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The Difficult Whole: A Reference Book on Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown

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► **To cite this version:**

Valéry Didelon. The Difficult Whole: A Reference Book on Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 2017, 10.1525/jsah.2017.76.3.402 . halshs-02297023

HAL Id: halshs-02297023

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02297023>

Submitted on 21 Mar 2020

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Book Review

Kersten Geers, Jelena Pančevac, and Andrea Zanderigo, eds.

The Difficult Whole: A Reference Book on Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott Brown

Zurich: Park Books, 2016, 261 pp., 112 color and 190 b/w illus. €48, ISBN 9783906027845

At the very beginning of *The Difficult Whole*, the editors explain that it is “a book about the architecture of Robert Venturi, not around it. The aim is to document what is there. The book shows the work, it doesn’t over-interpret” (15). Thus readers are promised that they are about to receive a deadpan presentation of projects and buildings conceived by the office Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown from 1959 through 1985. Indeed, the largest and central part of the volume consists of twenty-eight monographic pieces on VRSB projects, each combining a short text, several documents from the firm’s archives preserved at the University of Pennsylvania, and some plans and sections drawn especially for the book. In the cases of three specific buildings, also included are sets of pictures taken by the photographer Bas Princen. Indeed, the elements presented are actually descriptive and not interpretive. Nevertheless, they depict only the outside shapes of the buildings and the interior spaces. Construction and functional aspects of the projects are deliberately left out, as are details of the circumstances of their commissioning and the social contexts of the realizations themselves. In this way the book’s approach, like every description, is partial and thereby innately interpretive. It implies a distinctive and debatable point of view on Venturi’s work, one that is expressed after this daunting incipit about “what is there.”

The introductory text of *The Difficult Whole* is daringly revisionist. The editors assure us that the works presented in the book are “often misunderstood” because of the declarations of Venturi himself and of “his entourage” (John Rauch and especially Denise Scott Brown, who coauthored most of the projects but does not receive further consideration in the text). Throwing out the commentaries, interpretations, and judgments accumulated for half a century, Geers, Pančevac, and Zanderigo claim to let the buildings speak for themselves. Better hammered than argued, their thesis is that “architecture deals with itself.” In our overdeveloped world shaped by the modern project, they say, every building has to show “its own *raison d’être*, its cultural context, its roots, and finally, its necessity” through its form (16). In support of this essentialist pronouncement, they call upon Venturi after having disowned him. In his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the editors say, the architect has delivered “a set of nerdish and slightly naive principles for architectural form and composition,” which they intend to implement—in a less naive way, we might assume (16).¹ They attempt to use a somewhat biased reading of Venturi’s book to support the dogma of “architecture without content” that Kersten Geers and his students have been gradually developing over the past few years, first at Columbia University in New York and then later at the *École Polytechnique Fédérale* in Lausanne. Indeed, out of their reading of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the editors of *The Difficult Whole* recall observations on architectural form but not on its signification. They precisely claim “to cut the work loose from the reductive perspective of semiotics” while taking the risk of depriving Venturi’s theory of all substance (15). A less prejudicial and more extensive analysis like the

one proposed by Stanislaus von Moos in Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown: *Buildings and Projects* shows us how the architects were in fact “not concerned with the fundamentally timeless structure of architectural form but rather with its capacity to convey extremely temporal meanings and messages.”²

Geers, Pančevac, and Zanderigo seek to read the twenty-eight projects they highlight as many occurrences of a “survival strategy,” useful for the present day, when architecture is, according to them, threatened by the many forces of modernization. They “re-invent” Venturi as a pioneer of a disciplinary withdrawal they themselves now champion. They claim that in an America devoid of context, Venturi’s architecture would have been on its own—“a universe of itself, potent enough to survive as an independent settlement” (16). Could one imagine a more nonsensical statement? It is actually worth noting that from the time of his diploma thesis at Princeton and on through his long and close collaboration with Scott Brown, Robert Venturi was one of the first architects in the United States to give credit to the American suburban context and to show clearly how it gave meaning to his projects. More than any other architect, he acknowledged the virtue of “trivial” vernacular architecture. Through both theory and practice he proved to be a true inclusivist; his extensive understanding of European highbrow architecture never prevented him from taking the side of Main Street and Long Island’s Big Duck against the formalistic games of the architecture elite. He repeatedly desacralized the profession he belonged to and fought the idealism of his colleagues who proved to be indifferent to the productions of ordinary life. In this way, Geers, Pančevac, and Zanderigo engage themselves in an instrumentalization of Venturi’s work with the intent of establishing their own authority, but with the result of delivering a series of banal tautologies such as “The problem of the project is the project itself” (17). Based on ideology rather than on balanced observations, their volume can in this way hardly be considered a “reference book” as von Moos’s book is one, despite the publisher’s inclusion of those words on its cover.

Nevertheless, the volume is attractive. As a printed object, it is flawless. The layout is sharp and beautiful; the relations between the written descriptions and the pictures and drawings are accurate. Some of the documents coming from the VRSB archives (which are now part of the University of Pennsylvania’s architectural archives) appear in print here for the first time. The twenty-eight monographs will most likely be useful to students who engage in formal analysis of Venturi’s projects and buildings—even if they will not find all the richness of the conception of the works. At the end of the book, the nineteen observations on Venturi’s architecture are rather judgmental and show no true historiographical foundations. Nevertheless, researchers might be interested in reading the essay that follows: a short overview study that traces the evolution of the manuscript of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, from the first draft delivered to the Graham Foundation in 1963 to the first published edition in 1966 and the second in 1977. In its last pages, *The Difficult Whole* remains abstruse insofar as it includes, without any explanation, some fine and stylish color plates depicting buildings from the architects Kazunari Sakamoto, Alvaro Siza, and James Stirling and Michael Wilford. Let us assume that we are dealing here with some drawings without content. Till the end, *The Difficult Whole* is wholly difficult.

¹ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

² Stanislaus von Moos, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown: *Buildings and Projects*, trans. David Antal (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 16.