1960 Vanna Venturi House
Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania

Robert Venturi

Tegan Bukowski and Randall Schoen
Robert Venturi and John Rauch designed the Vanna Venturi house in 1962 for Robert Venturi’s mother in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania. The house is an object that explores “complexity and contradiction in architecture”—which is also the name of his eponymous book published several years after the house’s completion. In that book, Venturi explains the house “is both complex and simple, open and closed, big and little.” He designed the building based not on the consistency of form that modernism espoused, but as a manifestation of his “love for history and variety”. The house’s seemingly hodge-podge elements “borrowed from other times and places” are not a singular experiment, but an ongoing architectural crusade by Venturi. The array of architectural objects used by Venturi makes reference to typical architectural symbols (such as “entrance” demarcated by an arch) but the way that he combines them distorts meaning. In this way, the symbols used within the Vanna Venturi house contradict one another so that there is no singular essence of the building. The house has numerous contradictory elements, but the façade and the staircases are the two elements in which the contortion of traditional meaning and use is most apparent.

History/Context

Throughout the early twentieth century, architects and designers explored a new “International Style” that rejected classicism, ornament, and Beaux-Arts ideology. Postmodern architecture emerged as a self-conscious rejection of the modern international style that favored a reemergence of archetypes and “reintegration of architectonic conventions.” Within the postmodern doctrine, Venturi was interested in “complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience.” He best explains his views on architecture in a quote from Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture:

I like complexity and contradiction in architecture...I like elements which are hybrid rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as “interesting,” conventional rather than “designed,” inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity.

His design for the Vanna Venturi house, which is at once ordered and unordered, classical and modern, designed and coincidental, is the epitome of an actualization of his vision of a postmodern architecture.
Postmodernism Explained

Postmodern architecture is a self-conscious rejection of the modern international style in favor of a revival of the “vast quantity of values, layers, semitones” of historical architecture achieved only through thousands of years of trial and error.\(^7\) Mannerists used historical symbolism in their buildings in order to satirize and reinvent these classical ideals. In fact, Mannerists strove to apply all revisited historical concepts in each building they designed, regardless of time period or style. Postmodern Mannerism can be described as Reactionism; a satirical architectural style in which the architect takes one style and applies both topical appliqué to the exterior of the building, as well as altering formal conventions so that they no longer make complete sense. Originality was of secondary importance to Venturi and many other Mannerists. Rather, the thing of primary importance was architecture’s “special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or its implications of totality.”\(^8\) As well as not caring whether ideas were original or not, Robert Venturi completely rejected the Miesian ideal of “less is more,” and instead coined the term “less is a bore.”\(^9\) Venturi believed architecture should be used as “a sign (rather than space) for a Mannerist (rather than expressionist) time.”\(^10\)

An integral part of the postmodern critique is an intellectual play on the semiotics associated with architectural form. While symbols and signified meanings have always existed in architectural design, the science of semiotics in architecture was first introduced into architecture through the work of the deconstructivist theorist Jacques Derrida and his concept of “différance.” Derrida argues that the meaning of a word or a series of words, such as the French verb “déférer,” can be understood in completely different ways given certain circumstances.\(^11\) Although the signifier is the same, the signified can be many different things. In architectural form, the explicit signifier is often symbolism relating to classical or antiquated architecture. Its explicit meaning sometimes lies within thousands of years of application and the onlooker’s familiarity with that history. An example of this would be the modern use of classical columns. In ancient times columns were symbolic of power because they took many hours of man labor and resources to construct - something only a powerful and rich man could afford – but also were often massive, supporting grand structures. Modern architecture, however, merely borrows the symbolism of the column, for the modern column can even be plastic and non-structural.

Classical motifs compared.
Within the design of the Vanna Venturi House, Robert Venturi references historical architectural elements but then alters their form and use to render their symbolism obsolete and their meaning changed. One symbol prevalent through historical architecture is the grandiose staircase. In classical pieces of architecture, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, the staircase sprawls into the street, wide at the bottom and closing in upon ascension, as if to tell the passerby of the grandness of its inhabitants. But Venturi understates the role of the staircase in his design by shaping the stair so that it is smaller at the bottom and slowly widening as it goes up. By doing this, the staircase no longer acts as a symbol of magnificence; rather it sends the message of modesty and then confusion to the user. Still more bizarre, Venturi designed stairways that lead nowhere throughout the house. These “nowhere stairs...accommodate awkwardly” to the central node space and add a sense of whimsy to the space. Through his use of stairs, Venturi takes classical stair symbolism and renders both their historical use and meaning null.

*Interior Living Room and Second Floor Stair, Vanna Venturi House.*
Another example of a historical symbol with an altered meaning in the Vanna Venturi house is the arch over the entry doorway. The arch signifies “entry” and structural integrity in ancient architecture. Indeed, Venturi places an arch above the front door of the Vanna Venturi house as if to signify the entrance using this antiquated method. However, he cuts through the arch where the keystone would be, subtracting the most crucial piece of a true arch. While the arch still signifies the dominant entrance to the building, it no longer stands for structural integrity; it is cut through in the same stroke as the apex of the non-structural roof. The signifier of the arch is still the same, but in the way that Venturi has altered it the signified is something much more postmodern in its conceptualization. Venturi’s archway suggests an event of entry, but even more relevant is that the incongruity of the entire building is suggested as the eye travels across the incomplete arch.

Venturi’s arch over the doorway is also an example of a mannerist application of ornament. Many postmodern mannerists explored the application of ornament by painting murals on flat walls or adding molding and cornices where they were not structurally necessary or did not make sense. In the Vanna Venturi house, Venturi applies a non-structural wooden molding to the top of the main entrance to help signify the entry as well as extend the perceived height of the entrance. Not only does the form of the arch on the façade act as a deconstructed symbol, the fenestration on the front elevation evokes a sense of contradiction and complexity by contrasting historical styles using a Mannerist method. For instance, on the front elevation is an out-of-scale picture window that resembles the one a child would draw on the front of a house, but on the other side, a more appropriately scaled row of Miesian International Style windows appears. Venturi applies a mix of styles to the Vanna Venturi house making it a mannerist as well as satirist artifact.

Front façade.
Venturi references archetypal elements of historical architecture within the Vanna Venturi house, but he also explores the semiotic philosophy of the “sign” in architecture. Venturi analyzes “signs” in his book *Learning From Las Vegas* in which the symbolism of the Las Vegas Strip’s architecture is noted for its explicit references to historical architecture in literal form. He investigates the use of the form of a building as “sign,” mannerist appliquéd of the “sign,” and form completely absent of the “sign” through the metaphor of the decorated shed and the duck. Within the design of the decorated shed, “systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program and ornament is applied independently of them”, and the symbol is directly manifested as form in the duck.\(^{13}\) The name for the metaphorical “duck” stems from a New England restaurant that is literally shaped like a duck. In this building, the shape acts as a signifier of program, but the program does not necessarily fit well inside. An example of a decorated shed is a big box, such as Wal-Mart, in which the signs exist only as appliquéd applied to the exterior and the form follows function closely – it is a warehouse. In the Vanna Venturi House, Venturi furthers the contradictory nature of his design by creating a form with space informed by its signs as well as its function. Venturi and Rauch began to explore within the Vanna Venturi house the semiotic dissonance between the ideas of the symbol, symbolized and signifier in architecture, especially in the treatment of the front façade.

![Illustration from Complexity and Contradiction.](image)

The form of the front façade of the Vanna Venturi House is an explicit, self-aware use of a “sign”; “in its conventional combinations of door, windows, chimney and gable, [it] creates an almost symbolic image of a house.”\(^ {14}\) The “sign” of “house”
was used by Venturi to represent several different ideas. First, he was designing the house for his mother so the childlike representation of “house” acted as a symbol of personal relationship between client and architect. Second, it mimicked the simplified, diagrammatic form of the vernacular architecture of Pennsylvania, something that his wife and partner, Denise Scott Brown, encouraged him to investigate in his designs. In these ways, the simplistic form of “house” acts as a pure signifier of a particular meaning: it is a duck. However, the literal symbol of “house” is turned on its head by Venturi’s unconventional design choices, and what is actually signified by the signifier is much different than a simple metaphor. The front façade is almost diagrammatic in its proportions and shape, yet Venturi chooses to cut a large slit into the apex of the “roof,” a move that tells the observer that the roof is not as predictably structural as might be initially expected. The Vanna Venturi House represents a postmodern intermediary between the signifier and the signified in architecture.

Another way that Venturi uses classical “signs” but then contradicts them is through an almost Palladian symmetrical form that is completely disrupted on the interior. The exterior form seems to be symmetrical; its front façade is symmetrical with the exception of the fenestration, which is still balanced with 5 panes on each side. However as the onlooker moves around the building, they begin to see that the front and back look like they could belong to two completely separate houses. While the front façade evokes the stereotypical idea of “house,” the anterior is seemingly misshapen in contrast, only one floor high with a patio on the top. The utter lack of attention to symmetry on the exterior combined with the initial presumption that the house will in fact be symmetrical is another way that the
Vanna Venturi house exemplifies the Venturian postmodern ideal of being complex and utterly confusing.

One aspect of the front façade and rear façade of the house that Venturi emphasizes in *Complexity and Contradiction* is that the façade hints to what is going to happen in the interior, but also imposes spatial expectations that do not come to fruition on the interior. He explains, “the protrusions above and beyond the rigid outside wall reflect the complexity inside.” The front and rear facades are parapeted to emphasize their falseness, and the fact that they are screens “behind which the inner intricacies can protrude.” The parapets emphasize enclosure horizontally, but also show openness and lack of enclosure through the cut out on the front façade, and the presence of the rooftop porch on the anterior reveals great openness where enclosure was expected. The plan of the enclosure seems continuous and very opaque, yet the walls are punctured by openings that are large and out-of-scale. In addition, these openings are very close to the corners of the building, contradicting the feeling of total enclosure assumed by the building in plan.

While the Vanna Venturi house is disordered and unconventional, it is an example of a piece of architecture that is effective despite its distinctiveness. Venturi uses the stairways in his design for the Vanna Venturi House to prove that although he does not design with norms in mind, the everyday person would still find the complex and somewhat nonsensical space useful. For instance, he explains that the stairway that wraps around the central chimney “is a fragment appropriately accommodating to a complex and contradictory whole and such it is good.” He goes on to explain that even though from some angles it is awkward because of its upward widening, from other angles its shape is inviting. Because of its shape, the bottom of the stair is a place to sit and set things to be taken upstairs later. The stairs that terminate against a wall are useless in their original purpose, but on another level very useful. Venturi explains that the “nowhere stair...is like a ladder against a wall from which to wash the high window and paint the clerestory.” Venturi’s use of the symbolism of the stair as a space creating form that works with function is evidence that he aptly combines the duck’s symbolism and the decorated shed’s attention to program in his design.
Historically, monumental scale has been reserved for monumental architecture, but Venturi combines massive scale with the anthropomorphic scale of a single persons’ house in order to maintain breathing room for the complex elements of the house. He explains that the “house is big as well as little, by which I mean that it is a little house with a big scale.” The fireplace is very large for the space, the doors are slightly too wide, “the chair rail is high” and there is a minimum of “subdivisions of space—also for the sake of economy.” The scale of these elements is emphasized by the smaller scale elements. For instance, the large and central loggia in the front center of the house is emphasized by “its contrast with other doors, smaller in size but similar in shape”. Venturi explains that the reason for the large scale of the house is to “counterbalance the complexity” to avoid “busyness.” This is one way that Venturi is able to avoid chaos in a design that includes so many warring elements, and is one of the reasons that the Venturi house remains successful despite its disorder.

Previous works by Venturi, including the Guild House, also possess elements of Venturi’s exploration of contradiction in postmodern architecture, but none so much as the house he designed for his mother. Through contradictions the Vanna Venturi house acts as a physical relic of “différance” in postmodernism in which the relationship between the sign and the signified are obscured. Robert Venturi combines the deconstructive alteration of classical symbolism with “signs” of his own in order to create juxtapositions that change the meanings of every “sign” involved. Venturi mediates this complexity and contradiction by using a (almost) monumental scale and by sticking to a palette of pedestrian symbols that most would recognize as altered conventional architectural symbols. Despite its complexity, Venturi’s “Mother’s House” is able to exude a state of tension rather than the state of anxiety that typically accompanies the incongruity of postmodern mannerism. When considering the architecture of Robert Venturi many words come to mind: playfulness, surprise, irony, satire, non-conformity. While in many ways Robert Venturi’s design of the Vanna Venturi house was merely a playground to test his theories the house has nonetheless influenced generations of architectural theory and built works.
Notes

3. Ibid. 189.
6. Ibid. 16.
17. Ibid. 116.
18. Ibid. 118.
19. Ibid. 119.
20. Ibid. 115.
21. Ibid. 19.