

The Legacy of *Complexity and Contradiction* in Architecture

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, by Robert Venturi.¹ Often identified as the first postmodern manifesto—although Venturi has disavowed this attribution—*Complexity and Contradiction* had a significant impact on architecture culture as much for what it did not do as for what it did. As a “gentle manifesto,” it eschewed the polemics and vehemence of earlier modernist manifestoes and took a more personal tone. Statements beginning “I like . . .” or “I find . . .” shifted Venturi’s treatise from a polemic to what he called an “apologia—an explanation, indirectly, of my work” (18). Far from the fervent proclamations of early twentieth-century manifestoes, the mildness of Venturi’s tone concealed the radical nature of his program to dismantle “orthodox Modern architecture.”

Venturi decoupled architecture and “other things,” the social, technological, and political issues that had informed modernism:

The architect’s ever diminishing power and his growing ineffectualness in shaping the whole environment can 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. (20–21)

The shift to a realistic approach to architecture, which abandoned a utopian or idealistic basis, characterized both Venturi’s method and the era that followed the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction*. He ended his preface by declaring, “This book is an analysis of what seems to me true for architecture now, rather than a diatribe against what seems false” (21). He interpreted the spirit of his times as a reaction against the social and political imperatives of heroic

modernism. The ambivalence of Venturi’s “almost all right” acceptance of the contemporary built landscape, however, reveals a simultaneous detachment from its moment. The degree to which *Complexity and Contradiction* was untouched by then-current events and debates is striking. The racial unrest that erupted across U.S. cities, the Free Speech Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, criticism of urban renewal, and other movements with direct impact on public space and the built environment had no place in this gentle manifesto. The hermetic quality of Venturi’s treatise was essential to its appeal: it allowed architects to see history as a repository of forms detached from their associations.

Venturi articulated the malaise pervading architecture in the postwar period and made a virtue of it. He took the “chaoticism” of the era and valorized it, recuperating the jumble of styles and lack of ideological coherence that were decried by critics and proponents of “orthodox modernism” alike.² Antiheroic, ironic, and humorous, *Complexity and Contradiction* offered history as an instrument, a method for accessing tradition through what T. S. Eliot called the “historical sense” (19). Venturi showed architects, and historians, how to look closely at buildings and see the innumerable ways meaning can be derived from historical material. His book sparked renewed interest in architectural history, making history relevant to architectural education and practice again. But his appeal to an “architecture of inclusion” means something different today than it did in 1966. Allowing relationships and power to take care of themselves seems less and less a viable option for our discipline. If Venturi’s motto, “More is not less,” still holds value, we can take this as an exhortation to write a more expansive, intersectional history of *Complexity and Contradiction* and its time.

What does *Complexity and Contradiction* mean for architectural history today? In this issue, five scholars take a fresh look at this seminal work in “re-reviews” that examine its reception and legacy from diverse perspectives, personal and scholarly. Joan Ockman provides an overview of its immediate impact on architecture culture and its intersection with the changing landscape of discourse over five decades. Maarten Delbeke demonstrates how Venturi’s preference for mannerist, baroque, and rococo examples reflected scholarly

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debates of the period and discusses the variable role of mannerism in Venturi's theory. *Complexity and Contradiction's* catalytic effect on young architects is the subject of Thomas Noble Howe's re-review, including his own conversion from design to the history of ancient architecture. Kishwar Rizvi interrogates the appeal of Venturi's historicism to nationalist regimes across the Middle East, focusing on Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's design for the Baghdad State Mosque competition (1983) and Venturi's controversial participation as a jury member for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1986. Jonathan Massey calls on architecture and architectural history to use the occasion of *Complexity and Contradiction's* anniversary to reconsider the disciplines' implication with power and privilege. I am grateful to these historians for their insights on the current significance of this landmark work. My thanks also go to the *JSAH* book review editors, who commissioned these re-reviews.

With this issue, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury and Steven Nelson end their terms as *JSAH* book review editors. I would like to thank them for their extraordinary professionalism and scholarly rigor, which have enriched the journal and the discipline greatly. In their places, I welcome Sheila Crane and Dale Gyure as the new book review editors in the areas of Europe, Africa, and Asia after 1750 and North and South America, respectively.

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Notes

1. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). Citations of pages in the text refer to this first edition.
2. See "The Period of Chaoticism: The Sixties—A *P/A* Symposium on the State of Architecture," *Progressive Architecture* 42, no. 3 (1961), 122–33.