

Complexity and Expression in Robert Venturi

At a time when architecture is about anything other than historical reference and representation, how are we to assess the relevance and significance of Robert Venturi's work? An articulate advocate for an architecture based on analysis of its own tradition and for applying that analysis to developing an architecture adequate to postwar society, Venturi wrote *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, in 1966, both as a critique of late-modern architecture and as a nuanced and sophisticated proposal for an alternative.¹ Some of his early contemporaries, including Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Philip Johnson, had been experimenting for a decade or so with historical allusions, but *Complexity and Contradiction's* widening of references to include buildings from many times and places was nonetheless revolutionary for a discipline whose idiom was still largely restricted to abstraction from structure and function. Grounded in his wide-ranging knowledge of historical, vernacular, and contemporary buildings, the original small, almost square book was studded with diminutive pictures of buildings from diverse origins, grouped according to Venturi's analysis and classification of their formal properties. Like a pattern book structured by means of formal categories – ambiguity, both-and, contradiction, accommodation, convention – rather than by historical periods or architects' careers, the book became best known not for its comparative analysis but for its revival of historical motifs.

Despite its eclectic sources, the conception underlying this equal-opportunity mining of history and the present for current use was a modernist as well as a historicist one. Tying together what Venturi called the “difficult particulars” of *Complexity and Contradiction's* 10 chapters was an argument about expression, meaning, and symbol – about how architecture functions in relationship to its historical situation, its sociocultural environment, and its material, structural, and functional “determinants of form.”² Of these concepts, it was *expression* that featured most prominently.

1. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).

2. Venturi, 14. In “The Six Determinants of Architectural Form,” *Architectural Record* 120, no. 4 (October 1956): 183–190, Paul Rudolph listed various factors attention to which could lead to “richer architectural expression.” The six were: environment, “functional aspects,” geographical region with its climate and landscape, materials, demands for psychological qualities, and the spirit of the time. Rudolph, like Sigfried Giedion, emphasized the need for a renewed understanding of the symbolic aspects of architectural design, but his suggestions for implementing this understanding were still couched in the framework of modernism.

3. Ernst Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963), 56–57. See also Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Scholarship: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, London, 14 February, 1957* (London: University College, 1957), 112. For Gombrich, the physiognomic fallacy consisted in the idea that the system of signs or the style is not a language but “an utterance of the collective, in which a nation or an age speaks to us.”

Expression is a difficult term to define, complicated by the fact that meaning itself is one of the possibilities that can be expressed, and in architecture, the word carries the sense of a self-sufficient tautology of meaning. In his 1963 essay “Expression and Communication,” Ernst Gombrich describes expression in the arts as a symptom of a cause or an effect of an emotional contagion, conveying meanings that are natural and unlearned on the assumption that “expression is somehow rooted in the nature of our minds, and that it therefore stands in no need of conventional signs.”³ In architecture, as in the social sciences, expression has the sense of a direct mechanism from cause to effect. It signifies a transparent, unmediated, veilless relationship between stimulus and response, available to and understood by all, regardless of previous experience and cultural and historical background – a “correspondence” notion of truth to materials, to technique, to structure or function, a truthful reflection of a way of life, a time and place, a culture. Expression is natural; in the terminology of linguistics, it is “motivated,” or nonarbitrary. This results in a kind of circularity or self-sufficiency – an expression and its origin are nearly one and the same, almost indistinguishable from each other. The thing expressed becomes its own necessary and sufficient cause.

Expression is, somewhat contradictorily, also associated with historicity – with human life in the particular. This idea that built forms are a reflection of their specific time and place is a modern idea, a consequence of the discovery of the distinctiveness of each human culture that followed the Enlightenment. The historical philosophies of Montesquieu, Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Schlegel, and Hegel influenced 19th-century architectural theory, which gradually substituted neoclassical rhetorical categories of propriety and *caractère* with the conception that architecture and art are reflections and expressions of their particular historical situations. A building’s style manifests the character of a time and a place – its culture, habits, mores, technological attainments – and a true work of art is a “resultant,” a direct and organic expression of its cultural conditions and the human life particular to those conditions. By analogy with the growth of plant and animal life, which reflect the influence of their geography and climate, the true style for the contemporary world, the “style for our time,” must grow naturally and necessarily out of the forces of modern society to embody the present situation as completely as possible. The further and more radical implication is that architecture has the power,

not only to express the truth of the present moment, but also to give form to that moment. Through a comparative analysis of the built forms of all times and places, architects can understand and put to use the past forms of building to create a valid architecture of the present. Thus the possibility of understanding history becomes the precondition for the possibility of producing a new history.

Modernism replaced comparative analysis of the past with analysis of the present, but the idea that architecture is an expression remained the all-encompassing conception of its relationship to its own intrinsic nature and its environment. The problem of expression was to become the dominant one for modern architecture, and this idea was encapsulated in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art that would embody the totality of the new historical situation, or express the epoch. In the dislocation of a European society overturned by industrialization and mass migrations from country to city and then, in the early years of the 20th century, a world war, the possibility that architecture could also *create* history became an imperative. As Le Corbusier proclaimed, “*Architecture or Revolution. . . . Revolution can be avoided.*”⁴

Educated at Princeton according to an eclectic mixture of modernist historical theory and Beaux-Arts design method, Venturi was heir to a loose and capacious understanding of a building’s expressive capacities, instilled in analytic exercises, history courses, and studio critiques. Venturi’s education prepared him to treat history not as a set of formal precedents or a repository of forms from which to pluck solutions to formal problems, but as data to be examined for a critical understanding of the relationship of form to its historical context. Thus the plea at the end of *Complexity and Contradiction* for a complex architecture – “It is perhaps from the everyday landscape, vulgar and disdained, that we can draw the complex and contradictory order that is valid and vital for our architecture as an urbanistic whole” – came directly out of the idea that architecture is an expression of its time and place.⁵

For Venturi, expression was more or less interchangeable with meaning, by which term he meant the “nonexact, ambiguous correspondence between form and function and form and structure.”⁶ In many ways, this paradigm of expressive meaning took the tenets of modernism at face value. What architecture was expected to express – primarily structure and function, but with new attention to context – was what modernism had prescribed. The desire for expression of structure

4. “We are dealing with an urgent problem of our epoch, nay more, with *the* problem of our epoch. The balance of society comes down to a question of building. We conclude with these justifiable alternatives: *Architecture or Revolution. . . . Revolution can be avoided.*” Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), 265, 289.

5. Venturi, 104.

6. *Ibid.*, 35.

7. Ibid., 42–43.

8. Ibid., 14.

that led Mies van der Rohe to add ornamental I-beams over the structural ones constituting the columns of the Seagram Building also led Venturi to admire Michelangelo's Porta Pia for its redundant ornamental-structural references. The valorizing of everyday life that led Le Corbusier to esteem the filing cabinet, the Thonet chair, and the automobile also led Venturi to extol the off-the-shelf ashtray and the Kohler plumbing fixture.⁷ The complexity that Venturi admired in mannerist architecture was applicable to the architecture of the moment because postwar society was complex, and the programs of buildings were no longer amenable to being expressed as glass pavilions. The developments in the means of construction in postwar America, such as light steel framing and curtain walls, in transportation systems now dominated by the automobile, in the late-capitalist commercial system of large-scale national and even international production and distribution, and in the social and cultural mores of mass society and mass media, meant that the environment from which built form arose and in which it operated had changed and that buildings had to perform different roles from those in the past.

Beyond the changing conditions of architecture's production and reception, there was another crucial difference between Venturi's theory of expression and that of the modernists, for whom architecture's essential historicity was interwoven with the ideal of architecture as agent of historical change. Venturi did not see architecture as either responsible for or able to carry out a revolution in society. For him, architecture was at best evolutionary and best seen as a solution to practical building problems:

*The architect's ever diminishing power and his growing ineffectualness in shaping the whole environment can perhaps be reversed, ironically, by narrowing his concerns and concentrating on his own job. Perhaps then relationships and power will take care of themselves. I accept what seem to me architecture's inherent limitations, and attempt to concentrate on the difficult particulars within it rather than the easier abstractions about it.*⁸

In doubting architecture's capacity for instigating revolutionary social change, Venturi was in some ways merely an accurate observer of his own time and place; in postwar America, modernism no longer served as the instrument of a new way of life but rather as a record of it, as the 19th-century historicists had advocated. The movement from a revolutionary to an evolutionary architecture and the willingness to accept a reduced role for architecture and architects

9. Ibid., 104.

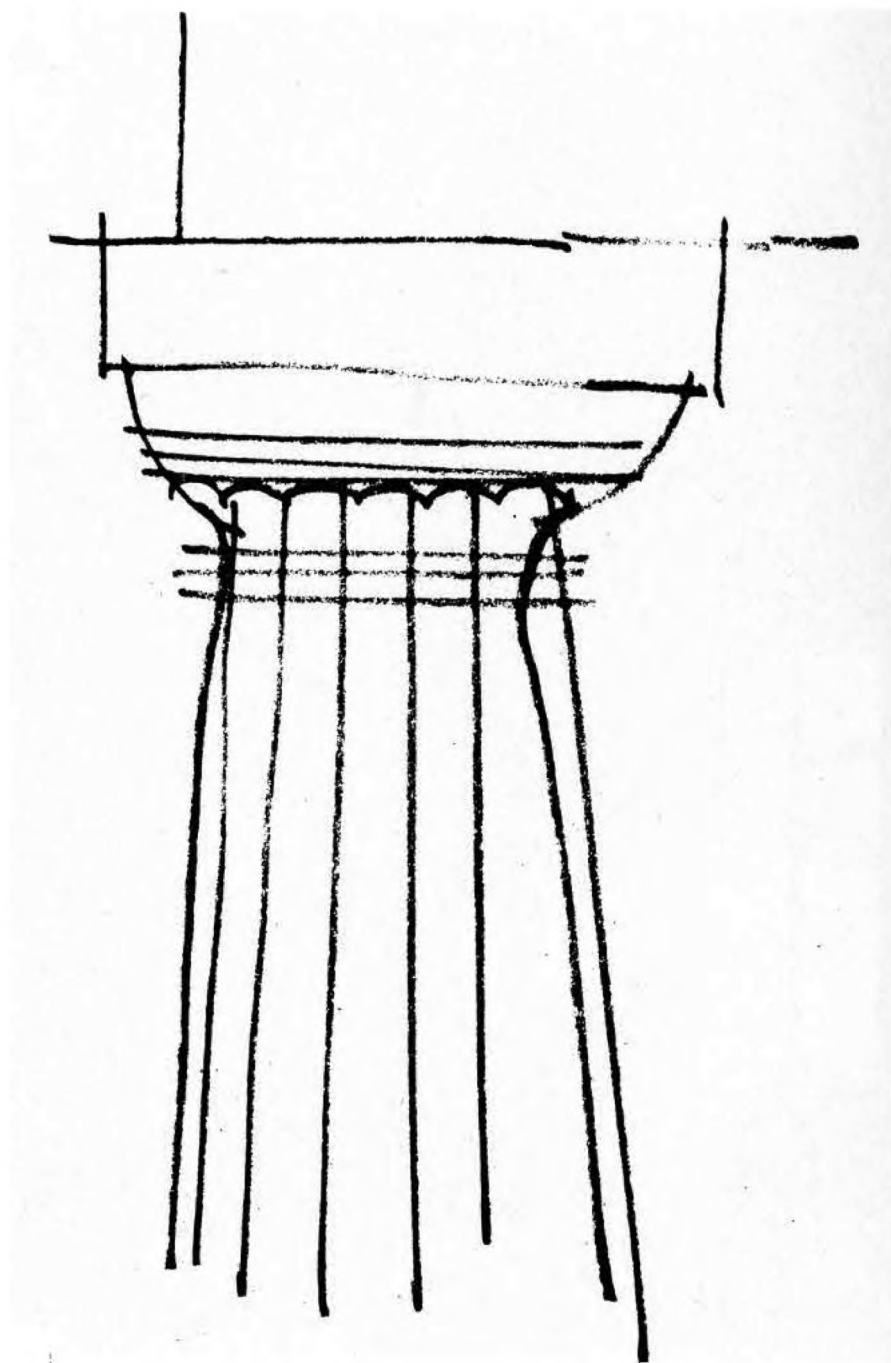
10. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

11. Ibid., 102.

returned Venturi to the humbler task of understanding, rather than reforming, the contemporary built environment – to the attitude that “is not Main Street almost all right?”⁹

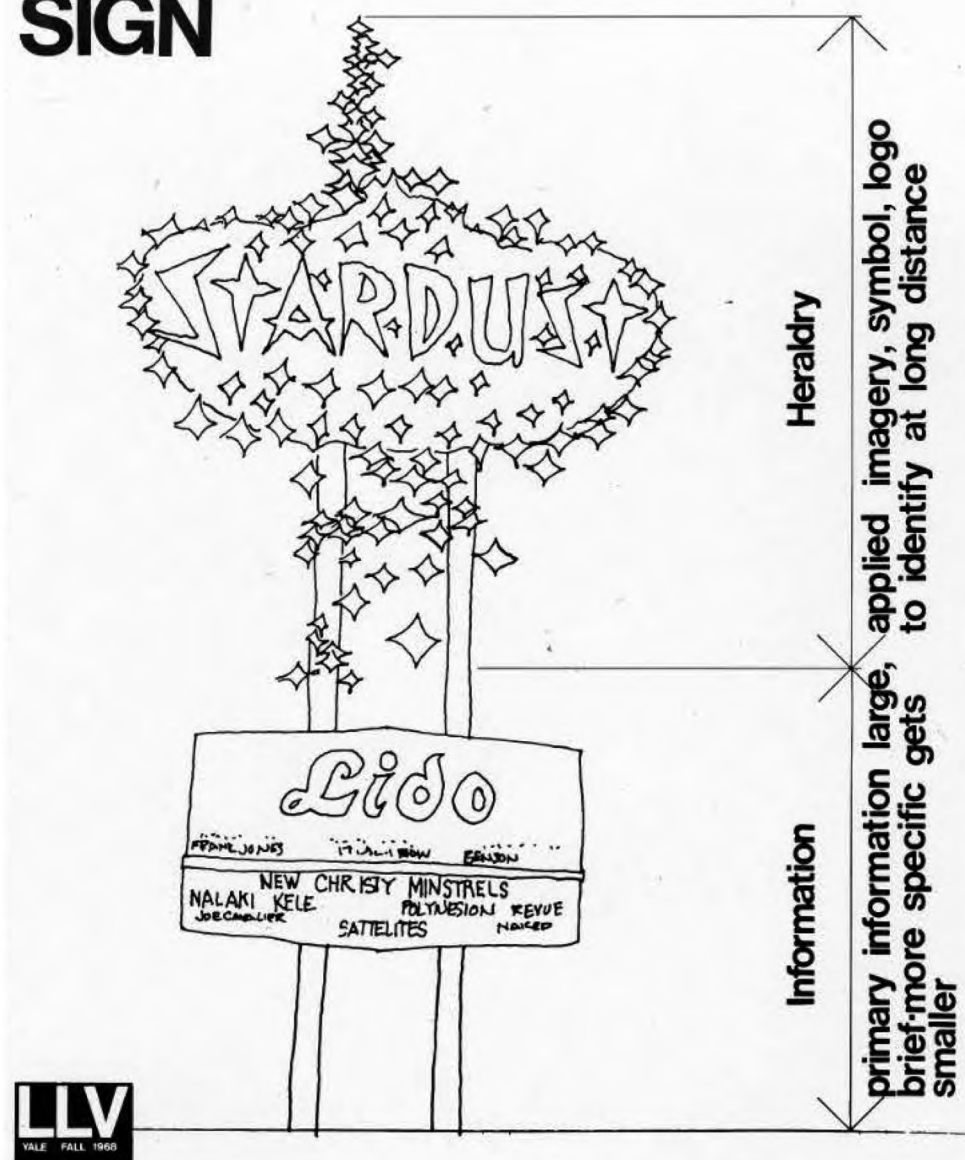
This shift from creating history to embodying it also set Venturi and his partner Denise Scott Brown on the path to Las Vegas, and to the understanding gained there of architecture’s role as a medium of communication. Their book *Learning from Las Vegas*, written with Steven Izenour and inspired by Scott Brown’s contributions to their combined intellectual project, took – or at least could be understood, if not read carefully, as taking – the position that architecture *was* communication.¹⁰ That an architecture of communication was equally an expression of a society and a culture was implicit in this contention, and the definition of architecture as “shelter with symbols on it” added the function of communication to the traditional one of housing the activities of humankind. *Learning from Las Vegas* contrasted expression, or more properly, expressionism, with communication as a mechanism for conveying meaning. In this opposition, the term *expression* was construed to mean “physiognomic” ornament that distorted building form to communicate structure and function, thus paradoxically failing to be truly expressive of cultural conditions.¹¹ A true architecture of communication could, by separating the function of conveying meaning from that of giving shelter, express the nature of the postwar automobile-dominated, media-driven society in which communication had become an explicitly designed and dominant force in social relationships.

In contrast to the natural, physiognomic, and symptom-like nature of expression, language-based or communication-based theories of architecture recognize intention and cultural convention as essential both to the production and the reception of a communication. Venturi and Scott Brown turned to association theory, a generation older than the theories of expression, as well as to 20th-century linguistic theory to explain how buildings communicate to their users and viewers by means of symbols with individual as well as cultural-historical references. Their drawing of the detached casino sign, titled *Physiognomy of a Typical Casino Sign*, was Venturi and Scott Brown’s answer to the classical order – the emblem of an informational architecture to replace that of a tectonic one. Elaborated from this sketch, the diagram of the Decorated Shed was, like Le Corbusier’s *Five Points of Architecture*, a manifesto of the expression of structure, function, and materials for a new epoch – the style, indeed,



Doric Order sketch. From Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 1977. Right: Physiognomy of a Typical Casino Sign. From Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972. Drawings courtesy The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

PHYSIOGNOMY OF A TYPICAL CASINO SIGN



for the times. But unlike building as expression, building as communication pointed outside itself to its formal sources. Buildings were no longer self-sufficient explanations of themselves; in order to understand the particularities of their forms, it was necessary to take into account extra-architectural causes and meanings.

In part because of Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's work, the communicative function of architecture became part of the discipline's self-understanding in the 1970s and '80s. The influence of structuralism and semiology shifted the theoretical discourse toward architecture as a linguistic system, with laws similar to those of verbal language. But what might have seemed like a common cause turned out to be another source of division, for Venturi and Scott Brown's work was deemed (merely) semantic, tied to specific cultural contents, rather than syntactic or structural, abstracted into relationships among architectural elements.¹² By analogy with language, in which the structural syntax underlies the particular semantic meanings, the syntactic systems of architecture were seen as having the capacity to work on the underlying structures of society. The langue, and not the parole, of architecture would be the basis for architectural design and for architecture's autonomy. Whereas Venturi

12. See Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Diana Agrest and Mario Gandelsonas, "Semiotics and Architecture: Ideological Consumption or Theoretical Work," *Oppositions* 1 (September 1973): 93–100; and Alan Colquhoun, "Sign and Substance: Reflections on Complexity, Las Vegas, and Oberlin," *Oppositions* 14 (Fall 1978): 26–37.

advocated sticking to architecture's difficult particulars, to the phenomenological realities of making buildings, the proponents of autonomous architecture saw what was particularly architectural in that which was free of all such functional, constructional, material, or cultural considerations.

Half a century later, these debates may seem largely moot. Architecture has never been only a language, and the rejection of the linguistic fallacy, with its focus on the code-like aspects of architectural meaning, is one of the benefits of architecture's turn away from postmodernism at the end of the 20th century. In addition to marshaling large amounts of data to generate complex forms in response to the complexities of global culture, computer-aided design allows architects to create effects that extend beyond the physical envelope, dissolving the boundaries between building and environment and between building and experiencing subject. The theories that follow from these potentialities posit new relationships between architecture and its users and environments. Today buildings are described not as communicating or expressing but rather as affecting, and they are designed for subjects who experience those effects not as language or as embodiments of historical situations but as attractive or repulsive forces or as atmospheres.

Nonetheless, and despite the contentions of contemporary architectural theorists, the field is still blessed or burdened with a self-conscious awareness of its expressiveness. In 2013, Greg Lynn, echoing the words of the 19th-century theorists and of Venturi, asserted that "architecture is bringing into physical form the values of a culture. . . . Architects are cultural figures who speak in some way for a civic vision and civic material objects."¹³ Likewise, Patrik Schumacher views parametricism as "the global epochal style for the 21st century," adequate to and articulate of the "global, post-fordist network society."¹⁴ Evidently the affections, absorptions, attractions and repulsions, associations, significations, uses and abuses of buildings – received by human beings in both their distracted and their cognitively activated states as bodies, as feeling souls, as minds – are still contained in a conception of ourselves as historical beings, and of buildings as expressive of our situations. In this sense, perhaps, Venturi's theories are still relevant to our understanding of how architecture works.

13. Greg Lynn, "Greg Lynn: What is Architecture?" Interview by Luca De Giorgi, Johanna Lehmann, and Julie Marthe Hoffmann, July 13, 2013, in *whatisarchitecture*, video, 8:25. <https://vimeo.com/70258213>.

14. Patrik Schumacher, "The Concept of Style and Parametricism as Epochal Style," *Cameronica Magazine* 10 (2016).

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