

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF IMAGES INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMAGINATIVE WORLD OF ROBERT VENTURI

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ARCHITECTURAL THEORY

IMAGE THEORY

ROBERT VENTURI

VISUAL PERCEPTION

The research presented aims to investigate the theoretical work of the American architect, Robert Venturi, starting with the question: what was his dreamlike, imaginative, and creative world composed of? What role did the images that populated it play out and how were they transformed? From European explorations, through the book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, to the realization of *Mother's*

House, the study seeks to shed light on the evolution of theoretical thought through the observation from the images that Robert Venturi selected for himself, and which thus constitute themselves an archive of the visual and spatial research he conducted. It is thus from the images collected or taken that an attempt has been made to reconstruct the connection between visual perception, image, and theory.

INTRODUCTION

The In reality, however, he has merely discovered that up till then he has never thought about his images at all. (Jung, 1934-54/2021, p. 21)

The text presented here wishes to place itself in the groove of those studies related with the observation of images. These are foundational grounds for the understanding of the historical-artistic processes made of evolutions, recurrences, and contradictions. We could call it an *Archaeology of Images* quoting Brusatin (1995), whose goal is not so much to reveal exact data about events or people, but, on the contrary, to show how high is the level of contamination, mixing and geographical/temporal dislocation of meanings that through images continue to have an opportunity to enter the world of things. A certain kind of study refers to the criterion of archaeological inquiry expressed by Foucault, and from which I borrow the desire to focus attention on what he calls traces, ruptures, layers, and transformations, within a discourse that does not aim to identify continuity and directionality (Foucault, 1999, p. 29).

The idea of using this 'tool' of investigation in the field of architectural representation stems from the characteristics from which this discipline is made, as well as the role it plays during the creative process. For architecture, as for many other practices, the condition that simultaneously nurtures and generates representations is always a true process. This is real before it even exists and after its eventual realization or destruction. Such a cycle, we might say vital, is composed of an imagination to which an action corresponds. Moving the threads of the path from ideas to reality is bonded with the desire for images. That is, that inexplicable but characterizing need of human beings since the dawn of time to expose outside themselves what they have intimately seen in the darkness of their minds. What we would call giving birth is the culmination of a long journey of inner gestation of images and perceptions. In this

time frame –short when commensurate with one man’s history, and very extensive when related to the history of man– what happens is the establishment of a constant dialogue between us and the images, and vice versa.

This intimate relationship, made up of words that tell images and images that try to synthesize words, is an integral part of all those activities whose purpose is transformation. For this reason, the research I conduct chooses to investigate the theoretical work of the American architect, Robert Venturi, starting with the question: what was his dreamlike, imaginative, and creative world composed of? Following the visible traces of its *oggetti di affezione* to discover the role that images play in the process of constituting an architectural theory, and in what ways and by what means they act in the process itself (Purini, 2002).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded. –Doing fine– the blind man said. (Carver, 1983/2014, p. 258)

To enter another person’s imaginative world, one must inevitably attempt to look through his or her eyes. In other words, to retrace the road already taken to glimpse images, thoughts and feelings, and if possible, neatly connect and make evident in retrospect the work of slow construction that the author, living it, could not already make narrative.

The starting point, of Robert Venturi’s long journey of formation, is his own family. Although both Italian-Americans and settled in Philadelphia, both Robert Sr. and Giovanna (Vanna) choose to instill in their son Bob more than a taste for pasta, a love of Italian art. In fact, his first entry into the world of pictures illustrating books happens when he was still a child and was initiated into Italian art and architecture through the volumes he could consult in

his father's home. In this way, what will be passed on to Robert will be "a powerful and topical idea of Italy as the cradle of Western arts and culture, but above all as a place of a history still eloquent and yet to be discovered" (Sessa, 2020, p. 35).

Venturi will never abandon this initial imprinting, which he owes above all to the long and firm relationship established with his mother Vanna. Images will accompany him all his life, cyclically marking real, personal, and professional evolutionary transitions. It may seem very trite to say, but in the pre-digital era images had a different value and perhaps even a different meaning and weight in the formative path of a young boy than they do today. If only because in the world still made up of paper books and film photographs, you were obliged to seek images, if you wanted to satisfy your curiosity to know. This physical relationship, made up of encounters with books, places, and imaginations is what I would like to highlight.

Consultation of the material constituting the Venturi Fund, housed at the *Stuart Weitzman School of Design* in Philadelphia, was a crucial if not mandatory step in the beginning of my research. In 2006 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown donated the entire body of material constituting the archives of *Venturi Scott Brown Associates*, their professional practice, to the University of Pennsylvania. The VSBA collection consists of both documents, drawings, models, reports, manuscripts, and correspondence; and documents that Venturi and Scott Brown produced for their lectures at UPenn and other institutions. All in all, this is a substantial amount of material that allows one to move throughout the author's life. Indeed, the extraordinary uniqueness of the Venturi, Scott Brown archive consists precisely in its unity and integrity; an extremely useful condition when related to the intent of trying to reconstruct the events, choices, and influences that shaped Robert Venturi's view of the world. What to look for, then, to 'look through another person's eyes? From the outside,

perhaps the only possible way is to see what those eyes have seen. The research, in fact, would like to substantiate the inseparable relationship that exists in Venturi's work between images and text, not only as a moment of reflection but above all as a real activity of processing visual material, which as Arnheim points out is only possible "if the relevant properties of the objects to be thought about are made evident to the eyes through images" (1969/2013, p. 17). A concept that in common parlance can be traced in the effective summary: 'if you do not understand I can draw you a picture'; an *extrema ratio* that reveals an insufficiency of words in the process of communication.

RESULTS

I was in the grip of a kind of hallucination; I was suffocating; I needed air. Mechanically, I fanned myself with the piece of paper, the back and front of which came successively before my eyes. What was my surprise when, in one of those rapid turns, at the moment when the back was turned to me, I thought I caught sight of the Latin words "craterem" and "terrestre", among others! (Verne, 2009, p. 66).

What, then, are images? And how do they construct their own autonomy of interaction within and with the viewer? It is undeniable that not all images are the same, and as far as research is concerned, the images that constitute the most important are those in which a relationship of significance established between the subject and the signs it contains can be discerned. Indeed, it is in this relationship that the image is not configured as a mere artifact, but a true epiphany (Wunenburger, 2008).

Starting from this and taking into account the approach to images that Robert Venturi constructed during his early years of training in the family sphere, I have chosen to proceed by beginning with the consultation of visual material,

giving myself as a criterion of temporal progression, that is, starting from what he saw to arrive at what he created. First there are the books he encountered during his journey, some of which we may know if we consider the stated sources of images and bibliographical references, he himself included in his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectures*, but which for reasons of economy of the text and in order to privilege unpublished content I choose not to delve into on this occasion.

Then there are the images he himself collected, including those extracted from books, or acquired in the form of postcards or photographs. The process of taking them out of context and precise selection, which underlies the very idea of collecting, makes this material a valuable 'mirror' of an otherwise inaccessible thought. The *Images and Illustrations* section, contained in the *Finding Aid* document specially created to allow consultation of the preparatory material for the book's publication in 1966, is a good key to the images that populated Robert Venturi's imagination. What is in fact found in the first 5 folders (225.XI.106 to 110) are postcards, photographs, negatives, and electrostatic prints belonging to a time span from 1960 to 1965. During this time frame, following his trips to Europe (the first in 1948 and the second from 1954 to 1956 as a resident at the *American Academy* in Rome), he continued to look at, use, and communicate with images that in retrospect we can recognize as springs of his theoretical thoughts.

In both Figures 1 and 2, I report some of the materials found in the archive. Already from this very small part of the voluminous corpus of images that in those years accompanied the process of construction of both *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and *Mother's House* (1964), it is possible to see how the recurrence of certain themes indicate a definite interest. That is, Robert Venturi selects and assembles images in which he recognizes a constancy in difference, a kind of mutation of form but not of substance (Giedion, 1969). For example, the theme of the plas-



Fig. 1 Robert Venturi, *Scott Brown Collection* (225.XI.108), 2022. Author's assemblage of postcards and photocopies depicting various subjects, belonging to Robert Venturi.

ticity of space recognizable in the images of the Campidoglio Square, Piazzetta Sant'Ignazio, Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne and the Pantheon recurs.

From this particular contingency, in which Venturi combines the study of images for the making of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* with the making of images (drawings) for the construction of *Mother's House*; one is prompted to further reflect on the level of interdependence between words, images and the body. Indeed, it is here that it makes sense to introduce the concept of the subject's physical involvement with the image. This relationship is not a passive one, but presupposes an involvement of the body in thought, possible through a certain degree of 'surrender' or 'spontaneity' on the part of the observer (Wunenburger, 2008).



Fig. 2 Robert Venturi, *Scott Brown Collection* (225.XI.108), 2022. Author's assemblage of postcards and photocopies depicting various subjects, belonging to Robert Venturi.

The topic of the form of space may seem almost obvious in the field of architecture, yet if we talk about images, it is not at all. In fact, lastly, I introduce the slides that Robert Venturi employed during his lectures. This archival material is still in the process of being arranged, thus mostly unpublished, and for this reason it cannot be considered to belong exclusively to a precise temporal phase of his formation. The images that converge here come from a variety of moments and sources, and it is precisely this heterogeneity that guarantees their provenance: the visual world of Robert Venturi. And exactly as Arnheim argues, by the term visual education we do not mean the ability to figure something in the mind and that is all, but something that is in the possibility of being imagined because there is a corresponding experience, even a physical one (2013).

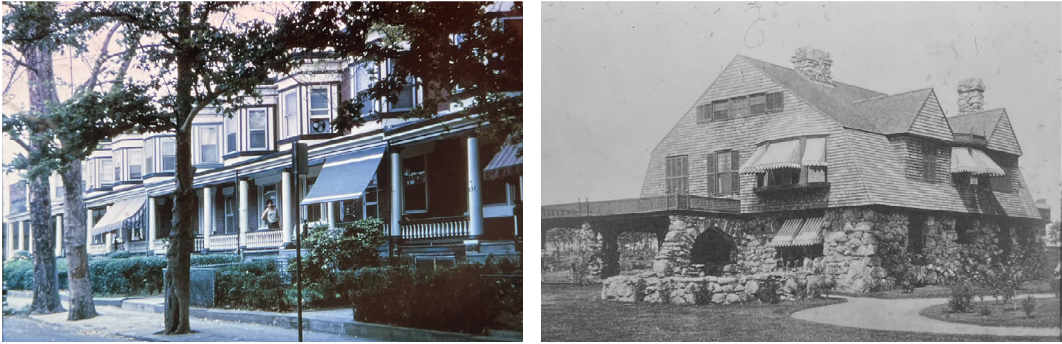


Fig. 3 Robert Venturi, *Scott Brown Collection*. Color slides made by Robert Venturi.

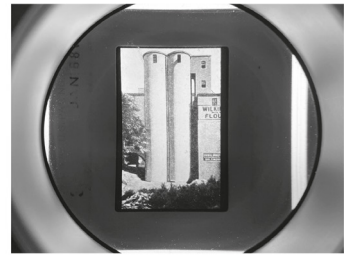
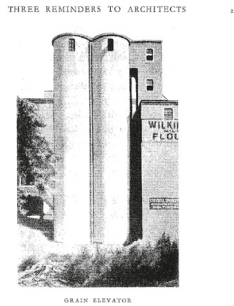
The following images have therefore been chosen and organized in order to encapsulate in small groups precise experiences on which different cores of a single thought were structured over time.

In Figure 3 I report what can be understood as one of the roots of Venturian theoretical and architectural thought: the American tradition of Shingle Style architecture and its city Philadelphia.

Similarly in the images in Figure 4, although not in a physical sense, I bring in a significant theoretical root that in this case refers to two important books of the twentieth century: *Vers une Architecture* by Le Corbusier (1923/1986) and *Architecture without Architects* by Bernard Rudofsky (1964). In their respective associations, in fact, we see how Robert Venturi selected precise pages in order to use the images in them during his lectures.

From Le Corbusier's book he borrows a photograph of wheat silos, a type of industrial element employed by the author to exemplify his discourse on volume as the true goal to be pursued in the imagination of architecture (1986, p. 25). From Rudofsky's book, however, he collects one of the pages in which the author focuses on the construction of the villages of the Dogon, a population of Mali. Here what is brought to attention is the high level of sophistication of the urban fabric, as well as of the buildings, in spite of the "primitive idea" of these places (1964, p. 41).

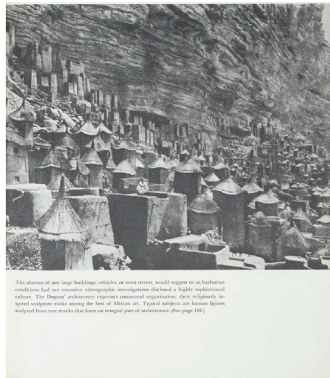
Fig. 4 Robert Venturi, *Towards a new Architecture* (p. 25) and black and white slide (above); Robert Venturi, *Architecture without Architects* (p. 41) and black and white slide (below).



ARCHITECTURE has nothing to do with the various "styles."

The styles of Louis XIV, XV, XVI or Gothic, are to architecture what a feather is on a woman's head; it is sometimes pretty, though not always, and never anything more.

Architecture has graver ends; capable of the sublime, it



The two themes just enunciated, namely, volume and vernacular architecture, are perhaps among those that most marked Robert Venturi's formative journey at an early stage. In fact, the next group of images, certainly made by him and thus dating from a period between 1948 and 1956, are a direct extension of these reflections now conducted in the field. The photographs in Figure 5 most likely depict villages in central and southern Italy, but although the location is not indicated in the margin of the slide as it is in other cases, what is interesting to note is Venturi's precise intention to research through physical experience and thus photography the theme of *Italian Hill Towns*, about which he would write in 1955 the unpublished essay *Hilltowns and Hilltowns*, in which ideas about the experience of space and

in particular the value of medieval urban space become evident (Costanzo, 2021).

During the years of his stay in Italy, and particularly in Rome, the theme of the perception of urban space will be combined with that of volume. This hybridization will lead to the development of a line of research in which the void between things will be the focus of Robert Venturi's sensory and visual attention.

In his photographs collected in Figure 6, one can sense how the attempt is to portray what is not visible but can be inferred from the arrangement of volumes around the void. This invisible is the physical perception of space, which through an effort of translation into an image he tries to restore. An intention that is made even more evident, and perhaps didactic, in the photographs in Figure 7. Here the great season of Roman Baroque space plays a decisive role, whose affinity with medieval architectural space should not be forgotten (Ambrosi, 1979, p. 5), and which perhaps not by chance are ideally juxtaposed by Venturi, following a criteria of visibility and direct experience.

In Figure 8, finally, are collected some of his photographs that perhaps have most to do with the theme of surface, here still mixed with the concept of ambiguity and space, especially if we consider his photograph of Luigi Moretti's *Sunflower House*. The surface, understood also only as an enclosure, would be one of the topics that Robert Venturi would work on in a second phase of his life and that would lead to the production of the book *Learning from Las Vegas*, written in collaboration with Denis Scott Brown and Steven Izenour (1972/2010).

DISCUSSION

Photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are. (Sontag, 1977/2021, p. 9)

The work presented so far, and still evolving, is intended to open a window into a way of looking at Robert Venturi's work in which the experience of architecture is placed at



Fig. 5 Robert Venturi, *Hilltowns*. Color slides from photographs taken by Robert Venturi.

the center of the theoretical discourse. Indeed, his abundant production of images, whether drawings or photographs, cannot be considered accidental, but more properly can be interpreted as an ability to process sensory data (Arnheim, 1969/2013, p. 11). This very aptitude will lead Robert Venturi to structure a theory of architectural space that probably cannot be separated from the idea that any space we pass through, unbeknownst to us, is transformed into an image. Besides our eyes, is therefore the body and its perception of space to become the instrument and the full sense.

The coincidence of his most important editorial work, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, with his equally important architectural work, *Mother's House*, presents itself as a great opportunity to analyze Robert Venturi's theoretical thinking and imagination. Wanting, in fact, to build a parallelism between what has been said so far about images (and how they were real moments of theoretical reflection to be placed at the basis of the architect's practical action) I thought it would be interesting to conclude the juxtaposing of photographs and drawings next to pages extracted from the famous book. In Figure 9 the extracted page comes from chapter 10, *The obligation toward the difficult whole*, the last of those belonging to the narrative of his idea of architecture and in which, in wanting to draw the sums of a long and articulate discourse, he finally speaks explicitly about the role of perception



Fig. 6 Robert Venturi, *Visions of urban spaces*. Color slides from photographs taken by Robert Venturi.

in architectural design. In particular, he makes a direct reference to the theories of Heinrich Wölfflin (*Renaissance and Baroque*, 1888/2010), undoubtedly demonstrating his knowledge and sharing of theories on the conception of tangible form and the psychic interpretation of spatial form (*raumform* as spatial form and *lebensgefühl* as vital feeling) (Venturi, 1966).

The photograph number 233 (*farmhouses and small provincial buildings in souther Italy*) in chapter 10, there I place side by side the page extracted from chapter 11, Works, in which Venturi presents in an almost philological manner to his theory the projects he executed (Figure 10). In this way it becomes interesting to note the affinity that exists between the two images. The spatial concept of proximity and accidentality is contained as much in the staircase of the 'typical southern Italian' dwelling (No. 249) as it is in the staircase that Venturi thinks of and makes for *Mother's House* (No. 315). Indeed, he designs a staircase with a winding, apparently unplanned form, in whose conformation he seems to try to imprint a certain spatial tension that is the result of his direct bodily experience of Italian villages.

Fig. 7 Color slides from photographs taken by Robert Venturi. Views from bottom to top.



The effort to understand the point of intersection between subject-body-and object-architecture-is what Venturi tries to do as much in his photographs, drawings, and architecture.

CONCLUSIONS

The material collected, and only a small part of the one here presented, takes the form of a possible path of investigation of an author's educational journey. Indeed, the



Fig. 8 Robert Venturi, *Surface*.
Color slides from photographs
taken by Robert Venturi.

analysis of visual mental processes is believed to be a good way to arrive at the understanding of a theory not only through words but also through images.

Robert Venturi's photographs portray mental and sensory places, as well as geographical ones. To look at them is to take a journey through time, history, and the physical perceptions he himself has experienced. His work, both in theory and practice, deals with the value of images in a very profound way. The construction of his thought is intended to bring out the true object of architecture, namely that will of matter that Wölfflin called "formal force" (2010, p. 26).

In this constant relationship between reality and image, and image and reality, a circular path is constructed in which we move from the absorbed image to the executed image, a circularity that precisely at its end returns to the beginning through an act of transformation. In other words, from the theory collected and made with photographs, the architectural project is generated. At this point a space that wants to reproduce in its image the same sensory values from which it was generated comes to existence.

Fig. 9 Page 101 excerpted from Chapter 10 related to figure No. 249 and its drawing made by Robert Venturi.

illustrated in 110), consists of almost equal combinations of contrasting directions and rhythms in columns, piers, walls, and roofs. A similar composition is that of the Berlin Philharmonic Hall (248). The plastic forms of indigenous Mediterranean architecture (249) are simple in texture, but rectangles, diagonals, and segments are intimately combined. Gaudí's dressing table in the Casa Guàrd (250) represents an orgy of contrasting dualities of form: extreme inflection and continuity are combined with violent adjacencies and discontinuities, complex and simple curves, rectangles and diagonals, contrasting materials, symmetry and asymmetry, in order to accommodate a multiplicity of functions in one whole. At the scale of furniture, the prevalent sense of the equivocal is expressed in the chair illustrated in (103). Its back configuration is curving and its front is rectangular. It is not dissimilar in its difficult comparison to Aalto's bentwood chair illustrated in (251).

Inherent in an architecture of opposites is the inclusive whole. The unity of the interior of the Inarri church or the complex at Walsbyrig is achieved not through suppression or exclusion but through the dramatic inclusion of contradictory or circumstantial parts. Aalto's architecture acknowledges the difficult and subtle conditions of program, while "serene" architecture, on the other hand, works simplifications.

However, the obligation toward the whole in an architecture of complexity and contradiction does not preclude the building which is unresolved. Poets and playwrights acknowledge dilemmas without solutions. The validity of the questions and vividness of the meaning are what make their works art more than philosophy. A goal of poetry can be unity of expression over resolution of content. Contemporary sculpture is often fragmentary, and today we appreciate Michelangelo's unfinished Pietà more than his early work, because their content is suggested, their expression more immediate, and their forms are completed beyond themselves. A building can also be more or less incomplete in the expression of its program and its form.

The Gothic cathedral, like Beuvas, for instance, of which only the enormous choir was built, is frequently unfinished in relation to its program, yet it is complete in the effect of its form because of the motivational consistency of its many parts. The complex program which is a process, continually changing and growing in time yet at each stage at some level related to a whole, should be recognized as



This is why Venturi's *Mother's House* can be considered the manifesto of his architecture, as it condenses the imaginative power from which it was generated.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that what has been said so far about images pertains to their evocative power, which is not to be traced to an executive technical value, and which needs the human body as a medium of transmission in order to exist.

Fig. 10 Pages 118-119 extracted from Chapter 11 related to photographs of the *Mother's House* staircase taken by Robert Venturi.



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