a new formalism as unconnected with experience as the former cult of simplicity. Its intricate forms do not reflect genuinely complex programs, and its intricate ornament, though de-



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which might parallel the industrial expressionism of early Modern architecture. The architect who would accept his role as combiner of significant old clichés—valid banalities—in new contexts as his condition within a society that directs its best efforts, its big money, and its elegant technologies elsewhere, can ironically express in this indirect way a true concern for society's inverted scale of values.

I have alluded to the reasons why honky-tonk elements in our architecture and townscape are here to stay, especially in the important short-term view, and why such a fate should be acceptable. Pop Art has demonstrated that these commonplace elements are often the main source of the occasional variety and vitality of our cities, and that it is not their banality or vulgarity as elements which make for the banality or vulgarity of the whole scene, but rather their contextual relationships of space and scale.

Another significant implication from Pop Art involves method in city planning. Architects and planners who peevishly denounce the conventional townscape for its vulgarity or banality promote elaborate methods for abolishing or disguising honky-tonk elements in the existing landscape, or, for excluding them from the vocabulary of their new townscapes. But they largely fail either to enhance or to provide a substitute for the existing scene because they attempt the impossible. By attempting too much they flaunt their impotence and risk their continuing influence as supposed experts. Cannot the architect and planner, by slight adjustments to the conventional elements of the townscape, existing or proposed, promote significant effects? By modifying or adding conventional elements to still other conventional elements they can, by a twist of context, gain a maximum of effect through a minimum of means. They can make us see the same things in a different way.

Finally, standardization, like convention, can be another manifestation of the strong order. But unlike convention it has been accepted in Modern architecture as an enriching product of our technology, yet dreaded for its potential domination and brutality. But is it not standardization that is without circumstantial accommodation and without a creative use of context that is to be feared more than standardization itself? The ideas of order and circumstance, convention and context—of employing standardization in an unstandard way—apply to our continuing problem of standardization versus variety. Giedion has written of Aalto's unique "combination of standardization with irra-

tionality so that standardization is no longer master but servant."<sup>34</sup> I prefer to think of Aalto's art as contradictory rather than irrational—an artful recognition of the circumstantial and the contextual and of the inevitable limits of the order of standardization.



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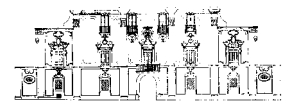
### *Contradiction Adapted*

The façades of two eighteenth century Neapolitan villas express two kinds, or two manifestations, of contradiction. In the Villa Pignatelli (62) the mouldings, which dip, become string courses and window heads at once. In the Villa Palomba (63) the windows, which disregard the bay system and puncture the exterior panels, are positioned by interior needs. The mouldings in the first villa adapt easily to their contradictory functions. The windows of the second villa clash violently with the panel configurations and pilaster rhythm: the inside order and the outside order are in an uncompromisingly contradictory relation.

In the first façade contradiction is adapted by accommodating and compromising its elements; in the second façade contradiction is juxtaposed by using contrasting superimposed or adjacent elements. Contradiction adapted is tolerant and pliable. It admits improvisation. It involves the disintegration of a prototype—and it ends in approxima-



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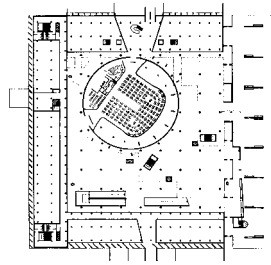
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tion and qualification. On the other hand, contradiction juxtaposed is unbending. It contains violent contrasts and uncompromising oppositions. Contradiction adapted ends in a whole which is perhaps impure. Contradiction juxtaposed ends in a whole which is perhaps unresolved.

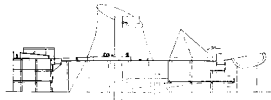
These types of contradiction occur in the work of Le Corbusier. Contrasts in the plans of the Villa Savoye (5) and the Assembly Building in Chandigarh (64) correspond to those in the elevations of the Villa Pignatelli and the Villa Palomba. In the Villa Savoye the positions of some of the columns in the rectangular bay system adjust slightly to accommodate to particular spatial needs—one column is moved and another removed. In the Assembly Building although the grid of columns also adjusts to the exceptional plastic form of the assembly hall, in the juxtaposition of the hall itself and the grid, they do not adapt—the juxtaposition is violent and uncompromising not only in plan but also in sections, where it appears to have been thrust violently into the grid (65).

Kahn has said: "It is the role of design to adjust to the circumstantial." The interior rectangles of Palladio's palace plans are frequently distorted into nonrectangular configurations in order to adjust to the Vicenza street patterns. The resultant tensions give a vitality to the buildings not apparent in their ideal counterparts illustrated in the *Quattro Libri*. In the Palazzo Massimo (66) a curving rather than an angular distortion accommodated the façade to the street, which also curved before it was changed in the nineteenth century. In the typical gambrel roof the need to accommodate living space within a roof angle essentially determined by drainage and structural functions results in an eloquent distortion of the original gable. These examples are distinguishable from the expressionistic distortions of Rococo or of German Expressionism where the distorted is not contrasted with the undistorted.

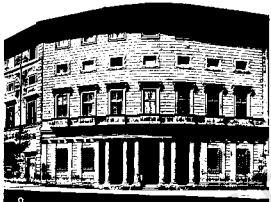
Besides circumstantial distortion, there are other techniques of adaptation. The expedient device is an element in all anonymous architecture that is dependent on a strong conventional order. It is used to adjust the order to circumstances which are contradictory to it: such circumstances are often topographical. The bracket on the house at Domgge (67) is a device that expedites the tense transition from symmetrical façade to symmetrical gable and at the same time accommodates the asymmetrical overhang on the right side. A vivid play of order and the circumstantial is,



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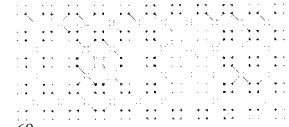


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in fact, a characteristic of all Italian architecture, with its bold contradictions of monumentality and expediency. The ornamented post in the center of the inner portal at Vézelay (68), which is a shore for the lunette, interrupts the axis to the altar. It is an expedient device made eventful. Kahn's uniquely deep beams over the great span of the gymnasium in the project for the Trenton Community Center are exceptional devices to maintain the consistency of the domes of the roof. They are made manifest in plan by the filled-in-columns that support them (69). Lutyens' work abounds in devices: the split at the side of the house called The Salutation in Sandwich (70), is an expedient device which is spatial. By introducing natural illumination at the central stair landing, it breaks the order and promotes surprise in the classical prism of the house. (In some of Jasper Johns' painting the device is similarly made explicit by arrows and notation.)

Le Corbusier today is a master of the eventful exception, another technique of accommodation. He breaks the order of the bays in the ground floor of the Villa Savoye (5) by moving one column and removing another, as I have shown, to accommodate exceptional circumstances involving space and circulation. In this eloquent compromise Le Corbusier makes the dominant regularity of the composition more vivid.

The exceptional location of windows, like the eventful exception in columns, usually produces an altered symmetry. For example, the windows at Mount Vernon (71) do not follow an exact symmetrical pattern. Instead, the window pattern is the result of earlier renovations, and it breaks the dominant order of the central pediment and symmetrical wings. In McKim, Mead and White's Low House (72) the blatantly exceptional window positions in the north façade contradicted the consistent symmetrical order of the outside shape to admit the circumstantial complexities of its domestic program. The very subtly distorted relationships of the windows in H. H. Richardson's house for Henry Adams in Washington (73) reflected the particular circumstances of the private functions inside, yet they maintained the regularity and symmetry demanded by the public function of a monumental building on Lafayette Square. Here the subtle compromise between order and circumstance, outside and inside, and private and public functions, produced ambiguous rhythms and vibrant tensions in the façade.



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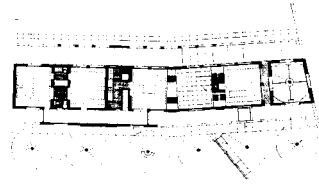
1. Project, Pearson House, Chestnut Hill, Pa., Robert Venturi, 1957. (254–259)

This project for a house was designed in 1957. It is a rare manifestation of the idea of multiple enclosure in my work because layers of enclosure require programs of a scale which I have not yet had the opportunity to exploit. It involves things in things and things behind things. It exploits the idea of contrasting spatial layers between the inside and the outside in the series of parallel walls in plan and in the open inner domes supported on diagonal frames in section; the idea of contrapuntal, rhythmic juxtaposition in the relation of the pier openings of the porch, and of the lower and upper windows and of the cupolas above the inner domes; and the idea of a series of spaces en suite which are general in shape and unspecific in function, separated by servant spaces specific in shape and function.

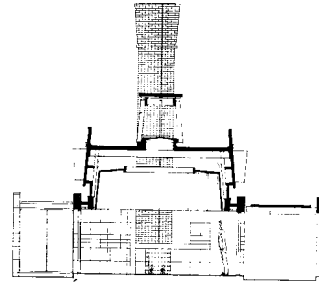
2. Renovations of the James B. Duke House, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, Robert Venturi, Cope and Lippincott, Associated Architects, 1959. (260–264)

This mansion on upper Fifth Avenue was donated to the Institute of Fine Arts for use as a graduate school of the History of Art. It was designed by Horace Trumbauer in 1912; its interiors are by Alavoine. It is a copy of the Hôtel Labottière in Bordeaux on the outside, but it is blown up in scale and expanded in size—a Louis XIV scale in a Louis XVI building. Its Edwardian-Louis XVI details are exceptionally fine inside and out.

Our approach was to touch the inside as little as possible and to create harmony between the old and the new through contrasting juxtapositions: to separate the joint between the old and the new layers, to create change by adding to rather than modifying existing interior elements, to consider the new elements furniture rather than architecture and to use furniture and equipment which is commonplace and standard but enhanced by its uncommon



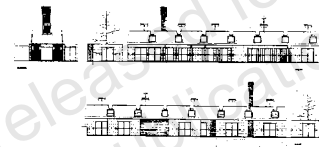
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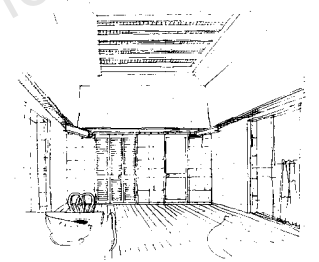
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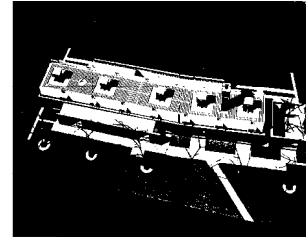
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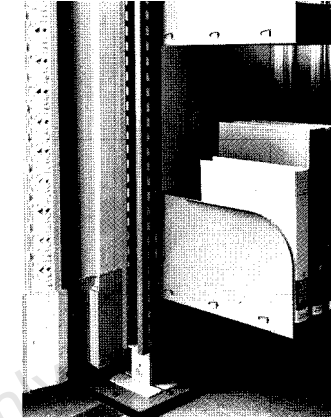
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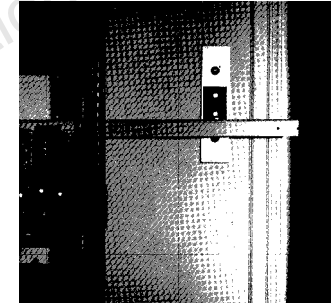
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This volume is dedicated to Robert Venturi (1925–2018)

# Complexity and Contradiction at Fifty

On Robert Venturi's  
“Gentle Manifesto”

Martino Stierli  
David B. Brownlee

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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## Introduction

Anniversaries generally seem to occur at arbitrary times, but the fiftieth anniversary of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, written in the decade of the March on Washington, a rising tide of protests against the Vietnam War, and the Stonewall Riots, coincided with another moment of cultural turmoil. When the conference “*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture at Fifty*” took place November 10 through 12, 2016,<sup>1</sup> the divisive American presidential election that brought Donald Trump to power had just occurred and the streets around The Museum of Modern Art were crowded with people protesting the outcome of the vote. No one could miss the point that books are written—and conferences are held—in the context of their times.

The Museum of Modern Art and the University of Pennsylvania cosponsored the anniversary conference and this volume, which grows from it. This partnership is fitting. Venturi's book was based in large part on materials that he assembled for a lecture course that he taught at the University of Pennsylvania from 1961 to 1965, and his papers are now housed at the Architectural Archives at Penn. The book was selected by Arthur Drexler, then the architecture curator at the Museum, to inaugurate an intended series of texts on modern architectural theory.



*Complexity and Contradiction* was famously characterized by Vincent Scully, in his introduction to the book, as “probably the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, of 1923.”<sup>2</sup> While described by Venturi himself as a “gentle manifesto,” it is generally agreed that *Complexity and Contradiction* has lived up to the loftier assessment made by Scully.

The book is conventionally identified as a potent and early expression of postmodernism. Its title became shorthand for the postmodern condition, and the book has many recognizably postmodern features: it expands the architectural canon, embraces the vernacular, and adopts linguistic modes for the interpretation of art. But focusing on those things, true as they are, is a projection onto the book of characteristics of what came later. This volume embodies a broader approach, including both a historical framing of the text and a critical consideration of its impact. It comprises a selection of essays by historians and architects who spoke at the conference, as well as a few additional contributions.

In the first section, "Context" Martino Stierli writes the institutional history of the book project, explaining how an alliance between the Graham Foundation and The Museum of Modern Art produced a work that seemed to challenge the Museum's long commitment to modernism. A detailed account of the teaching that Venturi did at Penn is provided by Lee Ann Custer, who draws parallels between the methods and content of his course and the book that he was writing at the same time. Mary McLeod discovers and disentangles the important roles played in the making of the book by Venturi's several collaborators, including Denise Scott Brown. The concept of complexity is explored by Joan Ockman, mapping the larger intellectual terrain and the theories of knowledge that were being restructured by ideas about ambiguity and contradiction in the mid-twentieth century. The modern appreciation of mannerism, the object of Venturi's sustained interest, is the focus of an essay by Andrew Leach. To conclude this section, Jean-Louis Cohen discusses one of Venturi's earliest executed architectural works as context for his writing: the tactful renovation of the James B. Duke House for use by New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

In the second section, "Interpretation" Dianne Harris examines the dissonance between the book's measured, largely formalist argument and the social tumult of its day, thus calling attention to the continuing detachment of the architectural profession from social concerns. Venturi's interest in literary theory serves as the invitation for Peter Fröhlicher's consideration of the structure and rhetoric of the architect's writing. Emmanuel Petit investigates the position assigned to Venturi in the history of modern architecture by Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully, in particular through the lens of his relationship to Le Corbusier. Finally, the engagement of modern artists with seeing and perception is the central theme of Stanislaus von Moos's essay,

which positions Venturi's text in relation to "the twentieth century's preoccupation with pure visibility."

Punctuating the longer essays are reflections by some of today's most distinguished practitioners and teachers of architecture from several generations: Deborah Berke, Sam Jacob, Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake, Rem Koolhaas (in conversation with Martino Stierli), Michael Meredith, Pier Paolo Tamburelli, and Stanley Tigerman (in conversation with David B. Brownlee).



Many large debts were incurred in the making of this book and the anniversary conference. Special acknowledgment is made of Denise Scott Brown, whose work continues to inspire and challenge, and whose conversation with William Whitaker was the grand finale of the conference.

Beyond those whose writing is featured here, we are grateful to all the conference panelists and moderators, who also included David G. De Long, Deborah Fausch, Alice T. Friedman, Kersten Geers, Christine Gorby, Kathryn Hiesinger, Momoyo Kajima, and Enrique Walker. William Whitaker, the curator and collections manager of the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, gave crucial support to all the authors and, together with Lee Ann Custer, organized the anniversary exhibition at the Architectural Archives' Harvey & Irwin Kroiz Gallery: *Back Matter: The Making of Robert Venturi's "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture."* The Philadelphia Museum of Art hosted the Saturday morning panel. The Vanna Venturi House ("Mother's House") and Louis I. Kahn's Margaret Esherick House were opened to conference participants by their generous owners: David Lockard, and Paul Savidge and Dan Macey, respectively. Darlene Jackson, Yessica Manan, Bret Taboada, and Jocelyn Wong provided unstinting organizational support.

This book has benefited greatly from the editorial guidance of Alexander Scrimgeour, who sharpened both the prose and the arguments put forward in these essays, and from Amanda Washburn's elegant design, which honors the spirit of the first edition of Venturi's manifesto, with which it is coupled here in facsimile. We thank Matthew Pimm, Production Manager, for expertly shepherding both books to print. Jocelyn Wong, together with Erin Wrightson, must also be thanked for her efforts in securing the numerous images that grace this volume. In addition, our gratitude is due to Cerise Fontaine



## Opus 2: Robert Venturi's Metamorphosis of Duke House

*Jean-Louis Cohen*

The last thirty-odd pages of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* are devoted to a portfolio of his work, both built and unbuilt. This juxtaposition of a theoretical argument with examples of the author's own architectural projects had a precedent in Le Corbusier's sandwiching of his designs between the more polemical chapters of his 1923 *Vers une architecture*; it can be seen as a sign of Venturi's ambition to be considered within this lineage. Given Venturi's frequent parodies of the French-Swiss architect's writings, the parallel is no accident. The second project in the chronological sequence of works in the book's appendix is Venturi's first completed design, which is accompanied by five illustrations and here described under the title "Renovations of the James B. Duke House, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, Robert Venturi, Cope and Lippincott, Associated Architects, 1959."<sup>1</sup>

On February 10 of that year, *The New York Times* informed its readers that the "first fete . . . since '39" had taken place at "Duke Mansion" upon the occasion of its "dedication as [New York University]'s Fine Arts Center." Under a photograph of a group of students gathered around a circular seminar table,

Fig. 1. Horace Trumbauer (American, 1868–1938). James B. Duke Mansion, New York. 1912. Exterior view. 1959. The Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

reporter Sanka Knox wrote: "Directors of libraries, curators, scholars and students thronged the great hall. . . . It was the first time in twenty years that the classic building at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-eighth street had been opened to a large group."<sup>2</sup> Most likely using copy provided by the designers, she explained: "The eighteenth-century French style of the Duke house has been left intact by the university's architects, Robert Venturi, Paul Cope and Mather Lippincott. New, adjustable lighting and modern tables have been installed in the dining room, but the creamy marble walls were not touched. The ballroom is now a lecture room. A screen for slides has been 'floated' out from a wall to prevent injury to the ivory and gold paneling."

The mansion into which James B. Duke and his wife Nanaline (née Holt), had moved in 1912 still serves as NYU's Institute of Fine Arts today (fig. 1). It was designed in the office of Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer, whose firm was responsible for buildings including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, crowning the city's Fairmount Parkway, and scores of palatial mansions on the outskirts of the Pennsylvanian metropolis.<sup>3</sup> The designer in charge of Duke House was Julian Abele, the first African American to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Architecture;<sup>4</sup> he modeled the building's envelope on the château built in 1770 in Bordeaux by the architect Étienne Laclotte for the printers and booksellers Jacques and Antoine Labottière.<sup>5</sup> In Venturi's "Architect's Notes" on the project, which were written in 1959 for communication purposes (reproduced in an extremely condensed version in the section on Duke House in *Complexity and Contradiction*), he described the mansion as follows: "Its unique characteristics are its enormous scale, a Louis XIV scale in a Louis XVI building, and the fineness and chasteness of these Edwardian-Louis XVI details inside and out."<sup>6</sup> The house caught the attention of Frank Lloyd Wright; Venturi liked to tell an anecdote about the elder architect "riding down Fifth Avenue in an open car when he was designing the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and passing the Duke House and saying, 'Stop! There is a good building.'"<sup>7</sup>

Besides its homothetic inflation, this New York version of the Hôtel Labottière has expanded piers between the windows, reflecting that the interior was extremely different from the original: it was designed to accommodate the grandiose parties Nanaline aspired to host on Millionaire Row. (In this regard, the building reflects the importance of the dichotomy of inside and outside, which would become the subject of the

touch and collaboration. He is now, moreover, associated with Cope & Lippincott, which seemed to us an alert and sound firm. Our lengthy discussions with Venturi have convinced us that he has imagination to think his way into our problems wholly sympathetically and to accommodate the house to our needs while preserving its character—not just in a utilitarian way, but with the positive distinction the building deserves and the University wants. We are aware that Venturi does not have building experience in New York, but as an intelligent man he must be able shortly to learn what it is necessary to know.<sup>17</sup>

Smyth wrote with the same eloquent persuasiveness to Doris Duke, who approved his choice.<sup>18</sup>

Venturi and his partners lost no time in accepting the commission in late January 1958, commenting on their motivation in a letter sent to the university: “We consider this job [as] more than [a] usual, certainly not a typical school or office building alteration; we would not intend merely to paint the walls, renew the wiring and design desk and chairs layouts. The present architectural value of the mansion and its new habitation for a school of art history require special consideration of space and proportion, as well as treatment of lighting, acoustics, and cabinetwork.”<sup>19</sup>

The design process was relatively rapid, with the space-planning study and the architectural design running on parallel

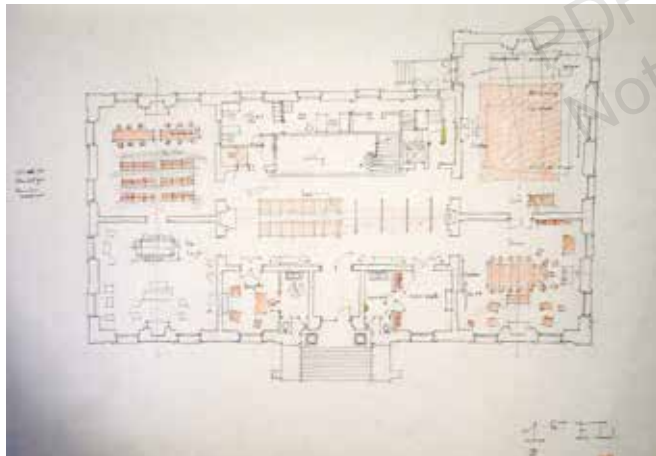


Fig. 2. Robert Venturi (American, 1925–2018). Space planning study for the James B. Duke House, New York, 1958. Plan of first floor. The Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.



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tracks between February and August 1958, and the contract documents being completed in July of the same year (fig. 2). In their preliminary outline, Venturi and his partners described the scope of the job in the plainest possible terms: “Alteration of interior of former residence for occupancy by private graduate school, to include in general: new stairway, new electric service, wiring and fixtures; new books storage equipment and furnishings; addition to and alteration of certain room finishes; general painting; changes to elevator.”<sup>20</sup> In 1990, Smyth would recall a meeting in the building with Venturi and Doris Duke “at a table in what was then the dining room, with Robert putting out his plans for her. His drawings are elegant. . . . They’re not your normal architectural drawings. I think she was intrigued. She argued with him, but . . . in the end she approved.”<sup>21</sup>

The philosophy of the design is best conveyed in the aforementioned “Architect’s Notes”: “the Institute desired to respect this distinctive house, maintain its monumentality and character, and yet adapt it in a contemporary and apparently easy way to its new function. We, as the architects, chose in the renovation neither to copy the existing forms nor to ignore them. Our recent prototypes we considered the Genovese and Milanese renovations of Albini, Gardella, and BBPR: the museum in the Palazzo Bianco rather than the wartime headquarters in Caserta.”<sup>22</sup> This direct allusion to Italy gives a key to Venturi’s design strategy, which consisted of installing contemporary elements in metal that would touch lightly or lean on the existing features without ruining them. The systems used by Franco Albini for carrying the paintings and suspending the lighting features in the Palazzo Bianco in Genoa in 1950–51 (fig. 3), those of Ignazio Gardella’s installation at Milan’s Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea in 1949–53 (fig. 4), and the supports of the sculpture at the Castello Sforzesco

Fig. 3. Franco Albini (Italian, 1905–1977) and Franca Helg (Italian, 1920–1989). Renovations of the Palazzo Bianco. Genoa. 1950

Fig. 4. Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso (Italian, 1909–2004), Enrico Peressutti (Italian, 1908–1976), and Ernesto Nathan Rogers (Italian, 1909–1969). Restoration and exhibition design, Castello Sforzesco, Milan, 1954–56. Installation of medieval sculpture





Fig. 7. Richard Saunders (American, 1922–1987). McNulty service station, Camden, N.J. 1952. From p. 108 of Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964

### God's Own Junkyard

With documentary photography, by the nature of the medium, the issue is not the dichotomy between the appearance of the object and the space it occupies, but the dichotomy between information and the formal structure in which it is held—a dichotomy which is also a quality of (or a problem in?) *Complexity and Contradiction* as a text. With photography, of course, information can be ambivalent to begin with, as in, for example, Richard Saunders's 1952 picture of the McNulty service station in Camden, New Jersey (fig. 7). For Blake, who uses one of its several versions in his manifesto *God's Own Junkyard* (1964), the picture represents the evils of commercialism and the ways it corrupted the American landscape. For Venturi, who includes the image in *Complexity and Contradiction*, “the pictures in [Blake's] book that are supposed to be bad are often good. . . . The seemingly chaotic juxtapositions of honky-tonk elements express an intriguing kind of vitality and validity, and they produce an unexpected approach to unity as well.”<sup>34</sup> In short, by oscillating between information and ornament, the visual mess rescued by photography defines a no-man's land that Venturi and Scott Brown would subsequently colonize with a multitude of signs of their own making. Here too, the information most often lies between the lines, or, indeed, in their simple presence as ornamental variations on the retinal *divertimenti* offered by the contemporary city—especially its postwar shopping strips. In their elaborate “language games,” each “ornament” is configured as a “perceptual whole”—as with Jasper Johns's *0 through 9* (1960) or Robert Indiana's *LOVE*, which The Museum of Modern Art



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initially commissioned as a Christmas card in 1965 (fig. 8).<sup>35</sup> These oscillations between architecture and typography, erudite variations on themes of graffiti art (practiced with humor, up to a few years ago, even on the VSBA website)<sup>36</sup> may be the one aspect of Venturi and Scott Brown's work that has enjoyed uninterrupted popularity among many of their colleagues—granted that this popularity also reflects the by now ubiquitous presence of Pop and Conceptual art tropes in the networks of commercial communication (fig. 9).

### Perception Restrained

The patronage of The Museum of Modern Art did not prevent Venturi's book from being criticized as either a misunderstanding of modern art or as a sign of the erosion of its foundations. The eclecticism of the historic references, not to mention the implication that mimesis was key to artistic creation, was seen as an offense to the modern dogma of abstraction.<sup>37</sup> The references to Pop art appeared as mere surfing on the waves of fashionable gallery talk, while the more serious implications of the priority of “perception” were largely ignored. Perhaps the smallness of the illustrations in the book should be understood as a way of restraining perception in order to focus attention. I am borrowing this notion from Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron; *Perception Restrained* was the title of their small exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 2006, forty years after the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction*. The two architects—the first to be included in the Museum's Artist's Choice series—decided to make the act of seeing itself the subject of their exhibition.

Fig. 8. Robert Indiana (American, born 1928). *LOVE*. 1967. Screenprint. Composition and sheet: 33<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 33<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (86.3 x 86.3 cm). Multiples, Inc., New York. Sirocco Screenprinters, North Haven, Conn. Edition of 250. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Riva Castleman Fund

Fig. 9. Venturi & Short. Grand's Restaurant, Philadelphia. 1961. The Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown