

ARC 386K—Theory I

NOTES ON *COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION IN ARCHITECTURE* BY ROBERT VENTURI

I. On the Role of History/Precedent

- p. 13 "As an architect I try to be guided not by habit but by a conscious sense of the past—by precedent thoughtfully considered."
- p. 43 "Familiar things seen in an unfamiliar context become perceptually new as well as old."
- p. 13 "The historical sense involves perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." (quoted from T. S. Eliot)
- p. 13 "I rely less on the idea of style than on the inherent characteristics of specific buildings."

II. On Modernism

- p. 16 "Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox modern architecture."
- p. 35 "Modern architecture separates and articulates elements. Modern architecture is never implicit."
- p. 23 "The tradition 'either-or' has characterized orthodox Modern architecture. . . . An architecture of complexity and contradiction tends to include 'both-and' rather than exclude 'either-or.'"
- p. 50 "In Modern architecture we have operated too long under the restriction of unbending rectangular forms supposed to have grown out of the technical requirements of the frame and the mass-produced curtain wall."
- p. 10 This book is "this generation's answer to grandiose pretensions which have shown themselves in practice to be destructive and overblown." (Scully)

III. On Building Materials/Products

- p. 42 Venturi is interested in "the vast accumulation of standard, anonymously designed products connected with architecture and construction, and also to commercial display elements which are positively banal and vulgar in themselves and are seldom associated with architecture. . . . The main justification for these honky-tonk elements in architectural order is their very existence. They are what we have. . . . These commonplace elements accommodate existing needs for variety and communication."
- p. 44 "Honky-tonk elements are often the main source of the occasional

variety and vitality of our cities. . . . It is not their banality or vulgarity as elements which make for the banality and vulgarity of the whole scene, but rather their contextual relationships of space and scale."

- p. 54 "It is when honky-tonk spills out beyond spatial boundaries to the no-man's land of roadtown, that it becomes chaos and blight."
- p. 74 "Through the creative use of zoning and positive architectural features it is possible to concentrate the intricacies of roadtowns and junkyards, actual and figurative. . . . They achieve an ironically compelling kind of unity."
- p. 43 "The architect should accept the methods and elements he already has. Technical innovations require investments in time and skills and money beyond the architect's reach, at least in our kind of society."

IV. On American Values and Culture

- p. 104 "Is not Main Street almost all right? Indeed, is not the commercial strip of a Route 66 almost all right?"
- p. 9 This "is a very American book, rigorously pluralistic and phenomenological in its method.' (Scully)

V. Architecture as an Expression of Function

- p. 10 This book "values before all else the actions of human beings and the effect of physical forms on their spirit." (Scully)
- p. 11 Venturi "does not lie to us once concerning what the facts are. In the straightest sense, it is function that interests him, and the strong forms deriving from functional expression." (Scully)
- p. 19 "Though we no longer argue over the primacy of form and function (which follows which), we cannot ignore their interdependence."
- p. 34 "A room can have many functions at the same time or at different times. . . . The multifunctionary room is a possibly truer answer to the Modern architect's concern with flexibility. The room with a generic rather than a specific purpose, and with moveable furniture rather than moveable partitions, promotes a perceptual flexibility rather than a physical flexibility, and permits the toughness and permanence still necessary in our building. Valid ambiguity promotes useful flexibility."
- p. 41 "I emphasize the complexity and contradiction that develops from the program and reflects the inherent complexities and contradictions of living. It is obvious that in actual practice the two must be interrelated."

VI. Inside-Out/Outside-In

- p. 82 "Every phenomenon—a physical object, an organic form, a feeling, a thought, our group life—owes its shape and character to the duel between opposing tendencies; a physical configuration is a product of the duel between native constitution and outside environment." (quote from Kepes)
- p. 20 "Architecture's meaning derives from its interior characteristics and its particular context."
- p. 86 "Architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of use and space. These interior and environmental forces are both general and particular, generic and circumstantial. Architecture as the wall between the inside and the outside becomes the spatial record of this resolution and its drama."

VII. On Simplicity/Complexity/Order

- p. 16 "The movement from a view of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature." (Quote from Heckscher)
- p. 19 "Simplified or superficially complex forms will not work. Instead, the variety inherent in the ambiguity of visual perception must once more be acknowledged and exploited."
- p. 25 "Simultaneous perception of a multiplicity of levels involves struggles and hesitations for the observer, and makes his perceptions more valid."
- p. 42 "But the building's original order must be strong. A good deal of clutter has not managed to destroy the space of Grand Central Station, but the introduction of our foreign element casts into doubt the entire effect of some modern buildings. Our buildings must survive the cigarette machine."

VIII. On Unity/Wholeness

- p. 16 Architecture "must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less."
- p. 100 "Hierarchy is implicit in an architecture of many levels of meaning. It involves configurations of configurations—the interrelationships of several orders of varying strengths to achieve a complex whole."
- p. 102 "The obligation toward the whole . . . does not preclude the building which is unresolved. A building can be more or less incomplete in the expression of its program and its form."
- p. 103 "An architecture that can simultaneously recognize contradictory levels should be able to admit the paradox of the whole fragment:

the building which is a whole at one level and a fragment of a greater whole at another level."

- p. 104 "The seemingly chaotic juxtapositions of honky-tonk elements express an intriguing kind of vitality and validity, and they produce an unexpected approach to unity as well. . . . It is a unity which 'maintains, but only just maintains', a control over the clashing elements which compose it. Chaos is very near; its nearness but its avoidance gives force. In the validly complex building of cityscape, the eye does not want to be too easily or too quickly satisfied in its search for unity within the whole."

IX. Architecture as an Expression of Structure

- p. 36 "It is valid to sense stresses in forms which are not purely structural, and a structural member can be more than incidentally spatial."
- p. 35 "To the structural pursuit as well as the organicist, the double-functioning structural form would be abhorrent because of the non-exact, ambiguous relationship between form and function and between form and structure."

X. On Contemporary Times

- p. 16 "Modern architects with few exceptions eschewed ambiguity. But now our position is different. 'At the same time that the problems increase in quantity and complexity, and difficulty they also change faster than before.'" (Alexander)
- "Today, the wants of program, structure, mechanical equipment, and expression, even in single buildings in simple contexts, are diverse and and conflicting in ways previously unimaginable. The increasing dimension and scale of architecture in urban and regional planning add to the difficulties."

XI. Dealing with Change/Growth/Urbanism

- p. 42 "A play of order and compromise supports the idea of renovation in building, and of evolution in city planning. Indeed, change in the program of existing buildings is a valid phenomenon and a major source of the contradiction I am endorsing."

XII. On the Architect's Role

- p. 13 "Self-consciousness is necessarily a part of creation and criticism."
- p. 14 "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."

- p. 44 "Architects should accept their modest role rather than disguise it and risk what might be called an electronic expressionism which might parallel the industrial expressionism of early Modern architecture."
- p. 44 "By attempting too much architects flaunt their impotence and risk their continuing influence as supposed experts."
- p. 43 "Present-day architects, in their visionary compulsion to invent new techniques, have neglected their obligation to be experts in existing conventions. . . . The architect selects as much as creates. . . . The architect's main work is the organization of a unique whole through conventional parts and the introduction of new parts when the old won't do."
- p. 42 "An architect should use convention to make order vivid. I mean he should use convention unconventionally."
- p. 44 "The architect who would accept his role as combiner of significant old clichés—valid banalities—in new contexts as his condition within a society that directs its best efforts, its big money, and its elegant technologies elsewhere, can ironically express in this indirect way a true concern for society's inverted scale of values."
- p. 42 "I am taking the limited view, I admit, but the limited view, which architects have tended to belittle, is as important as the visionary view, which they have tended to glorify but have not brought about."
- p. 102 "The complex program which is a process, continually changing and growing in time yet at each stage at some level related to the whole, should be recognized as essential at the scale of city planning."
- p. 104 "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."