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THE ARCHITECTURE OF ROBERT VENTURI AND DENISE SCOTT BROWN: DEMOCRATIC AND DANGEROUS

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AS THE POPULARITY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE BEGAN TO DECLINE, POSTMODERNISM OFFERED A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE FOR HOW STRUCTURES MIGHT BE FORMED AND INTERPRETED. RATHER THAN IGNORING INFLUENCES OF COMMERCIALISM AND POPULAR CULTURE LIKE THEIR MODERNIST PREDECESSORS HAD DONE, POSTMODERN ARCHITECTS WORKED WITH THESE FORCES; LIKEWISE, INSTEAD OF SEARCHING FOR IDEAL FORMS STRIPPED OF DECORATION OR HISTORY, POSTMODERN ARCHITECTURE EMBRACED THESE QUALITIES. HOWEVER, MANY OF THE BUILDINGS THAT RESULTED FROM POSTMODERN INFLUENCES WERE NOT CONSIDERED TO BE AESTHETICALLY PLEASING. THE PROBLEM, IT SEEMS, IS IN THE TRANSLATION OF THEORY INTO FORM: BY EXALTING THE ORDINARY, THE REALIZATION OF POSTMODERN THEORY POTENTIALLY LEADS TO DYSTOPIA.

CHARLES A. Jencks, the British architectural theorist, famously wrote, “Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite.”¹ While Jencks believed this to be the precise moment of modern architecture’s demise, counter-movements such as postmodernism had already begun to develop in the United States prior to the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex designed by Minoru Yamasaki. As modernism began to decline and eventually was declared dead, the question of what form architecture should take next arose. Postmodernism offered a radical alternative. Unlike modernism, which was perceived as European when it came to the United States after World War II, postmodernism, rising out of modernism’s ashes, was characteristically American.

The postmodern movement advocated for an architecture that was democratic and accepting of capitalism. Postmodernists wanted to work with the forces of commercialism and popular culture. Instead of searching for ideal forms stripped of decoration or the influences of history, postmodern architecture embraced history and was full of references to it. It could be ironic, complex, boring, ugly or banal. Postmodernism accepted consumer culture and wanted an architecture based on a multitude of references. While American architects were attracted to postmodern theory, many of the buildings that resulted from it leave much to be desired. Issues arose in the translation of the theory into architecture. Why is postmodern theory so attractive when the buildings that result from it are not? Is there a problem created in the translation of postmodern theory into actual buildings? By exalting the ordinary, does the realization of

postmodern theory lead to dystopia?

The origin of Postmodernism is often traced back to 1966, when Robert Venturi published his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. The postmodern movement grew out of a belief that modernism was lacking, too limited and without complexity; modern architecture was accused of ignoring the “experience of life and the needs of society.” In discussing modernism, and particularly the famous statement by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, Venturi wrote, “The doctrine of less is more bemoans complexity and justifies exclusion for expressive purposes. It does, indeed, permit the architect to be highly selective in determining which problems he wants to solve.” Venturi believed that modern architects were ignoring many of society’s problems in their search for pure form. He believed that modern architecture did not adequately represent the needs and the experience of con-

temporary society, which was now too complex to be represented by pure forms.

Venturi proposed a new architectural style that embraced variety, complexity, unsolvable problems, and multiple and contradicting elements; he advocated what he called “both-and” over “either-or.”² Instead of a pure, unified architecture, Venturi advocated for one with many meanings. Contemporary society was complex, and its architecture should be too. Emphasis on client and context, which modernism had often excluded for a higher purpose, were now returning. Pure forms and building types that were supposed to be appropriate for any client or context were to be replaced by architecture personalized to the client and tailored to the building’s location.

As postmodernism developed, it was presented as democratic and welcoming of commercialism. Everything was architecture and eligible to be studied; vernacular buildings were worthy of the same scrutiny as a famous skyscraper. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner wrote in *An Outline of European Architecture* of 1942, “A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.”³ Pevsner’s statement asserts that nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building, but he applied the term architecture only to buildings designed with a focus on aesthetic appeal. Venturi disagreed; he claimed that everything from a cathedral to a gas station was worthy of study. Every element of the built environment is architecture, and as architecture, each element can be studied. His future work would continue to advance this principle. Furthermore, contemporary architecture could no longer be concerned with beauty in the manner that Pevsner discussed. The search for beauty became outdated in such a complex society.

Beauty was to be replaced by multiplicity of meaning in contemporary architecture. The increased availability of glass created a more transparent style of architecture; different parts

of a building could be viewed from within it. This transparency and the influence of overlapping planes found in Cubist art led Robert Venturi to develop overlapping facades which can be seen in his first built work, the Vanna Venturi House. Not only were multiple references, meanings, and contexts found in a single building, but also the facades of Venturi’s buildings themselves overlap.⁴ Many of his buildings are ones in which the facade is the main element and the building behind is simply attached to it. Here, facade becomes very important, and a variety of historical references can be found on Venturi’s facades. This type of design can be found in the early main streets of Western towns where extra-large, decorated facades were attached to simple buildings. In the Vanna Venturi house, built for his mother between 1960 and 1962, Venturi purposely ignores many of modernism’s formal conventions. Among the elements banned by modernism, he uses a broken saddle roof, creates a hip roof penthouse, and paints the home green. Furthermore, a variety of forms collide on the interior and exterior of the home creating conflict, complexity, tension, and awkward spaces.⁵ This is not a pure, ideal house form. Instead, the home is a clash of many forms each competing for consideration. While modernists had rejected illusion for purity of form, as evidenced by John Ruskin’s chapter “The Lamp of Truth” in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Postmodernists embraced illusion, as well as decoration, meaning, and many other elements, in their architecture.⁶

Modern architects believed that architecture should be the framework for society, thus, creating the society that should be instead of that which was. There was a constant push for progress and the betterment of society. Architecture, they thought, could improve society or even cause a revolution. However, the social revolution never came in the United States. Architecture did not change society; capitalism conquered in America instead. Postmodern

architects accepted this reality and chose to work within it. Modernism was exhausted, overworked and bankrupt. The simplification of architecture into ideal forms had lost its meaning, particularly once the social revolution was improbable. Postmodernists believed it was time for society to move into a new era, one that embraced the principles of Mannerist periods. Postmodernism accepted society as it was and called for architecture expressive of this. Robert Venturi presented two reasons why complex architecture was necessary: first, the scope of architecture needed to be expanded to accommodate to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multiplicity of functional goals in buildings required a complex architecture.⁷ Buildings were no longer built for a single purpose; a building such as a casino could include multiple functions, such as restaurant, temporary housing, and entertainment.⁸ Thus, the search for pure or ideal forms was no longer a legitimate type of exploration for architects.

As the complexity of the functional programs of buildings increased, the expression of the function through the form of a building became more difficult to achieve. Due to technological advancements, buildings could span long distances without obstructing the interior with columns. Instead of expressing form, buildings became large boxes divided into many functions. Signs could be used to communicate the specific function of each particular box building, negating the need for the building’s form to express this. Venturi called these decorated sheds. A building of the old style of architecture where form follows function was called a duck.⁹

An infamous example of how anything in the built environment can be studied is the trip that led to the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour and the concept of the duck and the decorated shed. In 1968, Venturi and Scott Brown took their graduate seminar class at

Yale University to Las Vegas. They analyzed the Las Vegas strip, using it as an example of a typical American Main Street. This was the beginning of a process of classification and study of the built environment that would continue throughout Venturi and Scott Browns’ careers. This initial study caused quite a stir in the architecture community. Presenting a city infamous for immorality and unchecked capitalism as something that was quintessentially American offended many people. However, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour thought that the notorious cityscape of Las Vegas exaggerated many of the principles they wished to explore; thus, Las Vegas was the best place to study them.¹⁰

What they found was a jumble of signs clamoring for attention along the freeway and big box buildings behind huge parking lots. Venturi and his associates were fascinated by the fast-moving automobile culture and its effect on the architecture of Las Vegas. The only buildings that were similar to those a person might see in their hometown were the gas stations, but even those were double in size because they needed to compete with all of the flashing signs of the Strip. This was architecture of symbol, not of space. Spaces were large, sprawling, and without meaning. Illusion was often used to make the spaces seem even larger or look endless; space in the modernist sense, as something sacred to architecture, was no longer relevant. The American Main Street was intensified and rearticulated at the Las Vegas Strip. Symbol dominated every part of this landscape because it was designed solely for a commercial purpose. Each sign had to be brighter, taller, and more extravagant in order to compete and draw in the consumer. On the Las Vegas strip, the buildings no longer conveyed meaning; signs were now very important elements of the architecture. Architecture was commercialized and made into a type of media.

At the time of the postmodern debate architecture was discussed as a means of communication, as though architecture were a type of

language. During the 1960s and 70s, the United States experienced a period of great technological advancement, but also tremendous political turmoil. These profound changes inevitably led to social and cultural changes as well. The question of what form architecture should take mirrored that of what form American society should take. Architecture began to be interpreted as a type of communication, one similar to that of a television set; a building could be interpreted as a screen transmitting messages. The debate about what direction architecture should take after the demise of modernism centered on what messages future buildings should be transmitting to people.

Charles A. Jencks and Manfredo Tafuri, an Italian architect and theorist, both discussed postmodern architecture in terms of language. In *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977), Charles Jencks wrote in defense of postmodernism:

A multivalent architecture, opposed to a univalent building, combines meanings imaginatively so that they fuse and *modify* each other. A multivalent architecture, like the inclusive building, makes use of the *full arsenal of communicational means*, leaving out no areas of experience, and suppressing no particular code (although of course any building is inevitably limited in range).¹¹

Jencks believed that in contemporary society a building could no longer be limited in the messages that it transmitted. The experience of America in the 1970s was of many conflicting ideals and of great changes, and he believed architecture should reflect the experiences of the people and of the time. There was no longer a singular image of an American; the multitude of experiences, beliefs, and opinions in American society was being recognized. Jencks defended postmodern architecture because he thought that it would produce buildings that could effectively communicate to contemporary American society in a way that modernist buildings could not. Postmodern architecture would be one of

many interpretations combining and altering each other in the process; it would communicate better than modern architecture.

In 1987, Manfredo Tafuri wrote a strong denunciation of postmodernism in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*. He wrote:

The desire to communicate no longer exists; architecture is dissolved into a deconstructed system of ephemeral signals. In place of communication, there is a flux of information; in place of architecture as language, there is an attempt to reduce it to a mass medium, without any ideological residues; in place of an anxious effort to restructure the urban system, there is a disenchanting acceptance of reality, bordering on extreme cynicism.¹²

Instead of seeing postmodern architecture as a desire to communicate to a more complex society, Tafuri thought of it as a barrage of information. This bombardment led to the deterioration of any effort to communicate. Instead of a message, there was an overwhelming amount of information, too much information for a clear message to be found within it. He criticized the idea that architecture could be a mass medium of communication similar to a television set. This is not what Tafuri thought architecture should be. He held architecture up to higher principles.

While other architects and theorists were discussing language, Tafuri was concerned with what was occurring in the world. Even though modern architecture had not created a revolution, it had strived to create a better society. This constant push to move forward and to progress was what Tafuri believed architecture should represent. People should constantly try to better themselves, and architecture should be a manifestation of this principle. Tafuri interpreted postmodernism’s acceptance of society at large as cynicism; it should strive to progress and better society instead. Tafuri saw postmodernism as commercial, shallow, vapid, and skeptical of society’s potential. Instead of moving toward the future, postmodernism was stationary. By

accepting society as it was, postmodernism made no effort to progress, advance, or change.

Many critics have also criticized Venturi and Scott Brown's method of analysis and the translation of their theory into practice. Tafuri wrote that their theory "manages to justify personal figural choices."¹³ One of the criticisms of Venturi and Scott Brown's work is of their mixture of theory and practice, namely that by mixing the two they are creating theory to justify design choices. Their theory is compromised by their practice of architecture because the two are not independent of each other. Architecture is created to justify theory, and theory is created to justify architecture.

Deborah Fausch argued that while "they did possess a loose coherency," Venturi and Scott Brown's work "lacked a formal conceptual apparatus."¹⁴ She goes on to say that the problem may also lie in what Venturi and Scott Brown were trying to theorize, the everyday. Fausch cites the work of a cultural theorist:

Gayatri Spivak has emphasized the "unconceptualized" nature of the quotidian. She has claimed that the very act of labeling a part of experience as "everyday" alters its fluid character and its immersion in an ongoing stream of events, substituting a hypostasized mental object formed according to the rules governing theoretical operations.¹⁵

Therefore, the problem with Venturi and Scott Brown's theory was not only their mixing of it with practice but also with what they were trying to theorize. Because the quotidian are repeated activities common to a flow of daily events, people do not often analyze these actions as they are performing them. Instead, they are part of a pattern of daily life and are completed with little thought due to their common nature. Spivak says that by trying to conceptualize the everyday, the nature of it changes. These actions are fluidly moving through a stream of events and analysis of them disturbs their fluid nature. Any sort of analysis creates a caricature; the everyday loses its authenticity when conceptualized because an

unmoving object of inquiry is created in its place.

Another interesting criticism of Venturi and Scott Brown's theory is raised by Fausch in "Ugly and Ordinary: Representations of Everyday." She discusses the conflict of the high-art expertise of Venturi and Scott Brown being applied to the task of providing architecture for the people. As architects, Venturi and Scott Brown are members of the intellectual community; their ability to analyze the everyday was "inescapably compromised by the elite social position of architects."¹⁶ Not only does the everyday resist theorizing, but also Venturi and Scott Brown were trying to create architecture for the common people without being one of them. This led to architecture that was confusing to both the architectural community and to the people.

In 1971, an informal debate developed between Scott Brown and Kenneth Frampton, a British architect and historian. It began with Frampton's essay titled "America 1960-1970: Notes on Urban Images and Theory." Like Tafuri, Frampton believed that architecture should provide an alternative to present forms rather than exalting the contemporary. Architecture should try to create a better-built environment than what is currently in place. Frampton questioned whether Venturi and Scott Brown were really catering to the tastes of the people and believed that the two were confusing the influence of large corporations on consumer culture with the wishes of the everyday American public. Who are the people? Do the forces of commercialism really reflect the desires of the common American citizen? Is commercialism the will of the people or the will of large corporations? Frampton believed that these forces were not wholly the will of the people. Therefore, there were major issues with Venturi and Scott Brown's theory and architecture. Scott Brown answered this criticism in "Pop Off." She wrote that popular culture was still a critical element in determining consumer capitalism; consumers choose which products they want and these choices determine

the flow, type, and appearance of products.

Thus, consumer culture should be respected and utilized to determine architectural forms. While Frampton believed that architecture should create a framework for a better world, Venturi and Scott Brown believed this to be patronizing and misplaced. This debate over the role of architecture and its interaction with its users is still occurring today.

Although Venturi and Scott Brown claimed to be creating architecture of the people, their work was obviously polemical. As seen in the Vanna Venturi House and many other works, their buildings purposely agitated the architectural community. Fausch wrote:

Venturi and Scott Brown believed that a common language and common mechanisms of reception for architectural messages could be developed... But their belief that "reading" architecture by means of association to other known forms provides the basis for a commonly understood language of architecture seems belied by current practice. While the concept of architecture as communication is accepted by many practitioners as the principle underlying the design of forms, the content of the communications is often designed to disturb rather than confirm commonly held cultural patterns.¹⁷

Fausch states that architecture's ability to communicate was accepted by many architectural professionals but that they used this communication to alter culture, not to respect or continue it. Architecture was being used in the manner of Tafuri and Frampton, not in the manner of Venturi and Scott Brown. Furthermore, the latter pair does not seem to be creating architecture in the manner of their own writing. If Venturi and Scott Brown's architecture matched their theory, it would be bland and unprovoking. Their architecture should match the rest of the built environment in order to respect current trends in consumer culture. Instead, their buildings create a blurring of the line between the architect and the critic. Venturi and Scott Brown's architecture

is one that is critical of popular culture and commercialism, not respectful of it.

Postmodernism may have begun with the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1966, but what has happened to the movement in the more recent past? Is postmodernism steadfastly Venturism or has it changed in form? What did the application of Venturi's original ideas produce? In 1995, Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect and theorist, wrote "Generic City" for publication in *S, M, L, XL*. In the article, he writes about the current state of postmodernism:

Postmodernism is the only movement that has succeeded in connecting the practice of architecture with the practice of panic. Postmodernism is not a doctrine based on a highly civilized reading of architectural history but a method, a mutation in professional architecture that produces results fast enough to keep pace with the Generic City's development. Instead of consciousness, as it original inventors may have hoped, it creates a new unconscious. It is modernization's little helper.¹⁸

Development in the United States was moving so quickly that large cities were popping up around the country in places where they had not existed before. These cities had no identity because they had no past. Their growth was so rapidly that little planning was done in the process of building them. The phenomenon of the Generic City was aided by postmodernism. Architecture was losing its value, and architects were losing their elite social position in society; architecture had become a business instead of an art. Postmodernists were architects who had traded their respect for money and their position in the intellectual community for a one in the business community. By accepting the trends of consumer and popular culture, they were no longer members of the intellectual elite; they were no longer innovative or progressive. In fact, even the polemical character of Robert Venturi's work was being lost in the later postmodern era. Postmodernist architects had become bureaucrats; they were cogs in the

machine of capitalism. Generic buildings were quickly being produced to create generic cities.

The forces of capitalism continued to revolve without being questioned.

Is this what we want our architecture to be? Is there poetry in the ambiguous, in the banal, in the ugly? By exalting the ordinary, are we creating bad architecture? Are we creating dystopia? Shouldn't there be principles for what is good and for what is bad? We cannot accept everything as good. Modernism failed, but was postmodernism the correct choice for the future? There are many issues with modern architecture and with the architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown. The question of what architecture should be still remains open for debate.