Inside and the Outside,” would become part of the book’s second section, on “program.” 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.

The New Critical vocabulary and Sypher’s “recurring mannerism” seem to have allowed Venturi to distinguish architectural “medium” from “program” and to describe the principles governing the medium. But by stating that mannerism is also “relevant” for the “program” of contemporary architecture, Venturi adopts a second interpretation of mannerism, present in Sypher but also in Blunt’s article and its reception by Rowe: of mannerist architecture as the spatial and visual expression of society’s complexities and uncertainties. Here, too, early modern architecture is an important model, in the way Palladio’s architecture reacts to the contingencies of the environment or baroque buildings generate a layered urban space. But the real test case for architecture’s dealings with the complexities of society is the contemporary city (59, 70, 75, 85–89). If Venturi sets out in Complexity and Contradiction by proclaiming a “partiality” for early modern architecture and the concept of mannerism, by the time he reaches his conclusion he also looks elsewhere: “It is perhaps from the everyday landscape, vulgar and disdained, that we can draw the complex and contradictory order that is valid and vital for our architecture as an urbanistic whole” (103).

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Notes

Venturi and the Recovery of Metaphor and Precedent in Architecture

Few people recall, and the history books still do not record, the oppressiveness of the practice, and especially the education, of architecture in the 1960s and 1970s. Nothing was permitted in schools or reported in the journals that was not “orthodox modern,” and no forms 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 modus, “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” (25). 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 unpredictable 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 Minoru Yamasaki’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, vanitas) 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.

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 mai- rium (ways of our ancestors—literally, our...
“greaters”) and suspicion of foreign influences and of innovation (don’t trust the new opus reticulatum) (2.8.1). But a close reading reveals that Vitruvius throughout the Ten Books exercises a critical appraisal of his “maiores,” for good or ill. He praises those who passed on knowledge of successful practices by writing useful treatises (7. praef. 1), but he advises against the practice of others who built heavy stucco cornices (7.3.3). Throughout the Ten Books Vitruvius is constantly interested in recent innovations: new types of surveying instruments, more spacious temple interiors, new types of foundations. For Vitruvius that critical empiricism was an essential component of innovation; by employing a modernist suspicion of tradition, most writers in the twentieth century missed it.

Venturi’s signal accomplishment is his argument that architecture’s innate complexity commits designers to reconnect innovation with (as he quotes T. S. Eliot) “not only the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (19). Venturi arrives at this anti-modern attitude by adopting Eliot’s reversal of the meaning of the word traditional. Trade, tradition, and traitor all derive from the same root, traders, “to hand over.” But, as Venturi quotes Eliot, tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (19). In this view of tradition the active participant is thereby not the ancestor but the descendant. Venturi opens his preface by arguing that criticism is—as any artist should know—an essential component of the creative process, again quoting Eliot: “This frightful toil is as much critical as creative” (19).

As Scully points out, Venturi also invents a new and American way of generating legible form by combining the monumental European tradition (mainly Italianate classicism of Renaissance and baroque) with American vernacular (“Main Street is almost all right”). The postmodern movement that began in the later 1970s, inspired by Venturi’s work, is almost entirely classically based. And a salient point of classicism is tectonic signification.

Charles Moore, Michael Graves, Robert A. M. Stern, and Philip Johnson (among many others) practiced what I would call ironic classicism, which recalled the tectonic forms of classicism that made buildings more familiar, complex, and communicative, but that also irritated many observers with the witty falseness of forms borrowed from tectonics rather than actual tectonics (e.g., Graves’s keystone capitals in Portland). This practice was based on one of Venturi’s main formal tactics: the employment of a semiotic approach that he and Denise Scott Brown would later call the “decorated shed,” but I would call the “honesty of fiction.” When Venturi employs arches that are not arches on the Guild House and the Vanna Venturi House, he uses a tectonic form, but the fiction is foregrounded. Charles Jencks quotes an anecdote from Umberto Eco about a young man who recovers the ability to talk of love by self-consciously citing a typical line from a romance novel (“As Barbara Cartland would put it, ‘I love you madly’ ”). In a similar manner, the Vanna Venturi House has recovered the ability to speak about its own meaning by reactivating and reshaping the language of architectural, not abstract, form while acknowledging its “artificiality.” (Artificial means choice, but not necessarily false choice.)

When I was at Harvard Graduate School of Design in the early 1970s, I was repelled by the distinctly oppressive modern orthodoxy then current. I went across the street to the Department of History of Art and Architecture (moving in the opposite direction from Philip Johnson) and wrote a PhD dissertation on the invention of the Doric order. My main thesis was that the Doric order does indeed express the tectonics of stone trabeation, but with forms that do not derive from the forms of structure. But Doric hides that fiction, which is why scholars have been frustrated in their attempts to explain its creation for centuries. The distinction is that Doric does not express the innate tectonic character of a structure; it expresses an architect’s opinion of the character of that structure. This is a disjunction that Venturi acknowledges when he writes that Kahn “has referred to ‘what a thing wants to be,’ but implicit in this statement is the opposite: what the architect wants the thing to be” (19–20).

Venturi’s prime contribution is not just complexity, inclusiveness, the difficult whole, and “precedent thoughtfully considered”9— it is also a strategy of form that puts the thinking mind of an architect between the perceived reality of a building and its communicating visible form. Form does not follow function, nor function form. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Venturi are both right: the high Gothic cathedrals of France are virtuosic expressions of structure, and they are decorated sheds.

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Notes
8. This is the main opinion of Charles Jencks in his review “Complexity and Contradiction Turns 50,” Architectural Record (May 2016), 24–25. Jencks points out that Venturi “doesn’t deal with social or scientific ideas that bolstered complexity in other disciplines.”

History and Representation: Venturi’s Engagement with Modern “Islamic” Architecture

In Complexity and Contradiction Robert Venturi presents a critique of modernism, with its rigid systems and fetishization of the functional. Mining the past and utilizing examples as diverse as Borromini’s churches and Frank Furness’s houses, Venturi addresses the complexity of architectural form, made visible through unexpected juxtapositions and scalar manipulations. He considers intricate baroque ornament and heavy Egyptian columns alongside Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye to impress upon the reader that the study of architecture requires close analysis and historical breadth. The perspective is that of a designer, however, not a historian, a point Venturi makes clear from the outset.

The book ends with twelve of the architect’s own projects, seven of which were