
13. Philip J. Finkelpearl, review of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd ed., by Robert Venturi, and other publications, JSAH 38, no. 2 (May 1979), 203–5. Finkelpearl was a close friend of Venturi from Princeton and had been instrumental in introducing him to the work of William Empson and the other New Critics.


The Mannerism of Architecture and the City in Complexity and Contradiction

Robert Venturi’s assertion in Complexity and Contradiction that “the examples chosen reflect my partiality for certain eras: Manerist, Baroque and Rococo especially” (19) stakes a multifaceted claim for the importance of early modern architecture.1 Quoting Henry-Russell Hitchcock about how the changing interests of architects in certain periods of architectural history reflect their own preoccupations, Venturi proposes that mannerism, baroque, and rococo provide the most apposite historical references for contemporary architecture.

But he also suggests that the “eras” of these three styles share principles that are not specific to a particular moment in history. In the chapter “Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification and Picturesque-ness,” Venturi affirms that “the desire for a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions,” is “an attitude common in the Mannerist periods,” which include the sixteenth century, but also Hellenism, and the seventeenth century up to modernism, in the works of “Le Corbusier, Aalto, Kahn, and others” (26). In Complexity and Contradiction, early modern architecture represents both a historical body of references and a sample of suprahistorical design principles.

With these claims Complexity and Contradiction resembles earlier essays by Colin Rowe and Anthony Blunt that had tested the relevance of mannerism for modernist architecture.2 It also prefigures later uses of the baroque in design theories and historiography critical of modernism, as in Christian Norberg-Schulz’s Existence, Space and Architecture and its uptake of Paolo Portoghesi’s monograph on Borromini.3 But the use of early modern architecture and its description as “Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo” is also specific to Complexity and Contradition in the way it structures the book and articulates its agenda.4

Like the predilection for pre-1900 architecture and especially mannerist and baroque buildings, the role of the concept of mannerism in Complexity and Contradiction, and in Venturi’s built oeuvre, has been emphasized, not least by Venturi himself. His stay at the American Academy in Rome and his European travels of the 1950s developed his interest in historical architecture but also complicated its purport.5 Venturi has recalled how during his final months in Rome he became less concerned with baroque architecture as a paradigm of architectural “space,” in line with Giedion’s Time, Space and Architecture, than with “meaning” as embodied by mannerism, partly under the influence of the section on Palladio’s mannerism in Rudolf Wittkower’s Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism.6 If, in Complexity and Contradiction, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples still outnumber samples from the sixteenth century, conceptually Venturi claims to be interested in the baroque as a form of mannerism. This would change between Complexity and Contradiction and Learning from Las Vegas (1972), in which the baroque becomes the paradigm of a rhetorical architecture imbued with symbolism and power of persuasion, distinct from the mannerist play with form and convention.7

But a closer look at Complexity and Contradiction reveals that the role of mannerism is not entirely stable throughout the book. Venturi concludes the introduction with the statement that “today this attitude [common in the Mannerist periods] is again relevant to both the medium of architecture and the program in architecture” (26). He discusses the “medium”—forms as they are visually perceived—in chapters 2 to 5, and the “program”—the “growing complexities of our functional problems” (26)—in chapters 6 to 10. While cross-referenced examples tie both sections together, there is a notable distinction in their conceptual frameworks. Venturi’s often-noted reliance on literary New Criticism is largely confined to the first part. It is reflected in the chapter titles: “Ambiguity,” “Contradictory Levels,” “The Double-Functioning Element.” In this last instance Venturi draws on Wylie Sypher’s Four Stages of Renaissance Style, which had applied to literature Rudolf Wittkower’s identification of such elements in Michelangelo’s Biblioteca Laurenziana. Venturi returns the “double-functioning element” to architecture and in the process adopts Sypher’s idea that mannerism, “a perennial overgrowth of ornate, clever, strained, abnormal phrasing,” is part of a recurring cycle of “baroque, mannerism, rococo” that “repeat[ed] itself during the renaissance and the nineteenth century.”8 Sypher recognizes this cycle in works of art that are contemporary but in different media, as they share similar formal principles, a view that supports Venturi’s easy transition between architecture and literature in the first section of Complexity and Contradiction.

Sypher’s mannerism-as-form, applicable across history, probably assisted Venturi in structuring and legitimating his own “partiality” for a wide range of pre-1900 architectural styles. As such, mannerism may have arrived quite late in the editorial process of Complexity and Contradiction.9 In an excerpt published in Perspecta in 1965, Venturi states that complexity and contradiction are a matter of “form and function,” but he does not associate the distinction with mannerism or present it as the principle structuring the book.10 The excerpted chapter, titled “The
It is driven by baroque and neobaroque examples, juxtaposed to Byzantine, Gothic, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings. “Mannerism” appears as a stylistic category (75), not as a formal principle; references to literary criticism barely figure.

“Mannerism” and the concept of mannerism, by the time he reaches his conclusion he also allows Venturi to distinguish architectural medium from any other century were allowed. Gropius-Mies-Corbusier were the Holy Trinity. There were no “alternative modernisms” (art deco, reductive classicism, and so on) of the type that historians now include in the narrative of the architecture of the twentieth century. Even Louis Kahn’s luminous monumentality, redolent of Rome and heroic striving, was often suspect.

The salient assertion of modernism was that the present is so different that the forms of the past are irrelevant. Modernism is well named, since the Latin word modernus means simply “just recent” (from modo, “just now”). From Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier onward this committed designers to a formal vocabulary and problem-solving method that was primarily autarkic and purist: new forms were to be reasoned abstract forms detached from history.

Robert Venturi’s “gentle manifesto” Complexity and Contradiction came out at a critical period in architectural history, when “a false complexity [had] recently countered the false simplicity of an earlier Modern architecture” (23). Venturi refers to what we now know—pace Charles Jencks—as late modern architecture as histrionic arbitrary forms, and which he and Scott Brown would later categorize as “ducks.” More significantly, the book arrived at a time when a younger generation was just beginning to feel that modernism had debased the language of architecture with its idealization of the “primitive and the elementary,” to the point that its ability to speak to the human spirit was stifled, and that “single-function” rational design was producing a string of unpredicted technical and cultural disasters. At Harrison & Abramovitz’s U.N. Secretariat, the windows leaked because wind blew the rain upward on the curtain wall. So many windowpanes blew out of L. M. Pei’s Hancock Tower that it became known as the plywood skyscraper. And in his introduction to Complexity and Contradiction, Vincent Scully notes “that cataclysmic purism in contemporary urban renewal which has brought so many cities to the brink of catastrophe” (13), most famously in Minori Yamashiki’s Corbusian Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, which was to be dynamited in 1972.

Although his book is a “gentle manifesto,” there is an almost ruthless logic in Venturi’s citing Vitruvius’s commodity, firmness, and delight (utilitas, firmitas, venustas) as proof that good architecture is innately complex and never completely resolved or pure. If architecture is to be vital and simply useful, it must be inclusive, and if inclusive, complex. Anyone who has tried design knows that it is a struggle to resolve conflicting demands, and the result is at best a vital compromise that achieves unity by prioritizing some demands over others. Venturi quotes Paul Rudolph, “All problems can never be solved” (24), although Rudolph made this statement in support of Mies’s highly selective purism.4 Judging anything as complicated as how a building works requires the empirical examination of actual buildings, and that means engaging with the past, but engaging critically, “precedent thoughtfully considered” (18). That remark has a strong similarity to Vitruvius’s own attitude toward precedence and innovation. A quick reading of Vitruvius gives the impression of an emphasis on conservatism, on the maintenance of nos maiores (ways of our ancestors)—literally, our