Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture
Robert Venturi

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architectural ambiguity
vestigial elements
orthodox Modernism
urban planning
form
program

Mies van der Rohe
Le Corbusier
Louis Kahn

Summary
This collection of excerpts is from the book Venturi wrote for the Museum of Modern Art as part of a book series curated by the museum in the 1960's. The objective of the series was to explore and promote ideas that were too complex or involved for exhibit, and were therefore written independently of any physical museum exhibitions.

Though Venturi's original utilizes many photographic examples to support his arguments, the points he makes in "Complexity and Contradiction" are probably too involved and discursive to explain in a museum or gallery context. Even so, his key points (upon which he elaborates in the main text) are generally outlined in "Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Gentle Manifesto." This opening comment advocates embracing "contradiction and complexity" in order to create valid, vital works. Venturi also touches on the concept that richness can contrast with clarity, and urges architects to leave the tenets of traditional Modernism behind in pursuit of "truth in its totality," a sort of organic messiness that he perceives as more real and useful than overly planned, hyper-logical Modernist constructions.

"Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification or Picturesqueness" criticizes "orthodox Modern architects" and their treatment of (and attitudes toward) complexity. Venturi feels that diversity in architecture represents a type of sophistication that is lost in the works of the Modernists. It is in this section that he discusses Mies' famous dictum, "less is more," which he criticizes for its exclusion of complexity for purposes of expression, though he admits that their "selectiveness of content and language" is both a strength and weakness in Mies' buildings. However, he continues, this type of simplicity does not always work, because it often results in an architectural "blandness." Here, he is also careful to make a distinction between "simplicity" and "simpleness" before retorting that "less is a bore."

In his discussion of "Contradictory Levels," Venturi explains that challenging the observer actually enhances his/her experience with the architecture because the work becomes "more vivid." He talks about "complex architecture" as a "both-and" scenario (rather than strictly "either-or," which is not inclusive). "Both-and" architecture promotes hierarchy within it, which leads to contrasts, layers and levels of meanings. Additionally, Venturi seems to appreciate the double meanings that can result from traditional forms of architecture or architectural elements, which derive one meaning from their original/historical context and those associations, and the new meaning from its contemporary function or context. Some examples of this type of architectural recycling include old palazzos transformed into embassies or museum, or old city walls that become boulevards around downtown in later centuries.
Systems, laws and order are the prime focus of "Accommodation and the Limitations of Order: The Conventional Element." While "there are no fixed laws in architecture," Venturi explains that architects must decide what will work in a particular building or project. This rule also applies on a larger scale when considering neighborhoods, even cities. In this way, the "complexities and contradictions" at the heart of this book should manifest themselves in the architectural program as a reflection of those complexities and contradictions inherent in daily living. Several ideologies of prominent architects are compared and contrasted within this chapter: Mies: "create order out of the desperate confusion of our time;" Kahn: "by order I do not mean orderliness," and Le Corbusier, "There is no work of art without a system." Though Venturi's opinions seem to be more in line with Kahn's statement, he credits the idea of order in some ways, suggesting that "order must exist before it can be broken." In order to create the "anomalies and uncertainties" that "give validity to architecture," the architecture must be reacting against something. So while "there are no fixed laws," architecture benefits from some sense of order or a system so that it can react. Because systems cannot accommodate every circumstance, architecture should strive to defy order or create a new order. The altering or breaking of order enhances the deeper meanings of the architecture.

On a larger scale, Venturi explains the "inverted scale of values" built into the system of research and development that is promoted by business and government. This system supports industrial and scientific experiments but ignores architectural research as a valuable investment. Therefore, the architects' "budgets, techniques and programs for his buildings must relate more to 1866." This lack of priority for architecture has resulted in a number of "honky tonk elements" in our constructed environments. These will always be part of the landscape, so we must learn to embrace them and work with them as opposed to trying to delete or ignore them. In the realm of the "honky tonk," we must rely on architects and planners, who "can make us see the same things in a different way." To that end, in the ongoing battle of standardization and variety, Venturi encourages architects to consider how they can use principles of standardization "in an unstandard way."

Finally, we reach "The Obligation Towards the Difficult Whole." Venturi believes that variety in the cityscape and individual buildings creates a certain type of tension that not only promotes many levels of interpretation but also forms a sophisticated unity. He gives examples of certain works that are "complete" even though they are technically unfinished, such as the series of sculptures Michelangelo left unfinished at the end of his life. These "contradictory or circumstantial" parts can make a work more dynamic because they rely on the principle of inclusion: they are open to interpretation, sometimes loose, more expressive, not rules-based. He suggests that architecture should look to and learn from Pop Art's "contradictions of scale and context" instead of relying upon "the easy Gestalt unities of the urban renewal projects of the establishment."

Looking at graphic design, there are no "laws," but there are certain ideas about systems, rules and form. However, it seems that many of Venturi's principles work effectively in a graphic design context: variety, inclusion, and tension are all key components to successful and compelling works. While graphic design projects generally have a much shorter life span than architectural works, it is interesting to consider the graphic landscape in reference to the city landscape. As Venturi discussed these ideas in relation to both the singular building and the dynamic, living city, we can also think about our design work as individual entities as well as parts of a whole by considering how they fit in with both contemporary and historic examples of graphic design. Certainly his idea of repurposing historical or traditional elements also applies to graphic design—postmodernism would not exist without this concept.