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## **Abstract**

*Throughout his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi calls for a hybrid of two things: Modernist and Classical architecture. Venturi compares, on a stylistic level, ancient Roman and Greek structures with Modernist ones built post-WWI. Scholars engaged in architectural literature and discourse raised concerns about Venturi's canon as his book excludes, to a great extent, the works of women and people of color. In this paper, I expand on a topic that neither critics of Venturi— nor Venturi himself— have sufficiently explored and that is the intersection of Modernist architecture and environmental psychology. Just as Venturi posits in his book, Modernist architecture is extremely simple both in form and in function. The deliberate choice of twentieth century architects to follow rigid lines and avoid ornamentation agitates Venturi; however, if Venturi had more place-specific knowledge and understanding of how Modernist architecture intertwined with people's lives and traditions, as will be detailed in this paper, he would have presented a more comprehensive critique of Modernist architecture to his audience of architects.*

Robert Venturi's book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* has been crowned as a canonical piece of literature by a slew of architectural critics since its publication in 1966. Scholars traced the origins of Postmodernism in architecture to Venturi's book where he criticized Modernist buildings for having an overly simplified form. Venturi, an American architect, collected and collated images of ornate churches and homes to attack the purism of Modernist architecture. Indeed, most of his examples were characterized by Baroque, Rococo, Renaissance and Gothic styles. Those buildings served as foundational arguments against Modernist architecture, but they also attested to his professional and academic experiences. Venturi acknowledged in an interview that his fellowship at the American Academy in Rome from 1954 to 1955 significantly influenced the content of his book (Delbeke 267). Despite being

armed with examples of Classical architecture to explain how Modernist buildings were— and should not have been — radically different, Venturi failed to support his arguments beyond principles of design, and especially, beyond principles of environmental psychology. Venturi's examination of environmental psychology in his book was significantly poor, and consequently, it went unnoticed by architectural commentators. Therefore, I sought to investigate where and how Venturi should have analyzed the interconnectedness of environmental psychology and architectural design. As will be argued in this essay, if Venturi appropriately and sufficiently discussed environmental psychology alongside design principles behind Modernist architecture, then he could have engaged architects reading his book on a greater conceptual and visual level.

An understanding of Venturi's distaste of Modernist architecture and his insufficient discussion of environmental psychology call for a breakdown of what is meant, in layman's terms, by the two concepts. Architectural Modernism is a post-WWI style that incorporated materials such as reinforced concrete and steel. The buildings, despite their rigid rectilinear framework, still had open floor plans. Additionally, and perhaps most noticeably, ornamentation was absent from the interiors and exteriors of Modernist buildings. As for environmental psychology, it was not a formally recognized field of study in 1966 when Venturi published his book. However, it can be argued that, in essence, environmental psychology is a part of architecture. Architects have and continue to hypothesize and describe how buildings influence emotions. It was only the advent of research dedicated to specifically predicting and correlating human behavior with the natural and built environments that caused the split (Gifford 543). For the remainder of this essay, any reference to environmental psychology will be made to the concept as understood and utilized by

architects rather than to the academic field which may or may not directly involve architects. It is therefore sensible to examine the instance where Venturi critiqued Modernist architecture via environmental psychology and then explain where else he could have done so in his book.

In a vague manner and without much corroboration, Venturi touched on the psychological response to living in a Modernist home with open-floor plans and large windows. To express his revolt against the ‘flowing space’ of a typical Modernist home, Venturi claimed that the “function of a house [is] to protect and provide privacy” rather than to “direct space” (Venturi 72). However, an architect’s understanding of how a building will impact a client is only hypothetical until the building is occupied and the client articulates, or the architect witnesses, their feelings toward the space. Bearing that in mind, Venturi’s insinuations that one will feel ‘unprotected’ and ‘overly

exposed’ if they live in a Modernist house, are just that: insinuations. Had Venturi interviewed multiple residents and documented why they favor or disfavor such open-style living, his claims would have been more plausible. Hence, Venturi’s arguments against Modernist architecture, particularly with respect to the psychologies of living, are speculative in nature and not backed by evidence. Moreover, there are other instances in Venturi’s magnum opus where the introduction of environmental psychology into the text could have resulted in a more nuanced discussion of Modernist architecture.

If Venturi knew how Modernist buildings helped solve some societal problems, he would not have continuously called for the revival of ancient architecture in his book. One of the most fitting examples absent from Venturi’s book would have to be Modernist architecture in

post-Nazi Germany. Following the Holocaust, Jews in Germany preferred houses of worship that were less traditional—ones that did not look like image 193 shown in Venturi's book <sup>1</sup>. The reason why

German Jews gravitated toward Modernist-type synagogues was because the synagogues were “defined by privacy, modesty and anonymity” (Rosenfeld 290). To have gone to a Modernist synagogue, like the one in Offenbach <sup>2</sup>, meant a Jewish person attracted less attention, which was an understandable course of action in the wake of the Holocaust. Modernism also suited German Jewish synagogue architecture as it was “sufficiently neutral and anonymous to serve as a common stylistic denominator for groups that otherwise might not have agreed upon that much socially or religiously” (Rosenfeld 281). Meaning, the absence of historical symbols, allowed diverse Jewish groups to peacefully congregate in synagogues. Therefore, and contrary to Venturi's statement that “buildings must relate more to 1866 than 1966” (Venturi 51), the deconstruction of societal and architectural norms is sometimes necessary to create accommodating spaces for individuals. Architectural practitioners reading Venturi's book are presented a skewed view of what Modernist architecture truly is, simply because Venturi chose to focus on aesthetics and excluded stories of how social and psychological needs were fulfilled using Modernist architecture.

Another key point missing from Venturi's arguments regarding Modernist architecture is the role of familial behaviors and how they shape (or are shaped by) space. In the ninth chapter of his book, Venturi explored the case of a Modernist villa by Le Corbusier called Villa Savoye. Venturi acknowledged that there are exceptions when it comes to Modernist façades, or even layouts, and categorized Villa Savoy as one such example. An analysis of Brazilian Modernist homes could

have been a better option for Venturi to include in the ninth chapter as Brazilian Modernist homes 1) had atypical floor plans and 2) represented an intersection between local, familial traditions and a foreign architectural style. An open floor plan, vital to the principles of Modernist architecture, was —for the most part —absent from Brazilian Modernist homes in the 50s.

Brazilian families

remained connected to traditional home layouts with private rooms and began introducing open layouts in the 60s (Lara 41-50). If Venturi included this account or a similar one in his canonical book, he would have given his readers a deeper understanding of how Modernist design principles were applied and changed according to people's psychological tendencies to stick to conventions dictated by cultures and families.

Thus far, only examples of Modernist architecture with positive relationships to environmental psychology were presented. There are, however, examples of emotional responses to Modernist spaces that match Venturi's anti-Modernism narrative. For example, Venturi criticized the work of Yamasaki on the World Trade Center for having an "exaggeratedly" simple form (Venturi 39). But, Venturi did not comment on Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe which was a Modernist complex riddled with controversy and heavily intertwined with environmental psychology. Given that Venturi's primary focus was on evaluating Modernist architecture from an aesthetic lens, even if he mentioned Pruitt-Igoe, he would not have mentioned to whom the complex was designed for— just as he did with a sweeping majority of his examples. Nevertheless, the tenants (African Americans with low income) played a major role in the gradual fall of Pruitt-Igoe in the 60s. As documented in the 2012 film "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth", some saw the residential buildings as a symbol for the failure of Modernist architecture as a design concept. However, before the film

concluded, the narrator explained how the tenants vandalized the buildings to express their anger toward oppression and racial segregation. Therefore, the film debunked the ‘myth’ that the plain style of Modernist architecture was the catalyst for the fall of Pruitt-Igoe; instead, the film shifted the blame towards discriminatory governmental practices. Raymond Mohl is a professor who explored how racial tensions manifested in the landscape, and in policies, especially with high-rise

public housing in America. Mohl wrote in a journal article, while referencing St. Louis’ Pruitt Igoe and Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes (both of which are Modernist buildings), that such projects were designed “to maintain a rigid color line in urban housing” (Mohl 13). When Mohl stated that, “the black poor were concentrated in the city centers; those a bit better off sought transitional housing in white areas, and urban whites fled to the suburbs” (Mohl 13), Mohl was underscoring how Americans subconsciously understood where they had to reside based on their income and race. Hence, if Venturi chose to properly analyze Modernist architecture from the perspective of human behavior, and not just design, he would have provided his primary audience of architects with a richer commentary on Modernist structures.

The final benefit of expanding on the topic of environmental psychology in Venturi’s book would be to engross the readers more by breaking the monotonous organization of ideas. The first way Venturi could have better engaged his readers is by adding diagrams that explain the cause-and-effect relationship between Modernist architecture and psychology. The reason why this point is being made is because the book’s visual layout is redundant. On the sidelines of most pages are unannotated, grayscale images of buildings and floor plans. Only a few plan sites and structures are hand-drawn. Based on that observation, additional hand sketches with annotations related to

environmental psychology would have made it easier for readers to understand the complexity of the Modernism movement. The second way Venturi could have maintained his target audience's attention is by changing the structure of the paragraphs. Instead of having lengthy paragraphs only centered on scrutinizing Modernist architecture on a stylistic basis, Venturi could have added block quotes of testimonies about how people felt in and around Modernist spaces.

Understandably, the suggestions put forward would increase the book's length. Nonetheless, such recommendations

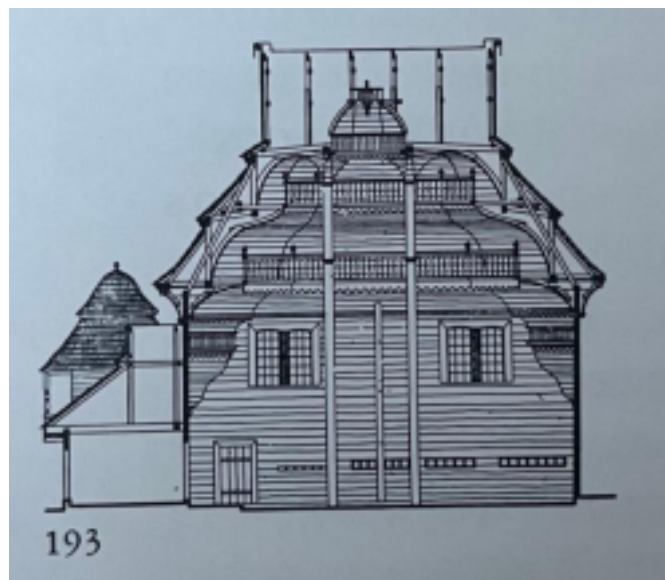
are for a good cause: to increase the depth and breadth of topics covered in the book and in turn draw the readers' attention even more.

All things considered, this paper focused on why, how, and where Venturi should have talked about environmental psychology in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Venturi did not intend to discuss environmental psychology at length in his book, but rather, he aimed to find faults in the idyllic design of Modernist buildings. In the very instance where Venturi linked environmental psychology to Modernist architecture, he did so in a superficial manner. His supposition that Modernist homes cause inhabitants to feel 'unprotected' and 'overly-exposed' was not supported by any piece of evidence such as a testimony from a client. As explained, there were other places in the book where he could have examined the relationship between environmental psychology and Modernism in architecture. Three case studies (Modernist American homes, German synagogues, and Brazilian homes) could have been part of Venturi's book. Such examples would have increased the readers' awareness of the intricacies involved with Modernism as a post-war architectural movement that is closely linked to social behavior. Shifting between the topic of architectural design and environmental psychology would

not only aid readers' understanding of Modernist architecture, but it would also keep them interested in reading the book. The potential for Venturi to engage architects reading his book would have been even greater if Venturi added diagrams and block quotes to clarify how the two topics are interrelated. To summarize, American architect Robert Venturi must have centered his book on human behavior and how that was are connected to the development of Modernist architecture.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Polish synagogue (image 193 on page 83 from Venturi's book):



<sup>2</sup> Offenbach synagogue as documented by Rosenfeld in *Three-Way Street: Jews, Germans, and the Transnational* on page 284:





**Fig. 12.2. Hermann Zvi Guttman, Synagogue, Offenbach, 1955–56.** The synagogue, which is set back from the street behind the attached community center, reflected the postwar German Jewish community's desire for privacy. (Photo courtesy of Alfred Jacoby.)

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