Architecture as Signs and Systems

For a Mannerist Time

Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown
Architecture as Sign rather than Space

New Mannerism rather than Old Expressionism

ROBERT VENTURI
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A New Mannerism, for Architecture as Sign

So here is complexity and contradiction as mannerism, or mannerism as the complexity and contradiction of today—in either case, today it's mannerism, not Modernism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, an aesthetic revolution made sense via a Modern architecture that was a stylistic adaptation of a current vernacular/industrial way of building—just as in the mid-fifteenth century an aesthetic revolution made sense via a Renaissance architecture that was a stylistic revival of an ancient vocabulary, that of Roman architecture. At the same time, in the Modernist style an industrial vocabulary was paradoxically accommodated within an abstract aesthetic, just as in the Renaissance style a pagan/Classical vocabulary was paradoxically accommodated within an explicitly Christian culture. And can it now be said that an aesthetic evolution makes sense at the beginning of the twenty-first century, engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the proceeding style, that of classic Modernism—just as an aesthetic evolution made sense in the mid-sixteenth century engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the proceeding style, that of High Renaissance?

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* I referred to a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions, [as] not only a reaction to the banality or prettiness of current architecture. It [can also represent an] attitude common in . . . mannerist periods [and can also be] a continuous strain among diverse architects [in history]. Today this attitude is again relevant to both the medium of architecture and the program in architecture. First, the medium of architecture must be re-examined if the increased scope of our architecture as well as the complexity of its goals is to be expressed. Simplified forms or superficially complex forms will not work. Instead, the variety inherent in the ambiguity of visual perception must once more be
acknowledged and exploited. Second, the growing complexities of our functional programs must be acknowledged.¹

In that work, I described, through comparative analysis, historical examples of mannerist architecture, explicit and implicit, that acknowledge complexity and contradiction in their composition, but I did not prescribe a resultant architecture for the time. This lack of prescription was noted by Alan Chimacoff and Alan Plattus as positive in their essay in The Architectural Record of September 1983.² But here and now, through a reconsideration of complexity and contradiction as it currently evolves, I wish to prescribe a specific direction, if not a style—that of Architecture as Sign—and describe a specific manner, that of mannerism, explicitly appropriate for our time. I shall rely again here on analyses of historical examples of mannerist architecture and urbanism—plus one example of our own work—to verify and clarify the evolutionary idea of mannerism and the complexity and contradiction it inherently embraces.

WHAT IS MANNERISM?

Mannerism—not discovered or acknowledged as a style until the mid-nineteenth century—is, according to Nikolaus Pevsner, “indeed full of mannerisms.”³ And it is by definition hard to define: Arnold Hauser has written, “It can be rightly complained that there is no such thing as a clear and exhaustive definition of mannerism.”⁴ Is not that an appropriate acknowledgment for our own era—exemplified by multiculturalism and by technologies evolving by leaps and bounds? But here is my attempt at a definition of mannerism in architecture appropriate for now:

Mannerism as Convention Tweaked—or as Modified Convention Acknowledging Ambiguity. Mannerism for architecture of our time that acknowledges conventional order rather than original expression but breaks the conventional order to accommodate complexity and contradiction and thereby engages ambiguity—engages ambiguity unambiguously. Mannerism as complexity and contradiction applied to convention—as acknowledging a conventional order that is then modified or broken to accommodate valid exceptions and...
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plexity and contradiction—rather than acknowledging no order or
acknowledging a totality of exceptions or acknowledging a new
order so as to be original.

These characteristics are what can distinguish a mannerist approach
appropriate for today from a Neomodernist approach, which abhors
convention as ordinary and adores originality as anything to be different.

So convention, system, order, genericness, manner must be there in
the first place before they can be broken—think of the British aristoc-
racy's tendency to break the rules of etiquette in order to imply confi-
dence about knowing them so well and therefore ease in not following
them consistently. Later I shall describe what I consider a parallel man-
nerist trend in British architecture throughout its history.

It is certainly significant that the most vivid manifestation of man-
nerism occurs immediately after the High Renaissance, where conven-
tion as a style was most explicit and therefore most vividly breakable. So
here is a definition of mannerism where convention is inherent but at
times given up on and made thereby exceptionally unconventional—a
definition that does not involve originality or revolution, which is for
our time a bore. Here is a list of elements of a mannerist architecture
that acknowledges and accommodates the complexity and contradic-
tion of today (appropriately, in no order except alphabetical):

- Accommodation
- Ambiguity
- Boredom
- Both-and
- Breaks
- Chaos
- Complexity
- Contradiction
- Contrast
- Convention broken
- Deviations

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tique inconsistency of which ends up as abstra
cerning what manner:

Consorted
Excessive
Ideological
Mannered
Minimalist
Picturesque
Polite
Willful

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I refer here not to the total inconsistency of recent Decon architecture, for example, which ends up as total consistency, and not to the dramatique inconsistency of current Neomodern architecture, for example, which ends up as abstract sculpture. So here is a further list of notes concerning what mannerism is not:

Contorted
Excessive
Ideological
Mannered
Minimalist
Picturesque
Polite
Willful

There are two kinds of mannerism in architecture that can be acknowledged: Explicit and Implicit. Explicit might refer to the particular style of a particular period, that of the mid-sixteenth century in Italy in its purest and predominant form—to the extent mannerism can be pure—and spelled therefore with a capital M. Implicit mannerism, spelled with a small m, refers to what can be called traces of mannerism in varying historical eras and varying places and can be interpreted as either naïve or sophisticated in its manifestation.

Explicit Mannerism is exemplified in the sixteenth-century work of Giulio Romano, acknowledged as the Mannerist architect by historians. But it also embraces the architectural work of Michelangelo and Palladio. Implicit mannerism I also find to be an enduring and endearing characteristic of much English architecture, from Late Gothic to Sir Edwin Lutyens—or was he explicit? This is why I adore and learn from English architecture, from Gloucester Cathedral to Lutyens’ manor houses.
IMPLICIT MANNERISM: EXAMPLES

What I am describing as a mannerism to evolve via complexity and contradiction for our time is more on the explicit side than the implicit side—it is more capital M-oriented than small m. But I shall first review some historical examples of implicit mannerist precedent in England that I have subjectively chosen—many of which were illustrated as examples of complexity and contradiction in Complexity and Contradiction:

- Gloucester Cathedral, whose buttresses expressed within the walls of the nave are essentially structural and horrendously incorrect, within the hyper-rational architectural order that is Gothic.
- The architecture of most Elizabethan and Jacobean manor houses, whose tense compositions embrace bearing walls that consist mostly of window openings, as well as compositional dualities, iconographic

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• Inigo Jones' St. Paul's, C
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• Saint (rather than Sir) C
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EXEMPLARY EXAMPLES evolve via complexity and contain explicit side than the implicit small m. But I shall first review erist precedent in England that were illustrated as examples exitly and Contradiction:
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Jacobean manor houses, walls that consist mostly onal dualities, iconographic

signage at the scale of billboards, and stylistic ambiguities. Are they naïve or sophisticated? Is this Late Gothic or Early Renaissance, as at Longleat House, Montacute House, Hardwick Hall, Hatfield House?
- Inigo Jones’ St. Paul’s, Covent Garden, an adorable church as a temple, whose incorrect Classical proportions create sublime tension.
- Saint (rather than Sir) Christopher Wren: viva St. Paul’s Cathedral, whose ultimate Baroque dome and drum are supported by a kind of incorrect/ambiguous pendentives inside (naïve and sophisticated)!
And Saint Stephen’s Walbrook, whose similar configurations combine convention and originality to create tension!
The façade of Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields, or is it a tower or a dilatory pediment.


Sir John Soane's arches hanging rather than supporting the pediment.

Sir John Soane's House and Museum, London.

Similar analyses can be made of their vocabularies but valuing masters like that of William and Lutyens. And could Mr. Venturi be an explicit Mannerist?

Other examples—not for small m:

The longitudinal elevation of Francesco Borromini's Church of the Immaculate Conception, Rome, via the division of the hall as they spatially inflect each of it's dualities that are compositional.

Luigi Moretti's Casa della Riforma, Rome, via the division of one building or two? Is it one building or two?

The plans of Guarino Guarini's Church of the Immaculate Conception, and Vaccaro's San Gregorio each composes at once of a single and contradictory lay.
• The façade of Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields: is it a façade or is it a tower? Or his St. George's, Bloomsbury—a symmetrical classical temple but with its huge tower halfway down one side.
• Sir John Vanbrugh's Blenheim Palace, a building I visited on my first day in Europe. On its front façade: is that a broken pediment or a dilatory pediment?
• Sir John Soane's arches inside his house and museum, which are hanging rather than supported.

Similar analyses can be made concerning the work—not original in their vocabularies but valid for their mannerist quality—of other British masters like that of William Butterfield, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Lutyens. And could it be argued that some of these Brits were explicit Mannerists?

Other examples—not British—that evoke implicit mannerism with a small m:

• The longitudinal elevations of the interior of Francesco Borromini's Baroque chapel of I Re Magi of the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide, whose piers compose dualities that are then mollified by the corners of the hall as they spatially evolve.
• Luigi Moretti's Casa del Girasole in the Parioli section of Rome, via the duality of its front elevation: is it one building or two? Probably one, because of the inflection atop each of its two segments.
• The plans of Guarino Guarini's Church of the Immaculate Conception in Turin and Giuseppe Vaccaro's San Gregorio Barbarigo in Rome, where each composes at once dualities and wholes.
• Alvar Aalto's church in, Vuoksenniska, near Imatra, involving a conventional but asymmetrical nave as well as contradictory layers inside.
135. Guarino Guarini's Church of the Immaculate Conception, Turin, Italy.

134. Luigi Moretti’s Casa del Girasole, Rome.

137, 138. Alvar Aalto’s church in Vuoksenniska, Imatra, Finland.
- The Gothic church of its columns/piers marching it an example par excellence.
- The mosaic figure of Cefalu—it is eloquently.
- The slopes of the pediment McKim, Mead & White the long elevations and but the house as iconic:
- And the work of Frank as in the Pennsylvania Bank for the Republic demolished—for being.
- And Armando Brasini's Santissima in Rome, ful dynamic classical compared its name is too long.
- And finally the ultimate Tokyo itself, whose aesthetic demolitions and its evolution exemplary city of today.
• The Gothic church of the Jacobins in Toulouse, whose row of columns/piers marching mysteriously up the center of the nave make it an example par excellence of duality—and of ambiguous beauty.
• The mosaic figure of Christ in the apse of the cathedral in Cefalu—it is eloquently too big.
• The slopes of the pedimented roof of the Low House, an early work of McKim, Mead & White in Bristol, Rhode Island, which occur on the long elevations and therefore on the “wrong” sides of the house, but the house as iconic shelter is thereby eloquently enhanced.
• And the work of Frank Furness, teeming with ambiguous dualities, as in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the National Bank for the Republic in Philadelphia. Much of his other work was demolished—for being mannerist?
• And Armando Brasini’s Church of the Cuore Immacolato di Maria Santissima in Rome, full of “too muches” and “too littles” in its dynamic classical composition inside and out—not to mention that its name is too long.
• And finally the ultimate example of mannerist urbanism—the city of Tokyo itself, whose aesthetic of chaos derives from its revolutionary demolitions and its evolutionary multiculturalism, making it an exemplary city of today!
EXPLICIT MANNERISM: EXAMPLES

Here are some historical examples of explicit Mannerist precedent that I consider relevant and that "turn me on"—many of which also were illustrated as examples of complexity and contradiction in Complexity and Contradiction.

First of all, the architectural work of Michelangelo, whom I love the most and learn the most from, and whose architectural work in the sixteenth century, along with Palladio’s, I consider explicitly Mannerist. I can refer to the rear façade of St. Peter’s, with its grand scale confirmed and yet humanized by the height of its false attic windows, which matches that of the capitals of the adjacent pilasters; to the Laurentian Library, whose interior pilasters are columns individually niched within the wall and whose vestibule has space by implication expanse; to each of whose side walls as if by implication expanse.

145, 146. Michelangelo's St. Peter's, Rome.
I cite Mannerist precedent that I—many of which also were in contradiction in Complexity Michelangelo, whom I love the architectural work in the sixteenth century explicitly Mannerist. I with its grand scale confirmed its false attic windows, which stand at pilasters; to the Laurentian Library individually niched within the wall and whose vestibule is a room and a staircase at the same time; to the façades of the facing buildings of the Capitoline Hill, which, through their giant and minor orders, glorify vagaries of scale and create humane monumentality; to the Sforza Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore, each of whose side walls as a niche, via its huge radius in plan, makes the space by implication expand beyond itself, and the space is therefore perceived as bigger than it is and therefore as a monumental as well as a small space; to the Porta Pia, with its varying combinations of scales and proportions.
149. Michelangelo's Capitoline Hill, Rome.
150, 151, 152. Michelangelo's Sforza Chapel, Rome.
Of my controversial book criticism, a Mannerist period. How And then there is Palladio's Palazzo Valmarana, one of the smaller in size than the three stories of the front facade of the glorious architectural good manne. Manerism via his palaces defines the typical rhythm of a Mannerist period. How and a statue in relief as a small-scale elements—rather than more delicate reversing this convention in the five stories, all but one of the five and a statue in relief as a small-scale elements—a movement rather than more delicate

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symbols and distorted conventions of vocabulary, illustrated on the cover of my controversial book of thirty-eight years ago.

And then there is Palladio, known throughout history more for his architectural good manners via his writings and his villas than for his Mannerism via his palaces and churches. But to me he is a Mannerist in a Mannerist period. How else can you acknowledge the corner of the front façade of the glorious Palazzo Valmarana in Vicenza, whose bay is defined not by the macho pilaster of the giant order that consistently defines the typical rhythmic bay of the rest of the façade but by several small-scale elements—a minor-order pilaster at the ground floor level and a statue in relief as a kind of caryatid at the piano nobile level. Also, all but one of the five openings vertically composed in this bay are smaller in size than the three openings of the typical bays that conform to the three stories of the rest of the façade. Corners are usually less rather than more delicate in wall-bearing façades—and the effect of reversing this convention is haunting.
And then there are the front façades of two of Palladio's churches in Venice—San Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore—teeming with complexities and contradictions that are valid. In each case here is a Christian church whose interior is based on a Roman basilica (a law court) and whose exterior is based on a Roman temple—or is it a juxtaposition of temples? And the combination of basilica and temple(s) makes for beautifully weird juxtapositions and layerings on the front, where each side of the basilican façade becomes a bisected fragment of a pedimented temple and where the buttresses of the interior vault become other kinds of fragments of temple pediments. And then the temple's front columns become pilasters of various scales on a wall, and the entrance becomes another little temple façade juxtaposed upon the center. And then the way that some of these elements, involving forms, symbols, and scales, hit the ground, combining bases, no bases, and steps, makes for other elements of architectural wonder in a Mannerist period—the Italian sixteenth century!