

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's  
Confrontation with Postmodernity

*Gerard Leone, College '07*  
University of Pennsylvania

2005-2006 Penn Humanities Forum on Word & Image  
Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

Final Project Paper  
April 2006

Gerard Leone

Undergraduate Humanities Forum

Presentation: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Confrontation with Postmodernity

This presentation, like the others of this panel, concerns itself with interactions that take place between those who create a work and those that study it, those who practice and those who theorize, not that they are exclusive characterizations. In the particular case of my project, the interaction between practitioners/theorists and a critical establishment is an adversarial one, or many times seems that way. My project is titled: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Confrontation with Postmodernity. The immensity of the material the Venturis have produced and the variety of issues involved in tackling a term like postmodernism makes for many tangents and a far longer paper, what I'm concentrating on in this presentation is the issue which sparked this project: Robert Venturi believes there is a pervasive misconception about his work. How did this come about?

As with most things associated with the term Postmodern, the issue is, at very least, difficult to lay out and attack in an orderly way. The difficulty is in the fact that the word and what it describes are used in an enormous number of ways. In the scholarship that was actually most helpful, people stayed away from using the term at all. It's too amorphous. If you are scrupulous its imprecision really doesn't help you with your point. When one is talking about architecture however the term Postmodern means something somewhat particular. Postmodern, when describing an architectural style, in the most usual parlance means a style on or of a building built in the past 40 years that uses references to past non-modern styles, most commonly the classical. As an example (I don't know how much he'd like being characterized this way) Robert AM Stern's building on Penn's campus, the McNeil Center, could, under this definition be considered postmodern, but he probably wouldn't like that characterization, because postmodernism is out, it's not in style. The most common example of what is architectural stylistically postmodern is the 80's pastel, classical ornament covered Plaza d' Italia in New Orleans of Michael Graves. So, now, we have some idea of what it means to be an architect working in a postmodern style.

Now to the confrontation in my title. In the September 2001 issue of Architecture Magazine, titled Postpostmodernism, Robert Venturi, winner of the Pritzker Prize, former professor of architecture at Penn and Princeton, prolific and groundbreaking architect with a legacy assured, comes out and says he was never a Postmodern architect, and he denies creating the movement. Excuse me? The thing is, he is generally regarded as having started the revival of use of classical ornament on buildings. He and Denis Scott Brown, his partner and wife, apparently made it ok to start using historical styles and created of Postmodernism. It's widespread and understood. In the article he mentions what he regards as a misconception: Herbert Muschamp wrote in the 1997 New York Times, that Venturi's first seminal work of theory "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" gave "architects license to draw once again upon the historical styles." Venturi disagrees, he denies in unequivocal way. "I am not now nor have I ever been a Postmodernist and I unequivocally disavow fatherhood of this architectural movement." He denies it, but the understanding of postmodernism's paternity is then very much confused. During a Princeton University symposium remarks were made joining Venturi

with big trends in academic architecture: "As Dean Maxwell rightly noted, the application of semiotics to architecture began in the sixties and was given a tremendous boost by *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi's notorious 1972 manifesto glorifying the semantic richness of the urban strip. Venturi 'crossed semiotics and communication and produced Postmodernism.'" Perhaps one of the most important postmodern-founding accreditations comes from the Postscript to Robert A.M. Stern's *New Directions in American Architecture* (1977). Stern, another architect whose work can be considered Postmodern in that loose sense of the word, says that "Venturi and Charles W. Moore laid the foundation of post-modernism in their emphasis on 'meaning' and their recognition of the dysfunction between a reductive architecture and a complex culture." It goes on and on to the chagrin of Venturi.

Both Venturi and Scott Brown began their careers inculcated in architectural modernism. Scott Brown was a student of Brutalist British architects and Venturi was an associate of and faculty member with the famous Louis Kahn. When I say modern in this case I'm speaking in an architectural sense meaning the international styles and those that bear a "family resemblance" to the style characterized by a degree of minimalism, a purported lack of ornament, and "pure" form. Venturi and Scott Brown's careers were to become reactions against their modernist roots, attempts to undermine the prevailing modernist ideologies of the architectural academies and establishment. They were to do their critiques in two main works, *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, and would attempt to apply their novel ideas in their own built work.

Fast forwarding through their early work, we should try to get to the beginnings of this debate, we come to Robert Venturi's first large theoretical work, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. What is *Complexity and Contradiction*? Why is it special? Published in 1966 in association with the Museum of Modern Art, *Complexity and Contradiction* was the result of Venturi's teaching at Princeton, but far more the result of his independent research as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, where he was exposed to the breadth of Italian Architecture, especially the style which was to imprint itself upon him and what he characterizes his own style as, Mannerism. The book's purpose? to be a scathing critique of the modern style. There are many different attacks which Venturi presents in book, but I'll try to give you a flavor. Venturi characterizes all of modern architecture as orthodox, dogmatic, lifeless, and charges that despite all the utopian rhetoric that was used to advocate it, it never delivered on its promises that design could solve actual problems. International style abstraction could be the same everywhere, the abstraction was supposed to make it relevant everywhere, but Venturi says that's what makes it irrelevant and despite all the cant about form following function it rarely got the job done. To Venturi, the architecture which best serves people is architecture catering to its place. The architecture which is most interesting and most artistic is that which isn't simple in the abstract but complicated, incongruous, plural, paradoxical and self effacing. Venturi makes his point visually primarily by using historical architecture. He uses Borromini, Van Brugh, Lutyens, Hawksmoor, San Gallo, Furness, the late Corbusier as heroes of complex, fun, vibrant architecture and takes a rhetorical hammer to the derivative pavilions of Philip Johnson, Mies VanderRohe, and the Early Corbu. There was a great deal of power in Venturi's wit when he made his point. In 1966, with all the Big Names still alive, Van Der Rohe, Gropius, venerable and

beloved and LeCorbusier only dead a year, modernism was very much entrenched. Then this upstart and his "gentle manifesto" turned Van Der Rohe's maxim "Less is more" on its head saying "Less is a bore."

Move ahead 6 years to 1972 and Venturi and Scott Brown have not only taken on Modernism with what little built work they have but they have begun a series of studios which are studying the American vernacular, from main street, to Levittown, to Las Vegas. These studios produce Learning From Las Vegas. What's so great about Learning from Las Vegas? The first part of Learning from Las Vegas is an analysis of the new architecture popping up in the flat, sprawling desert predicated on the car and the leisure economy. The study was a generous study of a native, organic, gauche vernacular architecture that the academy would of course go nowhere near. The conclusions drawn from this study are far more interesting. Once again, the conclusions that now BOTH Scott Brown and Venturi drew were distinctly anti-modern, they concluded that buildings could be either Ducks or Decorated Sheds, or buildings whose form expressed what they were or buildings who had generic form but used signage to express what they were, respectively. They drew a distinction between the heroic/modern and the ordinary/ugly and drew the revolutionary conclusion that ordinary wasn't a bad thing at all, that all buildings did not have to be full of geometric form, clean lines, and puritanical fervor to be well designed and good buildings, that style was not the sole arbiter of a building's goodness.

So, is the critical establishment who attributes Postmodernism's birth to Venturi's theory correct? Is Venturi right? Take Muschamp's claim that Complexity and Contradiction gave architect's license to use historical styles again. Is it true? Not necessarily, Venturi correctly points out that the architecture he advocates isn't just old architecture, he appreciates the kinds of modern architecture which employs context and paradox and ambiguities in their designs, like Aalto, the late Corbusier, and Howe and Lescaze. So, Complexity and Contradiction wasn't advocating for historical styles, it was advocating for non orthodox modern architecture. Venturi in fact considers most of what passes as pastel, 1980's early 1990's architecture that happens to have a column or a pediment as bad modern architecture with historical applique. Yet at the same time, is Muschamp's claim so crazy? No, its not, could an architect have been even able to practice bad postmodern architecture without Venturi's initial criticisms of orthodox modern. Is it so crazy to say that without his critique, that the postmodern architects would have just been modern architects?

Next claim, did Venturi apply Semiotics to Architecture? Did he apply the Linguistic studies that were the vogue of the academy to architecture? To this claim we can with some confidence, no. The main thrust of his work was as a criticism of modern architecture, what is possibly construed as their use of literary theory is 2 pages of Learning from Las Vegas is where connotation and denotation are mentioned as ways to interpret actual signs on the strip, and another 3 where they cite the essays of George Baird, Charles Jencks, and Alan Colquhoun. Venturi never applies literary theory to any of his work ever again, and this stands in stark contrast to architects like Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi who embraced post structuralism and deconstructivism in both movement's respective vogues. Baird and Jencks were theorists who were the first to apply the literary theories to architecture, with only limited success. Jencks has stayed very much in the theory business. We can safely identify Jencks as being THE theorist of

Leone: 4

Postmodernism, the main perpetrator, the paterfamilias of the theoretical taxonomy and distinction of being postmodern, as well as many other not particularly useful classificatory terms. He has stayed very much abreast of the trends and published several books classifying various arts and architecture as "postmodern" as well as attempting to expand upon the term in various ways. Jencks' histories of recent architecture have parsed it into a frustrating taxonomy, especially for someone examining Venturi. Jenck's categories and definitions often confuse any attempt to understand what an architect did. Take Venturi in Jencks's taxonomic tree of architecture since the 1960's. There are 6 trends of historicism, straight revivalism, neo-vernacular, ad-hoc urbanism, metaphor/metaphysical, and post-modern space, and even 31 sub categories, all of them unhelpful.

Now, by this point in the presentation, you will have noticed that I really have shown few of Venturi and Scott Brown's buildings at all, I'm getting there, I've just nearly divided the presentation into theory and practice. So its correct to say that Venturi never intentionally created or advocated postmodern architecture. But is he a postmodernist? Well, by the generally accepted parlance, the definition of postmodern architecture being the use of a historical reference, then he's guilty, a postmodernist. Now, it is best understood that how he uses these historical architectural references is markedly different from the rest of the postmodernist architectural pack. Notice, that while architects like Graves, Moore, and the lesser postmodernists apply columns and pediments with abandon, Venturi uses them only as symbols, as a way of communicating to the building's audience. For example, why does he put flat columns on the Vagelos labs? He's using them as signs to communicate that the building is academic, to denote the entrance. He also references Context in using red brick and stone, explicitly referencing Philadelphia's use of brick and the color of the esteemed Frank Furness's library next door.

So what do we have in the end? In my project I've found Venturi to be an insightful critic, of what was and still remains, to Venturi's chagrin, the predominance of modern architecture. He is correct in his assertion that his work did not produce the stylistic trend, but his denial of his participation in it is false. Though the issues inherent in historical modernism and postmodernism are far more complex than simply movement and reaction, Architectural postmodernism was considered a reaction against architectural modernism and Venturi was integral to this. What Venturi is aware of, yet I believe, not willing to admit too publicly is that architecture and its theory, despite all of its normative content and all of its academic pretensions, are simply issues of fashion. It is as much an issue of out and in and retro and contemporary, it is just that architects simply aren't willing to admit it.

# Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Confrontation with Postmodernity

By Gerard Leone  
for the Undergraduate Fellowship of the Penn Humanities Forum

Leone-6

## An Unwanted Classification

The theory and practice of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown is one of reaction to what they perceived to be an unreasoned orthodoxy in architecture and of their frustrations given novel, clever, and urbane forms. The story we're looking at, in its briefest iteration, is of a nickname that stuck. It's not as simple as a nickname, but there are enough issues to be had in overblown taxonomic games crossing oeuvres, theory, and academic trends to remind you at times that this might be just that simple. It comes down to the fact that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (the Venturis), though esteemed, awarded, and revered, aren't particularly happy with what their legacy will mean if it is associated with things they never had anything to do with. It has always been their prerogative to criticize what they see as an architectural establishment and advance what they believe to be the theory needed in contemporary architecture, while explaining how this theory works in their own buildings. Robert Venturi's simple denial, "I am not now and never have been a Postmodernist," lies in the midst of many different criticisms that Venturi has launched at architecture at many different times, but this particular rejection provokes the question of what exactly Postmodernism is in architecture and in general.

The problem with Postmodernism is that it can mean many things and the term has been used in all sorts of ways, lending it a frustrating amorphousness. There are particular ways it is used by philosophers, literary critics, academics, architects, designers, and even in a colloquial way (e.g. "Pomo"). Of course, many of the definitions of "Postmodern" do not apply to architecture, so we must first understand that when Postmodernism is used to mean an architectural style it means that beginning

around half a century ago, if a building included classical references it is considered “Postmodern.” Venturi’s work has made classical references, why should he deny the classification? The tenor of his disavowal makes postmodernism a consummately insulting accusation. Who dares accuse Mr. Venturi of Postmodernism?

The answer is that many people do. Perhaps the best way to characterize the confusion that pervades the discussion of postmodernism, at least in architecture, is as a kind of low lying fog or cloud of dust. So many different authors pick up this term and unscrupulously use it to mean all manner of things, characterizing all sorts of different things as postmodern, establishing historical progressions to the postmodern age, etc. The use of the term so liberally essentially kicks up dust, making its meaning obscure if not meaningless. One could explain almost all the aspects of Venturi and Scott Brown’s work without ever using the term “Postmodern,” but if one attempts to understand their work in regard to architectural history then one is frustrated because they are pervasively credited with founding architectural postmodernism.

There are many demonstrations of how widespread the understanding of Venturi and Scott Brown’s work as postmodern is: The book *Towards Post-Modernism* (1987) by Michael Collins credits Venturi as being a “major exponent of Post-Modernism and Post-Modern Classicism, seen for example in the split gables in the Chestnut Hill House [Vanna Venturi House]” and had “emerged as the leader of American Post Modern Architecture and design [in 1986 with the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery London].”<sup>1</sup> In a cursory and hostile glance at a Princeton University symposium, remarks were made joining Venturi with big trends in academic architecture: “As Dean Maxwell rightly noted, the application of semiotics to architecture began in the sixties and was



given a tremendous boost by *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi's notorious 1972 manifesto glorifying the semantic richness of the urban strip. Venturi 'crossed semiotics and communication and produced Postmodernism.'" Later on in the description of the conference, "*Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) that self described 'gentle manifesto'... has often been credited with inaugurating the turn to postmodernist architecture."<sup>ii</sup> Perhaps one of the most important postmodern-founding accreditations comes from the Postscript to Robert A.M. Stern's *New Directions in American Architecture* (1977). Stern, another architect whose work can be considered Postmodern in that loose sense of the word, says that "Venturi and Charles W. Moore laid the foundation of post-modernism in their emphasis on 'meaning' and their recognition of the dysfunction between a reductive architecture and a complex culture."<sup>iii</sup> It goes on and on to the chagrin of Venturi.

If one were quickly parsing the history of architecture, it would be tempting to put Venturi under the heading of classical reference-filled Postmodernism. He disagrees. The disavowal I find most compelling comes from the May 2001 edition of *Architecture* magazine, titled *Postpostmodernism*, the title demonstrating the architectural establishment's own bemusement with the term itself. The issue takes as its subject a number of architects who at some point had done work in the postmodern style and how few perpetuate the style today. It visits in editor's note and the title essay the notion that the style is very much dead and how many architects, not just Venturi, in 2001 denied association with it. In 2001, just as now, the appliqué of historical detail is very much dated and recipient of much tongue clucking in the more cutting edge circles. Venturi's essay, *A Bas Postmodernism, of Course*, begins:

I am not now and never have been a postmodernist and I unequivocally disavow fatherhood of this architectural movement. The reaction against it by the architectural and critical establishment in the early 1990s I can understand; however I disagree with the Neomod, the modern-revival or modern-dramatique style that has replaced it.

The title is in a way, a reference to architecture advocated by Venturi and Scott Brown in which signs and symbols (the perennial objects of their theoretical attentions) must become the skins of buildings. To Venturi and Scott Brown, the buildings which respond in a genuine and correct way to the contemporary world are those that communicate with it (via electronics, signs, etc.), and so the nature of the envelope of a building, its skin, its relief is what they've expressed in their later work. The last remarks reference his renewed disgust with the return of the senselessly modern, the orthodoxy of the functionalist, International, or Miesian styles. This rehashing of modernism was what Venturi had opposed when he wrote *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and yet in contemporary architecture the orthodox modern prevails. The Venturis could be characterized as teachers who are irritated because they have to repeat the same lessons, the same critiques over again.

The most general task ahead is to look at the Venturis work and theory and see if the attribution of Postmodernism is correct, or what isn't postmodern about their work. First we should look at some of the more general, pervasive claims made about the Venturi's work, and see what could be objected to in these claims if we accept the Venturis' denial. This primarily involves investigating claims made about their theoretical works and what they apparently gave license to. After examining claims made about their theory, the second part of this paper will examine the stylistic

classification of postmodern buildings and whether or not the Venturis, despite their denials, can have their buildings categorized in such a way.

The Claims to be Denied:

Before examining claims about the Venturis' work (which they would deny) it would be best that we have a discussion of what the various forms of the word "postmodern" will mean for the rest of this paper. I will attempt to use two different running definitions of postmodernism, the critical and the theoretical. The critical definition is the definition used by critics when they evaluate styles, the working classification used to judge buildings. The theoretical definition is different in that it is used in a kind of normative way in tandem with other philosophical positions. The usual parlance meaning of the term and what I believe Venturi was responding to in his essay is what I'm calling critical Postmodernism. Critical Postmodernism for the purpose of this paper describes the architectural style on or of a building built in the past 45 years that uses references to past non-modern styles, most commonly the classical. Theoretical Postmodernism doesn't describe any concrete style as much as the application of various philosophical and ideological positions to architecture. Theoretical Postmodernism is an umbrella term covering a broad amount of theory produced since the 1960's that involved the use of phenomenology, linguistic theory, Marxism, Feminism.

What Robert Venturi and Denis Scott Brown are responding to in their denial are claims about what their theoretical work did and what their buildings are. The first claim to look at is a rather modest sort of claim: Robert Venturi's *Complexity and*

*Contradiction in Architecture* was the impetus for the use of references from architecture's past. In his essay in *Architecture* magazine Venturi gives an example of this kind of claim, an article by Herbert Muschamp in the *New York Times*, where *Complexity and Contradiction* is attributed with giving "architects license to draw once again on the historical styles." This is a somewhat prevalent conception about the Venturis work, and will be the first claim that we will examine. What we can look at is whether, in fact, *Complexity and Contradiction* does "license" the use of historical style, or advocate it in some way.

The next claim that is somewhat pressing when one says that the Venturis work is Postmodern in the theoretical sense, in that it uses linguistic theory. While definitions of the postmodern regularly include elaborations on Feminism, Marxism, Phenomenology, etc., the only part of the theoretical explosion that might be relevant at all to the Venturis work is that of linguistic theory. While *Complexity and Contradiction* lacks many references to communication, *Learning from Las Vegas* coincides with the adoption of French linguistic theory by the academy. When the Venturis insist on architecture that "communicates" are they insisting upon it in this theory-laden way? The second claim which we will examine is this: the Venturis used the linguistic theory of the day to make their architecture, and by using this linguistic theory they made an architecture that was postmodern. The discussion of this claim primarily centers on *Learning From Las Vegas*, which actually includes allusions to the linguistic theory of the day. How was it used? Was it the Venturis who did the application?

Despite the correctness or incorrectness of the above two claims, which primarily concern what could be described as their theory, we should entertain a claim about their

built work. Whether or not they advocated or took a theoretical postmodern position, can their buildings be considered postmodern? The third claim is this, despite whatever their theory may advocate, the Venturis work can be considered if not theoretically Postmodern then critically Postmodern. Even if we cannot find a building of theirs that advances a phenomenological or structuralist perspective on architecture, then it is entirely possible that their buildings have made use of a classical element. Thus, it is entirely possible that Venturis are “postmodern” in one sense but not in another, and this is what we must look at. The heart of this particular issue is a question of how one conceives of a building in relation to others. When the Venturis use a column, is it really that different from the way that Michael Graves uses a column?

What did *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* actually do?

When *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was published in 1966 by the Museum of Modern Art, Vincent Scully wrote in the introduction that the book was “the most important writing on the making of architecture since LeCorbusier’s *Vers une Architecture* of 1923.” In the second edition, Scully was somewhat surprised at how correct this interpretation was, or at least how correct his statement is considered. The first claim, the understanding that *Complexity and Contradiction* gave architects back the ability to use historical style, seems to be both supported and rebutted by the preface of the book. Complexity... is a book of criticism and explanation of his built work not of advocacy for any style, but at the same time he invokes Eliot’s regard for an awareness of history in creative work. Note that an awareness of the traditions and archetypes of

architecture does not mean the use of those traditions in contemporary practice. At the same time the word “license” by Muschamp, is usefully vague, while it doesn’t necessarily mean outright encouragement, it could mean something as simple as “opened a door for” or “freedom,” but more on this later. What does the book say?

The first paragraphs make it apparent that the primary object of criticism will be what Venturi terms “orthodox” modern architecture. Venturi doesn’t necessarily argue that the virtues of modernism (“purity,” “cleanliness,” “unity,” “directness,” “clarity”) are what is wrong with architecture as much as asserts what he prefers. A style cannot be wrong, what is wrong is the puritanical insistence upon the credos of LeCorbusier and Mies as the fundamental truths of design. To Venturi, the contemporary world calls for an architecture that could acknowledge complexity. The pavilions of Mies in their crystalline purity belied their complete inability to address the complexity of a site or the humans they serve. Though he doesn’t use the example, I find it instructive. No one could live in the Mies Van Der Rohe’s Farnsworth house, it was unlivable. To Venturi, though simplicity might be a virtue, the overt simplification of the complex problem of the house’s program is irresponsible, and ultimately makes for “bland architecture. Less is a bore.” The book continues addressing the problems of Modern architecture, frequently invoking comments on poetry by Eliot, art theory by Albers, and pop art. Every point of attack on the Modernist camp was illustrated comparatively with examples from all manner of architects from the baroque to the Mannerists. Borromini, Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh, Furness, and the Late LeCorbusier were used to address the deficiencies of Johnson, Gropius, and even the early LeCorbusier, but all were used to illustrate the virtues of an architecture with ambiguity, accommodation, and

Leone: 14

contradiction. *Complexity...* is, in a way, a rejoinder to the history as told by Modernists in which stultifying tradition prevented architects from realizing an architecture that was suitable to their time. As LeCorbusier tells it in *Vers Une Architecture Nouveau*, design inexorably moves to geometric perfection, simplicity, and efficiency as shown in the famous analogues of how Paestum must result in the Parthenon much as the Humber must result in the Delage 'Grand-Sport' car.<sup>iv</sup> Though it is a selective history as well, Venturi rebuts the Modernists conception of history saying that architecture's history is the slow accommodation of convention with innovation, the reconciliation of the new with the old, and not the unavoidable dialectic and revolution unto a modernist perfection. In Rome as in the Main streets of the USA, accommodation and compromise produce a complicated and messy but blessedly vital city.

In *Complexity and Contradiction*, Venturi never advocates pillars and pediments on a contemporary architecture, what he advocates are more general principles to build by. Instead of geometric perfection, let your building address the problems of the site; instead of the form precisely following the building's function, let the exterior inform the interior but lets its appearance belie its use. Vanbrugh and Borromini were exemplars of architects who acquiesced to convention and reformed it in remarkable ways. Venturi's own works, which appear in the end of the book are definitively modern, spare and clean, but trying out distortions in the plan and expressive elements, Furness-like chimneys and large geometric excisions similar to Louis Kahn designs. The two most famous buildings included in *Complexity...* are the Guild House and the Vanna Venturi house, both of which make no explicit reference to anything historical at all. The Guild house attempts to somewhat willfully introduce complexity with conventional elements like double hung

Leone: 15

windows in slightly asymmetric patterns, and a gold accented television antenna. The Vanna Venturi house uses its massing and roofline to symbolize a house, and yet uses asymmetries and competing elements which jockey for each other inside of the house (e.g. the fireplace chimney and the stairs). The only two remotely historical comparisons used by Venturi are not references but ways of describing elements, "palladian" and a comparison to a shingle style stairway. Much ado is often made of the ribbon window on the façade, or the broken roofline of the house, often compared to the broken pediments of the Rimini cathedral or Vanbrugh's Blenheim, but Venturi never points these out as references or insists upon their importance. The broken roofline of the Vanna Venturi house is often seen as the residential equivalent of Johnson's AT&T building's Chippendale crown, but these comparisons are external to the text. If one is looking to assign Venturi the role of critical Postmodern architect then one will definitely see the Vanna Venturi house as evidence, whether or not it is intended that way. At the same time, the idea of referencing the past in the architecture of present is nowhere to be found in *Complexity ...*; those who attribute the riot of pastel columns in the Plaza d'Italia to Venturi will not find its advocacy in *Complexity and Contradiction*.

I'm willing to agree with Venturi's denial in the case of the first claim, the book does not attempt to give license to use historical styles, and those who claim it does haven't read the book. At the same time, the first claim is not entirely wrong if we look at it from an intellectual history perspective. The 1966 publication was, in a way, a shot heard round the architectural world with a riot of articles and essays written agreeing or disagreeing with Venturi's position. It was seen as a kind of vocalization of a widespread

Leone 16



feeling of discontent. Philip Johnson maintains the significance of the book whether or not it can be considered the start of any kind of Postmodernism:

It all came from Bob Venturi's book. We all felt- Venturi, Stern, Graves, and I- that we should be more connected with the city, and with people. And more contextual: that we should relate to the older buildings. <sup>v</sup>

Venturi's desire to revive a consciousness of history does not mean that architects should use historical references, but if some should take his ideas of historically conscious practice of architecture in a literal way, what can he do? Whether one considers it reasonable or unreasonable, the historical comparative method used in *Complexity...* can be interpreted as advocacy for an older architecture. Even if Venturi didn't mean to encourage it, Muschamp isn't entirely incorrect when he says that *Complexity and Contradiction* encouraged the postmodern historical revival.

Semiotics on the Vegas Strip?

The second claim to entertain is that there is some kind of substantive engagement with linguistic theory in the Venturis theoretical work, thus making them part of the larger movement of theoretical postmodernism. *Complexity and Contradiction* restricts itself to commentary on poetry, the only other body of theoretical work to examine is *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), written with Steven Isenour as the product of a series of research studios at Yale University beginning in 1968. The first part of the book is a study of the vernacular architecture of the Las Vegas strip and concerns itself with the space, form, and iconography of the vernacular American architecture. Once again, the Venturis' work is set as a kind of polemic against the current design world, dominated by

Leone: 17

the orthodoxy of the modern in the form of the born-again modernisms of brutalism or neo-constructivism. These forms of architecture were entirely absent in the vulgar and commercial worlds of vernacular American architecture with the suburbs, Main Street with its A&P's, and Las Vegas. Aside from the study of the vernacular architecture itself, *Learning from Las Vegas* augments this with an attempt to reintroduce the design world to a common, commercial iconography. Modernism, in its insistence upon universality, stripped architecture of vernacular signs and symbols on buildings and insisted on communicating through pure form. The consummately tasteful cleanliness is exclusive and in a way dead; the Las Vegas Strip with its clichés and allusions includes a wide variety of people and is nothing if not vital and alive. If we look through these first sections of *Learning from Las Vegas* we are tempted to see semiotics everywhere the Venturis use the word "sign," but generally they always mean billboard; the Venturis prefer the term iconography, the icons' power being not necessarily in its inclusion in a system, but its ability to stand alone and represent a single particular thing.

Whereas *Complexity and Contradiction* made its case as a criticism cum explanation of Venturi's current built work, the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* makes its criticisms border on a manifesto of a new kind of architecture with its rallying cry being "ugly and ordinary," glorying in the criticisms of Gordon Bunshaft. The most famous segment of *Learning from Las Vegas* is the classification of buildings into duck and decorated sheds, or those buildings who bend program and structure into a symbolic form and those buildings whose structure and program are independent of the ornament applied to it, respectively. Once again, the Venturis appreciate the particulars of Modernism, but finds its dedication to the "heroic and original" as outmoded and

dishonest in its claims. The vocabulary of industrial forms and structural articulation which modern architecture purports to use is only expression and by having no meaning or ability to engage the people who use it is irresponsible and, in fact, ugly. The buildings which are “ugly and ordinary” are those which use representations, mixed media, and symbolism and thus engage the contemporary world, making them relevant and far more useful than functionalist buildings purport to be. The Venturis goes on to elaborate on Modernist neglect of history, still never advocating the use of historical ornament or reference, as much as emphasizing the false history on which Modernism based its arguments of inevitability.

There is one primary place in which the Venturis engage with the linguistic theory of the day, and that is through the citation of formulations by Charles Jencks, George Baird, and Alan Colquhoun. As the Venturis advocate for the decorated shed as a responsible and effective architectural response to the contemporary world, they understood that they approached their conclusions from a rather pragmatic way, analyzing the iconography of the vernacular American architecture. They say that the conclusion of a communicative architecture could be arrived at through semiotic theorizing, primarily quoting from the Structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Alan Colquhoun. Representation, as understood in language, is necessary for any kind of art, disproving the Modernist and Abstract Expressionist ideas that form alone communicates. Colquhoun’s conclusions sole use is polemical, to disprove the claims of Modernists. The modernist belief that a vocabulary of pure form would be so abstract as to be able to universally communicate runs counter to Baird’s and Colquhoun’s evidence from language and all other forms of art. The primary focus of the second half of

Learning from Las Vegas is the attack on architectural Modernism and its accompanying dogma. It is not the “gentle manifesto” that *Complexity and Contradiction* attempted to be, instead it is a series of attacks interspersed with the promotion of generic buildings using relevant systems of iconography. Does this “iconography” of the Venturis bare any resemblance to the signs and symbols of linguistic theory used by so many other theorists? I’m tempted to say no. The Venturis never invoke the systems of syntactic and semantic relationships in any of their explanation or theory. Though connotation and denotation make a brief appearance, it is only in an elaboration upon the witticisms of Guild House’s front signage. The only signs really considered were those as billboards, and in no way did the Venturis try to establish a ‘grammar’ of some kind, elaborating on the kinds and interactions of signage. Their comparative method does not bother with the problems of linguistic meaning, if only because the meaning of vernacular architecture’s signs is never really in doubt. One does not really find ambiguity of meaning in a Casino’s neon display or in a product’s billboard; so perhaps the iconography that the Venturis refer to may be the best description of their theoretical attentions.

### The Creation of Critical Postmodernism

In 1977, the idea of what I’m calling critical postmodernism begins to firm up. Robert A. M. Sterne published his *New Directions in American Architecture: Postscript on the edge of Modernism* that year, and stated that the issues of the new architecture are the city, the façade, and the cultural memory. All these issues seem to come from notions already mentioned by Venturi. Most notably, Sterne’s focus on the façade seems to be an

echo of the Venturis' talk of the decorated shed, and cultural memory, taken as one of the first definitions of contextualism, another echo of the consciousness of history that Venturi spoke about in *Complexity and Contradiction*. More importantly to the term Postmodern is the publishing in the same year of Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*, which is one of the works which established the stylistic definitions of what I'm calling critical postmodernism, what others call post modern historicism. While Venturi can be safely regarded as having gotten the ball rolling on some kind of theoretic or critical postmodernism, Jencks is truly the creator of the idea of a Postmodern historicist architecture and developed an exhaustive and, to an extent, unnecessary variety of terms and histories to explain the work of many contemporary, practicing architects. Jencks notes how important *Complexity and Contradiction* and the two editions of *Learning from Las Vegas* were in creating his own concept of Postmodernism in architecture, but believes his concepts to be different.

What does Jencks think the Postmodern building is? In the *Language of Post Modern Architecture*, the reference to linguistic theory nearly unnoticeable in the title, Jencks first rehashes what were decade old criticisms of Modern Architecture. Jencks goes through the litany of apparent modernist crimes, augmenting the criticisms of Sterne and the Venturis with some small scale economics. Jencks also adds some weight to the denial of linguistics in the Venturis' theory:

The Venturi argument, taken as a whole, insisted on revaluing commercial schlock and nineteenth-century eclecticism for how they communicated on a mass level...no developed theory of symbolism was put forward...no standards for selecting and judging schlock were presented and the argument was conducted on the level of personal taste - not semiotic theory.<sup>vi</sup>

To Jencks the lack of semiotic theory is a great deficiency of the Venturi's work, but we must be reminded that the Venturis were never out to create a coherent system of signs, as much as advocate for signs (literally and figuratively) as appropriate way to communicate in architecture. Jencks speaks of the Venturis' modernism like a cancer, but that is because Venturi is fundamentally a modernist architect in style who didn't buy into modernist theory and tried to incorporate things like complexity and ambiguity in distinctly modern buildings.

Before Jencks embarks on a highly complicated series of distinctions with his invented architectural genealogy he does some violence to the Venturis' work in *Learning from Las Vegas*. Jencks, whose belabored point is about how very much architecture is like language with symbolism, metaphor, syntax, etc, credits the Venturis with formulating a similar position on the architecture of communication. Jencks characterizes the distinction between duck and decorated shed as an either/or distinction, a building being strictly one or the other, and chastises the Venturis (well, just Robert) for advocating a kind of restriction on the modes of communication.<sup>vii</sup> The Venturis actual point when outlining the differences between duck and decorated shed was to distinguish modes of communication in architecture, and as *Complexity...* demonstrates the either/or distinction is a concept foreign to Robert Venturi. In *Learning from Las Vegas* the distinction between duck and decorated shed is not rigid, buildings like cathedrals are combinations of ducks and decorated sheds. The criticisms of Modernism, in *Learning from Las Vegas* essentially said that Modernism only traded in ducks and that was a fault, not that we should abandon the use of a duck-like building to communicate meaning. What one should understand to be the most important thrust of Jencks' theory is that of

dual coding, of two semiotic levels to a work of architecture. One semiotic level of the built work addresses a small group of architects and other professionals who are able to read or understand the various references used or the artistic play in built work. The second level addresses the general public communicating various messages about status or comfort.

It is in Jencks's elaborate system of classification we can find perhaps the most explicit branding of the Venturis' work as Postmodern and perhaps one of the most imaginative and faulty attempts. To Jencks, Venturi provides a kind of bridge from what he regards as Late-Modern to the Post-modern. He characterizes each of the Venturis' buildings as a kind of ugly, polemical statement, battling architectural modernism. The Headquarters building for the North Penn Visiting Nurses Association is seen by Jencks to be the first "anti-monument of Postmodernism" primarily because of the arch over the entrance which "shouted 'public entrance.'"<sup>viii</sup> Though Venturi simply hopes to make a point about having broken the modernist box by distorting the walls to fit the sloping, odd shaped plot, Jencks bends the building's description to his larger attempt to categorize most of recent architectural history, making all of what could simply be considered concessions to the urban site a Baroque feature, as if all use of a buildings' surrounding context were Baroque. In captions, the simple, thin arch whose purpose was to communicate the entrance, is made to be one of the "first uses of historical ornament in a recognizable and symbolic way."<sup>ix</sup> The simple, explicitly thin and unadorned wooden 'arch' is more a sign used to communicate the entrance. To most viewer it isn't historical in any way with no reference to any kind of historical style, Jencks seems to invent the notion.

The Venturis' Brandt House simply confuses Jencks who continues to attempt to force the Venturis' architecture of communication into his artificial categories and stylistic genealogies. The Brandt house, sheathed in blue and green tile and with curving façade doesn't look historicist in any way, but apparently the curving south exterior is paying homage to the Art Deco art collection of the owners. The Venturi's various remarks on the southern façade, that it is "1930's Post office and Walter Gropius" and that it "resembles a Georgian country house (except there is no central motif)" are taken to be evidence of a double coding, the Venturis speaking to the architects and theorists in the crowd who'd understand that the windows on the façade are so distorted as to not seem Georgian at all. Jencks seems to inadvertently read the Venturis' work correctly, but not understand why they wouldn't want to be postmodern architects: "One can enjoy the building for its marvelous idiosyncrasy...but still wonder why the Venturis have to try so hard at being original in this esoteric way? It's as if their sensibility were still Modernist, while their theory were Post."<sup>x</sup> I ask you, who wouldn't want to be thoroughly postmodern? Therein lies one of the great problems for Jencks and the critics who follow his categories. Their classifications are developed independently of actual works and they will make buildings fit into their classifications or be frustrated when architects defy their categories. The best example of this confusion and what seems like a totally unnecessary vivisection of architecture is the evolutionary tree that Jencks develops. It contains some six major trends (historicism, straight revivalism, neo-vernacular, ad hoc urbanist, metaphor metaphysical, and post-modern space) and, by some counts, thirty odd sub categories under these trends. Venturi's work appears in four different trends, post-modern space, the neo-vernacular, metaphor metaphysical, and



historicism. In most cases the chronological progression is manipulated, buildings being placed on the evolutionary tree long after they were built. Even the same buildings are in two different categories at once, like the Brant House and the Trubeck-Winslocki Houses. These confusing and near worthless distinctions do not add to an understanding or greater grasp of these buildings, whether or not you buy into the idea of double coding.<sup>xi</sup>

Whether we need to buy into Jencks's definition or his hackneyed taxonomies we can still use the usual parlance definition of Postmodernism that I proposed at the beginning of the paper, the use of some kind of historical reference, most commonly the classical. We cannot deny that the façade of the Venturi's Gordon Wu Hall has its clever, flat appliqué of simplified Renaissance stereotype designs. Neither can we ignore the flat columns that adorn the porches of the Brant House of Tuckers Town, Bermuda, or the façade of the Vagelos Laboratories at Penn, nor the use of actual columns, pilasters, and a pediment on the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London. These examples really should be sufficient, we need not extrapolate references from other buildings. The very use of these references on buildings is undeniable, and in a way, proof of the final claim, that whether or not Venturi explicitly intended to produce Postmodernism, he is, in the critical sense, a Postmodernist architect. At the same time, the flatness of the majority of these references returns again and again to the Venturis' conception of signage and communication. The flat columns on the Vagelos and the masonry appliqué on Gordon Wu hall are meant to communicate the academic nature of the buildings and to contextualize the buildings with their 19<sup>th</sup> century, revivalist neighbors. The Sainsbury Wing means to work with the context of the National Gallery and harmonize and yet play with its traditions. Though I have generally stayed away from comparisons with other

Leone: 25

Postmodernists, the work of Michael Graves and Charles Moore is not nearly so concerned with communication, but with ironic or whimsical usage of random classical references. Moore and Graves are why idea of critical postmodernism is tinged with the late 70's and early 80's pastels and gaudiness. The Venturis' work has stayed remarkably independent of stylistic trends. If they were to deny their participation in what I've termed critical postmodernism, it would be understandable if only because they took no part in the gauche excesses of the 1980s.

## Conclusion

The Venturis have always insisted on two things to characterize their work, iconography and their own mannerism. Venturi is indebted to the past and his experience of it as a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome, and it is this awareness of history that made his criticisms of modernist architecture as salient and powerful as they were. When he denies being father of the Postmodern movement in architecture he can only really deny what he control over. He never advocated the use of historical styles in *Complexity and Contradiction* and they never used semiotics in *Learning from Las Vegas*. At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that because of the Venturis' criticisms and built work, people began to reevaluate modernism in a theoretical way and in this reevaluation drew literally on past styles to create a critical Postmodernism. Though Venturi never advocated the use of historical references, he did use them in a couple of his particular, mannered ways. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were never Postmodernists, through an unfortunate confluence of theories, their architecture

became postmodern. If they ever built or wrote anything to espouse Postmodernism, they did so unwillingly, with nothing Postmodern aforethought.

---

<sup>i</sup> Collins, Michael. *Towards Post-Modernism: Decorative Arts and Design since 1851* (Boston, Little Brown and Company: 1987), p 168

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*

<sup>iii</sup> Sterne, Robert A. M. *New Directions in American Architecture* (New York: Braziller 1977), p126

<sup>iv</sup> LeCorbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1986) p 134-145

<sup>v</sup> Kate Nesbit, ed. *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1996) p26

<sup>vi</sup> Jencks, Charles A. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1984) p 87

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.*, p 45

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*, p 87

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> *ibid.*, p88

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid.*, p 80