

# Venturi and Scott Brown as Functionalists: Venustas and the Decorated Shed

DENISE R. COSTANZO

»Bob and I are dour functionalists. We see the Modern Movement's belief in functionalism as one of its glories. While Postmodern and Neomodern architects have departed from early Modern doctrines on function, we have remained functionalists for both moral and aesthetic reasons.«<sup>1</sup>

This statement may be surprising, because its author, Denise Scott Brown, and her partner Robert Venturi are better known as critics of architectural functionalism than adherents. Among their most memorable critiques is a pair of equations in Venturi, Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's 1972 book *Learning From Las Vegas* (F1). One presents the Vitruvian triad as a sum: Firmness + Commodity + Delight, which, according to the accompanying text, equal »architecture«. This formula is contrasted with another attributed to Walter Gropius: Firmness + Commodity = Delight, their summary of the functionalist position.<sup>2</sup> Together, these equations present functionalism as a departure from the discipline's most venerable theoretical foundation. The authors further describe the functionalist position as a belief

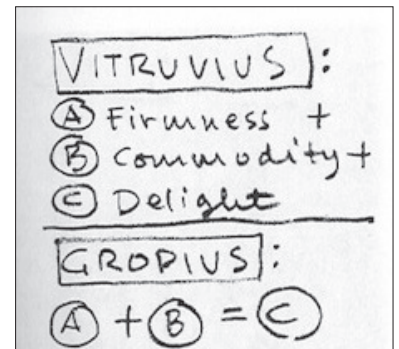
»that structure plus program rather simply result in form; that beauty is a by-product; and that – to tamper with the equation another way – the process of making architecture becomes the image of architecture. It relies upon a faith that process and image are never contradictory and that Delight is a result of the clarity and harmony of these simple relationships, untinged, of course, by the beauty of symbolism and ornament or by the associations of preconceived form.«<sup>3</sup>

In a later essay, Venturi restates their definition thus:

»When you get structure and program right, expressive architecture will be the automatic result. You shouldn't try for beauty, if you would, indeed, mention that word; architectural quality, the spatial and expressive quality of a building, comes out of the harmonious solution of structural and functional problems.«<sup>4</sup>

The authors object to this position, which they attribute to a mistaken analogy between engineering and architecture. While the function of bridges and airship hangars is properly articulated in non-visual terms – however (unintentionally) pleasing the results might be – explicit management of the aesthetic lies within architecture's essential purview. To pretend otherwise through selective portraits of modernist history or »scientific« practice is self-delusion.<sup>5</sup> The authors believe architects are constitutionally incapable of allowing a building's appearance to be automatic or accidental. To posit that a building's appearance should be determined by »objective« forces only relegates this part of design to the architects' subconscious: »they [then] intuitively choose a formal vocabulary, an order, a system, a convention, and then adapt it (sometimes

1 Scott Brown 2004: 142



F1 Vitruvius and Gropius

2 Or, using Venturi's twentieth-century paraphrase of Wotton, »Structure + Program = Expression« (Venturi 1984 [1978]: 64)

3 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 134. All page numbers and citations are taken from the revised 1977 edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*. This is due to the more pervasive influence of this smaller, more economical and accessible edition, and because it more accurately fulfills the authors' intentions for the book's design. On the alterations between the first edition of 1972 and the 1977 edition, see »Reducks, 1972, 1977« in Vinegar 2008, and Vinegar 2009

4 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 64

5 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 134

avowedly) to their own uses»<sup>6</sup>. Aesthetics, however deeply sublimated, are architecturally irrepressible.

Just as the declaration that the works of Maillart and Freyssinet are not architecture is debatable, one can question whether the formulation the authors attribute to Gropius (or, they concede, perhaps only some of his followers) is truly »functionalism«. <sup>7</sup> For now, the issue of diagnostic accuracy will be set aside to consider the remedy offered by Venturi, Scott Brown and their colleagues (hereafter »VSBA«). <sup>8</sup> They reject the idea that form should be the natural and unintentional offspring of a marriage between structure and program – a function of function, as it were – as both impossible and undesirable. For VSBA, authentic architecture is inextricable from designed, not generated, imagery, and their firm's work suggests how they intend this to be applied in practice. Any cursory survey of their projects shows car-sized flowers, hanging leaves, checkerboard-patterned walls, overscaled text and clocks galore. VSBA's architectural imagery ranges from the subtle contextualism of stone pilasters on London's Trafalgar Square to coloring-book-ready »caryakids« supporting the porch of a children's museum in Houston.

Such vibrant and accessible visuality enhances their work's popularity with clients, even as it has alienated many critics, who believe they reduce architecture to advertising, language or even television<sup>9</sup>. Much of the outrage at their »glorification« of the architecture of communicability is ideological as well as aesthetic. They stand accused of doing capitalism's dirty work, selling acquiescence to its injustices, since

»the public must be convinced that this chaos contains an unexplored richness, unlimited utilizable possibilities, and qualities of the »game« now made into new fetishes for society.«<sup>10</sup>

Another harsh objection is that

»the Venturi emphasis on sign deliberately wrenched meaning from form, building, and function. The emphasis on two-dimensional graphics denied the ultimate reality of architecture as three-dimensional substance or volume.«<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the verdict on such charges of crimes against their own medium, it remains difficult to reconcile their designs with the image of twentieth-century functionalism. Building upon Venturi's 1966 *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, *Learning from Las Vegas* undoubtedly helped inspire a tsunami of formalist work in the 1970s and 1980s. VSBA acknowledge their role in helping inspire and popularize post-modern historicism, but have consistently disavowed association with it. As Scott Brown's opening statement shows, they consider themselves heirs to and participants in a functionalist architectural tradition, despite their critical equations and statements. In fact, their preferred »decorated shed« design model was intended as a return to the more complete understanding of architectural function encapsulated in the Vitruvian triad. How have VSBA formulated and practiced the idea of functionalism, and should this inflect our understanding of this concept, their work, or possibly both?

Two challenges in addressing these questions are the sheer quantity of writing by and about VSBA, and the familiarity of their key ideas. Few theoretical de-

6 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 64-66

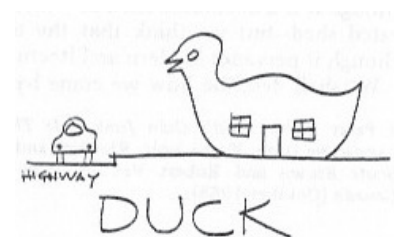
7 A critique of the influence of Gropius' functionalist ideology in postwar American design that takes a similar stance is Klaus Herdeg's *The Decorated Diagram: Harvard Architecture and the Failure of the Harvard Legacy* (1983).

8 Naming and attribution when discussing their collaborative work remains an active issue. Some use »Venturi and Scott Brown« to discuss the triple-authored *Learning from Las Vegas*. Others use »the Venturis« to designate the couple (although Scott Brown uses her first married name professionally). Some who use »Venturi« specify in advance that it signifies collective authorship (Lebensztejn places it in quotation marks to foreground its metonymic status). I here use the acronym for their firm's last and longest-used name, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc. (since 1990; Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, 1980-89; Venturi and Rauch, 1964-79) as a convenient shorthand for their collective theoretical and design authorship with multiple collaborators over the decades, notably Izenour and John Rauch. Citations from individually authored texts are credited accordingly.

9 Upton 2009

10 Jameson 1985: 82

11 Jordy 1985: 58-68  
Reprinted in: Jordy 2005 [1985]: 274

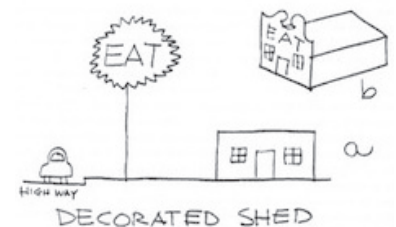


F2 Duck

sign constructs are more widely-known than the duck and the decorated shed, their famous counter-readings of the roadside architecture deplored by Peter Blake that encapsulate the subversive spirit of *Learning from Las Vegas* (F2 und 3). The book's simple diagrams and succinct definitions appear straightforward: a »duck« is a building whose »architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form«; in other words, a »building-becoming-sculpture«. In contrast, the decorated shed is a »building whose systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them.«<sup>12</sup> The distinction is not communicative imagery *per se* – that is assumed for both – but how communication affects architectural form and function. Although they consider both dialectical categories »valid«, and they can even overlap (Chartres is both), the authors take a partisan position: »we think that the duck is seldom relevant today, although it pervades modern architecture.«<sup>13</sup> In their view, the decorated shed provides a superior model to accommodate the multiple competing functions all architecture must fulfill. While the world has room for occasional ducks, they are often »like a minuet in a discotheque because most architecture in a normal context should be plain.«<sup>14</sup> Architectural needs are best met when three-dimensional form is determined by the practical, spatial, and structural work it must perform, and buildings' identities are visually proclaimed by whatever form of imagery is most efficient.

Their assertion that the duck is prevalent in modern architecture is a frontal attack on the disciplinary status quo. For symbolism to »distort« or »submerge« the demands of structure or program – the essential »truths« to be expressed through form – utterly compromises the design's integrity, an anathema to the modernist ethos. VSBA's claim that the appearance of Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor in New Haven does not derive from »the harmonious solution of structural and functional problems« is an audacious assault on both Yale's former dean and postwar modernism as a whole. Its formal qualities (isolation, concrete block in a structural frame masquerading as monolithic poured concrete, windows as voids instead of conventional openings) did not derive directly from its construction or program, but masked and distorted them because the set of acceptable design solutions was predetermined by a formalist orthodoxy which conflated established preferences for abstract sculptural form with expressions of construction and practical use. This is what makes Crawford Manor a duck – one only legible to a very limited audience conversant in modernist aesthetics, to be sure, but a duck nonetheless.<sup>15</sup>

VSBA seek to reclaim and make explicit an architectural function that, in their view, had persisted during the Modern Movement, but was unacknowledged by its »functionalists«. Formal communication is an inevitable part of design, and architects who believe their works' appearance is empirically determined are actually speaking a visual code which, despite their most sincere beliefs and efforts, often impedes rather than expresses a building's uses and structure. Their antidote to the production of expressive, inscrutable works of heroic originality is the duck's more modest companion, the decorated shed. Its disjunction of serviceable form and symbolic communication makes all of architecture's necessary »jobs« explicit. This permits them to be addressed more efficiently; VSBA argue that, in most (non-duck-shaped) instances, three-dimensional built form communicates less clearly and far more expensively than applied decoration or signage. Another analogy VSBA use to describe functional design is the mitten and the glove. »The mitten limits hand movement to grasping, but it allows wiggle room on the inside and can fit a wide range of hand sizes.«<sup>16</sup> A glove



**F3** Decorated Shed

**12** Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 87. Karsten Harries offers one of many thorough discussions of these categories (Harries 1998: 70-81).

**13** Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 87

**14** Ibid: 139, 67

**15** Ibid: 101

follows the exact size and shape of the fingers, reveals them through its form, and provides the greatest freedom of use. But it only delivers its functionality to a restricted set of size-specific hands, and its more complex, customized contour is more expensive to produce. While a more neutral container like the mitten serves fewer functions, it still provides basic warmth and communicates ›hand‹, albeit in a less anatomically precise way. Like a glove, the architectural duck is meant to provide a container precisely matched to and expressive of what it contains. But in practice, it often happens that ›the forms of building could not fit, like a glove on a hand, over the complex, unpredictable, and sometimes intangible elements of realistic programs.‹<sup>17</sup> In most cases, a more modest, flexible, and affordable solution, like the mitten or the shed, is more ›functional‹ than a more elaborate, customized one.

Venturi contrasts their approach with the ›Modern fundamentalist‹ expressivism of Rudolph, and the ›autonomous‹ formalism of Rationalists and the New York Five. Unlike these contemporary movements, the decorated shed ›presupposes an acceptance of the functional doctrine, not a rejection of it – an augmentation of it for the sake of maintaining it [emphasis added].‹<sup>18</sup> Like their equations, they call for a return to a more authentic, honest and workable functionalism resting on all legs of the Vitruvian triad. Another of VSBA's definitions of their architecture, as ›shelter with symbols [or decoration] on it‹, would improve architecture's functionality through liberation:

›We like emphasizing shelter in architecture, thereby including function in our definition; and we like admitted symbolic rhetoric in our definition which is not integral with shelter, thereby expanding the content of architecture beyond itself and freeing function to take care of itself.‹<sup>19</sup>

This statement suggests another equation: Shelter + Decoration = Architecture.<sup>20</sup> The intent to include function in the formulation is clear, but where does it belong? If the shed is a result of only firmitas and utilitas, Gropius' two ›functional‹ triadic legs, this would leave venustas outside the category of function altogether. Colquhoun interprets Venturi's model this way, as defining function and aesthetics as equivalent but separate and ›incompatible‹ concerns.<sup>21</sup> But Venturi later refers to the communicative ›function‹ of symbolism and ornament on the heels of a statement that ›allowing form and function to go their separate ways permits function to be truly functional – as it couldn't be, ironically, when Form followed Function, in the old Modern days.‹<sup>22</sup> While this declares an intention to ›be functional‹ – an uncontroversial (even tautological) definition of functionalism – charting ›separate ways‹ for form and function implies that form follows a different path, and is not itself a function. Is form not ›functional‹, while symbol and decoration are? This would be a difficult case to make: it is more logical that all three belong under venustas, and equally logical that either all three are considered functions, or none.

VSBA claim they ›accept‹ and ›maintain‹ functional doctrine even as they intend to ›augment‹ it. But what exactly do they retain, and what is the nature of their augmentation?<sup>23</sup> They clearly reject the Gropian equation and accept the Vitruvian, but function is not a specified variable in either. Returning to mathematical expressions, one of two possibilities seems likely.<sup>24</sup> Either:

16 Scott Brown 2004: 153

17 Venturi / Scott Brown 1984 [1974]: 44

18 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 65

19 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 62

20 Harries describes Ruskin and Pevsner's definition of architecture through a similar equation: *work of architecture = functional building + decoration* (Harries 1998: 4, 81).

21 Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 179

22 Venturi 1984 [1982]: 111-112

23 Alan Colquhoun was also confused by their ideas on form and function: ›Does function provide the framework which is distorted by ›forms‹, or do ›forms‹ provide the framework which is distorted by function?‹ (Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 177).

24 Scott Brown does this as well in 2004: 145

**(1) Function + Venustas = Architecture**

where Function = Firmitas + Utilitas,  
restating the ›shed + decoration = architecture‹ formulation above

OR

**(2) Function = Firmitas + Utilitas + Venustas = Architecture**

Equation (1) defines aesthetics as an architecturally necessary but non – ›functional‹ addition to structure and use, while (2) equates architecture with an expanded definition of function that includes the aesthetic with durability and program.

The most direct evidence for which best reflects their thinking comes from the 2004 essay by Scott Brown from which the opening declaration was taken, ›The Redefinition of Functionalism‹, and a brief statement she published in 1967 entitled *The Function of a Table*. Despite the nearly four-decade gap, the two statements are directly linked. Both begin by considering the many possible functions of a table (acted out in a series of photographs illustrating the 2004 essay). Scott Brown presents a table's ›function‹ as a matrix of possible uses and meanings that can be practical, imaginative and symbolic: a place for eating, writing or social gathering; something to dance upon or kneel before; an object that children can transform into a playhouse, or time can transform into an antique.

»[...] the functions of so simple and general an object as a table may be many and various, related at one end to the most prosaic of activities and at the other to the unmeasurable, symbolic and religious needs of man. They may change with time – breakfast for four in the morning, navigation for two in the afternoon, and, with extensions, dinner for ten in the evening; and two hundred years later, a museum piece. It would not be possible to list all the functions which could be served by a simple table.

In addition, it should be noted that some of the functions discussed above were not considered in the making of the table; but rather, the form of the table itself, through its own visible possibilities, evoked them. The functions, then, ascribed to a form lie in the mind of the user and are based on his needs [...].«<sup>25</sup>

25 Scott Brown 1967: 154

She presents function as a variable and subjective, not fixed and objective, set of overlapping uses and meanings. A table becomes whatever people need it to be to the extent that its form supports or even inspires a range of possibilities. This directly challenges the notion that design should proceed from a quantification of functions, rationally distributed and expressed through form. How could a project to design an object accommodating everything a table does produce so efficient a solution? This implicit critique of a formulaic view of function is expressed more directly in Scott Brown's later essay: »if the function of even as simple an object as a table fights definition, how much more difficult can the definition be in architecture? And the problem is exacerbated when time and society are included.« For architecture, unlike a table, the factor of time is potentially the most destabilizing:

»How do you define the function of a building that has housed a range of activities over some hundreds of years? How 'functional' is it to plan for the first users (for the client's program or brief) and not give thought to how it



may adapt to generations of users in the unforeseeable future?»<sup>26</sup>

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The relationship between function and time enters in her discussion of the ›mitten-building‹. She finds that

»some program elements of today may sit a little less well in a more generic solution, but these are likely to change even before the building is constructed. In many projects, sacrificing some adherence to the specifics of present programs may be worthwhile for the flexibility this offers the future.«<sup>27</sup>

26 Scott Brown 2004: 142

This analysis mirrors other functionalist critiques of the late 1960s: the persistence of forms across time and changing use echoes Aldo Rossi's *fatto urbano*; the limits of mapping functions onto space recalls Christopher Alexander's substitution of the semilattice for tree diagrams. Scott Brown also mentions questions she was taught to ask by the social planners she learned from at Penn. Because even »seemingly dysfunctional phenomena must be functional for someone«, any understanding of function should consider who benefits. VSBA's call for a ›nonjudgmental‹ analysis of the built environment is intended to help architects consider how existing features accommodate functions they might overlook, ignore, or condemn outright without serious consideration. She finds that architects »seldom ask, Who should define function?« but instead assume that their view of function is already complete, correct, or enlightened.<sup>28</sup> In her view, a lack of self-awareness about the individual and disciplinary subjectivity architects bring to design results in narrow, dogmatic, and limited definitions of function and many functionally inadequate built solutions.

27 Ibid.: 153

28 Scott Brown 2004: 146

Scott Brown thus promotes a ›broadening‹ of function through consideration of factors like time. Others include what she calls »psychological, symbolic, and communicative functions«. That this category includes aesthetics is apparent from her discussion of the Van Nelle factory in Rotterdam, a paradigmatic example of early twentieth-century European functionalism. She notes that this former packaging plant has remained in use for entirely altered functions (design offices and exhibition space). Scott Brown suggests that the project's exquisite machine-age aesthetics, not its formal expression of now-obsolete factory requirements, explain its survival: »we can surmise that among its most endearing features to its new users were its looks. These may have saved it from unsympathetic reuse. Were its looks part of its ›function?‹ The question is rhetorical, but she becomes more direct: »I have suggested that, as in Van Nelle, a building's aesthetic quality may be part of its function.«<sup>29</sup> Her language is cautious rather than emphatic, but becomes more explicit when discussing the decorated shed:

29 Ibid.: 151-152

»We see the shed component as following early Modern principles. It does its job, achieves beauty by indirection, and is not at first noticed as beautiful (we call it 'second glance architecture'). Then a limited spattering of quite conscious 'beauty' (delight, decoration, symbolism, iconography, communication—it takes many forms) can be applied, where it counts.«<sup>30</sup>

30 Ibid.: 152

Her last sentence clarifies that the aesthetic is meant to be understood broadly to include the effects of imagery on the viewer, the various sorts of imagery that can be used, and their semiotic content. She then asks: »Is communication a function? If the concept of function can be broadened to include everything we have discussed above, then certainly communication – architecture used as language – can be considered an aspect of function.«<sup>31</sup> The concept is extended

31 Ibid.: 164

to include time, aesthetics, and an enlarged view of architecture's audience: »Two logics of functionality – one of the immediate users, the other of the broader community – must be satisfied in any design. Resolving the issues that arise where they meet is much of the fun.«<sup>32</sup>

Scott Brown's expansive view of function incorporates so much – indeed, what does it exclude? – that it does appear equivalent to »architecture« as a category. This makes equation 2 (Function = Firmitas + Utilitas + Venustas = Architecture) the most plausible expression of VSBA's working definition. If so, then for them a »functionalist« is anyone who strives to reconcile the competing architectural imperatives summed up by Vitruvius two millennia ago. Such an all-encompassing definition may leave the term uselessly vague or redundant. But the triad's venerability does not make its definition of architectural success any easier to achieve. VSBA's model of functional architecture, the decorated shed, and their design work all connect these semantic issues to building-making. Alan Colquhoun argues that the decorated shed pushes architects to »abjure *architectural qualities of space and structure* and concentrate instead on *symbolic content*.«<sup>33</sup> This may be. Their revised understanding of function is largely distinguished by its treatment of venustas, so a full understanding of what they mean by »function« must clarify design's visual dimension. How does the decorated shed relate stable, useful space to imagery addressing the eyes and mind? Can it help reconcile their architecture with the modernist and functionalist traditions which they claim to continue?

32 Ibid.: 170

33 Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 179

Once again, the logical point of departure is a famous hand-drawn illustration from *Learning from Las Vegas*: Venturi's simple drawing of the decorated shed, now considered apart from its anatine companion (F3). The apparent simplicity of Venturi's familiar, cartoon-like illustration is deceptive. Unlike the unitary duck, and exactly like the Vitruvius-Gropius equations, a bifurcated image presents this category as a dyad from the outset. In this case the relationship is not dialectical, but demonstrates that the concept can be formally expressed in two distinct ways. Decorated shed »a« (DSa) shows a roadside site in section with two structures in elevation. One is a rectangle with two foursquare windows flanking a door, suggesting a simple box-like building – the »shed«, obviously. Between it and the road stands an elevated sign announcing the building's function (»EAT«) to passing cars on the highway. In DSa, the separation of signage and building is literal: drivers read the graphic information from one structure at a distance, but can obtain a meal inside the other.

Floating just above this first diagram is decorated shed »b« (DSb), drawn in isometric projection to show its box-like volume. This is necessary because in DSb the communicative sign is attached to the building: a façade with a scrolled split pediment draws the eye to the same informative word (»EAT«). The drawing echoes an earlier description of the false fronts of the Western frontier town: »bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance.«<sup>34</sup> While using the verb »attached« to characterize the connection seems natural, this raises a question. Is the façade a separate, applied addition to a structure that would remain fully enclosed without it, or has the enveloping wall itself been heightened to fulfill two roles, both practical and symbolic? If the former, then the relationship between a free-standing building and a separate signage element is conceptually identical to that in DSa, except that the distance has been reduced whatever gap, if any, lies between the billboard-façade and the shed. If the latter, however, then the DSb façade is something entirely different: both an integral part of the building's system

34 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 18

of physical enclosure, and a communicative feature intended for public, visual consumption. To simplify, the distinction is analogous to that between clothing and the skin: one is a separate, additive, legible element, while the other, still visibly communicative, is essential to the building's physical identity. In the former case, to saw off the scrolled top would be a partial change in costume – like taking off a jacket. In the latter case, it would be an amputation.

Unfortunately, Venturi's crisp drawing does not resolve the issue. While the false front clearly extends above the box's flat roof plane, its edges do not reach beyond its corners to indicate a separate, applied plane. However, the book contains another famous decorated shed cartoon to consider. The »Recommendation for a monument« illustrates a third way to relate communication to a neutral, box-like building (F4). Here, the shed is a three-story block upon which sits a giant billboard proclaiming »I AM A MONUMENT« (radiating motion lines suggest flashing neon), whose scale dwarfs the building beneath. This could be considered decorated shed »c« (DSc), but is really a variant of DSa. While the billboard legs establish a physical connection between shed and decoration, the two remain discrete elements. This third diagram does not clarify whether the DSb façade is shed, decoration, or both.

Thus, DSb's false front can be interpreted as either an appliqué onto or an extension of the shed's enclosing wall. Given Venturi's famous love of ambiguity, this may have been intentional. If so, then the DSb façade should be taken to be *both* symbolically distinct from *and* a physical continuation of the other sides of the building whose only job is to provide physical enclosure. Borrowing categories from *Complexity and Contradiction*, this »both-and« condition collapses the practical role of environmental enclosure and the semiotic job of communication, and makes the (partially?) false front an authentically »dual-functioning« element. Duality and tension are intrinsic to VSBA's model; they argue for »the particular significance of the decorated shed with a rhetorical front and conventional behind: for architecture as shelter with symbols on it.«<sup>35</sup> This statement describes DSb more than DSa or DSc, suggesting DSb is not just one of multiple alternative configurations, but their preferred one – an intrinsically divided model not intended to resolve into an integrated whole.

»The purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure, and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting – and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory – decoration.«<sup>36</sup>

Importantly, VSBA never claim that the decorated shed will provide the compositional coherence that modernists are trained to expect from architecture:

»Why not admit the impossibility of maintaining pure functionalism in architecture and the almost inevitable contradictions between functional and aesthetic requirements in the same building, and then let function and decoration go their separate ways so that functional requirements need not be distorted for unadmitted decorative aims.«<sup>37</sup>

These are more confusing expressions of conflicting ideas: again, function seems to only apply to *firmitas + utilitas*, and »inevitably« clashes with *venustas* rather than including it. »Pure« functionalism (the Gropius equation?) is presented as impossible, and two divergent paths for two distinct »requirements« must somehow converge on the drafting table. VSBA's rejection of impossible

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F4 Recommendation for a monument

35 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 90

36 Ibid.: 100

37 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 65. In his discussion of VSBA's project for the Yale Mathematics building, Colin Rowe describes the project in terms of »lesions«, »rifts«, and »cleavage«: »we might notice how the world of Venturi's images is without homogeneity [...] This cleavage, I think, should be evident to anyone who is not hopelessly prejudiced either in favor of Venturi or against him; and it would seem to be important (Rowe 1998 [1976]: 148).« Similarly, Alan Colquhoun writes that in »*Learning from Las Vegas* the architectural act is no longer seen as aiming at an integral aesthetic object, but at an object whose aesthetic unity is a priori impossible. Function and aesthetics, substance and meaning, are now seen as incompatible (though equally important) entities (Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 179).«



functionalist ›purity‹ in favor of an ›impure architecture of communication‹ has long been recognized.<sup>38</sup> That the decorated shed can only attain its ›purest‹, not wholly ›pure‹, form, is also noteworthy. As William Jordy has observed, their choice of ›the most ubiquitous phenomenon in building – the anonymous box, a prototypical form to house the most various demands for shelter‹ for the prosaic half of their formula is as multivalent as their unstable boundaries between shed and sign, function and aesthetics. The box remains the ubiquitous, impure staple of the commercial landscape even as, for the modern movement, ›the stripped-down box came to be accepted as an ultimate statement of both pure shape and pure function, a cachet of the style.‹<sup>39</sup> He adds, ›it is the decorated shed that principally enables Venturi to hold on to the two extremes of his design dialectic. It can be read as the purist box of modernism or the Pop-vernacular box of Vegas.‹<sup>40</sup>

VSBA's embrace of multiple tensions inherent to the decorated shed is contrasted with the ›selective‹ vision of their predecessors. *Learning from Las Vegas* describes how early modernists chose to look at only the unornamented backs of nineteenth-century industrial sheds, ignoring their ›rhetorical‹ public faces.<sup>41</sup> That they ›liked the backs of nineteenth century railroad stations – literally the sheds – and tolerated the fronts as irrelevant, if amusing, aberrations of historical eclecticism‹ demonstrates a profound unease with aesthetic ambivalence.<sup>42</sup> This preference for the shed minus its decoration carried over into new design, as ›modern architects began to make the back the front.‹<sup>43</sup> VSBA argue that the dualities of early industrial architecture are hardly unique to the conflicted nineteenth century, but are recurrent and enduring issues in architectural history. Examples of divided, ›incoherent‹ prototypes include the Italian palazzo, which they call ›the decorated shed par excellence‹: a neutral, box-like form serves as a consistent but flexible ›scaffolding‹ for changes to visible signage and ornament on communicative urban façades.<sup>44</sup>

Another is the Early Christian or Byzantine basilica, which Venturi also describes as ›that plain barn smothered in frescoes, the decorated shed par excellence.‹<sup>45</sup> This model makes the relationship between decoration and shed most vivid and clear-cut: a self-effacing container provides space serving programmatic needs, and surfaces for embellishment through iconographic, patently non-structural images. The typical plainness of a basilica's fabric establishes clear figure-ground relationships in two and three dimensions. Users understand which parts of the architecture should be read visually as form (its campanile and tall roof as visible landmarks in the city's skyline; the soaring volumes of the spacious, communal and sacred interior) or as image (mosaic or frescoed depictions of saints and divine subjects; marble revetment to dignify privileged surfaces). Non-iconographic building surfaces – exposed brick or stone walls like its neighbors – blended into the background, ignored. While the physical contact between shed and signage in a basilica suggests DSb, the clarity of the figure-ground distinction is more like DSa or DSc. Considered thus, the key difference between the DS models is the operation of vision in each: how a viewer is supposed to see, or not see, the shed in relation to its decoration. In DSa or DSc, the eye is arrested by signage (flashing, glowing, decorative), which identifies the building's programmatic or symbolic ›function‹. But the viewer is not supposed to look at the shed. Physically, it should accommodate spatial needs, but visually it must recede into the background to allow signage to do its job most effectively. The viewer reads *about* the shed, not the shed itself.

The primacy of decoration over shed is clear: ›The sign is more important than

38 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 18

39 Jordy 1985: 265

40 Ibid.: 268

41 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 90

42 Ibid.: 104

43 Ibid.: 114

44 Ibid.: 107. For a critique of their reading of the palazzo and other historic forms as examples of their decorated shed, see Colquhoun 1998 [1978]

45 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 67

the architecture...The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity.«<sup>46</sup> The term ›vulgar‹ is likely more complimentary than it seems; later they praise Italy's harmonization of *the vulgar and the Vitruvian*, suggesting the vulgate or vernacular, not inferior taste. The sign's importance is underscored when they claim ›if you take the signs away, there is no place.«<sup>47</sup> The shed provides shelter, but ›place‹ is defined through visual information. That the inverse is not true is shown by Venturi's description of the moment when the sheds of Las Vegas recede into darkness:

»And when you see no buildings at all, at night when virtually only the illuminated signs are visible, you see the Strip in its pure state. This is not to say that the architecture I am describing is without formal content, but to emphasize the predominance of signs over buildings on the Strip and of symbolism over form in the buildings on the Strip as functions of the vast spaces they are seen in and the fast speeds they are seen at.«<sup>48</sup>

Here Venturi does, deliberately, use the word ›pure‹ to describe Sin City. The desert night allows the extravaganza of neon-lit communication to float in the void of black space, erasing the architectural distractions against which the signage must compete in daylight.

That darkness provides the apotheosis of the decorated shed shows the need for architectural form, or, more precisely, the surfaces defining that form, to remain invisible.<sup>49</sup> In describing the architecture of the strip, VSBA find that ›regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless, because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back.«<sup>50</sup> From this perspective, that lack of style is a virtue. VSBA obliquely address the reading of the shed through their concept of *second-glance architecture*. Absent the cover of darkness, the building form must be sufficiently neutral and unremarkable to ensure the ›first glance‹ is held by the decoration alone.<sup>51</sup> Only after the main message has been delivered can seemingly unremarkable architecture reward the attentive, trained eye through cleverly referential composition. But the modernism in which Venturi and Scott Brown were trained, and claim to operate, was built upon a refusal to let the invisible remain so. The backs of factories and grain silos were fascinating objects of study precisely *because* they were ›invisible‹. Only the most educated and critical are likely to give the shed that second glance. VSBA's professional audience has been trained to fixate on, even venerate, visually ›plain‹ surfaces of unrelieved brick, stucco or concrete; glass curtain walls; enameled panels, or corrugated metal cladding. Modernism had elevated the blank surface of apparent nothingness to sublimity: the flat canvas of Greenbergian abstraction, the whitewashed wall connoting pure form, the sheet of plate glass that vanished altogether, permitting the ethical ›honesty‹ of exposed structure.

Both VSBA's detractors and supporters have struggled with the surfaces of their real-world decorated sheds (in recent terms, ›generic lofts‹). Stanislaus von Moos has described the typical VSBA façade as ›not so much ›architecture‹ as it is a two-dimensional screen recalling other buildings, often remote in space and time.« Some might protest his assertion that the ›flatness and the transparency of its overlapping layers recall Le Corbusier's white villas of the 1920s«, but the flatness itself cannot be denied.<sup>52</sup> The material palette of VSBA exteriors is varied and typical – masonry, metal, glass, and so forth – but they consistently transform these materials, independently of their intrinsic characteristics, into a seemingly immaterial ›skin‹. For instance, the bichrome stone

46 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 13

47 Ibid.: 18

48 Venturi 1984 [1978]: 63

49 Note Rowe's description of VSBA's Yale Mathematics building addition: ›it is an ›ordinary‹ building. So ›ordinary‹ indeed that it is almost supposed to be not there.« Rowe 1998 [1976]: 93

50 Venturi / Scott Brown / Izenour 1977: 35

51 VSBA's main solution to this design challenge is typology, which they discuss at length following Alan Colquhoun on Ernst Gombrich. The familiarity of a conventional form that, once spotted, can be quickly identified as ›house‹, ›warehouse‹ or ›gas station‹, then dismissed, minimizes distraction from the all-important signage (Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 133).

52 Von Moos 1987: 28

checkerboard cladding the gallery in their Oberlin Art Museum extension is a contextually appropriate, carefully composed counterpoint to Cass Gilbert's Italianate building. But they deny the surface of this shed-like structure the contoured moldings that give traditional masonry façades an appearance of weight through shade and shadow. Window frames are pulled flush with the flat surface, giving the effect of weightless wallpaper, literally »wrapping« the building.<sup>53</sup> The same effect is found in most of their projects, which usually have a plastic, even cardboard-like quality upon completion.<sup>54</sup> The effect suggests a full-scale architectural model, immaterial and decidedly non-tectonic in character.

Their dematerialized façades may be aesthetically disappointing, but they also enjoy a prestigious modernist pedigree. Continuing a line of observation that dates back to Hitchcock and Johnson, Jordy has observed how

»spatial volume took precedence over mural mass, the membranelike skin which contained the volume was considered a mere package for the space, and of all the shapes a package can take, the box overwhelmingly predominates.«

He sees another formal parallel at work: »as sharpness and tautness of outline incisively bounded the membrane containers of earlier modern architecture, so control of outline contains the shape of Venturi's building.«<sup>55</sup> Both the box-shaped shed and the floating envelope provide explicit links to the modernist tradition. Vincent Scully argues that »the taut, continuous, thin wall of Gordon Wu Hall of 1980-83 at Princeton University, with the columnar structure visible behind the glass, creates a wholly modern gesture. It could be of no other age.«<sup>56</sup> Yet despite the shared flatness of their exteriors, there can be no mistaking a VSBA skin for Mies or Le Corbusier. »The ideographic resonance of such thin, flat architectural components contributes to their quality as signs, that is, as actual signboards.«<sup>57</sup> Instead of abstract membranes, their informational content reduces them to billboards whose immediacy »can be upsetting in its audacity.«<sup>58</sup> In other words, Mies' glass and masonry curtain walls are signs of modernity, while VSBA's are signs of referents from advertising, history, or the vernacular. Modernist floating flatness had its critics, too, as when Frank Lloyd Wright saw mere »cardboard boxes« in Le Corbusier's »prisme pur.«<sup>59</sup> But this apparent immateriality was part of an overall aesthetic of spatial composition and tectonic expression, supported by other sources of modernist validity. Although McMorrough sees in VSBA's work the *solidification of the image*, that solidity is only literal, never visual.<sup>60</sup>

Which begs the question: why not? Given persistent criticism of their work (and the weighty influence of Kahn on much of their thinking), why have VSBA's designs retained their apparent insubstantiality for five decades? The answer may be DSb, their preferred version of the decorated shed, which also poses a special design challenge. Because its articulate architectural signage is contiguous with the shed's supposedly »mute« enclosing surfaces, how is the reading eye to stop? Will it not continue from »EAT« to the fenestration below, then continue around the corner, noticing with inappropriate attention every detail of whatever banal material fills the blank rectangles of Venturi's diagrams? Jordy's observations are again relevant: »what interests Venturi is not just the sign on the building, but the sign as it could become a building. In his design the signboard front of the decorated shed often appears in architectural disguise.«<sup>61</sup> Compared to DSa (or DSc), it is DSb that fully merges signage and

53 Kieran 1989, Colquhoun 1998 [1978]

54 The theme of literal cutouts consisting of frontal, silhouetted forms with sharply articulated edges is pervasive in their built work.

55 Jordy 1985: 265

56 Scully 1989: 8

57 Jordy 1985: 269

58 Ibid.: 270

59 Ibid.: 265

60 McMorrough 2009: 141

61 Jordy 1985: 270

architecture through its envelope. Jordy notes how, taken as a whole, this element is the locus of a shed's legible and literal identity: »with a change of wrap the failed gas station, sheathed in plywood against vandalism, can become a doctor's office or a dry-cleaning establishment.«<sup>62</sup> Conjoining the functions of enclosure and symbolism, the skin of DSb or VSBA's buildings is perhaps their most theoretically charged design element. It marks and occupies the liminal position between the shed and its decoration, embodying all the model's unresolved ambiguities. In 1966 Venturi had written: »Since the inside is different from the outside, the wall – the point of change – becomes an architectural event. Architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of use and space. These interior and environmental forces are both general and particular, generic and circumstantial. Architecture as the wall between the inside and the outside becomes the spatial record of this resolution and its drama.«<sup>63</sup>

62 Ibid.: 266

63 Venturi 1966: 88

Of course, if we accept the Palazzo Medici as another ›decorated shed‹ of the DSb type, the same could be said of its visually heavy, rusticated stone façade. But its apparent weight reverses their preferred hierarchy between symbol and shed: its skin reads as heavy structure, and only careful observation reveals it to be an architectural ›wallpaper‹ of applied, non-structural signage. If VSBA's goal is to prevent such an error in visual interpretation, then flatness is essential. By maintaining an unresolved abeyance between the utilitarian and the symbolic, they enforce an awareness of reading immaterial imagery through the building's material skin. VSBA's longstanding interest in using electronic graphics to decorate building exteriors is an extension of this idea. In fact, their frequent use of the term ›appliqué‹ for their ornamented surfaces is a misnomer; by definition this type of attached relief decoration cannot be coplanar with the surface to which it is applied.<sup>64</sup> A maximally smooth surface expresses the ambivalence of DSb, and provides their way out of the trap posed by modernist aesthetics: »flat pattern ornament may preserve the essence of modernist concerns for flatness while countering traditional modernist plainness [...] Modern artifacts were cleansed artifacts, as plain as they were planar.«<sup>65</sup> While VSBA reject the plain, they embrace the plane.

64 Jordy notes that Venturi actually intends pattern variations that remain superficially flush when using this term; see Jordy 1985: 273, Venturi 1984 [1982]: 111-112

65 Jordy 1985: 272

Seen thus, flatness is not elective, but essential. As McMorrough observes, »one way to understand their claims to modernist credentials is in the sense that they are truly looking for a modern conception of signifying practices. The thinnest possible support for signage accommodates the function of amelioration (whether as decoration or communication) within a material minimum.«<sup>66</sup> He cites Venturi and Scott Brown's description of pure flatness as the limit of a centuries-long progression:

66 McMorrough 2008: 138

»Baroque architecture needs a depth of one yard to do its decoration, Renaissance architecture needs perhaps a foot, Rococo one centimeter and Art Deco could suggest seven or eight overlaid surfaces with the Deco low relief, but when you think about what that means for us today, we realize that our decorative surface should be two dimensional – for many reasons, including cost.«<sup>67</sup>

67 McMorrough 2008: 141-142. The original quote is taken from Jacobs 2004/2005: 44

Of course, this limit is asymptotic; anything built can only *seem*, not be, fully two-dimensional. Among the fullest expressions of the Greenbergian ideal of modernist flatness in painting are Helen Frankenthaler's raw canvases that absorbed oil pigment, literally uniting the image and its support. In architecture, the ideal of an inherent, fully two-dimensional ornament adds another layer to our earlier analogy: between the natural purity of skin and the deliberate

artifice of clothing lies the tattoo, with all its Loosian baggage.

That a VSBA building envelope – anonymous yet information-laden, eye-deflecting yet worthy of contemplation, pragmatic yet symbolic, modernist yet anti-modernist – embodies and subverts all of architecture's conflicting and contradictory functions may be the whole point. Is its tenacious flatness the unvarnished truth about a »moment of surface rather than of depth, or the schizophrenic celebration of the commodity fetishism of the image,« or both?<sup>68</sup> Or merely »clever and decorative, evocative and nostalgic, the entertaining scherzi of someone definitely informed rather than anything profound?«<sup>69</sup> Or something more? At the very least, their commitment to flat, communicative surfaces can be considered a principled adherence to their own theoretical model and, ultimately, to their understanding of how the modernist ethic of »honest expression« of architectural function(s) can be maintained in practice. They refuse to treat veneer walls with any illusion of load-bearing *gravitas*, instead making them crisp, flat, and visually weightless. At the same time, this same skin (upon first, or second, glance) must convey the building's identity, its cultural context and design heritage, what it is for and whose it is. But, as Scott Brown has said, »contextual borrowings should never deceive; you should know what the real building consists of beneath the skin. For this reason our allusions are representations rather than copies of historic precedents. The deceit is only skin deep.«<sup>70</sup> Like the false front of DSb, or a tattoo, honest design communicates its own artifice, providing a superficial »deceit« that ultimately deceives no one. For VSBA, obvious artificiality and ontological ambiguity are both built into the decorated shed, functionalism, and architecture itself.

This may not establish VSBA as authentic functionalists, but it helps illuminate what they mean when applying the term to themselves. A more precise label might be »reformed« or, even better, »counter-reformation« functionalists, responding to an over-zealous puritanism that discarded ancient wisdom along with erroneous practices. We might agree with Colquhoun that their designs

»do not, as do other »post-functionalist« buildings, attempt to define an alternative language to that of functionalism. They reveal, but do not overcome, the contradictions latent in the contemporary state of architecture, and this makes it difficult to find a basis for critical discussion of the work.«<sup>71</sup>

That difficulty might explain some of the vehemence and variety in reactions to VSBA's ideas and buildings. But certainly a full understanding of the decorated shed, their designs, and the criticism they inspire demands a sharpened picture of how they define aesthetics in relation to architectural function. Even Kenneth Frampton, after excoriating their promotion of »the ruthless kitsch of Las Vegas, as an exemplary mask for the concealment of the brutality of our own environment«, describes »the aestheticizing intent of their thesis.«<sup>72</sup> The parallels Jean-Claude Lebensztein sees between their work and photo-realism, which share disconcertingly polished surfaces and seemingly banal subject matter, remain apt: »both are reactionary and avant-garde, smug and ambitious, discreet and rowdy: contradiction itself.« When he describes VSBA's work as »extraordinary in its mixture of aggressiveness and invisible elegance, of lightness and insolence«, its elegance is strictly conceptual, not visible, like that of a mathematical proof.<sup>73</sup> William Curtis finds that Venturi's »ideas were usually more convincing in writing than when built«, due in part to his »lack of an instinctive feeling for form, space or even proportion.«<sup>74</sup> If VSBA are guilty of aestheticization, they have not deployed aesthetics to placate their critics.

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68 Jameson 1985: 75

69 Rowe 1998 [1976]: 147

70 Scott Brown 2001 [1992]: 128

71 Colquhoun 1998 [1978]: 186

72 Frampton 2007: 291

73 Lebensztein 2009: 55, 64

74 Curtis 1996: 563



Or most: Jordy, hardly an uncritical VSBA apologist, praises Venturi's »great visual finesse« and »the consummate rightness of his aesthetic decisions« in their best projects, in which he sees »the taut balance [Venturi] maintains among the three principal sources of influence that currently condition architectural design: modernism, historicism, and Pop-vernacular.«<sup>75</sup> At the core of their work is a conviction that architecture should communicate this tension between conflicting needs, not the fantasy of harmonious, integrated design solutions that are more reassuring, but less useful and less honest than a shed whose decoration is simultaneously, ambiguously, on and of the building itself. Their insistent lack of visual integration does indeed »stress the contradictions between the inside and outside«, even as their overburdened skins tie them together.<sup>76</sup> Harries takes issue with the charge that they lean too heavily on *venustas*: »We do [Venturi] an injustice when we understand him as another representative of the aesthetic approach. His turn to textuality implies just the opposite – a critique of that approach.«<sup>77</sup> It can still be argued that »the Venturi emphasis on sign deliberately wrenched meaning from form, building, and function. The emphasis on two-dimensional graphics denied the ultimate reality of architecture as three-dimensional substance or volume.«<sup>78</sup> Or perhaps their understanding of function, image, and meaning simply binds them another way.

75 Jordy 1985: 266, 274

76 Vinegar 2009: 163

77 Harries 1998: 70

78 Jordy 1985: 274

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## Figures

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### F2

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## Denise R. Costanzo

Ph.D. / Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA. Bachelor of Environmental Design, Texas A&M University (1992); Master of Arts, Art History, Penn State University (1999); Dissertation, Art History, Penn State University (2009): *The Lessons of Rome: Architects at the American Academy, 1947-1966*.