2011

The Architecture of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown: Democratic and Dangerous

Ellen Pierce

Follow this and additional works at: http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-19

Recommended Citation

http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-19/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lehigh Review at Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Volume 19 - 2011 by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.
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.” 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 Minor 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-
postmodern architecture, which was now too complex to be represented by pure forms. Venturi proposed a new architectural style that embraced variety, complexity, unsolved problems, and multiple and contradicting ele-
ments; he advocated what he called “both-and” or “either-or.” Instead of a pure, unified ar-
chitecture, like the inclusive building, there was a process of classification and study of the built environment that would continue throughout Venturi and Scott Brown’s careers. This initial study caused quite a stir in the architecture com-
munity; Venturi believed the principles of postmodernism would be expanded to accommodate the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the multi-
ple forms found in Cubist or modernist architecture needed to be expanded to accom-
mobiles to the increasingly complex goals present in contemporary society; and second, the mul-
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 transla-
tion of their theory into practice. Tafuri wrote that their theory “manages to justify personal
figural choices.” One of the criticisms of Venturi and Scott Brown’s architecture is that it
is unconvincing in its embrace 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 and vice versa. As seen in their own theorizing and their examples, the
architecture did not remain 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 coherence,” Venturi and Scott
Brown’s work “lacked a formal conceptual appara-tus.” She goes on to say that the problem may also
be in what Venturi and Scott Brown were trying to theorize, the everyday. Fausch cites the
intellectual work of a cultural theorist: Gayatri Spivak has emphasized the “unconcept-
nalized” 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 immer-
sion in consumer culture. Instead, their buildings create 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 Frampton points out, Venturi and Scott Brown are lie-
ers of the intellectual community; their ability to analyze the everyday was “inescapably com-
prised by the elite social position of architects.”

Frampton’s essay titled “America 1960-1970: Complexities and Contradictions in
Architecture and its Interaction with its Users” begins with an exploration of the
cultural and Ordinary: Representations of Everyday.” She
notes that architecture’s ability to com-
municate was accepted by many practitioners
as the principle underlying the design of forms, the 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. Fausch states that architecture’s ability to com-
municate was accepted by many architectural professionals but that they used this communica-
tion to create a present form rather than exalting the contemporary. Architecture should
try to create a better-built environment than is currently in place. Frampton questioned whether
Venturi and Scott Brown were re-
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: “Are
they are the people? Do the forces of commercial-
ism 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
architecture. Scott Brown argued in this criticism in “Pop Off.” She wrote that popular
culture was still a critical element in determining consumer culture; 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 frame for a better world, Venturi and
Scott Brown believed this to be patronizing and misplaced. This debate over the role of archi-

tecture with the practice of panic. Postmodernism is the only movement that has
been a business instead of an art. Postmodern
architecture should match the rest of the built
environment in order to progress. In fact, the only architectural critic 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 evolve
without being questioned. Is this what we want our architecture to be? Is there poetry in the ambiguous, in the
band, in the ugly? By exalting the ordinary, are we creating bad architecture? Are we creating
dystopia? Should there be principles for what is good and for what is bad? We cannot accept
everything as good. Modernism failed, but was postmodernism successful? 

There are many issues with modern architecture and with the architecture of Venturi and Scott
Brown. The question of what architecture should be is still remains open for debate.