

Venturi Effect: The Acquisition Of Architectural Knowledge In Situ

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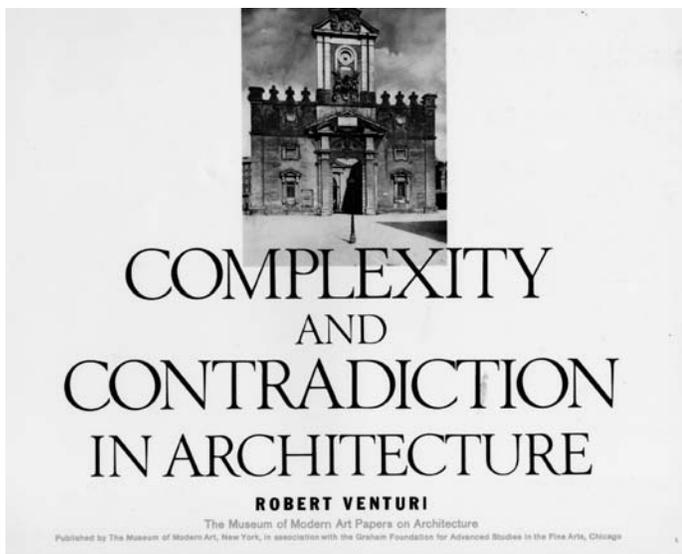


Figure 1. Cover of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*

"...we were jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins."¹

- Denise Scott Brown, in reference to the effect of visiting Las Vegas in 1966 with Robert Venturi

There is a single correction made to the text of Robert Venturi's seminal book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in the printing of its second edition in 1977. In the margins of page nineteen, following the introduction to the book's central thematic by way of a series of case study analyses, he notes: "I have visited Giovanni Michelucci's Church of the Autostrada since writing these words, and I now realize it is it is an extremely beautiful and effective building. I am therefore sorry I made this unsympathetic comparison".² This retraction does not seem like much more than a minor editorial

revision to what is generally regarded as an epoch-defining work of architectural theory. However, Venturi considered it to be of enough consequence to the argument that he later chose to include it as a footnote in the book's second edition, eleven years after its original printing in 1966. What made Venturi change his mind? What was so effective about his experience of the Church of the Autostrada *in situ*? What was the intended effect of a public apology for what the author retroactively considered to be an inaccurate analysis?

Venturi's footnote referenced a conclusion made in the chapter entitled "*Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification or Picturesqueness*". After describing what he meant by "simplification" with a comparison of two classic Modernist residences by Phillip Johnson, he compares Michelucci's Church of the Autostrada (1964) located in a highway roundabout outside of Florence, Italy to Alvar Aalto's Church of the Three Crosses (1959) located in a pine forest near Imatra, Finland. In this analysis, Aalto's building was used to demonstrate how the author understood - and would advocate for - the terms "complexity" and "contradiction" as positive attributes of an architectural object. In his attempt to resurrect the terms from their exile by orthodox Modernism, Venturi defined them as characteristics in which a case of architectural expressionism is justified so long as it is integral to the (spatial, programmatic, etc.) structure of the whole. Michelucci's church was presented as an anti-thesis. Its "willful picturesqueness" was deemed a "false complexity", as unfounded and subjective as that of Modernism's "false simplicity".³ This perceived expressionism was not the type of architectural characteristics that Venturi wanted

to attribute to a condition of "true" complexity. As such, the Church of the Autostrada served as the first sacrificial case study of his book – a necessary parting of the waters for Venturi to lay the groundwork for its thesis. Aalto's church was offered as the first of a selection of architects – Michelangelo, Hawksmoor, Sullivan, even Le Corbusier – and their projects to be retroactively cast as a case-by-case genealogy of what Venturi did mean by "complexity and contradiction". While this critical distinction is developed in the text of the first edition of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi does not elaborate in the second edition as to the cause(s) of his change of opinion upon visiting the Church of the Autostrada in person. From the published evidence, one can only presume that the retraction had something to do with the two architectural characteristics that are singled out in his footnote – that the building was "beautiful and effective".⁴

Venturi's usage of the terms "beautiful" and "effective" appears to be somewhat ordinary – that he just liked how the Church of the Autostrada looked and that this quality corresponded with the attributes that he was advocating for in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. In the footnote, he refers to characteristics of the object proper, not to his experience of it. Yet its presence in the text is evidence that something significant happened *between* the object and subject *insitu* that had not previously occurred when Venturi analyzed its photographic representation. As such, this footnote should be taken as an indicator that a more complex aesthetic experience had become operative in Venturi's thinking. This more dynamic usage of 'beauty' and 'effects' posits that the understanding of a given characteristic of the object itself is relative, tied to a subjective response that it produces in the perceiving subject. Its definition might be construed as a conceptual construction between the architectural object and subject that situates normative perceptual experience as a dynamic set of exchanges between the two – that an effect is everything that the object itself is not. Architects Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos describe this condition by saying that "effects are felt, but cannot be grasped".⁵ They are de-objectified as experiential, ambient, virtual conditions.

The notion of beauty and effects as a subjective and elusive quality that is something other than

the material object proper resonates with Walter Benjamin's assertion that any work of art has an aura – a unique "presence in time and space"⁶. This conditional specificity stands in opposition to classical notions of aesthetics whereby 'beauty' is understood to be solely a characteristic of the object itself and is thus given a quantifiable status through a fixed set of rules for representing, understanding, and producing it. In *Musings on Atmospheres and Modernism* critic Peter Buchanan critiques the suppression of this subjectivity, by suggesting that "one of Modernism's conceptual problems was that its sense of reality, and so the authentic, was too narrowly exclusive, so that the quest for anything as nebulous and subjective as atmosphere was at odds with that of authenticity".⁷ With his concept of atmosphere, Buchanan proposes to fill the void left by Modernism's removal of anything subjective or irrational from the material object by connecting its definition to one of 'authenticity'. While the use and definition of architectural effects attempts to distance itself from the linguistic terms of representation, symbolism, and signification associated with the cultural project of Post-modernism, it does seem to share in the intention of what Venturi's "complexity" aimed to recuperate in the architectural object. This shift of focus towards the subjectivity of experience loosens relations between architecture *as such* and it as a cultural project. Aesthetic experience is instead situated in a complex process of co-production that renders ambiguous the line between the subject, the object, and its effects, ultimately raising a question about the status of causality. These architectural effects not only posit a difference between the object and its effects, but also include how those effects operate in time and space to construct and destabilize relations between the subject and object. Venturi's footnote in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* evidences this distinction. It points out that the effects produced by the *image* of the Church of the Autostrada appeared not to be equivalent to those produced by the building itself. Venturi's apprehension of the Church of the Autostrada in pictures led to one conclusion, while the *insitu* experience led to another. His revised analysis, then, gives authority to the status of the *insitu* experience of architecture as a direct engagement of the object and its effects in the acquisition of architectural knowledge. Objective truth can only be gleaned from the object without the filter of representation.

An unmediated experience between subject and object (in production) represents an similarly rarified form of disciplinary engagement for the architect. While it is the production of representations that constitutes the primary work of the architect, materialization is emeshed in the problematics of representation. Virtual reality as a conceptual apparatus in architecture has a history.⁸ For some time it has been the conventional practice of architecture to use virtual realities to access and engage material reality through the transformation of one into the other. It is common practice in architecture that a representation is taken as a surrogate for the object itself, occupying a virtual space that precedes the work's materialization. The architectural critic Robin Evans recognized this difficulty as the "*peculiar disadvantage under which architects labour, never working directly with the object of their thought, always working at it through some intervening medium*".⁹ Given such a seemingly innate and defining contradiction, it might be said that it is in the spaces between ideas, representations, and buildings that architects perform their work, engage the world, and materialize it. This disciplinary scheme prioritizes the architect's role in orchestrating a series of information transfers between different mediums (drawings and buildings) in production. As such, the performance of representation is that of constructing communication networks and transmitting information between architectural objects and their intended effects in real time and space.

In its genuine attempt to foster an appreciation of cultural phenomena, tourism not only involves travel to physically visit sites, but travel to places in time (usually ones of historical significance). While this practice can be productive, its typical presentation of reality exists as an endless delirium of postcards, T-shirts, video recorders, and self-guided audio tours. The experience is designed as such. In this consumption-driven mode of travel, it is hard to pay attention to anything. While tourism often takes architecture to be its *modus operandi*, these practices are fundamentally different from the architect's travel as a disciplinary practice. The difference is that for the architect, the travel experience is (presumably) a means to an end – done with the intention of engaging aesthetic experience and the acquisition of architectural knowledge.

The disciplinary tradition of the Grand Tour finds its roots with Renaissance architects conducting ar-

cheological surveys of the ruins of antiquity. These widespread, empirically-based practices involved most of the major architects of the time - Brunelleschi, Alberti, da Sangallo, Peruzzi, etc. - and can thus be seen as a source for the era's design production in which the subjective particulars of field-based circumstance were converted into a basis for universal theory. In this instance, an ancient heritage is reconstituted via the systemic geometricization of the Classical language. The travel practices of 19th century English architects re-enacted this tradition and reoriented its historical focus towards a topological interest in place.¹⁰ Examples reveal how disciplinary travel is coupled with cultural models of collection and consumption: John Soane's collection of antiquities at his residence at Lincoln Field's Inn as the architecture itself, Robert Adam's drawing practices as the basis of his Neo-Palladianism. A more interpretive, or synthetic, use of these travel practices, lies in the use of these semi-fictions about the past in the theorizing and construction of the present (and future) is perhaps most operative in Piranesi's *Campo Marzo* project from 1778 in which source material is transformed in the author's imagination and becomes generative in their design work. In each architect's case, knowledge was generated thru a process beginning with the material artifacts observed *insitu*.

The privileged status of these disciplinary travel practices – and the direct experience involved – as a mode of acquiring knowledge became fully institutionalized as a part of the architect's professional education when the Prix de Rome was initiated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.¹¹ In this academic model, each year's top graduating student was awarded a government-funded fellowship to travel and study the Ancient monuments. This prize organized the architect's collection and documentation of evidence from the field within a formal educational process. Architect Henri Labrouste's Prix de Rome 'in-living-color' reconstruction of the temples of Paestum and its implicit anti-establishment criticism offers a particularly interesting case with regards to the objectivity of his *insitu* research and its subsequent application.¹² For his final student project, Labrouste did not represent the temples as the academy wanted them to be, but instead as he discovered them to be on site. His "misrepresentation" to the academy shows that a crisis of representation is a crisis of authenticity.

The breakdown of this academic system, at the institutional level, corresponded with the rise of Modernism. In "Visual Notes and the Acquisition of Architectural Knowledge", Norman Crowe and Steven Hurtt suggest that the disassociation of drawing (in general) from architectural education came from a perceived difficulty in evaluating such practices objectively.¹³ While there remains a residue of this institutional authority within travel tradition in the form of university foreign study programs and fellowships (semester-long study abroad, summer programs, individually awarded, etc.), self-initiated architectural travel still serves as an important learning venue for many architects and students. The formative experience of travel and the synthetic dimensions of such experiences on architectural production are evident in even cursory survey of notable architects from the 20th century: Le Corbusier's sketches of the Parthenon, Erich Mendehlson's photography of industrial structures in 'Amerika', Louis Kahn's pastels of the Egyptian pyramids, Aldo Van Eyke's field studies of vernacular in Mali, to name a few. Robert Venturi's own educational process included such an experience. The Rome Prize fellowship gave him the opportunity to try his hand at the Grand Tour and it is worth noting that these experiences served as much of the raw material for *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

Of particular interest to the issue of the 'expected' travel experiences is Rem Koolhaas' essay "Field Trip" in which he recounts research done to fulfill academic requirements as a student in 1971. Instead of following the typical 'Grand Tour' itinerary of historical monuments, Koolhaas went to find architecture in the Berlin Wall. It was a purposeful and polemical choice of place. Purposeful because Berlin was 'known' (as a major European city) and polemical because of how the city had been rendered 'foreign' as a divided city of the Cold War era. In the essay, he describes the "shock" of experiencing the architectural object and its effects *insitu*:

"My first impression in the hot August weather: the city seems almost completely abandoned, as empty as I always imagined the other side to be. Other shock: it is not East Berlin that is imprisoned, but the West, the 'open society'".¹⁴

Mentioning along the way the wall's peculiar beauty and deadly effects, he concludes that *"this was a*

*field trip that spoiled the charms of the field; tourism that left a kind of scorched earth. It was as if I had come eye to eye with architecture's true nature."*¹⁵ As with the case of Koolhaas' Berlin Wall, the authenticity typically ascribed to the traveling mode of acquiring architectural knowledge is a function of it as the experience of the reality - of the object and its effects. It would seem, from this, that the end goal of direct experience is the experience of some form of verifiable truth. Following from the notion that knowledge comes from experience, architectural travel is a process that has its basis in the logic of scientific method and thus places a high value on empirical evidence. This evidence is subjective in the sense that it is based on the specific circumstances surrounding its acquisition (i.e. Berlin's weather), but while it is not an indexing of universal truth, its use *as evidence* does make claims for objectivity vis a vis the authenticity of its author's engagement with the real - a moment in time and space.

In the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin suggests that a particular frame of mind is necessary in order to fully appreciate architecture *insitu*. He states: *"Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."*¹⁶ Benjamin expands upon this to include the operative terms of this mode of attention:

"Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception-- or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion. This mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value."¹⁷

Do either of these modes - use or perception - whether habitual or not, constitute a means for achieving aesthetic experience for the traveling architect? If this experience requires a certain degree of familiarity with the object that is not based upon its representation, then the answer would seem to be 'no'. Even though one could suppose, given a disciplinary interest, that the architect would pay

attention *insitu*, how can this happen within the transient and limited time of the traveler? It seems that the disciplinary practice of architectural travel might reframe the terms of 'appropriation' for the architect as a function of time, of its duration and of its frequency. In that it requires the subject's time, it also requires the subject's attention.

Representation is a central feature of architectural travel practices. The coupling of travel and representation has historically utilized drawing as a mode of inquiry and research to distinguish these practices as 'disciplinary'. Here it would be useful to expand upon a previous distinction made in this essay between the activities of specifically going to see a building as an architectural object instead of its engagement in everyday perceptual experience. The architect draws *insitu* not so much as to represent, but as to know. Thus, the analytical processes of representation serve as a means to a synthetic, interpretive end. Le Corbusier eloquently, if romantically, articulated this position:

*"When one travel and works with visual things - architecture, painting, or sculpture - one uses one's eyes and draws, so as to fix deep down in one's experience what is seen. Once the impression has been recorded by the pencil, it stays for good, entered, registered, inscribed...Inventing, creating, one's whole being is drawn into action, and it is this action that counts. Others stood different - but you saw."*¹⁸

It is the immersive potential of drawing described here that can become operative in the context of direct experience as an analogous form of occupancy within the space of representation. This sensibility is echoed by architect Enric Miralles in *"Things Seen to the Left and to the Right (Without Glasses)"*, in which he recognized the instrumentality of this mode of attention in the acquisition of architectural knowledge *insitu*: *"To not know what one draws - or thinks - nor how one draws - or thinks. Instead we enter it"*.¹⁹ It is this use of the term 'drawing' that repositions it as a dynamic translational activity with extraordinary potential to remap the cognitive relations between an architectural object and subject. The difficulty in translating this experience into the terms of representation is not an easy task practically or psychologically, but it is a process that opens up to the subject the full range of effects produced by the architectural object. The effect of this process has potential to direct and channel this flow. In this exchange, the

duration and intensity of the subject's time spent drawing produces the object's 'effects'. In a strange twist of this architectural plot, the more fiction that is produced through this process, the closer reality is approximated. Another way to say this is that the more one knows of a building's material reality - the fissures and traces of its production - the more one understands the nature of its fiction and how it was fabricated. Within this performative apparatus, the traditionally descriptive practice of drawing *insitu* is reconceptualized as a 'prosthetic' bridge between subject and object in such a way to animate the subject's participation in the object (as event).

The effect of drawing, as a mode of engaging the architectural object while traveling, allows the subject to participate in this kind of fiction about the building in lieu of actually engaging it habitually. It is this potential of drawing while traveling that might be offered as a form of shock treatment for the type of direct experience-turned-epiphany that Robert Venturi had when he visited the Church of the Autostrada.

In the photographic credits of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* 12 out of 253 images are credited to the author. Out of these 12, 5 of these sketches (appear to be) produced by the author *insitu*. Is this evidence of his travel and the authenticity of his knowledge? On the whole, the reader is left to speculate on the possibility that out of over 200 buildings offered as evidence of the book's reformulated use of the term 'complexity', it is possible that the author didn't travel to, or draw, any more than a handful of them. While this speculation is probably not quite true and, given the humility of Venturi's 'apology' in the second edition, perhaps an inappropriate accusation, it is not intended to pass judgment. It is, however, intended as a suggestion that Venturi's acknowledgement of his "reverse epiphany" at the Church of the Autostrada might serve as a platform for a more expansive questioning of the sources of architectural knowledge and the means of its acquisition.

In doing this, we need to recognize that there is rarely a one-to-one co-relation between an architectural object and its representation, and that instead of pretending this condition away, we should create a new conceptual territory to explore

this paradox – to engage the architectural object on its virtual *and* material terms. This is ever-more-so relevant in contemporary culture as our collective experience is increasingly a composite of these categories. Advances in information technology are changing the nature of the acquisition of architectural knowledge in fundamental ways. In this 'easy information' era of Wikipedia and Google Earth, it is more important than ever for architects to engage the material world as a source of knowledge and to recognize the vast potentials and power of what William J. Mitchell has described as the "revenge of place"²¹. It appears that this is what confronted Robert Venturi at the Church of the Autostrada between the first and second publishing of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.



Figure 2. Image of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown driving in Las Vegas in 1966.

ENDNOTES

1. David Brownlee, "Form and Content", in David Brownlee, David G. DeLong, Kathryn B. Hiesinger, *Out of the Ordinary: Robert Venturi Denise Scott Brown and Associates* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), p. 37. Cited in Joan Ockman "Bestride the World Like A Colossus: The Architect As Tourist", in *Architourism*. Ed. Joan Ockman and Salomon Frausto. (New York: Prestel / Buell Center/Columbia Book of Architecture, 2001) p. 178.
2. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966, Second Edition, 1977) p. 19.
3. Ibid, p. 18.
4. Ibid, p. 19.
5. Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos, "Effects", *Effects: Move, Volume 3*. (Amsterdam: UN Studio and Goose Press, 1999) p. 15.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) p. 220.
7. Peter Buchanan, "Musings about Atmospheres and Modernism", *Daidalos* 68. (1998) p. 82.
8. Kester Rattenbury, "A Partial History of Virtual Reality". *This is Not Architecture*. Ed. Kester Rattenbury. (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 1.
9. Robin Evans, "Translations from Drawing to Building", *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997) p. 156.
10. Edward Kaufman, "Architecture and Travel in the Age of British Eclecticism", *Architecture and its Image*. Ed. Eve Blau and Edward Kaufman. (Montreal: The Canadian Center for Architecture, 1989) p. 60.
11. Norman Crowe and Steven Hurtt, "Visual Notes and the Acquisition of Architectural Knowledge". *Journal of Architectural Education*. 39, no.2. (1995) p. 9.
12. Professor Joel Bostick pointed this out to me while visiting the Paestum site. Rendering the ancient temples in color was considered a form of historical heresy. For more on the subject, see Neil Levine's "The Romantic Idea of Architectural Legibility: Henri Labrousse and the Neo-Grec" in *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*.
13. Norman Crowe and Steven Hurtt, "Visual Notes and the Acquisition of Architectural Knowledge". *Journal of Architectural Education*. 39, no.2. (1995) p. 10.
14. Rem Koolhaas, "Field Trip". *S, M, L, XL*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995) p. 216.
15. Ibid, p. 222.
16. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) p. 239.
17. Ibid, p. 240.
18. Le Corbusier, *Creation is A Patient Search*. Trans. James Palmes. (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1960).
19. Enric Miralles, "Enthusiastic Travelers". *Enric Miralles: Works and Projects, 1975 - 1995*. Ed. Benedetta Tagliabue. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1996) p. 91.
20. The phrase "reverse epiphanies" is from Rem Koolhaas' "Field Trip". See endnotes 16 and 17.
21. William J. Mitchell, "The Revenge of Place". *This is Not Architecture*. Ed. Kester Rattenbury. (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 52.