

## Public Ambiguity

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### A Complexity within the Framework

The term 'ambiguous' is used to refer to something indefinable whose outlines are blurred, preventing a clear grasp of its status. The strangeness that characterises it often makes it a negative adjective employed to define a state that should be corrected, rectified or clarified. But it is also the realm of confusion, hesitation and invention.

'Ambiguity' is not a new term in architecture. It gained traction in the field of French-language architectural theory in 1977, with the first translation into French of the American manifesto *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*<sup>01</sup> [Fig. 1, Fig. 2] which, surprisingly, was translated as *De l'ambiguïté en Architecture*.<sup>02</sup> The author, Robert Venturi, sought in this book to provide a critique of modern architecture, which he described at the time as 'orthodox', preferring instead 'ambiguous' architectures (in French), 'complex and contradictory' ones (in English). Venturi regretted that the clarity pursued by modern architects removed architecture from life, from its inherent and joyful contradictions. In so doing, Venturi taught us an essential lesson: the (un)ambiguous character of architecture in fact defines a posture that is not neutral with regard to the world. For Venturi, ambiguity contradicts modernism, is inclusive, has no expectations, and anchors architecture in the world as it is, without seeking to order it.

Sixty years after the manifesto, the critique conveyed by Venturi's ambiguous architecture still seems relevant, as it resonates with a more general critique of a social structure that philosophy of science calls modernity<sup>03</sup> and which rests on such binary distinctions as the nature/culture dualism<sup>04</sup> or the male/female, high culture/popular culture, sick/healthy, etc. dualisms and which, when extended to architecture, opposes form/function, private/public, author/executor, technique/ornament, design/realisation, etc., thereby perpetuating necropolitical<sup>05</sup> hierarchies and dominations that we urgently need to rid ourselves of. Ambiguity seems to open up a space for resistance in the face of the power effects<sup>06</sup> of this social structure. It breaks with modern rational thought to construct an epistemological paradigm shift.

In parallel with this critique, we have seen architectures emerge in Europe<sup>07</sup> whose approaches differ from mainstream production. These architectures share a taste for ambiguity. Playing on truth and falsehood, they produce architectures marked by distorting mirrors, ornaments, *trompe l'œil*s and ready-mades that intrigue and savage the modern heritage. These architectures seem to criticise any architectural truth, the univocal expression of materials, the functionalist approach to the programme and the free plan. They play with logic, making it difficult for us to decipher them. Following in the tradition of Venturi, and in keeping with the topicality of these ambiguous architectures, Ouest's oeuvre takes part in this revival of ambiguous architectures critical of modernity and its binary thinking. This essay takes a closer look at how this ambiguity takes shape in Ouest's architecture and what critical value results from it.

### Ouest's urban ambiguity

*Thursday evening, 7 p.m. I lock my bike at the top of Rue Goffart, a few metres from Chaussée de Wavre. As I look for the entrance to the Théâtre du Rideau, I hesitate between a garage door and a door to a house: how can I tell among the various refurbished buildings?*

<sup>01</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (MoMA, 1966).

<sup>02</sup> The translation was due to Maurin Schlumberger and Jean-Louis Vénard, who translated many books for Éditions Dunod. Robert Venturi, *De l'ambiguïté en Architecture* (Dunod, 1971).

<sup>03</sup> The adjective 'modern' refers here to the field of the philosophy of science and to the works of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers.

<sup>04</sup> Philippe Descola. *Par-delà nature et culture* (Gallimard, 2005).

<sup>05</sup> Paul B. Preciado, 'Architecture as a Practice of Biopolitical Disobedience', *Log* 25 (2005): 121-34. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>06</sup> Ilias Theodoropoulos, 'Ethnographing Gender Roles and Power in Intercultural Communication in Qatar', *Journal of Arabian studies* 8 (2008): 141-60. David Pinder, 'Situationism/Situationist Geography', in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. Rob Kitchen and Nigel Thrift (Elsevier Science, 2009), 144-50.

<sup>07</sup> To cite just a few practices: in Belgium, Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen (2002, Brussels) and architecten de vylder vinck taillieu (2009 - 19, Ghent); in the Netherlands, Monadnock (2006, Rotterdam); in Portugal, Fala Atelier (2012, Porto); and in France, Bruther (2007, Paris) and Éric Lapierre (2000, Paris). The projects carried out by these offices are all examples of this architectural renewal.



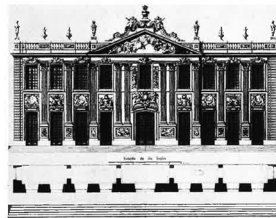
# COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION IN ARCHITECTURE

ROBERT VENTURI

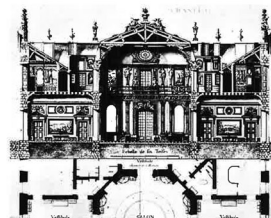
of a house, domestic scale, and partial mystery inherent in a sense of privacy. Its outside order expresses the unity of the idea of house at an easy scale appropriate to the green field it dominated and possibly to the city it will one day be part of.

A building can include things within things as well as spaces within spaces. And its interior configurations can contrast with its container in other ways besides those of the Villa Savoye's. The circular perimeters of bearing wall and colonnade in Hadrian's Maritime Theatre at Tivoli (138) produce another version of the same spatial idea. Even Wright, although only by suggestion, contains the interior intricacy of his Evans House (139) with a rectangular envelope implied by the sculptural corner posts. At the other extreme, the intricacies within the plan of the typical Tudor manor, Barrington Court (13), for example, are hidden, maybe excessively and expressed only incidentally, if at all, on its rigid, symmetrical façades. In another symmetrical Tudor plan the kitchen balances the chapel. The intricacies revealed in section in the chateau at Marly (140, 141) are a concession to light and convenience inside. Because they are not expressed on the outside, the interior light is surprising. Fuga's walls wrap around S. Maria Maggiore (142) and Soane's walls enclose the distorted intricacies of courtyards and wings of the Bank of England (143) in the same way and for similar reasons; they unify outside, in relation to the scale of the city, the contradictory spatial intricacies of chapels or banking rooms which evolved in time. Crowded intricacies can be excluded as well as contained. The colonnades at St. Peter's (144) and at the Piazza del Plebiscito in Naples (145), respectively exclude the intricacies of the Vatican Palace complex and the city complex, in order to achieve unity for their piazzas.

Sometimes the contradiction is not between the inside and the outside but between the top and the bottom of the building. The curving dome and drum on pendentives in Baroque churches protrude beyond the parapets of their rectangular bases. I have already mentioned in the P.S.F.S. skyscraper the curved base, rectangular shaft, and angled top as manifestations of multiple functions contained within the building (40). In the Castel Sant' Angelo (146) the rectangular elements evolve from a circular base. The Romantic roofscapes of Richardson's Watts-Sherman House (147) and the multidomed trulli of Puglia (148) contrast with the severe exterior perimeters of their lower walls. From the outside, the space within a space can become the thing behind a thing. The enormous clesstory of Wollaton Hall (149) reads as a



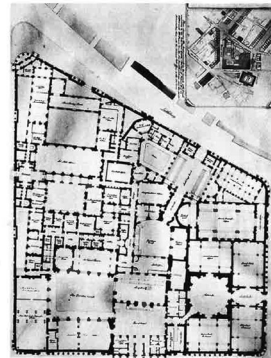
140. Hardouin-Mansart. Château, Marly, Elevation



141. Hardouin-Mansart. Château, Marly, Section



142. S. Maria Maggiore, Rome



143. Soane, Bank of England, London, Plan

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*Inside, a patio organises the different functions while the zenithal light of the bar suggests volumes jutting out over the theatre. The space seems at once perfectly legible for the public and eminently complex for the architect seeking to decipher it while sipping a drink.*

The ambiguity that Ovest develop is urban in nature, even public. It is expressed above all through a founding gesture, specifically reproduced and identifiable in the body of work built by the architects: (re)unifying. Indeed, gestures of reconnection, reunion and expansion abound in the architects's work. They can be found in various typologies, and they all share the same desire to (re)unify spaces.

At times, it is the party walls that open up and the floor levels that seek new connections. For example, in the Zinneke and Théâtre du Rideau projects, adjoining houses were unified, party walls opened up and floors joined by staircases. Sometimes, it is the streets themselves that are reconnected through the interiors of city blocks, as is the case with Centre Scarabaeus, whose existing buildings and enclosed backyards join Rue Creuse and Chaussée de Haecht. Lastly, we also note the presence of large volumes or double heights that open up basements and reconnect them with the context. This is the case with both the RAP house, where the removal of a floor reunited the street level with the garden level, but also the Théâtre le Vilar, where the semi-underground auditorium connects the building with the Louvain-la-Neuve 'slab'. Whether proceeding vertically or horizontally, whether party walls are torn down, streets are joined or double heights created, Ovest's projects reunite and open up while turning again towards the city.

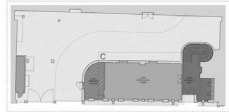
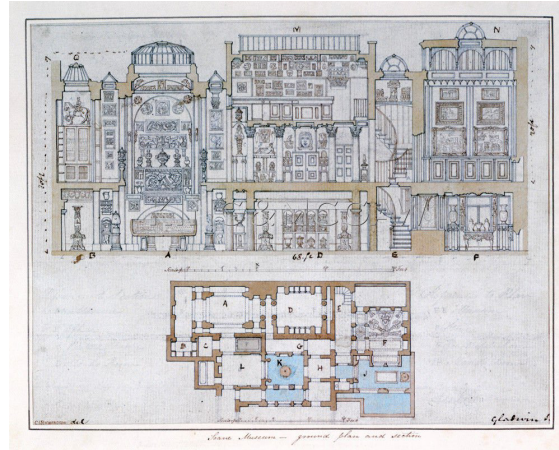
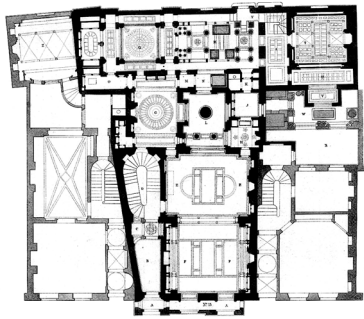
In the process, the uses of these spaces change or perpetuate a previous transformation. Thus, many domestic or industrial sites have been taken over by the city to create collective and public spaces. In the wake of programme adjustments and the reunion of adjoining parties, project scales are blurred. And yet, despite these internal changes—sometimes surreal, often daring, always complex—the building envelopes persist. Ovest's architecture often acts from the inside out, while the outside shares little information about the complexity it conceals. This is not to say that Ovest do not create façades; on the contrary, their façades are real containers that hold many mysteries.

Ovest's ambiguity summons up the relationship between the interior and the exterior, and in doing so resonates with a chapter in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* titled 'The Inside and the Outside'.<sup>08</sup> Venturi deplores here the transparent continuity that modern architects maintain with regard to the relationship between interior and exterior. In criticising the 'plan libre' and 'glass houses', Venturi laments the age of windows: real, structured openings within thick walls. Referring to a certain essentialist idea of the origin of architecture, he advocates architecture that serves to shelter and that distinguishes the inside from the outside. It is in this contrast between two worlds that Venturi develops a form of ambiguity that he calls 'The Inside and the Outside'. To exemplify this, Venturi returns to architectures whose façades unify an internal complexity:

Fuga's walls wrap around S. Maria Maggiore, and Soane's walls enclose the distorted intricacies of courtyards and wings of the Bank of England in the same way and for similar reasons:

[1], [2] Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966.

<sup>08</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 70.



<sup>09</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 71.

they unify outside, in relation to the scale of the city, the contradictory spatial intricacies of chapels or banking rooms which evolved in time.<sup>09</sup>

This gesture of external unification is reminiscent of Ovest's projects and underlines the extent to which the façade is a translation between the building and the city. Thus, Ovest's urban ambiguity responds to the ambiguity called for by Venturi. On the one hand, a rather complex interior; on the other, a façade that reveals nothing. Spaces interpenetrate cleverly, but within a very clear framework.

### The urban scale and representation

*A bright day in London. I look at the front of Sir John Soane's Museum from the outside without comprehending it: people seem to enter the museum through one house and leave through another. Inside, everything is mixed up. Although the rear of the plot is completely built up, light penetrates all the way down to the basement through a clever interplay of double heights and light wells. Lost in this labyrinth, I find the floor plan in a publication in the bookshop and analyse it so as to finally understand.*

Two centuries earlier in London, an architect whom Venturi was greatly interested in was already working on the same complex spaces as those in Ovest's projects. John Soane (1753–1837), whose museum on the edge of Lincoln's Inn Fields is now open to visitors, was also fond of backyards and light wells [Fig. 3 and Fig. 4]. Before becoming a museum, his house, which unites three adjoining buildings, was both the architect's residence and a place of teaching and experimentation.

A few squares away, the same experience is repeated in front of the Architectural Association (AA), the famous school of architecture whose façade unifies no fewer than eight houses, spanning numbers 32 to 39 of Bedford Square [Fig. 5 and Fig. 6]. The geographical and typological closeness of the museum and AA building reinforces this impression of urban entanglement, and even gives it a larger scale than that of a simple unification of adjoining buildings. London seems to be the stage for complex interiors in dialogue with each other. It suddenly becomes clear that Sir John Soane's Museum, the Architectural Association and the Bank of England are all part of the same whole, an urban, public whole: the city.

In his chapter on 'The Inside and the Outside',<sup>10</sup> Venturi observes that the question of the boundary between inside and outside arises on several scales: between buildings, of course, but also inside a building itself, through the boundary between rooms or furniture. It can also arise outside the building, and in a more urban relationship of the building within the city, or even of the city within its territory. The question is scalable and calls for a skilful interplay of scales.

In Sir John Soane's Museum, the abundant presence of paintings and models extends to a smaller scale the experience of urban entanglement [Fig. 7]. The Bank of England plans displayed on the walls combining with the various perspectives, the space blends with its representation and thus adds the scale of the drawing to the ambiguous impression that the museum creates. This sensation must also exist in the models made at the AA, so much so that

<sup>10</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 70.



[3], [4] John Soane, *Lincoln's Inn Fields*, London, 1808–1837.

[7] Joseph Micheal Gandy, *Public and Private Buildings, Sir John Soane's collection, between 1780 and 1815*. Painting realised under the tutelage of Soane representing the atmosphere of the house at that time.

[5], [6] Unknown / Collective authorship, *AA School*, London, 1920–(...).

one begins to think that the making of architecture—or at least its representations—is also part of this urban ambiguity. As such, the recurrence of spaces within larger urban ensembles is also an important element of the urban ambiguity we are interested in here. The repetition of a typology or its representation contributes to the creation of multiple ensembles.

One wonders, then, whether the unifying façades of Ouest's projects are not ultimately urban façades, made possible by the widespread repetition of this type of architecture within vast territories like Brussels, visible only on an urban scale. Ouest's urban ambiguity can be seen throughout their work, like a Nolli plan of ambiguous architectures.

#### In the framework, a shift towards process

*I often observe this picture. [Fig. 8] Several people are debating around a singular table. A plan of several adjoining buildings has been printed on the tabletop. Here and there, façades rise up, suggesting a complex urban ensemble. The figures, like marshals looking at a battle plan, seem to be discussing architectural strategies. In the background, the rhythm of the glass wall blends with the paper prints on display. Whether the table, the A4 papers or the grey cardboard façades, the architecture in the making maintains an ambiguous relationship with its décor-like background, a background whose fate is being discussed at that very moment.*

Thus, Ouest's ambiguity could be summed up as follows: unifying complexity within an urban framework. This attachment to the framework resonates with another important aspect of Ouest's approach. Indeed, Ouest don't confine themselves to spatial typologies, but also seek to question the processes, methods and protocols for the making of architecture. The practice seems to reflect again and again on working frameworks within existing or legal frameworks, such as public contracts.

Zinneke, the award-winning public project, is highly illustrative of this approach and deserves to be evoked once more. In this project, reuse and co-design completely reshuffled the cards in the public practice of architecture, generating an entirely new way of making architecture through the emergence of two types of disruptions, in terms of both temporality and roles.<sup>11</sup> These disruptions alter the classic process of producing architecture according to well-defined roles and project stages, enabling new ways of doing things. Another singularity of the project worth mentioning is the commitment of the architects, down to the design of the project's tools, such as the model table [Fig. 9], a co-design support inclusive of non-experts, or the tender documents (DCE) presented in the form of an exhibition to showcase the reused materials. All these considerations extend the scope of the project down to the design of its methodologies and tools.

This commitment to the creation of forms of practice resonates directly with the epistemological paradigm shift in which the above ambiguity takes place. Questioning ways of doing things has a direct impact on the deconstruction of oppressive hierarchies. In the case of the Zinneke project, for example, the disruptions of the roles and work stages make it possible to renegotiate the hierarchies at work between thinking and doing, experts and non-experts.

Reuse results in a different consideration of materiality. The form of the reclaimed elements becomes secondary to their use and makes it possible to reinvent our relationship with architectural form.

#### Between spatiality and process: a Public Ambiguity

Invention inside the framework can therefore also be a way to define the various research projects carried out around processes. It also expands the definition of public ambiguity in the work of Ouest towards a process-related dimension that Venturi had not identified and which nevertheless seems central to the urban ambiguity developed by the architects. Whether with its walls or working methodologies, Ouest's ambiguity engages with public, common frameworks, and makes possible a rich complexity within these frameworks, both spatially and methodologically. Spatially, the public is struck by the façade and by the ambiguity constructed between two worlds, that of the building and that of the city. As for the process-related dimension, it is by criticising the normative frameworks of architecture that Ouest engage with the common. This time, it is not a matter of designing a façade, but rather of questioning the common rules that govern the making of architecture.



[8]

<sup>11</sup> Although this aspect is developed in another article of the book devoted specifically to the Zinneke project, the present assertion is based on a study of the project which shows that several aspects of the project provoke disruptions in temporality (project stages) and the classic roles of the project (architects, clients, experts, etc.).



[9]