Art, architecture and graphic design

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Master of Fine Arts

Art, Architecture and Graphic Design
by Peter C. Amis
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Date: 5/4/01
In my two years of the Master’s Degree Program for Fine Arts in Computer Graphics Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology I took what I thought to be the most fascinating liberal arts class I had ever taken. Though the history of the subject-matter in this class paralleled that of my own fine arts undergraduate education, also at R.I.T., I found Modern architecture to be more interesting and in depth than I had previously thought possible. I can now see things in the buildings that are present in my everyday life that before I was blind to because I had never been taught the theories that were behind them. I became caught up and began to share that excitement with an architect that was the highlight of my Modern architecture course: Robert Venturi. I want to thank Robert Venturi for making Modern architecture interesting and meaningful, and my design professors Robert Keough and Nancy Ciolek for giving me the expertise to share that world.
I. INTRODUCTION / PROSPECTUS

Graphic design is about the skilled creation and arrangement of various elements of a two dimensional nature in a two dimensional environment. Traditionally and in general these elements may include but are not limited to shapes, lines, and type. These elements are, again traditionally, arranged from a premeditation of some degree into an order which may or may not be readily recognizable for the purpose of communicating specific information.

Post-Modern Architecture is a reach for the future with its feet in the past. It seeks to embrace the future without looking out of place. More specifically the Post-Modern Architecture of Robert Venturi at first appears to be not unlike the other architecture around it—at times quite similar. Some buildings need close scrutiny, some are blunt and quite conspicuous in their appearance. In and on these buildings you see something that one does not find in other constructions: an arrangement of shapes, lines, and sometimes type from a premeditation into an order which may or may not be readily recognizable in order to communicate specific information. You see what we as graphic designers seek to do in a totally different medium.
2.

The fascination here is that of common ground between two seemingly unrelated disciplines. Robert Venturi has tossed aside the convention of mere volume and structure—a skin between interior and exterior—and has elevated his work to that of high art. A building is not merely a building anymore. There are calculated, progressive rhythms, emotional explosions, complicated intricacies and complex contradictions that give functional as well as aesthetic value. Are these structures steps or seats? Is this pillar merely decorative or is it also a structural beam? Is that just a window or does it also serve as a complementary shape? How many functions does this have? Are they graphic and/or structural?

In his book Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi employs a series of words and phrases that he has created in order to describe the devices found in his and in others architecture. It is with this vocabulary that Venturi explains and interprets the past into a contemporary visual language. This language is then applied to his own work: a complete process including the Renaissance and seventeenth century Scotland to the main strip at present-day Las Vegas to the vernacular of the area to be built in. Though at times his work may seem hap-hazard, nothing is left to chance. Every aspect of what Robert Venturi constructs has a reason—and in many of those aspects, more than one.

This thesis project, instead of being viewed on a computer screen, will be a traditional hanging piece with images, drawings, and layout generated and/or modified on a Macintosh. The piece will exhibit selected accomplishments of Robert
3.
Venturi arranged in a manner that reflects his Mannerist, Post-Modern tendencies and theories. Contextual quotes will be arranged and placed to further enhance the meaning of these images. Design elements will direct the flow and compliment the unique complexities presented by the dominant imagery.
II. EXECUTION

There are two very fundamental parts to every design; its intent and how it is executed. The more basic and imperative the function, the more directly and simplistically that function need be executed. A “STOP” sign, for instance, is large and bright red with that word screened on its face. It is a very simple command requiring the simplest of solutions. The same could be said of a dormitory facility on the campus of the Rochester Institute of Technology. Instead of “STOP” this complex might say “exist densely and inexpensively.” This basic and imperative function is accomplished through many floors of equal size rooms encased by an angular, brick exterior. These are examples of the function taking precedence over aesthetic appearance. Part of what we will be exploring will involve more of aesthetics and meaning than of the function itself.

Robert Venturi has taken great lengths for execution. The root function of any architectural work is is a type of living or storage space including interior spaces and exterior expanses. However it is the substance, meaning, and process of his design that sets Venturi apart. Many factors are called into question that will determine the outcome of one of his structural solutions. Factors such as the vernacular; the history
and style of the area being built in. What were the buildings like there fifty, one hundred, or one hundred and fifty years ago? Factors such as these need to be considered for a Postmodern building. A pioneer and founding father of the Postmodernist Movement, Venturi employs the past while dealing with modernity. His buildings relate to those around them because Postmodernism is a movement of inclusivism. The building will relate to the people and places around it.
III. A PRESENTATION OF TERMS

I created a brief slide presentation entitled The Difficult Whole centered around Venturi’s book *Complexity and Contradiction* to somewhat explain what I have called Venturi’s “vocabulary”. It is in this vocabulary which he selected and arranged words and phrases to describe key elements found in architecture both historically and in those of his own. These terms serve as a language to describe, legitimize, and ultimately, for others to understand his work. In the end, my exhibit will reflect the implementation of these words at the level of graphic design thus showing the strong relationship between design and Venturi’s Post-Modernist architecture and how these terms can be fundamental and universal between the two. This section will define the

Fig. 1.  
Fig. 2.

6.
meaning of these words so that, in the end, the graphic design piece may be described in terms of the architectural works being displayed on that piece.

(Fig. 3) The book *Complexity and Contradiction* by Robert Venturi illustrates his views of architecture through the creation of his own vocabulary. This vocabulary will ultimately describe his own work, deriving specific historical and architectural design cues that are used. This vocabulary is most effective since history and design walk hand in hand with Venturi’s Post-Modern structures.

(Fig. 4) *Ambiguity* can be described in the form of a question using “or” usually involving seemingly contradictory statements. In the case of LeCorbusier’s Villa Savoye the question might be asked: is the overall design square or round? Which does the building want to be?1
(Fig. 5) A **Double Functioning Element** is described in terms of “both, and”: having more than one function. In Khan’s Richards Medical Research Building the open beams serve as both structural skeleton and a repeating division defining specific sections where different functions of the building take place.²

(Fig. 6) A **Rhetorical Element** enhances overall meaning by underscoring. In a project for a gateway at Bourneville, France by Ledoux the columns contained by the arch simply repeat the larger ones. Ultimately they identify the opening as more semicircle than arch.³
Accommodation occurs when pure, logical design must give way to another necessary function. At the Bologna-Florence section of the Autostrada del Sole by Care and Giannelli the supporting understructures of the bridge must conform to the valley floor underneath. They become irregular in their necessity.

(Fig. 7) Accommodation occurs when pure, logical design must give way to another necessary function. At the Bologna-Florence section of the Autostrada del Sole by Care and Giannelli the supporting understructure of the bridge must conform to the valley floor underneath. They become irregular in their necessity.

(Fig. 8) An Expedient Device is an element that is made eventful by its exceptional location and usage. The ornamental pillar in the entranceway at Saint Madeleine, Vezelay displaces and breaks the visual connection to the altar and is made, in turn, eventful in itself.
(Fig. 9) Superadjacencies are forms that can be both structural and or ornamental in their usage. What makes them significant are the images created when the forms are seen against others. What is at first seen as separate, structural elements are also images projected against others producing complex superimpositions which may be structural or ornamental in nature.⁶

(Fig. 10) Crowded Intricacies within a Rigid Frame consist of a relatively simple yet sturdy structure surrounding an area or volume of smaller, subdivided spaces as in LeCorbusier’s High Court Building at Chandigarh and or complex Superadjacencies in a facade such as the Parish Church in Lampa, Peru.⁷
(Fig. 11) Detached Linings occur when the interior shapes and dimensions are contradictory to the exterior shell. Usually the interior envelope is responding to a specific utility. Such a case is Aalto’s Maison Carre where the ceiling is contoured to accommodate an orator.8

(Fig. 12) Residual Spaces result when there is a combination of two or more different structural shapes. These leftover spaces are due to incongruities between the two shapes.9
(Fig. 13) *Inflection* involves a gesturing of some manner of one structure towards another. The inflecting structures tend to be more integral with the overall structure while the inflected structure is more visually separated. Inflection is also a means of tying together like and unlike parts.10

(Fig. 14) A *Dominant Binder* is a structure that is able to unify multiple parts of a complex but related number of structures. This structure can be, among other things, a wall or an archway.11
These next slides are a short gallery of Venturi’s more important projects up to the publishing of Complexity and Contradiction. Here we can attempt to bring together the terminology with Venturi’s own work and see how he has related history to Post-Modern architectural design.

(Fig. 16) Venturi’s Beach House is very reminiscent of Low House but with a twist. The house is divided in two. An Expedient Element, or is it? The large central stack acts as a Dominant Binder with a violent upward motion. The ramped entrance structure recalls LeCorbusier’s Millowner’s Building.
(Fig. 17) At the Guild House the frontal facade addresses the street while the white entrance is at human scale. Large graphics greet arrivals as does an expedient pillar. The TV antenna is a purely ornamental fixture.

(Fig. 18) The town hall at left dominates with its facade, oversize flag, and graphic display board. An interesting superadjacency occurs between the facade and the main complex.
(Fig. 19) Venturi’s trademark cross-mullioned window is evident. Again the “house with no sides” theme prevails. It is again expediently split in two with a binding chimney structure. The interior is abound with Accommodation and Residual Spaces.

(Fig. 20) A highly Superadjacent ceremonial archway is over the entrance doors. The street facade is congruent with the neighborhood buildings but all similarity ends there. One must approach from the parking lot side to see the entrance. Lower windows seem to sink into the ground in front. The upper and lower windows set up a brief Contrapuntal Dialogue.
IV. THE EXHIBIT

The exhibit (Fig. 21) is 24” square. A compositional grid was created based on Venturi’s ever present cross mullioned window. Like the window the primary supporting grid consists of two lines, horizontal and vertical, each bisecting the piece and themselves to create four equal quarters. The main elements in this composition conform to this larger, four quarter grid while secondary elements rest within eighths segments (Fig. 22) and still others on the level of sixteenths (Fig. 23). The window from Venturi’s mother’s house, from which the entire layout is derived, is pictured in the top right eighth of the bottom left, or third, quarter.

The text blocks are also set in purposeful order. These blocks are meant to be read in clockwise fashion with a simultaneous decrease in size and increase in specific reference to the visual elements they accompany. The sweep leads ones eyes from the upper left quadrant to lower right.

The first text block introduces the viewer to the concept of Gestalt and its notion of parts in relation to the whole and reads as such.

An architecture of complexity and accommodation does not forsake the
Fig. 21.

The very complex building, which in its open form is incomplete, in itself relates to Mies’s “group form”; it is the antithesis of the “perfect single building” or the closed pavilion. As a fragment of a greater whole in a greater context this kind of building relates again to the scope of city planning as a means of increasing the unity of the complex a whole. 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.

An architecture of complexity and accommodation does not forsake the whole. It is the difficult unity through inclusiveness rather than the easy unity through exclusion. Gestalt psychology considers a perceptual whole the result of, and yet more than, the sum of its parts. The whole is dependent on the position, number, and inherent characteristics of the parts.

The difficult whole in an architecture of complexity and contradiction includes multiplicity and diversity of elements in relationships that are inconsistent among the weaker kinds perceptually.

Fig. 22.

Fig. 23.

Residual space is sometimes awkward. Like structural parts, it is seldom economic. It is always leftover, infected toward something more important beyond itself.

Robert Venturi

...adjacent contrasting colored curtain contain spatial rhythms.

...adjacent contrasting colored curtain contain architectural rhythms.
whole...It is the difficult unity through inclusion rather than the easy unity through exclusion. Gestalt psychology considers a perceptual the result of, and yet more than, the sum of its parts. The whole is dependent on the position, number, and inherent characteristics of the parts. The difficult whole in an architecture of complexity and contradiction includes multiplicity and diversity of elements in relationships that are inconsistent or among the weaker kinds perceptually.14

The image underneath this block is that of a products catalog showroom facade designed by Venturi. Here he reveals his concern for the graphic nature of his work in buildings he calls "decorated sheds."15

Large abstract red and white flowers were chosen for their obvious appeal to the viewer, while the random "wallpaper" effect of the overall pattern in relation to the panel module and the edges of the building reinforced the two-dimensional graphic scale of the pattern.16

The second block discusses further the concept of the part, in this case a building, being a whole unto itself while still operating as part of the greater whole; the city block or neighborhood.
19.

The very complex building, which in its open form is complete, in itself relates to Maki's "group form"; it is the antithesis of the "perfect single building" or the closed pavilion. As a fragment of a greater whole in a greater context this kind of building relates again to the scope of city planning as a means of increasing the unity of the complex whole. 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.

In the third text block there is a more specific reference to the visual event occurring behind it and in this case becomes part of that event while describing it. The passage deals with what Venturi terms a "Superadjacency":

If "contradiction adapted" corresponds to the kid glove treatment, "contradiction juxtaposed" involves the shock treatment...its contradictory relationships become manifest in discordant rhythms, directions, adjacencies, and what I shall call superadjacencies – the superimpositions of various elements. In their complex relationships these elements are in varying degrees both structural and ornamental, frequently redundant, and sometimes vestigial.
The passage on the exhibit where this quote is taken from is itself a superadjacency: becoming not only a text block in the layout but a texture over the group of elements beneath. This "text-ure-block" is suspended in the previously mentioned sixteenths level of the compositional grid above the number "9." Here the large number "9" is superimposed over the image containing the original number. The use of the number on this building is part of what makes Venturi part of a bridge between art and architecture. The number serves two purposes in what Venturi would likely call a "double-functioning element"; while denoting the address of the house on the street it is also a pleasing graphic element making effective use of the area that would have otherwise been barren. A classic double-functioning element - simultaneous utility and embellishment.

Residual space is the victim of the larger design. As Venturi writes: "Residual space is sometimes awkward. Like structural poche it is seldom economic. It is always leftover, inflected toward something more important beyond itself." In the overall design's strides to be positive and effectual, something must be leftover. An insignificant negative space with seemingly no use other than to reinforce the active subject-matter around it. While in the realm of fine art or graphic design residual or negative space is seen as an interaction with the whole, it is held—and this can be deduced by the name—that residual space in Venturi's architecture must be utterly impotent and ineffectual. I submit that it is not. In the same way that the untouched
white space in a watercolor painting compliments and in fact gives strength to the painting, residual space performs the same function in a building. Because residual space isn’t viewable in some instances does not mean it is not having an effect on the overall design. It is not that it is not seen, it merely is not readily noticed. An oddly angled wall, created by residual space, is part of the complexity of the work of Venturi.

If that space had been incorporated into an overall design with mere efficiency in mind the result might have been regular and sterile, lacking in the emotional complexities that set art apart from utility and necessity.

At the very bottom of the piece, I have taken an elevation of Venturi’s House in Tucker’s Town in Bermuda and isolated the arcades that the accompanying quote refers to, where: "...adjacent contrasting arcades contain contrapuntal rhythms." To have executed the easy—to have placed each doorway at the center of each arch and in between each column would have meant the loss of life and vitality. Here doorways do not stand, instead they accelerate and move into and out of archways. Steady tempo accented by a backbeat. The spaces between the doorways decrease in progressive intervals towards the cupola structure, offset to the right. This focal point acts as a dominant binder for the two sections of rooftop in which both levels of doorways gravitate and inflect.
22.

ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., p. 34

3. Ibid., p. 40

4. Ibid., p. 41

5. Ibid., p. 46

6. Ibid., p. 62

7. Ibid., p. 72

8. Ibid., pp. 74-77

9. Ibid., p. 78

10. Ibid., pp. 88-90.

11. Ibid., p. 100

12. Ibid., p. 108

13. Ibid., p. 104

14. Ibid., p. 88


16. Ibid., p. 228


19. Ibid., p. 82

20. Ibid., p. 61
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