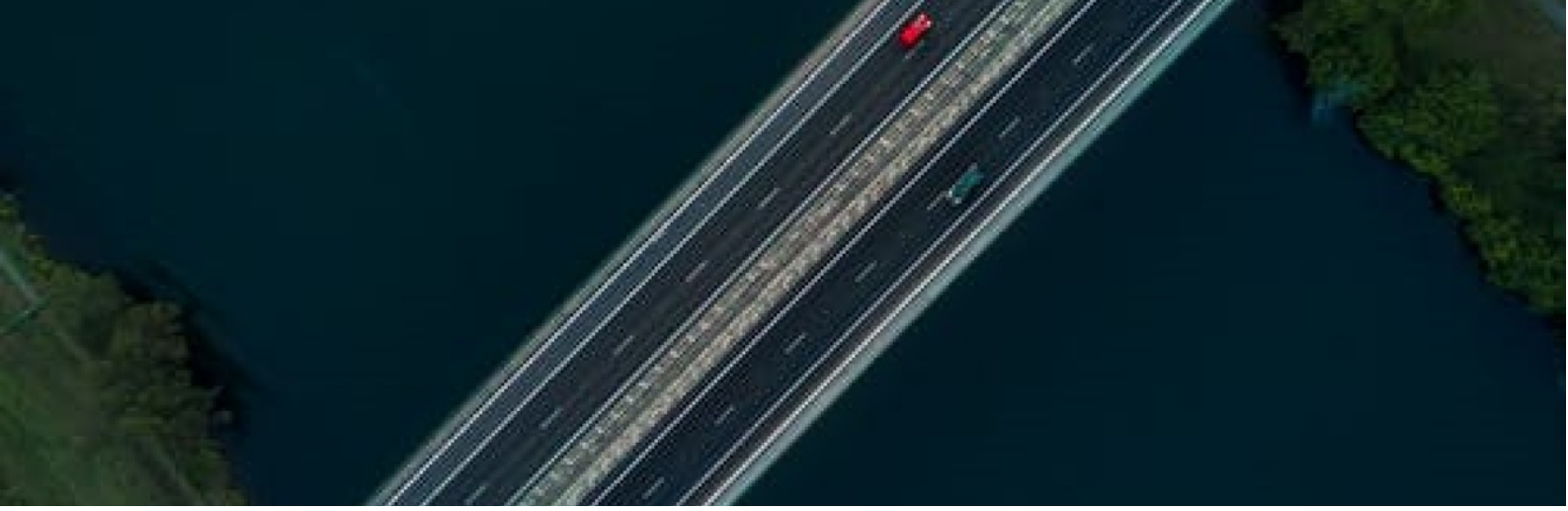

# The Complexity of the Venturi Contradiction


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# The Complexity of the Venturi Contradiction

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this review is to explore Venturi's approach to architecture as based on new insights into two of his books, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, coupled with critiques from Peter Blake and Louis Huxtable and one of Venturi's last interviews. Modern architects often confuse orderliness with order, which creates works that Venturi would describe as without meaning in the world. Even though many modern architects would argue that Venturi's ideas and works are contradictory, Venturi would respond that contradiction accommodates order. Venturi wanted modern architects to realize only one thing—perfection in the architectural world can and should include imperfection, in all its forms.

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**The Complexity of the Venturi Contradiction**

Figure 01- Viadotti Poggettone e Pecora Vecchia nel tratto transappenninico. (A.Carè, G. Giannelli, 1960).

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*[1], Robert Venturi tries to give counter-arguments to the modernist approach. He advocates embracing 'contradiction and complexity' to create valid, vital works. He finds great value in accepting complexity and contradiction, which attacks the challenge of the unity of inclusion rather than the comparatively easy unity of exclusion.

It is noteworthy that he doesn't oppose aesthetic simplicity. What he rejects is the 'oversimplification' of architecture, indicated when he inverted the famous Mies van der Rohe statement 'Less is more' into 'Less is a bore'. Venturi believed that it is exactly this doctrine of oversimplification that enables modernist architects to be highly selective in determining which problems they want to solve—not what they should/can solve. Such selectivity on decisions leads to the creation of a building that is successful in use and appearance, but it is bland in social relevance. Venturi speaks about ambiguity in perception and tension, which form a basis for the architecture of complexity and contradiction. Ambiguity and tension, when properly employed in architecture in both form and content, promote the richness of meaning over the clarity of meaning.

*Learning from Las Vegas*[2] on the other hand, is not about the content of the city—it is more about the method. It's used as the emblem of architectural form—a symbol of the city. Venturi hoped his ideas would help readers reassess the role of symbolism in architecture. Thus, the architecture would be socially less coercive

and aesthetically more vital. According to Venturi, the existing landscape should be seen non-judgmentally by architects. They should work to improve the existing environment rather than changing it. Because modern architecture focuses on space as an essential ingredient by separating architecture from other arts (rejecting the tradition of iconology), it surpasses the message of these ornamental contributions to the architectural spaces. Moreover, Venturi brings attention to how modern architecture avoids symbolism of form, aiming to reinforce the content, the meaning of which is communicated through inherent, physiognomic characteristic form and not through allusion. In contrast, the Las Vegas symbolism of form is important and spatial relationships are created through symbols, not forms. Architects should be open to using the architecture as a symbol, and thus to be able to communicate properly through signs and symbols.

A central argument in *Learning from Las Vegas*[3] is that architecture is created based on past experiences and emotional associations. This approach emphasizes image over form and symbolic representational elements can contradict with the form structure and program in the same building. Such a contradiction can appear in two ways. The first way is the *duck*[4]*,* where space, structure, and program are included and distorted in form. The second is called the *decorated shed,* where decoration is applied independently of space, structure, and program. The decorated shed is helpful to understand architecture as shelters with symbols on it. These two ways—*the ducks* and the *decorated shed*—were used to explain the symbolism of the ugly and the ordinary in architecture.

Yet, according to Peter Blake[5], Venturi's book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is much ado about nothing. He argues that what Venturi has to say might be interesting, but it is in no way original. Blake thinks that Venturi's book is subjective, written mainly to support his own 'indecipherable architectural projects'. Blake channels his criticism of the book in three directions. First, he argues that Venturi's reading of the history of architecture is done mainly to justify his overall project; his reading of history does not rest on objective grounds. Second, Blake disagrees with the idea that the history of architecture is that of complexity and contradictions. From his perspective, Venturi ignores the clarity and unity that

characterized architecture to that point in time. Third, Blakes thinks that Venturi summarizes the history of architecture based on the buildings he likes. For example, Venturi is attracted by the grotesque in some buildings and concludes and that is why the grotesque is an essential part of his architecture.

Venturi argues that 'a valid order accommodates the circumstantial contradictions of a complex reality'.[6] He employs his theory of contradiction and complexity to explain the role of the architect to decide on what elements to include in his work and what to compromise. When discussing the order relating to contradiction, Venturi argues that contradiction accommodates order and he calls it 'contradiction accommodated'. The relationship between the two is based on inconsistency. In other words, contradiction allows the architect to modify a consistent order. For this reason, it is necessary to understand that order is not orderliness. The architect can use contradictions and complexities to create his or her new sense of order. Breaking the order can also lead to meaning. Imperfection is essential for perfection. If a building has no imperfect part, it doesn't have a perfect part either. Some disorder is necessary for architecture. It should be noted, however, that disorder should not be the rule in a building, but the exception. Otherwise, it is chaos.

Another argument by Venturi is that the architecture of complexity should never and will not forsake the whole[7]. With this view, where truth is discovered in totality, the whole is often difficult to achieve. Venturi thus describes the contradiction of the complex elements that make the whole. He speaks on the thought that architecture embraces the 'difficult' number of parts—'the duality and the medium degrees of multiplicity'. But the nature of those parts also influences the perceptual whole. Because of this, the degree of wholeness varies. To truly understand the 'whole' in complex compositions, Venturi notes the importance of 'inflection' as defined by Trystan Edwards[8] and as seen in compositions like the Birnau Church in Bavaria. His question thus becomes: 'What slight twist of context will make them [architecture of complexity] all right?'

The Las Vegas Strip shares something special with the world, which cannot be found in most modern architecture—the perfect combination of chaos and

unity[9]. Venturi focuses on the big, low space of a typical Las Vegas building. This space is much more common today than the majestic, tall spaces of the past. He argues that this is related to a shift in our view of monumentality in that high spaces are no longer directly correlated to monumentality. This new monumentality is just as impressive as past spaces, but in a new way. He then goes on to describe how Las Vegas buildings are built with a combination in mind, with each holding a multitude of activities and blending many architectural styles. The signs that point towards buildings from the Strip are architectural monuments themselves. Las Vegas signs are built with persuasion and information in mind. Tom Wolfe describes such signs as soaring 'in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless'.[10] This all leads to the complex order of the Strip. Moving through the Strip, one must wade through the chaos to see the underlying unity. Venturi argues the Strip shows symbolism and allusion in bringing together old clichés with our everyday environment, which is sorely lacking in modern architecture.

Is the architecture of the past centuries officially dead? Rem Koolhaas and Hans-Ulrich Obrist aimed to find out[11]. In one of his last interviews, Robert Venturi was asked how he navigated the shift from investigating architectural complexity to looking at cities. There's nothing fundamentally different from one to the other, argues Venturi. He makes the point that the essential architectural element right now is iconography, rather than space. That's why he, Scott Brown, and others increasingly looked backwards for context to ancient iconographies, such as the Egyptian hieroglyphs or the interiors of Byzantine churches, that utilized signage as 'advertisement'. That is why signs are forefront in *Learning from Las Vegas*. This shift from form to iconography has meant the rebirth of architecture and death of sculpture. Indeed, many might believe this emergence of iconography as an essential element of architecture that has come from American triumphalism and commercialism. Brown argues it has nothing to do with global corporations, as what fascinated him about Las Vegas was more local than global. If a European were to adopt these theories, for example, they should learn from their environment and adapt, rather than simply take the American model.

If you try to upend the entire modern architectural world, what does the impending outrage look like? That is exactly what the Venturi adherents have generated. Louise Huxtable aims to dissect this anger shown by many modern architects[12]. In sum, almost everything in *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is viewed heretical. These works throw out conventions in modern architecture, shocking true believers of modern architectural theories. Architects were enraged because their architectural beliefs are almost religious. She describes modern architects as being seen as the 'hero figures', creating supposedly 'rational' structures that are isolated from the surrounding environment. However, the 'environment' has been rediscovered, as described through the works of the Venturis, and this approach is frustrating to modern architects. Yet, they should work to understand this new environment and meet it on its terms, not theirs. In Huxtable's opinion, the kinds of theories proposed by Venturi adherents have had extraordinary results, not only for the ideas proposed but for the outrage created. Their work is eye-opening, complex and contradictory; Huxtable applauds the Venturis for that.

**Conclusion**

Some architects call Venturi blasphemous for his words against modern architectural theory, whilst others praise him as someone paving the way towards a new understanding of architecture in the modern age. In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi spends the entirety of the book arguing

against the modernist approach to architecture and for a more complex view of the field. To create valuable architectural works, he advocates for the embrace of contradiction and complexity. His view in this book is that imperfection is an essential ingredient to achieve perfection and a bit of disorder is necessary to achieve an architecture of meaning. Thus, in his opinion, modern architects have completely banished this idea in favour of 'oversimplification' of architecture.

He points out as well that the architectural works of the world now focus more on appearances, rather than on the social aspects. Even though many modern architects would argue that Venturi's ideas and works are contradictory, Venturi would respond that contradiction accommodates order. Inconsistency is the glue that holds the two together in perfect unison. If an architect wants to achieve order, he or she must utilize contradictions and complexities to create an entirely new sense of order. Modern architects often confused orderliness with the order, which creates works that Venturi would describe as boring and without meaning in the world. In Venturi's mind, the real challenge for architects comes in whenever they aim to create actual valuable works. He says that they require consciousness of all potential parts (the chaos) to build a piece of architecture that brings them in unison (the order). Venturi wants modern architects to realize only one thing— perfection in the architectural world can and should include imperfection, in all its forms.

**Notes and References**

[1]Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966)

[2] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour: *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: (MIT Press, 1972).

[3]Ibid., pp. 86-90.

[4]Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Reinhardt & Winston Cloth, 1964). Refer to the illustration of the Long Island Duck. In this regard, Venturi promoted such ''honky-tonk'' elements in *Complexity and Contradiction* and made the Duck Building famous in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

[5]Peter Blake, Complexity and Contradiction, in *Architectural Forum* (June 1967).

[6]Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, pp. 41-42.

[7]Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, pp. 8-90 and 104.

[8]Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, p. 88.

[9]Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, pp. 50–72.

[10]Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (Farrer, Stuart & Geroux, 1965).

[11]Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interview with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown*. Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas (Ed.): *Project on the City II: The Harvard Guide to Shopping* (New York: Köln, 2001).

[12]Louise Huxtable, "Plastic flowers are almost all right" in Architecture, *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1971, Section D, p. 22.

## About the Author

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Blerim Lutolli has finished his master studies for architecture at the University of Maribor in Slovenia while his Bachelor studies at the University of Pristina and Czech Technical University in Prague. For several years he has worked on renowned architectural offices like in Croatia, Slovenia, Switzerland, and Germany including Pritzker architect Gottfried Böhm in Cologne. In 2015 he founded his own architectural office in Pristina with international team Partners, located in Germany and Slovenia. The office has won several international commissions and Competitions. Blerim Lutolli is the author of two books, ''Flexible Residential Housing'' published in Pristina in 2013 and ''Dome'' published in Slovenia in 2016. He is currently doing his doctoral studies at Weimar Bauhaus University in the field of Flexible Housing, supervised by Professor Barbara Schonig and Professor Verena von Beckerath. In the summer semester 2020, he taught the seminar "Lifestyle Changes and Flexible Housing," to Master Students in Architecture and Urbanism at the Bauhaus University Weimar.