“greater”) 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 antimodern attitude by adopting Eliot’s reversal of the meaning of the word traditional. Trade, tradition, and trairor all derive from the same root, trader, “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 reacquiring 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”—it is also a strategy of form that puts the thinking mind of an architect between the perceived reality of a building and its communicable 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
unrealized. The same black-and-white photography that caresses the façades of Roman churches documents Venturi’s Guild House housing project for the elderly in Philadelphia. The implicit connection is that of form and memory, and a blending of everyday materiality with historical reference. The polemic thus calls for an architecture of remembrance, the images composed like a dream sequence of memories long internalized. However, the past is not a passive imprint but a reflection of “society’s inverted scale of values” (43).1 The central issue is that of representation, of architecture itself as well as the multiple discursive positions that it may enable.2

The book is provocative and visually sophisticated, and its influence in the fifty years since its publication cannot be overestimated. The power of Venturi’s argument for historicism lies in its flexibility. Although answers to the questions “Whose history?” and “Which moment in time?” are alluded to in Complexity and Contradiction, they are also left somewhat ambiguous (for example, even though Venturi provides no dates and makes no attempt at geographic specificity, his bias toward Italian baroque comes through). Venturi’s claim for using traditional building types as a starting point for modern design resonated in developing countries in the Middle East and South Asia, which were attempting to rediscover a past severed by colonial and nationalist modernization projects.3

The historicism to which Venturi alludes in Complexity and Contradiction and proposes more directly in his later writings became the lingua franca of nationalist projects from Turkey to the Persian Gulf. The early 1980s were a watershed moment for the Middle East, coming on the heels of the Iranian Revolution and the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. Governments in search of local forms of authority looked to Islamic history for political and ideological inspiration.4 The turn to fundamentals was not the ambition only of theocrats and nationalists but also of multinational institutions such as the Aga Khan Foundation, even if the styles and buildings they chose as exemplars sometimes (although not always) differed.

Venturi’s writings were influential in the emergent discourses on identity, history, and regionalism, and they brought Venturi to the attention of both the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Aga Khan Foundation in Geneva. For the former, he was asked to submit a proposal for a state mosque in Baghdad. In the latter case, he was asked to serve as a juror for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, established in the late 1970s to recognize works that, among other characteristics, display “a heightened awareness of the roots and essence of Muslim Culture.”5

Figure 1 Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, interior prayer hall, Baghdad State Mosque competition, 1983 (courtesy of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.).
Both institutions saw Venturi’s role as central to defining a discourse on architecture that would serve as a model for a new “Islamic” architectural identity. Within an environment of nationalism, development, and indigenity, Venturi found himself being asked to make concrete his ideas on architectural postmodernity.

In January 1983, the Philadelphia-based architectural firm Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown (VRSB) submitted its proposal for an international design competition sponsored by the government of Iraq under the auspices of President Saddam Hussein. The project was a monumental state mosque for the capital city, Baghdad, and the competition rules specified that the design must integrate “historical settings and styles as well as contemporary design qualities.” That is to say, the design should be both traditional and contemporary, paying tribute to the history of Iraq and of Islamic architecture while being technologically and programmatically innovative.

Of the six entries, VRSB’s was the most self-consciously historicist in its form and iconography. The submission drawings and model show a massive rectangular hypostyle (columnar) hall, its horizontal expanse interrupted by a domed roof covering the courtyard. The firm’s statement began with the proclamation that “the image of a State Mosque must be at once profound, to speak to future ages, and popular, to be loved by the people of Iraq today.” The latter goal, intangible as it may appear, was to be achieved through image making, or the creation of a set of associations. The building would be, in Venturi’s own terminology, a “decorated shed,” with large-scale calligraphy, arched openings, freestanding minaret, and blue dome serving as signs advertising the building type of the mosque. (Figure 1). Ornamental flourishes would embellish the façade and interiors, the motifs randomly selected, “without being historically literal in scale, context or materials.” The building was meant to appear “at once modern and familiar.”

The jurors were called upon to choose winners from a diverse group of projects built for or by Muslim communities across the world.

Critics have condemned the Baghdad State Mosque project for its orientalist forms and its simple historicism. Even as VRSB’s proposal was relegated to the cabinet of misplaced intentions (it did not win the competition), however, Venturi’s writings continued to resonate with patrons and practitioners in the Middle East. In 1986, Venturi was invited to join the international jury that would select the winners of the third cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Also on the jury were Hans Hollein, Fumihiko Maki, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, Mahdi Elmandjra, Zahir Uld-deen Khwaja, Ronald Lewcock, Mehmet Doruk Pamir, and Soedjatmoko.

The 1986 cycle was likely the most contentious in the history of the Aga Khan Award, with Hollein and Pamir writing a scathing critique of the award and what they saw as the biases governing the selection of the winners. These jurors reserved particular censure for the award given to
the Bhong Mosque in Pakistan, which was designed and funded by a local landowner and comprised a variety of materials and decorative motifs (Figure 2). According to Venturi, the mosque is exuberant and flamboyant, a perfect example of “sources, high and low, focused and broad.” Critics of the award, however, saw the Bhong Mosque as “baroque,” kitsch, and undeserving. Its selection as a winner added fuel to criticisms of the omission of “modernist” buildings, such as the National Parliament House designed by Louis Kahn in Dhaka, from consideration for the Aga Khan Award. The “anti-modern bias,” as one commentator noted, was “troubling” and catered to populist sensibilities that were ideologically charged.

The criticism was clearly directed at Venturi. One of the two dissenting jurors, Mehmet Doruk Pamir, wrote, “There is a romantic bias toward traditionalism, historicism and the vernacular. This represents at least one dominant strain within the architectural discourse in Europe and America during the last decade.” While Pamir was correct in identifying Venturi’s influence on the outcome of the 1986 awards, the temporal and geographic effects of Venturi’s influence were not specific to that moment. The seeds of postmodernism to which Pamir alluded were already sown in Complexity and Contradiction, and they found fruitful soil in the discourse on Islamic architecture put forth by patrons in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

The Baghdad State Mosque competition and the selection of the 1986 Aga Khan Award winners revealed the disjunctions in Venturi’s theoretical stance, which aimed to reconcile historical, often elite, style with what Venturi characterized as the everyday. They also made evident the influence of his work on the broader discourse on “Islamic architecture” in the region. The primary shortcoming of VRSB’s Baghdad State Mosque proposal was that it gave little consideration to the history of Iraqi architecture, as though regional and chronological specificity did not matter. In the case of the award, Venturi’s championing of the Bhong Mosque, despite great resistance, revealed the tension between the high-minded discourse encouraged by the Aga Khan Foundation and the difficulty the jury faced in recognizing an unusual, if culturally relevant, project.

The question of representation, central to Venturi’s explorations, remains elusive. Calling for a plurality not just of architectural design but also of use and function, Venturi seeks diversity in form and relevance in historicism. The lessons that he tries to derive in Complexity and Contradiction have not always been successfully adopted in the Middle East, although architects such as Abdel-Wahed El-Wakil in Saudi Arabia and Hilmi Şenalp in Turkey have implemented historicist style in their designs. Modern critics have often been hesitant to explore the cultural impact of Venturi’s approach, while the academy falls short in its ability to judge works that do not fit easily into a modernist idiom. The challenge, as articulated by Venturi fifty years ago, remains to be met.

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Notes
2. My use of the term representation has to do first with architectural production and the ways in which Venturi uses drawings and photography to represent his “view” and second with the demographics (representations of ideas and people) that Venturi’s work engages and the ways in which he attempts to reconcile elite patronage with popular taste.
3. A parallel influence was that of regionalism, as put forth by Kenneth Frampton. A broader study would consider the relationship between these two thinkers and their reception in the Middle East. Kenneth Frampton, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism,” Perspecta 20 (1983), 147–62.
4. This was in contrast to early twentieth-century state projects that were modernist and linked themselves to pre-Islamic histories. Sandy Irani and Kishwar Rizvi, “Modern Architecture and the Middle East: The Burden of Representation,” in Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century, ed. Sandy Irani and Kishwar Rizvi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 3–36.
8. One participant in a symposium related to the competition, French critic Bernard Huet, noted, however, that architecture in Iraq had traditionally been restrained in its use of color, restricting the use of polychrome tiles to select spaces in interiors. Though one could note that VRSB’s project misunderstood the meaning of traditional in this context, choosing instead a generic Islamic style. Bernard Huet, “Reflections on the Projects . . . ,” in “Regenerative Approaches to Mosque Design,” 47.

Power and Privilege

When I arrived at Princeton University nearly thirty years ago to start my undergraduate education, I secured a work-study job washing dishes on the breakfast shift at Gordon Wu Hall. While the work was tedious, and the dank scullery air left my clothes smelling of eggs, I took pleasure in the design of my workplace. In Architecture 101 the following semester, the first assignment was to choose a room someplace on the campus for analysis through drawings and text. Aware that Wu Hall was a celebrated recent building, and knowing it from daily experience, I chose to write about its entry hall and dining room. In words and novice pencil drawings, I carefully described the postmodernist interplay between modernist and medieval architectural forms staged in the building’s façades and primary public spaces.

This intimate engagement with Wu Hall was my path into the work of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown (VRSB), into Complexity and Contradiction, and into architectural history, theory, and criticism at large. I learned postmodernism in part from these close interactions with Wu Hall and from