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Examining the book's micro-history and its influence

Anticipating postmodernism and presaging sampling culture

Learning from Venturi: *Complexity and Contradiction at 50*

Denise Costanzo

Ask any architect who said 'Less is a bore' and where, and most can answer unhesitatingly: Robert Venturi, in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Most recall this book and its publication year of 1966 as a hinge when an era of forward-looking, utopian modernism began to pivot towards its fragmented, conflicted successor, eventually christened 'postmodernism'. Yet much of what is 'known' about Venturi's famous text is, if not necessarily untrue, not entirely right, either. One truism is that *Complexity and Contradiction* reintroduced modern architects to history, returning them to Rome with new respect for the baroque and Mannerism. Yet, by 1966, appreciation for the architecture of these eras was hardly subversive, if not yet mainstream; Venturi trod a trail blazed by Sigfried Giedion, Colin Rowe, Bruno Zevi, and Paolo Portoghesi. It is more accurate to assert that his book benefitted from, and perpetuated, profound changes in history's role in architecture. And yet, for architects whose outlook was transformed by *Complexity and Contradiction* in the 1960s and 1970s, the initial statement remains valid. The book's legacy mirrors its title.

The fiftieth anniversary of *Complexity and Contradiction* in 2016–2017 (which appeared in January 1967, despite its imprint) has provided an opportune occasion to revisit this immensely influential, yet insufficiently understood book. In early November of 2016, a consortium of institutions – the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the University of Pennsylvania and its Architectural Archives – staged a two-and-a-half-day Golden Anniversary celebration spanning two cities and three venues, plus a bus tour. This group was not alone: only a few days earlier in Rome, that city's Museum of 21st Century Art (MAXXI) had sponsored a similarly-scaled symposium on the book, with a fieldtrip to local sites featured in *Complexity and Contradiction*, and the December 2016 issue of the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* featured five review essays and an editorial on the book's legacy. Several participants overlapped, with four scholars contributing to two of these three.[1]

At the epicentre of Venturian studies

The MoMA/Penn celebration was arguably the most ambitious. It opened in New York with an evening roundtable at MoMA featuring an international slate of architects, and presentations by panels of scholars the following day. The event then decamped to Philadelphia for a final panel of papers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This was followed by a rare opportunity to visit the Vanna Venturi house and Louis Kahn's Margaret Esherick house in Chestnut Hill, whose private owners graciously welcomed eighty strangers into their famous homes. The celebration concluded at Penn's Furness Library where William Whitaker, curator of Penn's Architectural Archives, led a question and answer session with Denise Scott Brown in the upper room where Louis Kahn taught his studios. A closing reception in the archive highlighted its newly-opened exhibition 'Back Matter: The Making of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*'.The event's scope and complexity were strategic. Philadelphia is where Venturi was born, raised, practiced, and resides (albeit privately, in declining health; he is 91 years old). Penn is the epicentre of Venturian studies, anchored by faculty David Brownlee and David De Long (the latter recalled seeing the book manuscript during his own student days), and the Venturi Scott Brown Collection, housed in the Architectural Archives under Whitaker's committed stewardship. New York can claim *Complexity and Contradiction*'s legacy as well, by way of MoMA, its publisher. The appointment of Martino Stierli, a Venturi and Scott Brown scholar, as the museum's Philip Johnson Curator of Architecture in 2014 ensured its attention to the anniversary (the initiative began under his predecessor Barry Bergdoll). Maintaining a foothold in New York also invited America's highest concentration of architects to revisit a text that may sit, dusty and neglected, on many studio bookshelves.

In 1970, Colin Rowe described *Complexity and Contradiction*'s audience as bifurcated into camps 'hopelessly prejudiced in favour of Venturi or against him'.[2] While this polarisation has subsided in the past half-century, the event's geography indicates an emphasis on 'outreach' over homage. This agenda was also evident in the selection of participants. The architects' roundtable featured two generations of architects with distinct relations having Venturi. Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake of Philadelphia both

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began their careers at Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown in the late 1970s, and there witnessed its author attempting to implement his book's principles through practice. They were joined by four practitioners representing the next generation: Michael Meredith of New York; Sam Jacob of London; Momoyo Kaijima of Studio Bow-Wow in Tokyo; and Kersten Geers of Brussels. All are younger than the book, and mostly unassociated with its legacy.[3] Similarly, the scholarly panels consisted of an international slate of Venturi experts and outsiders. The former included Stanislaus von Moos of ETH in Zurich who, like Brownlee and DeLong, has published on VSBA's work for decades, as well as Stierli, one of von Moos's former students. Another is independent scholar Deborah Fausch, whose work on architecture, fashion, and popular taste evolved out of her dissertation on Venturi and Scott Brown. Two projects drawing on recent research into *Complexity and Contradiction*'s writing were shared by Lee Ann Custer, completing her PhD under Brownlee at Penn, and architect Christine Gorby of Penn State University. They were outnumbered by speakers who turned their attention to Venturi from other areas of inquiry: Ockman, also of Penn, and Jean-Louis Cohen of New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and the *École Speciale d'Archiecture* in Paris (modernist history and theory); Andrew Leach of the University of Sydney (Manfredo Tafuri and historiography); Mary McLeod of Columbia University (feminist history); independent scholar Emmanuel Petit (Philip Johnson and postmodernism); Enrique Walker of Columbia; and Pier Paolo Tamburelli of Milan (contemporary practice and theory).

'Once you've read it, you can't escape it'

The participants' offerings were grouped thematically; scholarly panels were on 'Postmodernism', 'Creative Contexts', and 'Making the Book', although papers frequently transcended categories. The roundtable invited architects to discuss the book's relevance to practice. Kieran emphasised its call for architects to deeply consider the contexts in which they intervene. For Timberlake, the book 'made sense of history', and he returns to it regularly: 'once you've read it, you can't escape it'. Of the younger architects, educated when the text was no longer 'recent' but before it was canonical, several shared discovery stories. Meredith found his way to the book via 'bad copies' of Venturi's architecture, and was struck by its 'academic and personal' tone. Jacob recalled discovering a copy in a bookstore and, unaware of its original reception, finding its 'radical open-mindedness' to be 'fresh'. A welcome alternative to Britain's 1990s menu of orthodox modernism and Prince Charles, for him it admitted a 'love that dare not speak its name': for postmodernism. Kajima noted the 1969 Japanese edition was so inadequate that readers struggled with the English text, restricting the book's impact in Japan until her generation rediscovered it through a superior 1982 translation. *Complexity and Contradiction*'s impact on design was presented in varied terms. For Jacobs, it presaged sampling culture, while Kieran noted its realist and subliminally urban agenda, appeal for architects to consider deeply the context in which they intervene, and obligation to write and theorise as they work. The panel's importance to the organisers is evident; it was the only part of the event that was filmed and made available on MoMA website. Yet it was somewhat short on specifics. Had each participant illustrated a project in dialogue with the book's ideas, this would have grounded and enriched the conversation.

The scholarly talks offered memorable details and insights, some new, others delving more deeply into familiar, sometimes minimal territory. Cohen analysed the 1960 remodelling of his workplace at the Institute of Fine Arts, the Louis XVI-interior Duke mansion. Venturi's first independent project consisted of industrial metal bookshelves and custom lighting fixtures and connection brackets, a spare intervention that, as Cohen argued, adhered to the same principles he soon developed in his book manuscript. Its writing was shaped by many minds over many years, and McLeod focused on those named in the book's 121-word acknowledgements. She saw in his crediting of four women and three men a rejection of the 'architectural ethos of the lone authorial male'. Most are familiar to students of Venturi's career, including Vincent Scully, Denise Scott Brown, Robert Stern, and Philip Finkelpearl, but she clarified the nature of their contributions. Also significant: one who was deleted (Louis Kahn), and another (Richard Krautheimer) reinstated in the second edition. McLeod also highlighted the under-appreciated role of art historian Marion (La Follette) Scully (Vincent Scully's second wife), who honed and clarified a manuscript that a professional editor had declared 'unpublishable'.

That is correct: the hardly lucid published text is the 'clear' version. For Venturi, authorship was painstaking and laborious, a 'torturous path of development and evolution', according to Gorby. Her analysis of the sixteen surviving drafts of the book uncovered revealing details: the erasure of the word 'method' from the text, the late addition of 'gentle' to 'manifesto', and the author's initial plan to publish with Harvard University Press, clearly aspiring to the reach of *Space, Time and Architecture*. Custer's analysis of documentation from the theory course Venturi taught at Penn from 1961–5 exposed his simultaneous cross-writing of lectures and manuscript. He read chapter drafts in class, and presented many of the same diagrams, references, and eclectic mixtures of examples in the book to his (frequently disoriented) students. Gleefully 'corrupting the morals of architectural minors' by devoting whole lectures to forbidden topics like ornament, Venturi's view of his teaching as subversive underscores the manifesto's revolutionary ambitions. Significant differences include the absence of material on practical design issues, a major part of the course that was incompatible with the book's focus on formal principles.

Venturi's aspirations for the text were also considered by Ockman, who mapped his references to diverse fields of knowledge. She highlighted the author's incorporation of computation, information science, and botany, and how his interest in complexity theory (shared by Jane Jacobs) linked him to recent economics research.[4] Some of Venturi's wide-ranging interests, especially Gestalt psychology and literary criticism, have received considerable attention, although as Leach noted, he read 'widely and voraciously, but not systematically'. Leach reconsidered Venturi's mannerist and literary interests by way of Elizabethan drama, including a Shakespearean

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theatre project that he assigned to his design students at Penn. The question of how compositional ideas translate across literary, spatial, and visual media expresses his deeply syncretic view of artistic quality, a distinct contribution to architecture's linguistic turn.

'A book of beautiful images with weird text'

Petit situated *Complexity and Contradiction* within another creative context: a 1960s contest between Scully and Colin Rowe to define Le Corbusier's legacy by anointing his 'dauphin'. Petit rooted their preferences in divergent readings of Le Corbusier's modernism as primarily about ironic complexity or puritanical purity. Stierli shared another facet of Venturi's relationship with modernism through a 'micro-history' of MoMA and *Complexity and Contradiction*. The first of its 'Papers on Architecture' series intended to present thrice-yearly examples of 'theoretical studies and serious criticism', the book's only successor was Joseph Rykwert's *On Adam's House in Paradise* of 1972, an unexpected pairing. Also unexpected is the reaction of Stierli's predecessor Philip Johnson to the book. Johnson blessed a volume that attacked his work and (by implication) MoMA's modernist legacy, declaring himself 'fascinated' by its 'dense argument', a suitably ironic relationship between critique and criticised.

Complexity and Contradiction's relationship with art and the visual was a recurrent theme. During the architects' panel, Geers noted its fundamental visuality, 'a book of beautiful pictures with weird text' that 'offered a shameless embrace of formalism'. Yet one might also reverse those terms and declare it a book of weird pictures and beautiful text: von Moos noted how the author savours both the 'pleasures of looking and pleasures of language'. He compared the 'reverse perspective' of Guild House's massing to Robert Smithson and Jasper Johns, and linked Venturi's interest in visual adjacencies to nineteenth-century polymath Michel-Eugène Chevreul's theories of simultaneous perception of contrasting colours. Fausch explored the book's mosaics of images, whose groupings that defy chronology, geography, typology, or style are an extension of Venturi's education. His jarring juxtapositions echo the comparative approach of his mentors Donald Drew Egbert and Jean Labatut. Sketches from Venturi's class notes depict MoMA next to an Asher Benjamin townhouse and Christopher Wren's St Mary-le-Bow, a memorably visual index of the 'Princeton system'. Tamburelli contrasted *Complexity and Contradiction*'s visual impact with Aldo Rossi's contemporary *L'architettura della città*, two watershed manifestoes of 1966 that took strikingly different approaches to imagery. The first edition of Rossi's book featured only fifty-one dry illustrations versus Venturi's 350. Tamburelli did not suggest the tripling of images for Rossi's 1978 edition (reformatted in the familiar 1982 English translation by *Oppositions*) was influenced by *Complexity and Contradiction*.[5] His observations, however, imply this intriguing possibility.

Readings and re-readings

This unresolved question was only one of many raised by the symposium. One of *Complexity and Contradiction* at 50's achievements is its demonstration of how much remains to be understood about this famous book. Its organisation was a 'funnel', designed to lead a wider audience towards Venturi's volume and the archive, whose immense holdings will surely nourish decades of further research. Yet one unanswered question is the most essential: is this canonical text still worthy of exegesis? If so, is it primarily as an artefact contributing to the history of architecture and theory, or is Venturi's manifesto a gospel whose message remains valid for architects today?

There are reasons to leave *Complexity and Contradiction* on the bookshelf. By calling it 'an apologia for my own work', Venturi indexed its value to opinions about his architecture, which vary dramatically. Since 1972, the book has also competed for attention with its own half-sibling. *Learning from Las Vegas*, co-authored with Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, elicited even greater controversy than the earlier book, and has become an equally canonical text. One might consider *Complexity and Contradiction* a first draft, Venturi's initial elucidation of principles that were more fully developed in the later text. In this account, the earlier volume was supplanted by its less pretentious successor. Others may condemn the neon-lit *Learning from Las Vegas* as a devolution from its demure and dignified older sister, whose virtues were degraded by the commercial strip. If *Complexity and Contradiction*'s less flashy ideas are more valid, Venturi's first book might reveal him at his best.

This preferential view of the book still does not address charges of elitism.[6] Acknowledgements notwithstanding, unlike the cross-gender collective authorship of Venturi's later works, *Complexity and Contradiction* remains one more treatise by an individual male architect who aspires (however modestly) to heroic insights. Beyond the title page, the author's observations arise from an 'eye that sees' design quality, an erudite architectural connoisseur whose privileged gaze acquired its authority through elite experiences. Any attention to *Complexity and Contradiction* validates powerful, insidious myths about what makes one architect's understanding greater than another's.

If so, does Venturi's book have any legitimate claim on the attention of architects and scholars now, amidst a sea of competing writings, ideas, and issues? Although Rowe castigated *Complexity and Contradiction*'s author for his obliviousness to the centrality of myth to architecture, myth may be the book's most valid theme.[7] *Complexity and Contradiction*'s argument and enduring validity was addressed most directly in the symposium by Walker. Travelling by way of Rossi's design theory and the literary method of Raymond Roussel, Walker locates the book's central thesis in the title of its final chapter: 'The Obligation Towards the Difficult Whole'. The Difficult Whole was mentioned by Timberlake, Geers, and Ockman, but Walker's talk considered how it relates to its theoretical successor, *Learning from Las Vegas*'s famous Decorated Shed.

The Difficult Whole and the Decorated Shed both address an ancient conundrum: how to reconcile Vitruvius' *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas* (updated by Venturi to 'structure, program and expression'). The Decorated Shed cuts the triad's Gordian knot by embracing the elements' intrinsic separateness, accepting an 'unresolved whole' that holds them in overt tension. The Difficult Whole, in contrast, insists on achieving unity – costly, imperfect, and possibly unsatisfying, but

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resolved nonetheless. The two models are incompatible: one permits the architect to tackle technology, communication, and utility separately, accept their incommensurability, then stop and celebrate the resulting collage. The other orders the architect to *not* stop, to keep fighting until some sort of coherence is attained. It insists that architects accept the messy demands of real-world design as the raw material of poetry, and create unity without compromising reality. Timberlake observed this approach in Venturi and Scott Brown's practice, describing how hard they worked to attain Difficult Wholes by crafting fully resolved buildings like Wu Hall, a project he deems a high point in their career and a manifestation of *Complexity and Contradiction*'s principles.

Walker also asked whether *Learning from Las Vegas* was published 'too soon': did its justification of conveniently efficient disunity overtake *Complexity and Contradiction*'s more challenging message of inefficient unity? Perhaps – except Gorby noted that the final chapter was originally called 'The Unresolved Whole', a title more aligned with the Decorated Shed. Venturi was already torn between two polar teleologies in the early 1960s, and would remain so. The Decorated Shed is one half of a binary system, orbiting its partner, the Duck. Venturi and Scott Brown do not reject this model (as sometimes assumed), which bestows a more memorable name on the Difficult Whole's inefficient unity of structure, communication, and use. *Learning from Las Vegas* declares Gothic cathedrals to be Decorated Sheds *and* Ducks; both have their place, and either can be glorious. Those Ducks the authors condemn might be termed 'simplistic' or 'illegible Wholes'; those they venerate (like Ronchamp) attained wholeness the hard way – the right way.

Complexity and Contradiction and *Learning from Las Vegas* are deeply interwoven projects united by many themes – Rome, visual communication, baroque urbanism, context – and an essential goal of reinvigorating, not supplanting, modernism. What most distinguishes *Complexity and Contradiction* from its more populist successor is its idealism. It speaks directly, if coyly, to architecture's dearest myths about its place in the world, and its responsibilities to itself as an art. The Difficult Whole may be more asymptotic than achievable, and is laden with problematic ideological baggage. But it is also a testament to faith that chaotic reality, overlooked places, and inspiring ideas from anywhere can become great design. Those who aspire to address prosaic needs through poetic construction, to explore the new while embracing how buildings remain meaningful with their intended uses are forgotten, may discover a kindred spirt within *Complexity and Contradiction*. A half-century later, Venturi's first book remains a Difficult Whole that rewards a critical return visit.

Learning from Venturi: Complexity and Contradiction at 50 was held at MoMA, New York, and the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, 10–12 November 2016.

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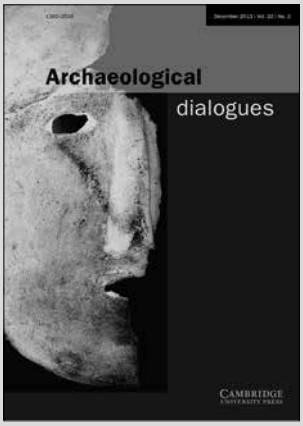
Notes

1. Martino Stierli and Stanislaus von Moos presented in both the MoMA/Penn and MAXXI symposia. Joan Ockman contributed a review essay to *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (*JSAH*) and delivered a paper at MoMA, and Maarten Delbeke of the University of Ghent both presented at MAXXI and published one of the *JSAH* reviews.
2. Colin Rowe, 'The Yale Mathematics Building', *Oppositions,* 6 (1976), 11–16, written in 1970.
3. Geers co-edited a volume presenting VSBA projects with brief commentary; K. Geers, J. Pancevac, and A. Zanerigo, *The Difficult Whole: A Reference Work on the Work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
4. Ockman credited Peter Laurence's research; see: 'Contradictions and Complexities: Jane Jacobs' and Robert Venturi's Complexity Theories', *Journal of Architectural Education,* 59:3 (2006), 49–60.
5. The first through third editions of *L'architettura della città* (1966, 1970, and 1973) had twelve in-text illustrations and thirty-seven in a separate section. The fourth Italian edition of 1978 had 103 in-text and 44 post-text illustrations, a clear shift in the interaction of word and image. See 'Principali edizioni italiane e straniere de "L'architettura della città"', Aldo Rossi, *L'architettura della città,* fourth edn, ed. by Daniele Vitale (Milan: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria del Politecnico, 1978 [reprinted 1983]), p. 291.
6. This theme is explored further by Jonathan Massey, 'Power and Privilege', in 'Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: A Fifty-Year Reception', *JSAH,* 75:4 (December 2016), 497–8.
7. Rowe, 'Yale Mathematics Building'.

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