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Robert Venturi and His Contributions to Postmodern Architecture

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Douglas Kahl graduated from UW Oshkosh in January 2007 with a degree in history. He studied the works of architect Robert Venturi and the ripples he created in the architectural community during the 1970s. Douglas has always had an avid interest in architecture, and this research allowed him to cultivate that interest even further. He is currently attending Syracuse University, pursuing a graduate degree in architecture.

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Abstract

This paper examines the major contributions of architect Robert Venturi to the field of Postmodern architecture during the 1970s. Many of Venturi's buildings were small in stature, designed for a specific location and site, and only large when necessary. Designing for a specific site was not traditionally done during the first half of the 20th century. The Modern movement was a stark, plain, and disengaging form of architecture from which Venturi took enormous strides to distance himself. Venturi's interpretations of what Postmodernism should be included intense historical symbolism from the particular region in which he intended to build. For him, a schoolhouse being designed for the state of Georgia ought to be different from a school being designed for Washington state. The cultural history that a community's citizens share varies intensely from city to city, a realization that Venturi worked to address through Postmodernism. Eventually fed up with the generic feel Modernism projected, Venturi took the quote "Less is more" from Mies van der Rohe, a staunch Modernist architect, and mockingly declared that "Less is a bore." Venturi's brand of Postmodern architecture was anything but boring.

Introduction

Robert Venturi always planned to become an architect (Owens, 1986, p. C13). Born in 1925, he was a summa cum laude graduate of Princeton University. In 1950, three years after graduating, he received his Master of Fine Arts, also from Princeton. Venturi eventually went on to work with some of the great architects of the day, including Louis Kahn and Eero Saarinen. Following that, he spent two years as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome before he opened his own firm in Philadelphia and started teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Venturi had always been a fan of Italian and English architecture (Owens, 1986, p. C13). By the 1960s,

he started to question the “blandness” that began to smother the cities of America, a blandness in architecture known as Modernism (Glancey, 2000, p. 198).

Venturi’s Interpretations: Detail, History, and Symbolism

In 1966, Venturi published *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, an immensely influential book for all who practiced some form of architecture (Glancey, 2000, p. 198). At first, it appeared to bash Modern architecture and everything it stood for. In reality, this was not the intended message; Venturi was merely explaining his argument against Modernism. He was positive there was something better than the cold and austere straight lines of Modernism. Much of the architectural community, especially those in the Modernist camp, did not receive Venturi’s argument with enthusiasm. As a result, he was condemned for his radical deviations from Modernism (Hughes, 1979). Here was a man, along with members of his firm, who had very few buildings of his own to showcase, telling the world that the most popular and seemingly successful movement in architecture over the past several hundred years was flawed.

Venturi attempted to untangle what he perceived as flaws in architectural thinking when he coauthored *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977). This book was his self-described brilliant study of the Las Vegas Strip (Louise, 1971, p. B7). Here he acknowledged that, despite the supposed defects within the Strip, such as the sporadic placement of buildings and parking lots, the Strip was here to stay. Las Vegas helped Venturi learn to look at an existing landscape and then go from there, accepting what he was given. The architectural community was appalled by this notion. Many felt that major boulevards across the country, including the Las Vegas Strip, were inherently flawed and had to be completely altered (Cook & Klotz, 1973, p. 248). Venturi was again branded a rebel.

“Naturally,” the rebellious Venturi began during an interview, “we were punished by the architectural establishment for being so vulgar. But we used it as a vehicle to learn about symbolism” (Owens, 1986, p. C13). In 1973, seven years after the release of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi freely admitted that he had very few buildings of his own to reference and acknowledged that as a problem to maintaining his credibility (Cook & Klotz, 1973, p. 261). If he was going to try to convince architects and the public of his grand vision for the future, Venturi needed experience to back up his ideas.

Venturi did not write his books to convince anyone of anything; he did not even consider himself to be a good writer (Cook & Klotz, 1973, p. 247). His books were written so he could better understand the world of architecture. Through his research, Venturi discovered that successful architecture did employ symbolism that was native to a particular area. He was referring to a society’s vernacular, the common techniques, styles, and traditions that could be used for constructing a building in a specific region (Hoeveler, 1996, p. 93). As a result, he was cited as “the first major American [architect] to give impetus to vernacular styles” through his writings of the 1960s (Giovanni, 1983, p. B3). It is interesting to realize that Venturi was the first to take this stance, a stance that seems only natural in retrospect.

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi stated that “Many architects find the vernacular of the middle class of America to be so repugnant, distasteful, and

unappealing that they have a difficult time in examining it open-mindedly to discover its true functionality” (1977, p. 153). He previously surmised in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* that the “desire for a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions,” was fundamentally a reaction to Modernism and the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s (1966, p. 19). He recognized that most people yearn for the use of symbolism within their buildings, a kind of symbolism that they could understand. Venturi believed that middle-class Americans preferred homes “that [were] nostalgic echoes of the past, rather than those dwellings that [were] ‘pure’ and austere statements of orthodox Modernism” (Carren, 1982, p. 30). While Venturi conceded that his buildings were never thought of as monuments, they were more successful than the Modernist behemoths because everyday people could relate to them in a much more personal way. Simply put, Venturi believed that “good architecture is regional architecture” (Giovanni, 1983, p. B3). He had identified a breach in the acceptance of Modern architecture by the American public and believed his new style, a style that involved tradition and history, was the best way to fill it. Modernism had become “stale and rigid,” according to Venturi, and his new style of architecture offered a way out (“American Wins,” 1991, sec. 7, p. 4).

To be clear, Venturi had no intention of creating a signature style. Unlike many architects of the 1970s, and even in the following decades, he was not out to make a name for himself. Venturi stated that he and his firm “don’t try to do a signature... that can be a real egotistical thing” (Klass, 1992, sec. 7). He explained that “It used to be considered a sign of weakness if your buildings were different, without the architect’s personal vocabulary stamped on it” (“American Wins,” sec. 7, p. 4). Venturi pushed the envelope in this area, making difference and variety more accepted. His style of architecture worked to provide the best possible building for a given site, offering a type of double coding that mixed traditional symbolism with modern building techniques, all to make the structure more readable to a broader regional audience. Venturi stated that “The main approach of mine, of our firm, is that we have emphasized an architecture which promotes richness over simplicity” (Owens, 1986, p. C13).

Venturi concluded that the simple façades of Modern architecture were not engaging enough. Instead he chose to showcase specific aspects such as colored brick patterns within the walls of his structures. As long as they were appropriate for the project, Venturi was intrepid in his use colors and patterns in his designs (Owens, 1986, p. C13). This love of richness and symbolism in design was apparent in Venturi’s Sainsbury Wing addition to London’s National Gallery, a work that was greeted with much praise (London National Gallery, 2006). Because of his flexibility in his architectural program, he was selected to design the new addition where he incorporated themes from the existing structure, but the addition was noticeably different. The new design maintained many of the exterior themes from the existing façade but also incorporated a vast array of skylights and an irregularly shaped and non-symmetrical floor plan. Like Prince Charles of England, Venturi shared the same “disdain” for the simplicity of Modernism (Owens, 1986, p. C13).

In another project, Venturi was commissioned to design an addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio. As with the Sainsbury Wing addition, Venturi and his staff achieved the goal of designing an addition that

conformed to a series of interior uses but avoided stealing the original building's significance by emphasizing specific qualities of the "architectural gem" (Miller, 1977, p. D1). The addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum was opened to the public in 1977 and was seen as one of the "finest examples of postmodern architecture in the United States" (Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, 2006). Venturi's addition, with its inventive use of ornamentation and symbolism, generously complemented the original Tuscan-style building to which it had been attached.

Along with these additions, Venturi produced a series of smaller buildings during the 1970s—most of which are not known by most Americans. Regardless of their lack of recognition, some of Venturi's proudest achievements were "houses that look[ed] like houses." He wanted to create fire stations that looked like fire stations and hospitals that looked like hospitals. Venturi admitted that what he and his firm were doing "horrified people," particularly Modern architects, (Klass, 1992, sec. 7).

Venturi designed buildings that were seemingly ordinary looking and that were not revolutionary like Modern style buildings, with their excessive simplicity. In creating a home in the traditional vernacular, he spoke directly to a local population. But by embracing commonality and ordinariness in his architecture, Venturi had, in fact, taken a revolutionary path of his own. What he did with his style of architecture was unlike anything people had been accustomed to throughout much of the 20th century. Naturally, it took a fair amount of time for the architectural community to digest it.

With everything he held dear, Venturi incorporated history and relevant, yet simple, ornamentation into his designs. However, while he was a staunch advocate of his use of history, he had urged a more symbolic, rather than literal, representation (Smith, 1975, p. 1). In essence, if Venturi had been commissioned to plan an addition to the White House in Washington or some other iconic building, he would not try to create a duplicate image of the White House. Instead, he would use the most current construction methods available to create a design that incorporated themes from the White House; he would create a representation to complement the character of the existing mansion (Anderson, 1990, p. 72).

In 1975, Venturi and his firm were hired to revitalize a boardwalk-type shopping center in Galveston, Texas, known as The Strand. Here, Venturi and his staff took many of the Art Deco and 19th century-style buildings into consideration but realized that a single style of historic architecture could not be favored over the other in the revitalization. As a way to unify the neighborhood, a series of color schemes was proposed, the original canopied walkway was reconstructed, and a visually engaging signage system was created (Taraila, 1976, p. 10). The result was a unique cross design that helped an ailing neighborhood reclaim its former footings. Not only in Galveston, but in all locations where Venturi chose to work, he formed a type of hybrid architecture, incorporating bits and pieces of the past with bits and pieces of the present, to produce a different result each time. "I like elements that are hybrid rather than 'pure,'" Venturi commented, "compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward'... I am for the messy vitality over obvious unity" ("American Wins," 1991, sec. 7, p. 4).

Venturi created a successful design, one that incorporated history, symbolism, and tradition through exhaustive research. He and his staff would travel to the city

for which their design was intended and meet with the local residents to discover the attitude and feel of the city (“American Wins,” 1991, sec. 7, p. 4). “Small details loom large” and they are “the hardest thing to get,” but the only way to success was to have an in-depth understanding of the local environment (Klass, 1992, sec. 7). Venturi’s attention to detail has been a major contributing factor to his success since the 1970s.

In the late 1950s, already hinting at his eventual shift to Postmodernism, Modern architect Philip Johnson declared, “You cannot not know history” (Hughes, 1979). Johnson’s proclamation offended orthodox Modernists, but he eventually realized that history binds people together and found that Modernism offered no outlet to express historical relevance. Venturi understood Johnson’s historical desires better than most architects did and later incorporated the same convictions into his own style of Postmodern architecture. He believed that successful architecture had to be undertaken by those who understand their history. Venturi pointed out in a 1990 interview that “most architects don’t (know their history) today.” As a consequence, he continued, the resulting architecture displays a “kind of lifelessness” and “lack of vitality” (Anderson, 1990, p.72). What is essential in understanding why Modernism failed to relate to the general population is that it was lifeless and bland and held no significance for anyone. In the same interview, Venturi commented on how “Modernism involved a minimalist approach,” so there was hardly room for historical symbolism to be included in a Modern-style building (Anderson, 1990, p. 78).

Since Venturi’s designs varied a great deal from project to project, there was no one right or wrong piece of ornamentation that could be used. Each of his buildings was different from all others because the specific historical factors from a given region contributed to the symbolism that Venturi included in his work. Because he aimed to include symbolism in his designs, a wide range of people appreciated and understood his traditionally inspired buildings. His symbolism came from influences such as local materials, local building traditions, climate, and the overall building site (Giovanni, 1983, p. B3). These elements came together in his mind to create a unique hybrid architecture, one that many people came to call Postmodernism.

Other architects following in Venturi’s footsteps recognized the importance of using symbolism. Author and architect Cesar Pelli stated that “Postmodernism reminded us that buildings have symbolic roles to play, that character may be more important than aesthetic composition” (1999, p. 47). Pelli continued by reemphasizing the importance of the use of history and tradition in architecture, saying “that we perceive buildings not only with our eyes but also with our memory” (p. 47). People often make comparisons between new and old buildings and there comes a moment when those people decide whether or not they do in fact like the building. A building is prone to be more successful and well-liked if its audience and everyday users can relate to it. Pelli understood the need for history, tradition, and symbolism—just as Venturi did.

Modernism employed symbolism through I-beams and repetitive window patterns and sheets of glass covering massive skyscrapers. The creation of space had become the paramount issue for Modernists. They had submerged all remnants of symbolism, and as Venturi explained, Modern buildings had essentially become symbols in themselves (1977, p. 103). He further went on to say that “Modernist architects [were] building for themselves as opposed to the rest of society.” Unlike the

Modernists, Venturi wanted to acknowledge the “silent white majority of architecture” and create designs that spoke to as many people of a particular region as possible through his use of architectural symbolism and tradition (p. 154).

Perhaps one of Venturi’s better-known smaller buildings is the Vanna Venturi House, a home he designed for his mother, constructed in 1964. The house is the type of hybrid that Venturi so often sought to create in his life’s work. By combining influences from American tradition with elements from European symbolism, he created a house that maintained the pitched roof—common in much of the United States—with a centered front entrance and a chimney on top. One of Venturi’s critics later described the house as “a child’s drawing” (“American Wins,” 1991, sec. 7, p. 4). The criticism was mainly due to the building’s nonstructural broken arch above the front entrance. But in spite of the criticism, it was arguably one of Venturi’s greatest achievements, one that has become a subject of study for architects and students around the globe.

The Vanna Venturi House may have been more of a source of influence for others than Venturi was willing to admit. Today the house looks like it may have been a precursor to Philip Johnson’s AT&T Building (now the Sony Building) in New York City. The classic and easily recognizable Chippendale pediment that caps off the AT&T Building is reminiscent of Venturi’s roof design for the Vanna Venturi House. By the 1970s, other architects were already beginning to emulate Venturi. With the success of Venturi and the new form of Postmodern architecture that he helped develop, a page was turned in the history of architecture.

Conclusions: Who are the Real Postmodern Architects?

Venturi himself probably disagrees with the categorization of Postmodernism that much of the architectural community has come to accept. He explicitly stated that while others term him a Postmodernist, he considers himself an architect of the Classical tradition of Western architecture (Venturi & Brown, 1984, p. 110).

Numerous architects, each with a style of architecture that protests the foundations of Modernism, have been lumped together under the term of Postmodernist. As author Robert Hughes stated, “There is no common style” (1979). Hughes cited a line from a book by Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (1977), in an effort to describe the accepted primary definition of what constitutes a Postmodern building: “‘any building with funny kinks in it, or sensuous imagery’ has come to be labeled as Postmodern.” Hughes stated that Jencks was not particularly fond of this definition and that it should revolve around buildings that are “hybrid[s] ...designed around historical memory, local context, [and] metaphor.” On this point, Venturi would likely agree.

It should be noted, too, that Venturi considers Postmodernism to be just as rigid and inflexible as Modernism (Anderson, 1990, p. 78). Both movements, as defined by others on the outside, adhered to a specific vocabulary and a unified way of doing things. This was not what Venturi had intended to convey through his writings. Venturi’s wife, Denise Scott Brown, stated in an *Architectural Digest* interview, “the Postmodernists have taken out of what we’ve done only what they wanted” (1990, p. 74). Brown also referred to the fact that many Postmodernists adhered to the idea of including historic symbolism in a design or building, but that it does not always have

relevance. She continued by saying that the Postmodernists “missed a lot of what we wrote and said” (p. 74). Venturi and his wife concluded this interview by expressing regret for other architects’ misinterpretations.

In *A View from Campidoglio: Selected Essays 1953-1984* (1984), Venturi declared:

Architecture can be many things, but it should be appropriate. It should have cultural relevance. It is necessary to make this obvious point because today’s architecture is frequently arbitrary in its symbolism. Architects who indulge their preferences for esoteric and exotic symbols tend to produce an architecture of whimsical pavilions and picturesque follies that makes insufficient reference to the diversities and subtleties of taste cultures at hand, or to the context of place which should give substance to form. (p. 110)

Venturi may have been referring to the works of Michael Graves and Frank Gehry, two well-known and successful architects. Graves is probably the best known self-described Postmodern architect. He is responsible for the Portland Building in Portland, Oregon, and the Swan and Dolphin Resort at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Both buildings by Graves, as well as numerous others, have a playful cartoon feel to them. While Graves’ buildings may have history and symbolism mixed into their designs, they display the same irrelevant symbolism that Denise Scott Brown mentioned in her interview with *Architectural Digest*.

Gehry, with his flare for Deconstructivism, exhibited traits that were generally undesirable to Venturi, who declared that he does not “feel sympathetic toward Deconstructivism.” Venturi also stated that he does “not like the incoherence or arbitrariness of incompetent architecture, nor precious intricacies of picturesqueness or expressionism” (Anderson, 1990, p. 82). As Jonathan Glancey described in *The Story of Architecture* (2000), the threat of Postmodernism falling “into the realm of visual puns and gimcrack design” was very real, and in fact it did (p. 199). With architects such as Gehry and Graves at the helm of Postmodernism, there was nothing to hold them back from creating buildings that continuously pushed the limits of the architectural community.

The tenets that Venturi developed were not wholly adhered to, and many of them were taken out of context and exaggerated. Despite these setbacks, though, Venturi continues to produce designs of exceptional quality that exhibit symbolic traditions passed down through cultures, as well as new and innovative building techniques of the present. Ada Louise commented that all of Venturi’s buildings are “intensely personal, idiosyncratic and arbitrary, done in an intelligent but totally unsettling way” (1971, p. B7). While Venturi may not describe himself as a Postmodern architect, he is because he stepped away from the staleness of Modernism. Any architect from the 1960s through the 1980s who took such a step is in essence a Postmodernist.

Venturi and a few other architects identified a problem in American society and took steps to solve it. Architecture is a voice for future generations to listen to; it speaks of the values and beliefs held by a society. Modernism failed to convey the needs, wants, desires, and values of American society because it was not a form of architecture specifically intended for them. Postmodernism, in its various forms,

helped to address the issue of unresponsive architecture. So far, Venturi's version of Postmodernism has arguably been the most successful. Through his architectural program, he included relevant symbols and traditions in his designs, creating a hybrid architecture, unique each time he began a new project. Venturi is a Postmodern architect who during the 1970s succeeded in addressing the ailments of society through architecture with designs aimed at the local level. To this day, he continues to stand above his contemporaries—a unique architect.

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