

VENTURI

Note: Accompanying diagrams are hardcopy and not included in this PDF

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, a husband and wife team, were two of the most notable architects of the budding avant-garde, or postmodernist movement. Their claim that architecture should be symbolic as well as functional brought about a paradigm shift, and thereby changing the way people perceived architecture, paved the way for successful postmodern architects such as Frank Gehry.

The modernist period at the beginning of the 20th Century was characterised by Bauhaus-inspired forms. Modern materials such as steel and concrete were used to construct unadorned buildings in simple or standardised shapes, such as rectangular towers, many of which still dominate skylines today. Through repetition and standardisation, modernism strove to achieve the image of a purist utopia. The purpose of a building, the movement declared, was distinct from its structure, so form followed function in every respect. The Venturis disagreed, vehemently. Their book, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture" calls for the resurrection of classically complex elements. Based off the concept that architecture can be defined as well by metaphor, in the form of signs and symbols, as literally, by walls, the postmodernist philosophy they developed calls for the return of intricacy in architecture. Moreover, it allows room for flexibility, for symbols are changeable, allowing postmodernist architecture to successfully appropriate the contemporary social atmosphere. Specific guidelines are given by the "gentle manifesto", which recommends referencing historical elements to inform contemporary design. Many such influences are present in their work. I will briefly illustrate this using two works, the Chapel at the Episcopal Academy, Newton Square, and the Vancouver Seattle Modern Art Museum.

The Episcopal Academy has an immediately eclectic feel. Its symmetrical silhouette immediately calls to mind Greek architecture, for instance through the pyramid above the primary columns, the combination of which is reminiscent of the Greek Parthenon. The staggered steps of the building's silhouette, in stark contrast to the box-like elements of modernism, also serve to enhance this association with sacredness, appropriate symbolism for a church. The interior features a central atrium with fan-shaped seating. This is unusual in churches, as pews are typically arranged in a rectangular format, but finds precedence in Roman amphitheatres. The format allows people on all sides to see and hear the pastor clearly, inviting more people in and promoting a sense of the democracy of religion. Circles also symbolise unity. The beams of the roof are set in a tree-like arrangement, furthering the message of connection and life associated with Christianity. Nevertheless, the Venturis must not be mistaken as to be simply copying traditional styles. Modernist elements are still evident in the rectangular shapes of the columns, and the conservative square forms of the glass window frames. Rather, they are using traditional references to explore the contemporary use of modern materials in a manner that communicates emotional significance to the audience.

The Vancouver Seattle Modern Art Museum is a somewhat more conservative building, but the sign on the front, the large, painted silhouette of a man, makes it equally striking. Like the street signs that initially inspired the Venturis in Las Vegas, the mural proclaims the purpose of the building. In addition, the south wall features a large engraving of the name of the building, as does the entranceway, making it unmistakable. Classical inspirations are evident in the corridors, which feature brightly coloured ornamental arches, the bright colour, again, introducing a modernist twist. Colour has further significance in the Museum in delineating its bold forms, and utilitarian elements. By highlighting the entrances with brick red, the Venturis also remind the audience of the traditional use of terra-cotta in Seattle. Limestone, which constitutes the south façade, also testifies to the city's historical context, as well as making the building warm and inviting. The use of natural finishes invites change caused by the elements, contrasting the deliberately bland, unchanging modernist architecture, and creating a comfortable, inviting feeling. Colour is also applied in a highly symbolic manner in the Reedy Creek Emergency Services Headquarters and Fire Station. Its walls, covered with the spots of a Dalmatian, instantly communicate the purpose of the building, the Dalmatian being the mascot of the fire department. Colour may not have been used in classical architecture, as far as we know, but by making effective use of it, the Venturis made their buildings more communicative, emotional, and therefore appealing.

The Venturis were the driving force behind the initial postmodernist movement. While perhaps less ambitious than later projects, their works were seminal and revolutionary, driving a reform in design that architects have just begun to explore the full implications of.

Works Cited

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Diagrams attached