

## IMPLICATIONS OF ROBERT VENTURI'S THEORY OF ARCHITECTURE

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**Abstract.** *Beginning with a functional program, the rational design method adopted by modernist architects took cognizance of neither cultural meaning nor context. Although criticized for these shortcomings by post-modern theorists, no means of introducing such concerns into the planning process has ever been proposed. This essay sets out a possible procedure – based on the ancient theory of rhetoric – that addresses these matters first, before turning to functional considerations. Its virtue is that it can be employed while otherwise leaving intact the prevailing method of design development.*

**Key words:** *Cultural context, cultural meaning, design method, planning process, rhetorical theory, rhetorical theme*

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, published in 1966, made the first big splash in architectural theory that disturbed the waters of modernism. The post-modern movement it helped to provoke did not directly inspire the other reactions, but its defiance of the rational design method of modernism as the unquestioned basis for architectural thinking prepared the way for them. Consequently, post-modernism amounted to more than a single ripple in the stylistic stream of late twentieth-century architecture. Whatever effect Venturi's book was to have was enriched by the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas*, in 1972, written with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. These two books entered a social context of rapid change and and major cultural ferment. Whatever they were meant to say – which is not entirely clear, even now – they were taken to imply much more than their texts actually state. This lecture is meant to explore those implications.

The aspirations of early twentieth-century modernists to an ahistorical mode of design, eschewing any reference to historical tradition, coincided with the rational problem-solving approach of Viollet-le-Duc's design method. Hence modernist architecture tended to be largely an exercise in formalism, ignoring the physical context into which it was inserted and lacking associative cultural references. Indeed, for all Viollet-le-Duc's

devotion to historical architecture, for what it could teach the architect about design, he had been interested neither in the functions for which those buildings were designed nor the aspects of their designs that denoted cultural content. He saw the Gothic cathedral, for instance, as a rational response to certain kinds of structural problems but not as an expression of the age of faith. Hence his rational design method had ignored the matter of meaning in architecture.

To endow a design with cultural meaning may involve going beyond straightforward rationality. And to understand that is to recognize an important limitation in rational design method, namely the blithe assumption that there is a single right way to go about designing a building, one that, if faithfully followed, will lead inexorably to the right solution to the problems posed by the functional program. By contrast, a post-modern outlook accepts that the logic of a truly satisfactory solution may lead beyond purely rational formulation, tolerating ambiguities that result when competing truths come into conflict. So began a new series of inversions of the accepted verities of architectural theory, creating a mannerism that exists beyond the realm of the classical orders.

One of Robert Venturi's great contributions in *Complexity and Contradiction* was to deplore the absence of cultural meaning in modernist architecture and to signal the importance of its presence in the historical styles. Similarly, in *Learning from Las Vegas*, he, Scott Brown, and Izenour demonstrated that even the lowest common denominator of non-modernist popular architecture has the value of conveying cultural meaning, which they regarded as indispensable to the built environment. The conclusion to be drawn from those observations is that even the highest quality of formal design does not suffice to replace cultural meaning, nor at the same time does the fullest satisfaction of functional requirements compensate for the absence of cultural meaning. Venturi's critique of modernism also addressed by extension the shortcomings of modern design method, which begins with the functional program rather than with the cultural purpose of the project.

This initial critique of modernist design unintentionally instigated a revival of mannerist tendencies, in which the rules for form as well as cultural content are broken. His pretext had been the analysis of numerous historical buildings in order to validate his criticisms of twentieth-century structures. His rhetorical purpose was to undermine the boring regularity and unrelenting orderliness of modernist architecture, which, he held, belied the physical complexities involved in a given planning problem and ignored the opportunities for cultural expression of the patron's motives.

The various analytical categories addressed complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, accommodation, and other similar qualities. Albeit convincingly employed in the assessment of buildings in which he perceived these qualities, Venturi's categories are too arbitrary and overlap too much to be adopted by others as a system of formal classification for their own observations. Nevertheless, these categories served to indict as naively bland the universalist outlook of modernist architecture and to encourage an alternative approach to the conception of a design. Although Venturi did not offer an explicit program of recommendations as to how this could be achieved, several inferences were drawn that substantially altered the character of modern architecture.

The very fact that Venturi mainly used historical examples to make his points helped to reinstate in the minds of his readers the value of the past as a legitimate source of inspiration. But possibly because he had made his points by citing specific features, there

was a tendency in his own work – as well as that of his followers – to employ historicizing quotations, with or without the pragmatic justifications that were inherent in his arguments. An unexpected result was an almost immediate resumption of the pre-modernist understanding that the architecture of the present best grows out of the architecture of the past. Such a rejection of the modernist premise that the past is both obsolete and irrelevant was a compelling justification for interpreting Venturi's theoretical speculations as initiating a historicizing, post-modern movement.

When his own work, made in consort with his partner, Denise Scott Brown, presented a difficult situation, Venturi and Scott Brown did tend to seek inspiration in the historical examples that had nourished their outlook. Their quotations, however, were only occasionally literal, as in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery of London [Fig. 1], 1986-91, and seldom historicist in purpose. Rather, they were normally used as culturally meaningful devices that also solved a practical problem, in this case the extension of a neo-classical building. Taken out of context, as in the Seattle Museum of Art [Fig. 2], 1990s, the quotations had the effect of breaking the rules and their use in incongruous circumstances gave them the kind of layered meaning that is associated with 16<sup>th</sup> century Mannerism.



Fig. 1. Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, London.  
Photo by Matt Wargo. Reproduced courtesy of VSBA.

The impact of these references was considerable, expressly because they did convey meaning. They helped to restore the sense of cultural belonging that had been lacking in modernist architecture. Venturi and Scott Brown never stated how cultural meaning was to be conveyed or with what means. But under their own hands it was subtly allusive and not programmatically imposed, often breaking the bonds of solemnity, with which almost



Fig. 2. Seattle Museum of Art, Seattle.  
Photo by Matt Wargo. Reproduced courtesy of VSBA.

all previous architecture had been constrained. Such qualities are represented here in Philadelphia's Franklin Court [Fig. 3], 1975, in which the long-lost historical house of Benjamin Franklin was rebuilt as a "ghost" frame. Indeed, for Venturi and Scott Brown meaning seems to have been a matter located behind, or beyond, explicit iconography, addressing instead a preconscious apprehension of the familiar.

An incidental result of Venturi's tendency to make allusions to 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian buildings was that the mannered version of the orders made its way into his architecture, in the form of both direct and indirect references. Both types are effectively illustrated in the most famous example of his work that appears in the treatise, namely the facade of the Vanna Venturi house, of 1962

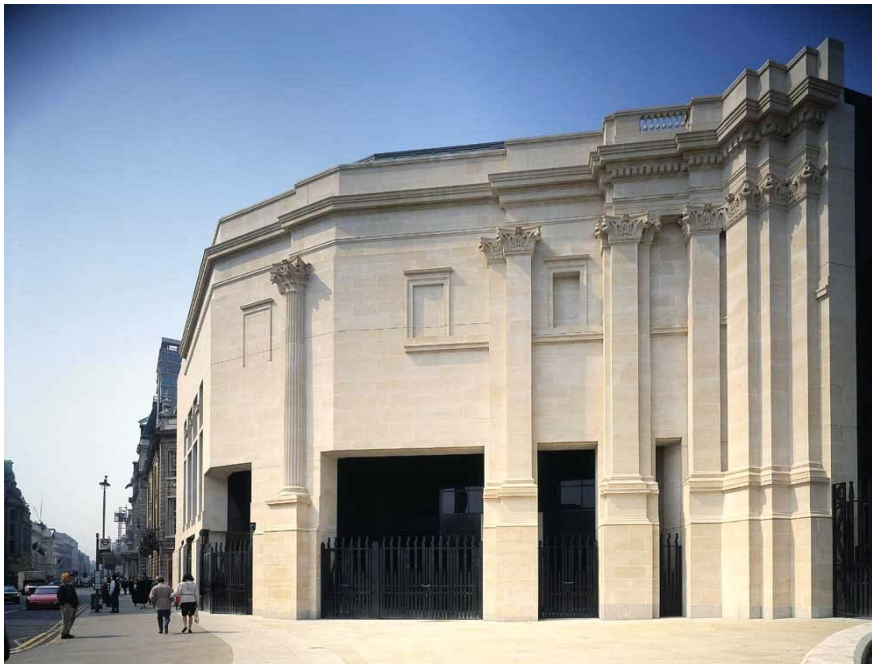


Fig. 3. Franklin Court, Philadelphia.  
Photo by Mark Cohn. Reproduced courtesy of VSBA.

[Fig. 4]. Direct references include the split pediment treatment of the roof and the segmental arc straddling the lintel of the entrance recess. These features are employed against the foil of classical normalcy, implicit in the pedimented frame of the house, the axial placement of the entry recess, the axial placement of the "chimney", and the molded stringcourse that runs the width of the facade. The indirect references to Mannerism occur in the violations of this regularity, manifested in the asymmetrical placement of the windows and their discrepant scale, the location of the front door to one side of the entry recess, and the placement of the flue off-axis on the chimney. The materials are non-committal, but non-traditional for classicism, and the structure is thin and light, in the tradition of modernism. The combination of these various ways of breaking the rules is at once cultivated, witty, and ironic, denoting a self-assured sophistication. Moreover, the overall composition possesses a dynamic tension that would be lacking in a more regular—and more normally modern—design. Shocking at first, perhaps smacking of an irreverent vulgarity, it appeals to the viewer with a headier aesthetic than that occupied by modernist designs. A similar situation is seen on the interior, where the staircase begins narrow, widens as it collides with the chimney, and sidles around the back of the obstacle.



Fig. 4. Vanna Venturi House, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia.  
Photo by Rollin R. LaFrance. Reproduced courtesy of VSBA.

Typically, post-modern mannerism has manifested itself through the incongruous appropriation of classical elements or the flouting of decorum in their application. Incongruity might occur with the use of incomplete or schematized classical elements or their application out of context. Violation of decorum might occur through the distortion of traditional proportions of classical elements, the juxtaposition of classical high art elements with popular low art, or a comic strip-like caricature version of classical elements. Post-modernism employed incongruity in order to be witty and indecorousness, to be charmingly vulgar. Neither quality had previously been deemed admissible to the high art of architecture, but both were undeniably characteristic of the contemporary culture. Such a tolerance had become the standard of sophistication, a response to the shattering of the traditional cultural codes of western civilization by the social cataclysms of the twentieth century. This aesthetic layering lies at the heart of post-modernism. Indeed, the use of these references in a piecemeal or mixed manner constituted an analogue to the late twentieth-century perspective on western culture as damaged and fragmented.

An important contribution came out of the intermingled effect of the implicit historicism unleashed by *Complexity and Contradiction* and the implicit justification of vernacular architecture in *Learning from Las Vegas*. The latter text asserted that "Main Street is almost all right" – namely, that ugly and ordinary architecture has the estimable value of communicating satisfying meaning. This dictum prompted recognition of the reality that in the total fabric of a town each type of building contains signifiers that denote its identity and function, guiding and reassuring the citizens as they go about their daily lives. The linkage of historicism and practical iconography raised the consciousness of architects everywhere to the importance of respecting the context in which any new building takes its place. Quickly acknowledged to be a serious issue, regard for context awakened an awareness that modernist architects had erroneously assumed that their work would eventually take its place as a congenial neighbor to the historical styles, just as each predecessor had done. Such an assumption was inconsistent with the ahistorical aims of modernism, but it was an unconscious holdover from the Gothic Revival's romantic attitude toward historical architecture in which modern theory had its origin.

It took several decades of cohabitation to discover that most modernist architecture was not ever going to be a congenial mix with other styles. For that reason, it became an obligation of socially aware architects to study with care all the buildings, indeed the whole district, surrounding a designated building site. In contextual planning such factors as height, scale, format of building type, and proximity to property lines need to be taken into account, along with color and texture of materials, so that they will all enhance rather than conflict with the setting. The principle of contextualism does not pretend to shape a design but does surround the development with cautionary guidelines.

One of the most far-reaching aspects of Venturi's influence shows up in the emergence of a wholly new situation in architecture, the practice of adaptive reuse, namely the willingness to accommodate conflicting cultural messages. Cultural layering occurs when a format clearly belonging to one building type is employed for a different purpose, or when blatantly incongruous period styles are juxtaposed in a single building or complex. For example, the adaptive reuse of a railway station as a restaurant creates a titillating cultural tension, sending disparate messages about function, in conflict between the obvious original format and the transforming decor. An aesthetic experience of the same sort may be occasioned by the combination of high and popular culture elements in the

same design, or by the juxtaposition of informal modernity with formal tradition. The tensions may denote such qualities as wittiness or the surreal, but of whatever character they are imputed, consciously or unconsciously, to the complexity of contemporary culture.

In adaptive reuse the operative principles are nearly opposite to those that apply to historical restoration. Preserving the authenticity of the original design is not a prerequisite, so long as the alterations do not obliterate the original identity – and thereby the disparate associations--of the building vis-à-vis its new function. Indeed, the goals of preservation may not even be desirable in adaptive reuse. In most cases the effectiveness of the makeover depends upon a maximal exploitation of the conflict between the old and new functions, because the attempt to mask the one for the sake of the other would void the effectiveness of the remodeling. For this practice to have attained acceptability implies the accommodation by society of a serious degree of cultural displacement. Although the wrenching events of the last third of the twentieth century may be responsible for that phenomenon, it is the theory of Venturi, in the perspective of the past, which makes it aesthetically palatable.

Subsequent reactions to modernism, such as deconstructivism, have not been based on the post-modern theory of Robert Venturi, but they share his concern for accommodating complexity and contradiction in architectural design without smoothing them over in an artificial synthesis. Similarly, they also draw upon the context for the conflicting factors that justify their designs. So, although in the final analysis Venturi's stylistic influence was of limited duration, the intellectual foundation of his theory has supported most of the progressive architecture of the last four decades.

This article is adapted from the author's recent book, *Ideas That Shaped Buildings*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2003.

## IMPLIKACIJE TEORIJE ARHITEKTURE ROBERTA VENTURIJA

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*Započinjući funkcionalnim programom, metoda racionalnog projektovanja koju su usvojili moderni arhitekti, ne uvažava ni kulturno značenje ni kontekst. Iako je od strane post modernih teoretičara kritikovana zbog ovih nedostataka, niko nije predložio način kako da se ovi elementi uvrste u proces planiranja. Ovaj esej izlaže moguću proceduru – baziranu na drevnu teoriju retorike-koja se prvo bavi ovim pitanjima, pre nego što se okrene funkcionalnim razmišljanjima. Njegov kvalitet je u tome što on može biti upotrebljen, a da ne utiče na preovlađujući metod razvoja projektovanja.*

Ključne reči: *Kulturni kontekst, kulturno značenje, metoda projektovanja, proces planiranja, retorička teorija, retorička tema.*