

## COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION IN ARCHITECTURE

*Robert Venturi*

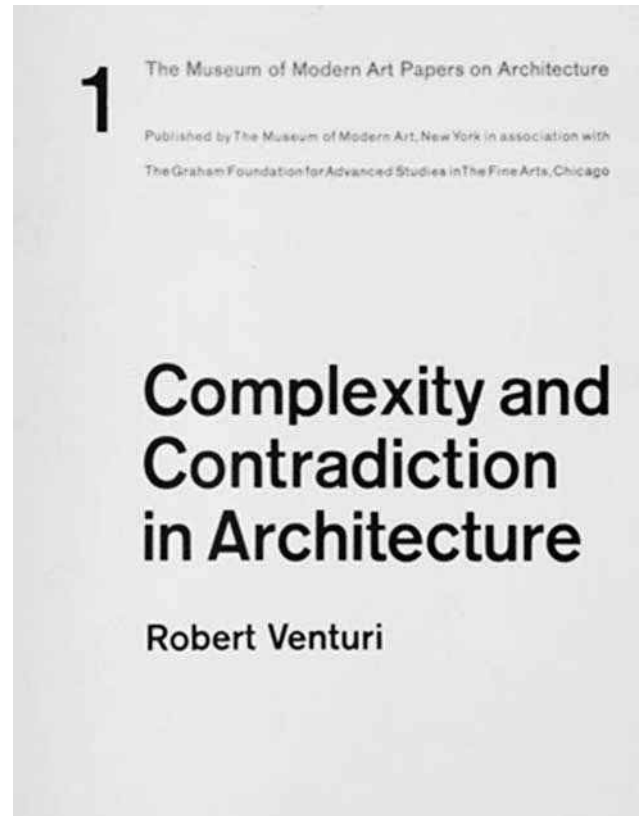
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Robert Venturi, one of the twentieth century's great architectural icons, wrote the most significant treatise entitled "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" that was first published in 1966. This impressive book has been translated into sixteen languages and has become a significant source of architectural literature. The writer, Robert Venturi, a prominent postmodernist, a symbol of American architecture, and theorist was born in 1925 in Philadelphia. As an undergraduate, he studied Architecture at Princeton, and in 1950, he received the highest distinction for his MFA degree from the same University. He served faculty positions at Yale and Harvard and trained under Eero Saarinen and Louis Kahn before starting his own practice. He established his architectural firm in 1964, directing it from 1967 to 2012, with his spouse Denise Scott Brown and in 1991 he received the renowned Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

Venturi explored the concept of how complexity and contradiction in architectural form. He questioned the orthodox modernism and ventured into possibilities of how more sense can be created in architecture rather than only the simplified form pursuit. He felt that Modernist movement in its effort to push away from traditional and start from scratch, failed to sustain the nature of architecture. He discussed ideas and proverbs, like "the difficult whole and less is a bore", which eventually became theory of architecture and inspired numerous post-modernist architects.

This book is presented in a unique architectural text in which Venturi backs his arguments with illustrations of buildings. It offers a poetic perspective on the complexity, as to how architectural form takes place, and then the function of symbolism in the process of design. It reconfigured architecture, by relooking the simplistic conversation in modernism into a reconnection with history, decoration, ornament and complexity and contradiction. Criticism of modern architecture and search for postmodern architectural elements, focused on complexity and contradiction, is the core idea of the Book. The Book has eleven chapters and



three hundred and fifty black and white architectural photos, ranging in types from images, architectural plans and elevations to rough sketches. Some of these sketches have been made by Venturi himself in order not just to clarify his arguments but also to make them digestible, serving as historical references and highlighting the ideas of the author.

In the introduction to the Book, Vincent Scully writes, "potentially the most significant literature on the making of architecture" after Le Corbusier's *"Towards a New Architecture,"* printed in 1923. Scully indicates that while Le Corbusier promoted a "noble purism," the approach of Venturi is opposite: he believes that architecture should accept the complexities and contradictions of urban reality. The introductory Chapter concludes with the statement,

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that creating and experiencing architecture are often "critical-historical actions," and the power and meaning of our interaction with buildings must rely on knowledge of history. Venturi's opening part, after Scully's introduction explains complexity and contradiction as an effort at architectural critique and an explanation for his work. Complexity and Contradiction thrives in utilizing historical knowledge to enhance understanding of architecture as a profession.

The initial chapters of the book are well written, relatively concise and relevant to contemporary architecture and design. Here Venturi admits his emotional appeal for complexity and contradiction and demonstrates the periods of western history that illustrate the best of architecture: Mannerism, Baroque and Rococo. The chapters One and Two are formalistic criticism of the rigid hegemony of the architecture of modernist philosophy, stating that "simple is always better" and that "form must follow function". He discusses architecture as the only place where unnecessary and simple development takes shape, in both thought and material reality. All other types of art embrace and encourage complexity in their art form, particularly in the multitude that arises in poetry, fine arts, and even in mathematics, where there is an emphasis on building on the variety of possibilities He respects simplicity, and for him, an inner complexity achieves true simplicity. The Doric temple, for instance, is an example of Venturi's rationale, implying that the temple as a whole elicits harmonious simplicity via a distorted form and internal tension (complexities and contradictions). The initial Chapters conclude that the design of complexity and contradiction has a special responsibility towards the whole, it must represent inclusion instead of the simple unity of exclusion, thus "more is not less".

Chapter Three, "ambiguity," is appropriately named and it is self-descriptive. Venturi explores the "gap between physical reality and psychological impact" characterized by the conceptual expressionism of the innovative art world that has already successfully mastered the concept of conflicting tension, paradox and contradiction, aiming at dramatic creativity and chaos. In Chapter Four, Venturi states that a design paradox is indirect and is dictated by "yet". For example Villa Savoye is inwardly simple but complex on the outside. The buildings of Barrington Court are symmetrical though asymmetrical. Kahn used simple concrete and polished granite in his buildings. While "either-or" generally characterizes modern architecture, contrary elements of design tend to contain "both - and".

Chapter Five is a continuity of "contradictory levels", introduced in Chapter Four. Venice's Ponte Vecchio has been quoted as a clear example of multifunctionality. A bridge,

an arcade, shops and boat piers present a 'whole' design. According to Venturi, symbolism or value could be as essential as function, in short, a gateway. He ends the Chapter by acknowledging Mies's I-beams as components of rhetoric, ornamented by Mies. One of Venturi's most fascinating Chapter's is Chapter Six, "the conventional element." About order, he cites Mies, lamenting on our time's uncertainty, and Kahn saying that order does not equal to orderliness. He further explains, "should we not search in the complexities and contradictions of our times for meaning? which would explain breaking the order. There needs to be order before it can be broken. If conditions contradict order, order will bend and break. Breaking the order strengthens meaning. Formalism is pure order; no order is chaos." In clear support of the context, this beautifully written and debated paragraph is accompanied by case studies of buildings designed by both Le Corbusier and Alvar Aalto.

Venturi acknowledges a compromise in architecture in Chapter Seven, citing the example of the curved front on Palazzo Massimo to suit the street line, that he relates to as an adapted contradiction, an arrangement, a solution without a loser or winner. In Chapter Eight, shock treatment ranging from rhythms, directions, scale and function in contradiction, from Michaelangelo to Gaudi to Cubism, have been cited. In Chapter Nine, Venturi discusses the flowing space, harmony between outside and inside, as one of the achievements of the modern movement. The examples in this Chapter demonstrate ways of differentiating between spaces with focus on light from the exterior. In Chapter Ten, Venturi informs us of the aim of unity besides simplification, debating the challenging unity of inclusion instead of the simple unity of exclusion, and the Gestalt's psychology that a whole is a product that is more than the sum of its elements. The book ends on Chapter Eleven with simple design examples by the writer. He includes the example of the Vanna Venturi House, showing typical concepts of the residence (pitched roof, chimney), its links to historical buildings (arch, lintel, and keystone ornamentation) and spatial 'complexities and contradictions', like his staircase that leads nowhere.

Overall, the book is practically an ideal book of theory. It also makes one appreciate post-modernism and post-modern art theory, literature and music. Venturi's arguments are bold and straightforward and supported by the first-person narrative. The key points are very simple to grasp and are based on a valuable interpretation and framing method. I admire his pragmatism in this brief yet sweeping analysis of the connections between architectural forms. His methodology is encyclopedic and his focus has spread around the globe, and among poles on the timeline, from the

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centralized gates of the Temple at Edfu to the house he constructed for his mom in the outskirts of Philadelphia. The most fascinating aspect of the book is the critical analysis of Venturi's numerous projects and how he "reads" those as an architect. For instance, the book clearly shows how to view two neighboring and similar buildings, as not only symmetrical but also having a "duality" in demand for "design."

The ending of the book, is a way to know how his ideas are interpreted into the built form, but it is felt that most of his projects do not achieve the same degree of complexity as those mentioned in the book or the contradiction is simply too easy to read and does not add sense to the whole. Another drawback is that frequently the author dwells too long into a simple argument. Additionally, the biggest error in the book is that the built work examples are right at the end, and consists of small images of some remarkable buildings that could have been adequately detailed.