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DOI

[10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Planning Perspectives: an international journal of history, planning and the environment

Citation (APA)

Gold, J. R., Hein, C., Orillard, C., Rego, R. L., & Pérez Oyarzune, F. (2019). Complexity and contradiction: in memoriam Robert Venturi. *Planning Perspectives: an international journal of history, planning and the environment*, 34(3), 533-538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927>

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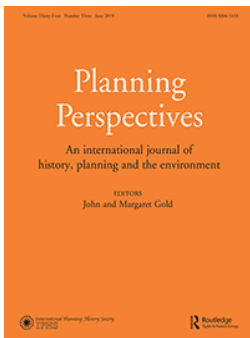
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To cite this article: John R. Gold, Carola Hein, Clément Orillard, Renato L. Rego & Fernando Pérez Oyarzun (2019) Complexity and contradiction: in memoriam Robert Venturi, *Planning Perspectives*, 34:3, 533-538, DOI: [10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927](https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2019.1587927>



Published online: 08 Mar 2019.



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Complexity and contradiction: in memoriam Robert Venturi

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Robert Venturi was not a member of the IPHS, but his writings influenced planners around the world. As a result, his impact is also visible in planning history. In the following pages, five planning historians from Europe and the Americas remember the impact of Bob on their scholarship and the architectural and planning debates in their respective countries.

John R. Gold

Anyone old enough to remember the serious questioning of architectural modernism that broke out at the end of the 1960s will have their own views about which events, buildings and writings sparked the seismic shifts in thinking. For me, there were three landmarks. The first was the November 1967 issue of the *Architectural Review*,¹ which shook the architectural establishment with its rasping critique of ‘the failure of housing’. The second was William Pereira’s pyramidal Transamerica building in San Francisco (finished in 1972); who knew it was permissible to design office blocks in that way? The third was the written work of Robert Venturi.

I became a postgraduate student slightly too late for *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* to make much impression on me.² For better or worse I then consigned it to a new wave of critical scholarship, also spearheaded by Kenneth Frampton and Charles Jencks, which recognized complexity, embraced plurality and challenged architectural historiography. However, such works were still mostly about architecture with a capital ‘A’. The world of the everyday built environment was only there, if at all, in muted fashion.

Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, however, had no such inhibitions.³ Here was a book that gave substance to abstract notions of signs and symbolic meaning by engaging with the emerging architecture of a place that was at once extraordinary and everyday. Las Vegas’s extraordinariness stemmed from being the urban expression of a theme park; a rapidly growing metropolis that lacked a conventional centre. Its ordinariness stemmed from the main engine of that growth being the commercial logic of the ‘strip’ – the linear development found along the highways radiating out from most American cities.

The book’s original cover admirably summarized that message. A small panoramic image showed yellow taxis on a wide asphalt highway. A vast colourful billboard erected on a patch of desert scrub

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¹Taylor, ‘The Failure of Housing’.

²Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

³Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.

advertised sun tanning lotion. The middle distance hinted at the usual combinations of restaurants, bars, churches, car dealerships and parking lots, but in this case enlivened by the towering neon signs of the hotels and casinos. The headlines surrounding the image proclaimed: 'Architecture as Space. Architecture as Symbol. Symbol in Space before Form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System. The Architecture of Persuasion'.

Learning from Las Vegas lastingly resonated with architectural and planning discourse. It engaged with everyday landscapes and street life; subjects that others had treated as being unworthy of attention. At a time when masterplanning was still seen as the way to give direction to urban growth, it provided insight into the spontaneous new urban forms that might develop under neoliberalism. Perhaps most important, it has continued to inspire. That partly results from being routinely implicated in discussion about postmodernism and about such subjects as contextualism, replication, eclecticism and ornamentation. Yet beyond that, a substantial multilingual and transnational literature testifies to the fact that that *Learning from Las Vegas* has served as a source book of ideas invoked in debate about topics as varied as critical spatial theory, inclusion/exclusion, spectacle, hybridity and impurity, iconography, urban legibility, place and placelessness, and modes of scientific representation. If a hallmark of a foundational work is its ability to address changing agendas, then *Learning from Las Vegas* has truly supplied a lasting basis for thinking outside as well as inside the box.

Carola Hein

The first time I heard the name Bob Venturi was at the architecture school in Hamburg during an architectural theory class. At the time, appreciative of Hans Scharoun and Alvar Aalto, I was not convinced by Bob's 'Ducks' and 'Decorated Sheds'. It would take me several more years to appreciate the depth and meaning of his analysis.

I first taught about the work of Bob Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown at Bryn Mawr College, located close to the Manayunk area of Philadelphia and in proximity to the offices of Venturi Scott-Brown. Then, I took up their works again, carefully studying them, and laying them out to the students in my class. I explained their relevance as a counterpoint to the preceding period of modernism and its commercial application around the world. At the end of the lecture, I received an intriguing compliment from a student: 'I really didn't like Venturi's work beforehand, but now that I understand where he comes from, I have come to appreciate it a lot'. That very much reflected my own feelings as well.

I met Bob and Denise for the first time at the conference *Rebuilding Urban Japan after 1945* that I had organized at Bryn Mawr College in 2000. The invitation had been sent out to a broad audience, and I didn't expect to see Bob and Denise in the first row in the audience. Having worked in Japan, they both helped me shape the event. Bob also wrote a blurb for the book.

In the following decade, I came to know Bob and Denise much better and wrote about their work for a German magazine.⁴ I have also developed fond memories of friendly events with the VSBA partners, colleagues and friends from the larger Philadelphia area at their house and sprawling garden in the Wissahickon Valley. We even spelled out Japanese characters on the objects that Bob and Denise had collected during their visits. I saw Bob for the last time at the VSBA office in Manayunk shortly before leaving the US.

For my trial lecture as part of the interview for the Chair of History of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Faculty of Architecture in TU Delft, I chose his Mother's house. Even after moving to

⁴Hein, "Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown".

TU Delft, Bob and Denise have remained my intellectual companions. I had hoped that they would visit us during their annual trip to Rome. We were lucky to have Denise in the conference *Women in Architecture*.⁵

For more than three decades through my academic journey, Bob has stayed with me as a brilliant intellectual and a very kind person.

Clément Orillard

I met Robert Venturi once when I interviewed Denise Scott Brown for my PhD research about Kevin Lynch and perceptual urbanism in the UK and the US. However, I discovered their work much earlier during the first years of my architectural studies in France. Indeed, the work of Robert Venturi with Denise Scott Brown had a major impact on the evolution of thinking about the built environment in France. It fuelled, in particular, the post-May 68 transformation of architectural education and practice and the birth of the ‘projet urbain’ approach to designing cities.

Venturi’s first book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, circulated early amongst architectural students at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. It became one of the main texts the students used to counter the archaic teaching of the École. It helped them to develop a new theory about architecture and the city that became the foundation of many of the new *unités pédagogiques d’architecture* separated from the Ecole after 1968.⁶ Jean-Louis Vénard, a young architect-engineer who belonged to this milieu, translated this book. A first extract was published in the journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité* (AMC) in 1968 and the whole book became one of the first texts of the important collection ‘Aspect de l’urbanisme’, of the publisher Dunod in 1971.⁷

The second book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, from Venturi and Scott Brown with the help of Steven Izenour, also quickly entered into the professional press through polemical debates in France as, again, in AMC between 1973 and 1975.⁸ It was eventually translated in 1978 by the Belgian publisher Mardaga in the other major francophone collection about the built environment, ‘Architecture + Recherches’.⁹ Despite some strong criticisms of its ‘ideological propaganda’, it was included in the building of a coherent theory about urban form that was put forward by the key *architecte-urbaniste* Philippe Panerai.¹⁰

Beyond theory, these writings also fuelled practice through the intervention of young avant-garde firms such as the Atelier de Recherche et d’Études en Aménagement (AREA), an interdisciplinary firm founded in 1969 by the editors of the journal AMC and Vénard (see also the 1975 documentary film ‘La diversité du paysage urbain’, directed by Eric Rohmer and Jean-Paul Pigeat, that was made about AREA).¹¹ Venturi and Scott Brown became so important in France in the seventies that the key journal *Architecture d’aujourd’hui* devoted one of their few monographic issues to their firm in 1978.¹²

This success in France did not lead to a French commission for their firm until the nineties when a local architect invited Venturi and Scott Brown to collaborate on the competition for the main

⁵<https://www.tudelft.nl/evenementen/2017/bk/lecture-denise-scott-brown-women-in-architecture/>.

⁶Viroleau. *Les architectes et Mai 68*.

⁷Venturi “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture de Robert Venturi”; Robert Venturi. *De l’ambiguïté en architecture*.

⁸Didelon. *La controverse Learning from Las Vegas*.

⁹Venturi. *L’enseignement de Las Vegas ou le symbolisme oublié de la forme architecturale*.

¹⁰Mangin and Panerai. “Les tracés urbains communs.”

¹¹<https://www.ina.fr/video/CPA75052575>.

¹²Anon “Venturi and Rauch. Projets et travaux récents”.

building of the Haute Garonne département in Toulouse. The broader character of Toulouse as well as analysis of the site itself held an important role in the design of this building. Venturi and Scott Brown used it as a key case study in their last book, *Architecture as Signs and Systems for a Mannerist Time*, published in 2004, to discuss about the 'context of a locality and of the convention of building'.¹³

Renato L. Rego

Compared to the United States and Europe, the work of Robert Venturi had a relatively late impact on the Brazilian milieu. I came across Venturi's ideas during my undergraduate course in late 1980s, when his buildings and words had already conquered an unquestionable place in the world architecture scene and in planning history. However *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, his most acknowledged book in the country, only received its first Brazilian edition in 1995, with a second one released nearly a decade later. His vision with regard to ordinary architecture and everyday life was at first overlooked. Against it was its North American capitalist background, in a time and place – 1970s developing but dictatorial Brazil – where modernism and its ideal order, socialist inclination and criticism to reality were prevalent.

When *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was originally published, Brazilian architects and architecture schools showed little interest in post-modernist approaches. *Paulista* brutalism was then the hegemonic architectural expression and criticisms of modern architecture did not find a welcoming environment. Brazil was still experiencing the positive effect of the 'economic miracle', a decade of extraordinary growth rates and the military dictatorship (1964–1985) promoted brutalist architecture as a potent image of the developing country. The vigorous and widespread production of modernist architecture and the repressive, nationalist regime led to insularity.

Only in the 1980s did a group of young architects – namely Éolo Maia (1942–2002), Jô Vasconcellos (1947-), and Sylvio E. de Podestá (1952-) – build on Venturi's ideas by promoting innovative intellectual debate and plastic experimentation. Not surprisingly, this group was based in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais – a hinterland setting famous for outstanding baroque architecture, distant from Oscar Niemeyer's sensuous Rio de Janeiro and Paulo Mendes da Rocha's industrial São Paulo. Mixing different materials, bright colours and hybrid historical references, Maia, leader of the Belo Horizonte post-modernist architects, renovated architectural thought in Brazil and transformed its idealized, uniform appearance.

Post-modernist ideas had a more consistent influence during the re-democratization period. The expansion of the architectural repertoire in a country of such a noticeable cultural diversity has also been an undeniable contribution of Venturi's work. Today, distant from the post-modernist extravagance, my young students seem perplexed about Venturi's aesthetics before they recognize and praise his valuable legacy: a broad, open and inclusive architectural perspective.

Fernando Pérez Oyarzun

During the early seventies, Robert Venturi became well known in Latin America. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* had been published some years before but the book had then puzzled the Latin American audience. Venturi's early projects – like Vana or Guild houses – were included in the book, as an indication about the design consequences of his ideas. Their reference to

¹³Venturi and Scott Brown. *Architecture as Signs and Systems for a Mannerist Time*.

conventional architecture and the symmetry of their plans surprised many of the readers, who were not necessarily expecting this result of the previous discourse. Since the publication of the book, as well as realization of other buildings and projects, Venturi became a reference point for Latin American architects and planners. He was recognized as a discernible voice within an international architectural debate in which modern architecture and planning were reconsidered.

Complexity and Contradiction was a surprisingly systematic book that stood far from the manifesto style so frequent in the mid-twentieth century. Instead of passionate declarations, the book exposed different ways in which complexity and contradiction could appear in architecture. In spite of this systematic treatment of the subject, the author described the book as a ‘soft manifesto’. Assuming an almost academic attitude, Venturi developed his argument step by step, questioning the naturalization of a functionalist poetics. Thus, the idea that form follows function, behind a significant part of the twentieth century architecture, was put into doubt. Behind the many examples, which supported the discourse, there was the presence of the Italian culture experienced by Venturi during his stay in that country in 1954. It was the Italy seen through the eyes of a North American architect, highlighting, in particular, the mannerist period.

Other projects, other books and other architectural views, would come during the following years. *Learning from Las Vegas* would accentuate the interest in popular or even commercial culture as an inspiration for contemporary architecture.¹⁴ A significant part of Venturi’s intellectual production would be done together with Denise Scott Brown, who would make a recognizable contribution to it. The books and projects, which came after *Complexity and Contradiction*, brought differences in the cultural tone, although not necessarily in the orientation of Venturi’s critical attitude. In Latin America he was often associated with Pop Art or simply with popular culture, which often simplified a much more sophisticated and complex point of view on his part.

During the last third of the twentieth century, that modern tradition, built during five decades, was severely criticized, both in Latin America and worldwide. As a result of that, a new imaginary, frequently alluding to traditional forms, was often arbitrarily put into practice. Amidst this complex and agitated scenario Robert Venturi represented a recognizable voice, one that avoided superficiality, trying to balance intelligence and sensibility, professionalism and theoretical reflection. For all of that, for his views about the contemporary city and for many other things, including the quality of his design and his contribution to the architectural debate, we are grateful for his life, his work and his ideas.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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¹⁴Ibid., 192–202.

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