Boredom’s Metamorphosis: Robert Venturi and Saul Steinberg

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation investigates questions of boredom and architecture in the middle decades of the twentieth century through the work of two figures: the American-Italian architect Robert Venturi (b. 1925) and the Romanian-born American architect and artist Saul Steinberg (1914-1999). The topic of boredom in architecture, and specifically within this timeframe, has been largely ignored in architectural history, theory, and criticism where, with the exception of a few articles, there is no consistent body of scholarship on this issue. Looming large in the sterile iterations of various –isms, boredom remains critical in contemporary architectural practice as the production and obsolescence of images becomes ever faster with new technologies. Quickly saturated with information presented in fleeting displays that are easy to produce, easy to delete, and easy to consume, as soon as our expectation for novelty and change fails to satisfy us, we fall back into the loop of boredom.

While boredom as the dissociation of person from place has raised architects’ interest especially during the middle decades of the twentieth century, there is no significant scholarship on this topic. In this context, my research looks at the work of two architects who go beyond the attractive rhetoric of boredom and explore its potential as both a critical and a generative tool.
My dissertation investigates questions of boredom and architecture in the middle decades of the twentieth century through the work of two figures: the American-Italian architect Robert Venturi (b. 1925) and the Romanian-born American architect and artist Saul Steinberg (1914-1999). Although the topic of boredom as a disease of modernity has been studied in various fields, such as philosophy, literary studies, sociology, and visual arts, it does not have a presence in architectural scholarship. We live in a world where images are short lived, their production and obsolescence becomes faster with new technologies, and we become quickly bored with everything. In this context, boredom remains critical in contemporary architectural practice where we are quickly saturated with information presented in fleeting displays that are easy to produce, easy to delete, and easy to consume. As soon as our expectation for novelty and change fails to satisfy us, we fall back into the loop of boredom. My research looks at the work of two architects who go beyond the rhetoric of boredom and explore its potential both as a tool of criticism and as a design tool.
DEDICATION

To Luca and my parents, cu dragoste nemăsurată
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been closer to a personal journey than I would have ever imagined. It has been written over several years, in several places: a living room facing a quiet backyard in Brookland, Washington, D.C.; the Ph.D. student offices at the Washington-Alexandria Architecture Center; our family house in Bucharest, between two peach trees; the main reading room at the Library of Congress; an office with a lavish porch at Mississippi State University; the Lee Hall “Tower” at Clemson University looking at the often troubled skies of the South; and, finally, nello studiolo of our rental house in Central, SC.

During all these years and in all these places, I would have never accomplished anything without the support, patience, and love of all the people who stood by me. This work owes everything to their friendship and unconditioned trust. I thank my committee members for their guidance, knowledge, and humanity. In her graceful and elegant manner, Dr. Marcia Feurestein has the incredibly strong gift of asking the right question at the right time and thus moving the research forward. By weaving together seemingly loose threads into an unexpected wondrous fabric, Dr. Amy Kulper has shown me how to construct meaning from conventional facts. With his infinite wisdom doubled by an infinite heart, Jaan Holt has magically made things possible at times when nothing seemed possible anymore. His larger than life personality belongs to mythology rather than ordinary life. Dr. Paul Emmons, my committee chair, continues to be a mentor and has become a friend. His ingegno operates at levels inaccessible to ordinary minds. With intuition and intelligence, he crafts not only future scholars, but perhaps more importantly, robust individuals. Entering the program, I did not know I would come out a different person.

I wish to extend my thanks to Kate Schwennsen, Director of Clemson School of Architecture, a role model and inspiring leader, and to all my colleagues for welcoming me with open hearts. They all make the school an incredible and inspiring place.

My gratitude goes to my friends. Dr. Sheila Schwartz, Research and Archives Director at The Saul Steinberg Foundation, is constantly helping me untangle the intricate threads of Steinberg’s life and work. Her discipline and rigor are exemplary, her knowledge, overwhelming, and her warm friendship, exquisite. I thank Berrin for her infectious laugh, and more importantly, for putting up with me during the last months of writing. My dear friends
Cristina and Vijay have stood by me in the thick and the thin. I thank Vijay for bringing spices into my life and for always staying calm in troubled waters. Cristina’s beautiful mind, honesty, and warmth are like no other. I hope she will always know what she means to me and that I am forever grateful for being part of her world. If someone is truly “responsible” for my finishing the work, it is my dear friend Muey, who patiently kept me from drifting away. The immense generosity, with which she fits the entire world in her tiny frame, is humbling. Anca and Virgil Nemoianu have become my family away from home, offering the unconditioned support that one only finds in the closest kin. My warmest and more sincere thoughts go to the Stavropoleos community in Bucharest, for their joy and wit, along with their reassuring presence that make the world a better place. Special thanks to my cousin Camelia, for her sharp humor, intelligence, kindness, and for always showing me the right way to cross the street.

Over the years, my family has seen the doings and undoings of my life and work. My parents have watched me come, go, then leave again. Never a reproach, never a question. They are stronger, braver, and more forgiving than anyone I know. Without their love, I would be lost in an abyss. Finally, meeting my husband Luca was the most unexpected gift. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. To him and my parents this work is dedicated.
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Preface

Ennui. Langeweile. Acedia. Tedium: what do we talk about when we talk about boredom? A pathological condition (Otto Fenichel), a mood conducive to philosophy (Martin Heidegger), “a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks” (Walter Benjamin), “a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly” (Sigfried Kracauer), the concept of boredom emerges and is intertwined with modernity. It has been closely examined in philosophy and aesthetics (Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin), social sciences (Otto Fenichel, Orin Klapp, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi), critical theory and literary studies (Patricia Meyer Sacks, Elizabeth Goodstein, Reinhard Kuhn, Sianne Ngai), and visual arts (Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, Jonathan Flatley, Tom McDonough, Julian Jason Haladyn). However, in architecture boredom has remained ambiguous, vague, barely defined, and rarely acknowledged, and nothing qualified as boring deserves further attention.

My study investigates questions of boredom and architecture in the middle decades of the twentieth century through the work of two figures: the American-Italian architect Robert Venturi (b. 1925) and the Romanian-born American architect and artist Saul Steinberg (1914-1999). The topic of boredom in architecture, and specifically within this timeframe, has been largely ignored in architectural history, theory, and criticism where, with the exception of a few articles, there is no consistent body of scholarship on this issue. Looming large in the sterile iterations of various -isms, boredom remains critical in contemporary architectural practice as the production and obsolescence of images becomes ever faster with new technologies. Quickly saturated with information presented in fleeting displays that are easy to produce, easy to delete, and easy to consume, as soon as our expectation for novelty and change fails to satisfy us, we fall back into the loop of boredom.

While boredom as the dissociation of person from place has raised architects’ interest especially during the middle decades of the twentieth century, there is no significant scholarship on this topic. A few glimpses into architectural writings show that those architects who touched
on the topic of boredom have disregarded its intrinsic significance and approached it mostly as a stylistic trope to draw attention to other, more significant issues.

Shortly after the first use of the word *boredom* in English in Charles Dickens’s 1853 book *The Bleak House*, architecture professor Adolf Göller delivered a talk in 1887 at the Technische Hochshule in Stuttgart in which he offered a hypothesis for style changes in architecture. Göller was mainly concerned with the formation of styles and the invention of architectural forms, which he saw as a cyclical process based on what he called “the law of jading:” as people become more familiar with certain forms, the style is exhausted and eventually becomes obsolete. What he described as the “law of jading” was the recognition of boredom as a link between architectural forms and human beings.

A few decades later, Le Corbusier, unknowingly reinforcing Göller’s deterministic argument, proposed new paradigms of inhabitation and identified the sources of contemporary boredom. In *Towards an Architecture*, he described how the unsuitable living conditions of present-day dwellings spawned the tedium that was driving men and women away from their houses. In the late 1940s, the Austrian architect Josef Frank put forward the concept of *accidentism* as an instrument to combat the dullness of mass produced architecture and the monotony ensued from modernist laws turned normative. First published in 1963, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander’s *Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism* described the “fundamental monotony” and “anxiety-ridden existence” of the modern man in terms of its lack of daily variety, contemplation, and introspection. As “more and more becomes less and less,” overstimulation leads to boredom, a disease whose pathology they identified in the proliferation of artificial, machine-controlled environments. Summarizing the state-of-affairs in architecture during the mid-decades of the twentieth century, in his introduction to the 1967 edition of *Space, Time, and Architecture*, Sigfried Giedion defined it as “Confusion and Boredom:” “In the sixties a certain confusion exists in contemporary architecture, as in painting; a kind of pause, even a kind of exhaustion. […] A kind of playboy-architecture became *en vogue*: an architecture treated as playboys treat life, jumping from one sensation to another and quickly bored with everything.”

In this context, my research looks at the work of two architects who go beyond the attractive rhetoric of boredom and explore its potential as both a critical and a generative tool.
Psychologist Orin Klapp has proposed that the increased use of the word *boredom* between 1931 and 1961 indicates a growing awareness of this particular mood in modern society. In the aftermath of World War II, when the discipline of architecture was reddefing its goals and mission, Robert Venturi, and Saul Steinberg proposed and exercised alternative modes of practice and criticism through rhetorical building (Venturi), and critical drawing (Steinberg). By expanding the boundaries of the field, they also challenged conventional notions about what constitutes architectural scholarship. Both of them, under different forms and in different contexts, specifically addressed the issue of boredom. The starting points of my inquiries is Venturi’s famous, but unexamined, quip *Less is a bore* (1965-1966).

Despite their education as architects, canonical historiography would place Venturi, and Steinberg under different labels and even different disciplines. It was only Venturi, in tandem with his wife and partner Denise Scott Brown, who maintained an active architectural office. Steinberg never worked as a practicing professional. From a disciplinary perspective, he would hardly be considered an architect – building his fame and reputation as a visual artist widely published in *The New Yorker* and many other magazines and journals (including architectural ones), Steinberg produced a broad range of artifacts from drawings, collages, and photomontages to murals, advertising art, fabric design, and stage sets. A visual storyteller, he described himself as a writer and, despite the lack of a consistent body of written work, his interviews, personal notes, and journal entries, reveal the same wit, imagination, and critical view as his drawings.

Venturi, on the other hand, although has always described himself as a practicing architect, became known first as an architectural writer. He had been working and teaching for several years when his 1966 treatise, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, truly put his name at the forefront of the profession. Famously described by Vincent Scully as “probably the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier’s *Vers une Architecture*, of 1923,”¹ the book most certainly played a significant role in the public recognition of Venturi’s practice. The year following its publication, the architectural journal *Progressive Architecture* officially acknowledged the work coming from the firm of Venturi and Rauch. For the 1967 *P/A* Annual Awards, they received one award (for the Frug House) and two

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citations (for the Princeton Memorial Park and three buildings for the city of North Canton, Ohio, the latter addressing directly the issue of boredom).

While Venturi glorified consumerism in its various forms, Steinberg constantly challenged it. In spite of their obvious and sometimes irreconcilable differences, Venturi, and Steinberg are nevertheless connected through multiple threads. Bringing them together sheds new light on the changing nature of the discipline during midcentury and the role boredom played in their own work, as well as in the evolution of the profession at large. What they have in common is also what shapes their shared interest in boredom.

Despite their unquestioned success, both Venturi and Steinberg deliberately positioned themselves at the periphery of the profession, a necessary move for gaining freedom from norms, as well as the distance to act critically. Capitalizing on their foreign origins (Venturi was of Italian descent and Steinberg was born in Romania), both of them had to create a public persona in order to become relevant in the intellectual, not just architectural, world they aspired to belong to.

They shared a consistent curiosity for the everyday and the ordinary of popular culture, most likely originating in their extensive travels around the world. Venturi recognized that his time in Italy and Europe as a fellow of the American Academy in Rome had a decisive influence on his view on architecture. Beginning his adult life as a nomad without a country, Steinberg never ceased to be an avid traveler who enjoyed exploring remote destinations as much as seeing America from the Greyhound. Both of them had a common fascination with Italian architecture, culture, and lifestyle. During their youth, they spent a significant amount of time in Italy at a formative age that left an indelible impact on their later work. Venturi was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, Steinberg studied architecture at the Regio Politecnico in Milan and lived in the same city one year after having earned his degree.

Trained at the height of modernism, Venturi and Steinberg turned into critics of its normative outcomes, using the tedium and fatigue of the modernist language as its own critical tools. Employed differently by each of them, boredom presented a never-before-used conceptual frame to re-imagine what architecture could become. Venturi proposed overstimulation as a way to overcome the tedium and alienation of modern architecture and public spaces. Looking at the
world with skepticism and serious humor, Steinberg’s drawings suggested irony as a mode to accept and, through acceptance, prevail over the boredom spawned from generic and impersonal architectures.

While Venturi uses boredom as a point of entry into the criticism of modern architecture, Steinberg employs it as a generative tool and, as we will see later, understands it as a state-of-mind that offers a gateway to imagination. Venturi recognizes boredom as the alienating mood of midcentury and proposes formal techniques to escape the tedium of modernism. Steinberg, on the other hand, plunges deep into boredom, inverting it into meditation and introspection, the creative moods of vita contemplativa.

I look at Venturi and Steinberg’s work through the lens of microhistory. Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg has put forward a research methodology that examines how small events contain and reveal larger truths. Employing the concept of microhistory (that he re-appropriated from other scholars, re-defining its relevance), Ginzburg has scrutinized the overlooked, the disregarded, and the ephemeral as a way to gain access to history at small scale. Individual stories give insight into wider collective histories. Within this framework, the relevance of a secondary character or that of a minor incident have the power to expose a broader network of significance. Not unlike the procedures routinely performed by doctors or detectives, this method requires a close reading of clues whose piecing together constructs speculative, yet rigorous, scenarios. Similarly, the dissertation unpacks the overlooked notions of boredom, boring, and interesting as a mode to construct a “thick description” of midcentury architecture. Simultaneously, it makes an argument for a positive valorization of boredom as a slow-paced mood of contemplation and introspection.

Attempting to be true to the bodies of work examined, the dissertation follows two intertwined, yet distinct threads. The first and most extensive one, studies Venturi’s early work (with an emphasis on his first treatise Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture from 1966) and unpacks his well-known motto Less is a bore in three chapters. Each of the chapters

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4 The concept of “thick description” was introduced by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle and developed further by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1973 book The Interpretation of Cultures.
comprises, in turn, three sections: the first one provides the theoretical background and critical apparatus of the investigation; the middle one situates Venturi’s work within the midcentury background; the last one focuses specifically on Venturi’s work.

The other thread, organized in two *interludes* interwoven between the main chapters and written in a different voice, looks at Steinberg’s work and its intersections with boredom through a series of speculative readings of his drawings.

The first chapter charts Venturi’s understanding of *boredom* in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* through Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *field*. It is when *habitus* loses its bodily dimension and turns into mere habit, that it becomes *boring*. A different understanding of *habitus* as *d disembodied* practice informs Venturi’s discourse in his first treatise. Influenced by cognitive psychology, behaviorism, New Criticism, and complexity theories from early twentieth century, Venturi has a positivist outlook on architecture and design. Born with modernity, *boredom* also indicates the beginning of its slow demise. A product of the *habitus* of the time, *Less is a bore* also becomes the organizing principle of the visual discourse in *Complexity and Contradiction*. Conceived as pedagogical props, the illustrations in the book operate as *didactic*, *disembodied*, and *discursive* images. Venturi identifies (and addresses) the issue of boredom as *public concern, lack of complexity*, and a *relational* condition between the viewing subject and the architectural object. I suggest that in this early stage of his work, Venturi acknowledges the deeper dimension of boredom to become a contemplative state, an opportunity missed once he focuses on the polemics between the *boring* and the *interesting*.

The first interlude introduces Steinberg’s own understanding of *boredom* through Bourdieu’s *habitus* as a mode of regenerating the creative impetus of the artist. This section looks at three drawings that evoke Steinberg’s childhood home and street. The embodied practices of his childhood, brought back by nostalgic recollections and longings, create a world that is both real and imagined, historically accurate and fictional. Key to this mode of operating is the folding of boredom into a concept specific to Romanian metaphysics: *dor*.

The second chapter traces Venturi’s understanding of *boredom* in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* through the lens of his upbringing as a Quaker. Two of Venturi’s most significant contributions to architectural theory are *Less is a bore* and the concept of
architecture as *decorated shed* (the latter co-authored with Denise Scott Brown). The two stand in a seemingly polemical position: while the former proposes excess as a design strategy, the latter invokes the flatness of commercial billboards as the most meaningful approach to architecture. I propose that Venturi’s Quaker background accounts for this apparent paradox, where both positions are simultaneously contradictory and legitimate. For Venturi, ideas about flatness are inspired by the overwhelming presence of billboards in midcentury America, but also by the lessons learned in his Quaker milieu. Boredom lies at the core of this conversation, as billboards ultimately propose to solve the problem of modern tedium through distraction and visual stimulations. The flatness of the surface cannot be dissociated from the flatness of meaning.

The second interlude attempts to decipher visual riddles in two drawings by Steinberg. His critique of modernism operates at the level of architectural representation, which in modernity assumes the space of clarity and precision. Instead, Steinberg claims the imprecise territory of visual riddles through even more imprecise tools, such as moods and atmospheres. Operating through inversions, Steinberg shows that boredom is never flat and opens up a thick space of interpretations. Key to his technique is the folding of *boredom* into *daydreaming*.

The third chapter maps Venturi’s position on the *boring* and the *interesting* as two ostensibly opposite attributes of architecture. The inquiry begins with the question that Venturi and Scott Brown ask in *Learning from Las Vegas*: “Is boring architecture interesting?” The dichotomy *boring* – *interesting* translates into the dichotomy *duck* – *decorated shed* situated at the core of their architectural theory. Tracing the intellectual history of the *interesting* as an aesthetic category emerging in the eighteenth century, the chapter proposes that the *boring* and the *interesting* are not dialectically opposed. Rather, they both illustrate a disenchantment and disengagement with the world, along with a lack of commitment to a particular worldview. Looking at Venturi’s early work from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and at his collaboration with Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*, I advance the idea that he builds upon nineteenth century aesthetic theories on form and vitality. Furthermore, I identify specific features of the category of the *interesting* in architecture. Different from a parallel discourse in visual arts, the *interesting* in architecture comprises a focus on appearance and formal
compositions, the use of self-referential and normative practices, and an understanding of complexity as excess and overload.

The consequences of the discourse on the boring and the interesting in architecture go beyond the loose, rhetorical meanings generally associated with them. What is at stake is how we construct our criteria for a meaningful worldview, both as designers and inhabitants of architecture. In an environment oversaturated with visual stimuli and information, exercising our ability to assume boredom as a form of contemplation and introspection might offer unexpected avenues to engage with the infra-ordinary of our world.

The concluding chapter discusses a few “uses of boredom” in contemporary design practices and presents two distinct directions. On the one hand, the work of Bjarke Ingels Group and their emphasis on seeking the interesting; on the other hand, the work of architects such as Alberto Campo Baeza and John Pawson who, without specifically addressing the issue of boredom, engage the most banal and ordinary features of the world as a way to construct and reveal wonder.
Chapter 1: Between Boredom and *Habitus*

**Introduction**

In the preface to *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi states: “As an architect I try to be guided not by habit but by a conscious sense of the past – by precedent, thoughtfully considered.”¹ What does the opposition between “habit,” on the one hand, and “a conscious sense of the past,” on the other, indicate? Is it, perhaps, the difference between *habit* and *habitus*, the concept coined by French and anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu? What is the role of history and historical precedents? How does Venturi’s statement from the book preface relate to the quip *Less is a bore* from the subsequent chapters?

The concept of *habitus* as elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, although never referenced directly, is a looming presence in the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Bourdieu generally defined *habitus* as a physical embodiment of practices, skills, and dispositions constructed upon and derived from our life experiences. This accumulation and growth will determine our choices and preferences. While *habitus* does imply repetition, it is when it loses its bodily dimension that it becomes tedious and turns into boredom. Venturi (and Scott Brown) approach *habitus* as a disembodied practice and it is precisely because of this disembodiment that boredom is never really overcome. While Venturi opposes “habit” to a “conscious sense of the past,” another distinction is coming into presence, that between past as finished, gone by time and history as living, active time.

Habit, Venturi suggests, implies a sort of inertia, a conformity to rules lacking critical questioning, a phenomenon he sees happening in the architectural practice of his time devoted to faithfully applying the normative rules of modernism. In this context, habit also implies the loss of an architectural past, which he proposes to revitalize by a careful and critical examination of historical precedents, brought as evidence toward a re-evaluation not only of the past, but mostly of the present and future of architecture. Comparing Venturi’s *habit* to Bourdieu’s *habitus*, I propose that Venturi seems to overlook the nature of habit as living practice, accumulated in

time, in which history is present, if disguised. He reduces it, instead, to the repetition, routine, conformity, and norm associated with the stale iteration of forms that he identifies with modernist architecture. It is from this numbing repetition that boredom is born and with it Venturi’s reaction: Less is a bore. Less and more define a quantitative approach, which in the book translates into an excess of images that soon become boring.

The understanding of boredom and the boring has changed throughout Venturi’s work, moving from what I propose was the broad assertion of Less is a bore in his first book, to the instrumentalization of the boring and the interesting as aesthetic tools in the later works of Venturi and Scott Brown. Less is a bore is not simply a pun on the much celebrated modernist adage nor only reflective of a particular state of architecture, although it is also both of them at the same time. Less is a bore is a product of habitus in the terms defined by Bourdieu, thus summarizing the ethos and the mood of the age. Less is a bore, although applied to architecture, addresses issues larger than architecture itself and situates it in the broader field of “cultural production.” Venturi’s quip acknowledges the generalized presence of a mood that, it has been suggested, was intensifying in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Sociologist Orrin Klapp has proposed that the increased use of the word boredom between 1931 and 1961 indicates the very expansion of this mood in modern society. Moreover, I suggest, while boredom was born with modernity, it also indicates the advent of discontent with modernity itself.

1.1. Learning from habitus and behaviorism

Less is a bore first appeared in Venturi’s 1965 article published in the Yale University architecture journal, Perspecta. The article offered a preview to the subsequent book that Venturi published the following year. Richly illustrated, both the article and the book include a multitude of images (three hundred and fifty in the book) whose role as a body of knowledge has not been carefully examined. I will look at how ideas about boredom and habitus have informed

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the visual discourse in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Proposing that the images in the book operate at various levels, I will unpack them from three different perspectives:

**Didactic images.** Firstly, and most clearly, as a series of representations of buildings, they perform the didactic function of providing architectural principles, giving us an insight into strategies of teaching and learning.

**Disembodied images.** Secondly, as a display of (mostly) historical precedents, taking out of their context, they act as signs and symbols that validate Venturi’s undertaking, also showing how relying on a “disembodied mind” eventually results in disembodied signs and symbols.

**Discursive images.** Lastly, as a lavish collection of items exhibited on almost every page of the book, through quantitative overload they illustrate the idea that *Less is a bore* in the most obvious way.

**Habitus.** Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, *practice*, and *field* provide a useful framework for situating Venturi’s motto *Less is a bore* for understanding it both as an architectural position and a larger cultural stance. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* (referred to both as a plural and a singular noun) revolves around oppositions that often appear difficult to grasp. *Habitus* designates sets of dispositions (in other words, subjective qualities) and structures (or objective arrangements) with particular characteristics: while ordered, they don’t obey to rules; while adjusted to objectives, they don’t deliberately envision them; while systematized, they don’t result from the action of a conductor; while organized as strategies, they are not the product of a premeditated intention. *Habitus* produces *practices* manifested in everyday life from small, individual actions to larger, collective acts at the level of culture, economy, politics, etc. Bourdieu rejects both the deterministic notion of practice as a mechanical reaction directly

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4 “(s)ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to functioning as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being, all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.” (Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, U.K; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72).

5 “The habitus is the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention – which would presuppose at least that they are the perceived as one strategy among other possible strategies.” (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 73).
derived from preceding actions, and practice as the result of free will. Through habitus, Bourdieu inhabits the gap between the objectivity of institutionalized structures and the subjectivity of the agent, between the structuralist exclusion of the individual and the Romantic vision of the artist, between determinism and autonomy, the group and the individual. He moves beyond positivist explanations and proposes to find meaning in the interactions between the practices of the individual (understood as part of the group) and those of the group (constituted from individuals).

It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less “sensible” and “reasonable.”

The homogeneity of habitus within a group causes practices to be intelligible, foreseeable, harmonized without a “conscious reference to a norm,” and “mutually adjusted” without explicit co-ordination. Habitus as “immanent law” has been acquired by each individual from their earliest upbringing, “which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination …”. Habitus is the product of objective structures “which are active only when embodied in a competence acquired in the course of a particular history.” Two key aspects in Bourdieu’s habitus are the notion of embodiment and the role of history. The former, focusing on the individual, was exemplified through various instances from the early acquisition of language by a child to the more complex acquisition of a craft by an apprentice. The former (history), referred to structures of groups, communities, and

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66 “It is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies, “models” or “roles” … . But rejection of mechanistic theories in no way implies that, in accordance with another obligatory opinion, we should bestow on some creative free will the free and willful power to constitute, on the instant, the meaning of the situation by projecting the ends aiming at its transformation, and that we should reduce the objective intentions and constituted significations of actions and works to the conscious and deliberate intentions of their authors.” (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 73).
7 Ibid., 79.
8 Ibid., 80.
9 Ibid., 81.
10 Ibid., 81.
societies: “In short, the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history.”

Bourdieu points to the essential role of the body and embodiment in various processes of learning. He imagines these processes as concentric circles starting from the family and moving toward the world. The child learns by imitating not abstract models, but the concrete actions and bodily postures of adults, in a non-institutionalized education system, the transmission of learning occurs through practice; learning is assimilated through concrete “numerical series” (defined by structured relationships between elements) such as verbal products, objects, or practices. Learning itself is an embodiment of the structures of the world, or in other words, “the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world.” Consequently, the mind formed in a world of physical objects inherently overcomes the conflict between subjectivity and objectivity because world, metaphors, and objects work together through the practices spawned by habitus.

Two significant sources of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as a “generative structure of practical action” are relevant to our discussion: on the one hand, psychologist Jean Piaget’s

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11 Ibid., 82.
12 “The child imitates not “models,” but other people’s actions. … in all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult – a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and … a certain subjective experience.” (Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 87).
13 … the essential part of the modus operandi which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. (Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 87).
14 Unlike an incoherent series of figures, which can be learnt only gradually, through repeated attempts and with continuous predictable progress, a numerical series is mastered more easily because it contains a structure which makes it unnecessary to memorize all the numbers one by one: in verbal products such as proverbs, sayings, maxims, songs, riddles, or games; in objects, such as tools, the house, or the village; or again, in practices such as contest of honor, gift exchanges, rites, etc. … [the child] has no difficulty in grasping the rationale of what are clearly series and in making its own in the form of a principle generating conduct organized in accordance with the same rationale. (Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 88).
15 The mind born of the world of objects does not rise as a subjectivity confronting an objectivity: the objective universe is made up of objects which are the product of objectifying operations structured according to the very structures which the mind applies to it. The mind is a metaphor of the world of objects which is itself but an endless circle of mutually reflecting metaphors. (Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 91).
conception of knowledge as practical action and, on the other hand, Erwin Panofsky’s theory on Gothic architecture as a result of the practices and world-view specific to medieval Scholasticism. Piaget wrote:

To know is to transform reality [through action] in order to understand how a certain state is brought about. By virtue of this point of view, I find myself opposed to the view of knowledge as a copy, a passive copy of reality. … To my way of thinking, knowing an object does not mean copying it – it means acting upon it.19

Bourdieu proposed an early definition of *habitus* in the postface to his 1967 translation of Erwin Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* where he described it as

a system of schemas [that] constantly orients choices which, though not deliberate, are nonetheless systematic, without being arranged and organized expressly according to an ultimate end, are nonetheless imbued with a sort of finality … .20

Both sources ground conceptions about learning, knowledge, and the creative process (and by extension, architectural learning and making) in concrete actions and embodied practices. While “the system of schemas” builds the world and is built by it, the world is known and made intelligible through its continuous making and remaking.

With the concept of *field*, Bourdieu roots the actions of the agent (specifically those of the artist or the writer) in a network of social and historical relations. He defines the main task of any historical study as “constructing the space of positions and the space of position-takings [*prises de positions*] in which they are expressed.”21 The former comprises the practices and production of the agents involved in the field (e.g. artists, writers), whereas the latter constitutes the totality of institutions (private or public) that legitimate the recognition and authority in a particular field.22 Specific to the notion of field is the internal struggle between the heteronomy

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22 The *space of literary or artistic position-takings*, i.e. the structured set of the manifestations of the social agents involved in the field … is inseparable from the *space of literary or artistic positions* defined by possession of a
of position-takings (e.g. the dominant economic and political forces that legitimate the ‘bourgeois art’) and the autonomy of positions (e.g. artists and writers producers of ‘art for art sake’). A consequence of this inherent tension is that “The meaning of a work … changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader.” One of the main challenges in the historical study of any field is to reconstruct the original network of people, relationships, facts or events that constitute the underlying fabric of a work and which most of the time remained unaccounted for in testimonies of the time precisely because “they were part of the self-evident givens of the situation.” In other words, without an understanding of the habitus of the time, a work lacks depth and becomes, instead, a thin surface.

Ignorance of everything which goes to make up ‘the mood of the age’ produces a derealization of works: stripped of everything which attached them to the most concrete debates of their time … , they are impoverished and transformed in the direction of intellectualism or an empty humanism.

It is important to note that Venturi does recognize, and in fact capitalizes on, the notion that the meaning of the work changes with each change in the field. This idea is central to his combinatorial techniques of isolating architectural elements and re-organizing them according to new sets of rules. His take, however, is different from Bourdieu’s. The concept of field as the intersection of agents, groups and practices is reduced to a narrow concept of background derived from the perceptual theories of Gestalt psychology. As we will see later in the discussion of the images in Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi uses a model of communication defined as the relationship between sender – medium – channel – receiver – feedback – context – noise.

Buildings become facades without environment and signs are floating signifiers. As Deborah

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23 Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 40.
24 Ibid., 30-31.
25 “One of the major difficulties of the social history of philosophy, art or literature is that it has to reconstruct these spaces of original possibles which, because they were part of the self-evident givens of the situation, remained unremarked and are therefore unlikely to be mentioned in contemporary accounts, chronicles or memoirs. It is difficult to conceive of the vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field and which all contemporaries immediately invest in their reading of works: information about institutions – e.g. academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc. – and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are ‘in the air’ and circulate orally in gossip and rumour.” (Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production, 31-32).
26 Ibid., 32.
Fausch has noted, “one of the key contentions of Complexity and Contradiction was that the perception and the meaning of form occurred within, and was dependent upon, its context,” where the definition of context shifted from historical to perceptual, to urban.27

Venturi writes:

Gestalt psychology maintains that context contributes meaning to a part and change in context causes change in meaning. The architect thereby, through the organization of parts, creates meaningful context for them within the whole. … Familiar things seen in an unfamiliar context become perceptually new as well as old.28

Bourdieu’s *habitus* mediates between the scale of the individual and that of history through the active presence of the body and its embodiment in various practices. The nature of *habitus* also allows us to understand “the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them” that accounts for our inability to see the role of the body in our thinking of larger historical crises.29 Underlying Bourdieu’s theories is the notion of *relationship* constantly present in the interaction between the body of the individual and the collective body of the group, between individual and history, between the space of positions and that of position-takings, between different forces within a field, between the agent and the world. In this world of relations, the form of education described through *habitus* is itself a relational process, based not on mechanical learning, but on knowledge acquired through practice. “Relational learning” does not exclude models or role-models, but integrates them into *habitus*. Through *habitus*, the apprentice exercises learning through *discovery*, which differentiates true creativity from pastiche.

An artist searches for true vision, but having found it, leaves in his successors’ hands the blueprint of a new academy. Almost anyone with a modicum of talent and sufficient

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29 “The hysteresis of habitus … is doubtless one of the foundations of the structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them which is the cause of missed opportunities and, in particular, of the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past, albeit a revolutionary past.” (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 83).
application can appropriate another man’s mode of representation. … But he cannot discover it.\(^\text{30}\)

In *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi recognizes a moment of crisis in architecture. Situated at this moment, his work constitutes a hinge between, in Bourdieu’s terms, “opportunities,” on the one hand, and the “dispositions to grasp them,” on the other. The path he chooses proposes an approach to the past that favors a more formal reading of history.

New Criticism and Gestalt psychology have shaped Venturi’s approach to tradition and history, on the one hand, and habit, on the other, two influences that he openly acknowledged throughout his first book, as well as in subsequent writings. Venturi was building upon the definition of tradition articulated by the New Critics through T.S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and Individual Talent.” According to Eliot, the creative artist should be aware of the presence of the past and have a sense of the larger genealogy to which he or she belongs.\(^\text{31}\)

The second part of Eliot’s essay, which Venturi does not acknowledge explicitly but which, I believe, plays an equally significant part in his theory, defines the role of the mature poet and, by extension, of the creative artist in general, as being analogous to the catalyst in a chemical reaction. Unaffected by the processes taking place, but key in shaping the resulting elements, the catalyst remains “inert, neutral, and unchanged.”\(^\text{32}\) Likewise, the mind of the mature poet within which “feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations,” needs to remain unchanged by those feelings that enter into the process.\(^\text{33}\) Eliot writes:

> [t]he more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates. … The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.”\(^\text{34}\)

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\(^{30}\) Leo Steinberg, “The Eye is a Part of the Mind,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 294.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 7-8.
Speaking against what he calls a “metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul,” Eliot sees the task of the poet not in seeking “new human emotions to express,” but in using the ordinary ones and “working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all.” For Venturi, the dissociation of the artistic mind from emotions translates into the search for an “objective” architectural form legitimized though historical precedents and a “conscious sense of the past.”

A less explicit reference supports the idea that Venturi understood habit as a disembodied convention, norm or routine. Describing his firm’s entry for the 1966 Copley Square competition in the last chapter of Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi mentioned Philip Johnson’s essay “The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture,” first delivered as an informal address to the architecture students at Harvard in December 1954 and later published in Perspecta.

Describing what he called “the Crutch of Utility or Usefulness,” Johnson dismissed it as an “old Harvard habit,” later defining “the Crutch of Comfort” also as a “habit that we come by, the same as utility.” Overcoming habit as a bad custom seemed to be an attitude recommended to architects as a way to enhance their creativity and critical thinking.

Venturi’s understanding of habit has negative connotations and resides at the intersection of his reading of New Criticism, his interest in Gestalt, and a certain approach to design as problem-solving, an attitude informed, I suggest, by behaviorism, the other strong direction in American psychology in the early twentieth century. (Behaviorism will latter become central to the development of environmental design.) Although never addressed directly, behaviorism and notions about behavior underlie Venturi’s writings and he was most likely familiar with them. Venturi was reading Herman A. Simon, a scientist whose research ranged across a multitude of fields from computer science, artificial intelligence, and complex systems, to cognitive psychology and administrative behavior. In the chapter “The Obligation Toward a Difficult Whole” of Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi quotes Simon’s definition of a complex

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39 Ibid., 42.
system from the article “The Architecture of Complexity” published in 1962. The goal of the article is to report “on some things we have been learning about particular kinds of complex systems encountered in the behavioral sciences.” Simon will address not only issues related to complexity and behavior, but also symbolic systems – all of these ideas will be present in various forms in Venturi’s book.

**Gestalt and behaviorism.** Emerging roughly at the same time, around 1912-1913, in Germany and, respectively, the United States, Gestalt and behaviorism shared a common criticism of and discontent with late nineteenth century psychology. However, their positions were different:

Gestalt psychology primarily protested against the analysis of consciousness into elements and the exclusion of values from the data of consciousness, whereas behaviorism mostly protested against the inclusion of the data of consciousness in psychology.

Psychologist Edward G. Boring proposed a concise definition of Gestalt as a form of psychology dealing with wholes (as given in experience) and whose data are phenomena – a position derived from the conviction that a conscious person always experiences wholes. Borrowed from phenomenology, the words *phenomena* and *phenomenal experience*, however, had a different meaning for Gestalt psychologists who shelved notions such as “sensations, images, and feelings” along with their attributes (such as “quality, intensity, extensity, and

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40 “A complex system in Herbert A. Simon’s definition includes ‘a large number of parts that interact in a non-simple way.’” (Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd edition, 88.)
43 The German word *Gestalt* means both form or shape, and essence.
44 “Each [Gestalt and behaviorism] is a protest against the ‘new’ German psychology of the late nineteenth century, the psychology of Wundt, G.E. Müller and Titchener, but the two are different protests.” (Edward G. Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology* 2nd edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), 587). Regarded as one of the founding figures of modern psychology, Wilhelm Wundt studied primarily thoughts, perception, and feelings, areas associated today with cognitive psychology.
46 Ibid, 588.
duration”) arguing that one can perceive whole objects without consciously knowing its constitutive elements.\(^{47}\) Gestalt took a stance against previous approaches in psychology, such as analysis into elements, associative congeries, and sensory content, proposing, respectively: a phenomenological description, the emergence of forms in wholes, and the relevance of meanings and objects.\(^{48}\)

The basic principles of Gestalt psychology revolve around laws of form (applied especially to visual form), relativity, and transposition (objects remain the same when the parts change but the relations between them remain the same), object constancy, field dynamics, and isomorphism (correspondence between the perceptual field and the underlying excitatory brain field).\(^{49}\)

The laws of form have influenced theories of perception in both art and architecture.\(^{50}\) One of the central ideas is that “a perceptual field tends to become organized,” where parts form connections further grouped in structures.\(^{51}\) Visual perception is divided into two parts: figure (situated in the center of attention, defined by a contour, and having an object character) and ground (located in the margin of attention, lacking definition, and seen further away than the figure).\(^{52}\) This principle had a significant impact on architectural representation and Venturi and Scott Brown’s work in particular.

Structures may be simple or complex and the degree of complexity corresponds to the degree of articulation. A good form is well articulated. A strong form resists disintegration. A closed form is both good and strong and “an open form tends to achieve closure by completing itself.” In the process of completing themselves, forms tend toward symmetry, balance, and proportion. “Organization tends to form structured wholes that are objects.”\(^{53}\) An object has object consistency, i.e. the property of preserving its “proper shape, size, and color in spite of change in the stimulus-situation.” Organization and object character “depend on the relations

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\(^{47}\) Ibid., 592. For instance: “A square is more than four lines, but four lines, successively coterminous, at right angles, and forming a closed figure are a square.” (Boring, A History of Experimental Psychology, 589)

\(^{48}\) Boring, A History of Experimental Psychology, 589.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 611-615.

\(^{50}\) See Arnheim, Gombrich.

\(^{51}\) Boring, A History of Experimental Psychology, 611.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 606, 611.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 611-612.
between parts and not on the particular characteristics of the parts.”

“Figure-ground,” “complexity,” “articulation,” “whole,” “context” – in Complexity and Contradiction Venturi borrows concepts and terminology from Gestalt psychology and applies them to the architectural language. A 1951 collection of essays on the relationship of nature, form, and aesthetics included chapters on Gestalt and form and was part of the library of Venturi and Scott Brown.

In 1913, American psychologist John B. Watson published “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It,” an article later known as the “behaviorist manifesto,” the founding document of the other major direction in American psychology: behaviorism. Watson’s main argument was that behaviorism, a term that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, he coins through this article, approaches psychology as a “purely objective experimental branch of natural science” whose theoretical goal is to predict and control behavior. In his book Behaviorism, first published in 1924, Watson expanded the nature, objectives, and methodology of this branch of psychology, which he defined as objective, in opposition with the introspective or subjective approach, prevalent until 1912. He reinforced behaviorism’s affiliation with natural sciences and more specifically with physiology. He determined its goal “to be able, given the stimulus, to predict the response – or, seeing the reaction take place to state what the stimulus is that has called out the reaction.” In terms of subject matter, while subjective psychology claims consciousness as its topic, behaviorism:

...holds that the subject matter of psychology is the behavior of the human being. Behaviorism claims that consciousness is neither a definite nor a usable concept. The behaviorist, who has been trained always as an experimentalist, holds, further, that belief

59 Ibid., 11.
60 Ibid., 18.
in the existence of consciousness goes back to the ancient days of superstition and magic.\textsuperscript{61}

Shifting the focus from subjectively defined terms (such as sensation, perception, image, desire, purpose, thinking or emotion) to “things that can be observed” (such as behavior, or “what the organism does or says”), this form of objective psychology describes behavior in terms of \textit{stimulus} and \textit{response}.\textsuperscript{62} Watson defines the \textit{stimulus} as “any object in the general environment or any change in the tissues themselves due to the physiological condition of the animal” and the \textit{response} as “anything the animal does.”\textsuperscript{63} Among more sophisticated and elaborate forms of response, Watson lists “building a skyscraper, drawing plans.”\textsuperscript{64} Later in the text, expanding upon the notion of \textit{response}, Watson brings up another architectural example:

Let me emphasize again that the behaviorist is primarily interested in the behavior of the whole man. From morning to night he watches him perform his daily round of duties. If it is brick-laying, he would like to measure the number of bricks he can lay under different conditions, how long he can go without dropping from fatigue, how long it takes him to learn his trade, whether we can improve his efficiency or get him to do the same amount of work in a less period of time.\textsuperscript{65}

It is not without significance that from the early stages of its development, behaviorism relied on architecture to demonstrate its arguments. Stripped of any subjective (also described by Watson as “medieval,” “savage”\textsuperscript{66} and, implicitly, irrational) content, behaviorism looks for objective, positivist manifestations of human behavior and turns to architecture as an appropriate terrain to edify its ideas. An intersection between architecture and behaviorism, at least in terms of language, is the concept of \textit{functionalism}.

Discussing the recently emerged typology of the tall office building, in 1896 Louis Sullivan proposed that “form ever follows function,” an idea that he will develop in two more essays on “Function and Form” published in 1901-1902 and later collected in the volume

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Watson, \textit{Behaviorism}, 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Watson, \textit{Behaviorism}, 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Watson, \textit{Behaviorism}, 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 2, 5.
\end{itemize}}
Kindergarten Chats.67 Usually misinterpreted, Sullivan’s dictum will be appropriated in the discourse of modern architecture that makes functionalism – reduced to deriving architectural form strictly from the function, program or use of the building – one of its main objectives. Outlining the intentions and methodology of behaviorism, in 1913 Watson wrote: “I feel that behaviorism is the only consistent and logical functionalism,”68 an instance credited by the Oxford English Dictionary as the first use of the term behaviorism.69

Behaviorism relies on observation as its main methodological technique, limiting its investigation to “things that can be observed” in order to “formulate laws concerning only those things.”70 The data resulted from the process of observation is subjected to scientific analysis using the tools of scientists: logic and mathematics.71 Taking the use of the latter to an extreme, early mid-century Yale University psychologist Clark L. Hull developed a mathematical model of understanding behavior based on mathematical formulas and equations that consider the “quantitative law of habit formation.”72

After permeating American culture, by 1965, the objectives and methodology of behaviorism were already called into question. Sigmund Koch structured the evolution of behaviorism in classical behaviorism (as shaped by Watson), neobehaviorism (which attempts to realize and implement objectivism at the level of theory), and neo-neobehaviorism (which abandons the idea that stimuli may be reduced to physical description and responses to movements in space and introduces perception and meaning in the definition of stimuli and, respectively, responses).73 Koch acknowledges the failures of modern psychology that “has projected an image of man which is as demeaning as it is simplistic” and recognizes the potential of phenomenology to provide a cure to “the simplification of sensibility, homogenization of taste, attenuation of capacity for experience” that “characterizes our time.”74

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68 Watson, “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It.”
69 OED, online edition, entry: behaviorism: “1913 J. B. WATSON in Psychol. Rev. XX. 166 I feel that behaviorism is the only consistent and logical functionalism.”
70 Watson, Behaviorism, 6.
71 Watson, Behaviorism, 6.
73 Sigmund Koch, “Psychology and Conceptions of Knowledge,” Behaviorism and Phenomenology, 7-20.
74 Ibid., 37-38.
In an effort to redeem behaviorism, psychologist B.F. Skinner published in 1974 *About Behaviorism*, a book that begins by shifting the definition of behaviorism from the science of human behavior to the philosophy of that science. The introduction listed what Skinner identified as the misunderstandings related to behaviorism (among others, that it ignores consciousness, feelings, and states of mind, that cannot explain creative achievements, that misses the essential nature of a human being, that it dehumanizes man and it is oversimplified, naïve, reductionistic, and scientific rather than scientific.) He claimed that behaviorism should not be understood based on Watson’s “behaviorist manifesto” from 1913, which was flawed mainly because at the time “very few scientific facts about behavior – particularly human behavior – were available.” Skinner argued that a more nuanced perspective is needed because “there are many different kinds of behavioral science” and the one he presented in his book was “the philosophy of this special version of a science of behavior.”

Gestalt and behaviorist ideas were appropriated in art and architecture in various ways. Having studied Gestalt psychology in Berlin, Rudolf Arnheim applied its principles to the visual arts. His essay “Gestalt Psychology and Artistic Form” was included in the anthology *Aspects of Form* that Venturi and Scott Brown were familiar with. In an article urging architects to “act” rather than “behave,” John M. Johansen – a member of the “Harvard Five,” along with Marcel Breuer, Landis Gores, Philip Johnson, and Eliot Noyes – defined behavior as a “mode of conducting oneself; deportment, the way in which an organism or person responds to stimuli, or conformance to environment.” Criticizing behaviorism in architecture for being “governed by the same attitude of mind” and for encouraging collaboration in design as a way to compromise ideas, Johansen asked architects to “act,” i.e. to be, among other qualities, free, original,

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76 Ibid., 4-5.
77 Ibid., 6.
78 Ibid., 7-8.
82 Ibid., 45.
83 Ibid., 47.
courageous, and disruptive. In the late 1960s and 1970s, behaviorism will provide the foundation of environmental design. Paraphrasing the title of Venturi’s book, Amos Rapoport and Robert E. Kantor – an architect and a psychologist, respectively – publish in 1967 “Complexity and Ambiguity in Environmental Design.” (Referencing Venturi’s treatise, the article indirectly suggests that architecture should be understood as environmental design.) Grounding their argument in cognitive psychology, they aim to demonstrate scientifically that good design should be based on complex systems in which the deliberate introduction of novelty and variety generates the ideal “optimal perceptual rate” between monotony and chaos.

Writing on architectural meaning, Robert G. Hershberger – another proponent of environmental design – embraces what he calls “mentalistic” and “mediational” theories: the former imply the dissociation of mind and body in the reading of images, signs, and symbols, and the latter, much like behavioral theories, focus on stimulus, response, and the mediation process in between.

Let us see now how some of the principles found in New Criticism, Gestalt, and behaviorism underlie the visual and theoretical discourse of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.

Didactic images. Thoughts about teaching and learning are central to the work of Venturi and Scott Brown. Defining themselves simultaneously as teachers and students, architects and lay-people, operating from within and without the profession, they have summarized their take on education and design in the approach of “learning from…” employed as a rhetorical strategy of humbleness in front and acceptance of the richness of the environment. “Learning from…” also implied a non-judgmental view and openness toward everything that the surroundings – social, cultural, historical, architectural, etc. – might offer. While Learning from Las Vegas is the most celebrated of the couple’s “learnings,” it was preceded and followed by various other

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84 Ibid., 48-50.
86 Ibid., 211.

While architecture history was taught as a succession of styles, in the 1960s architecture schools shared a common concern about how to teach history and theory. In April 1967, the subject of the spring conference of the Society of Architectural Historians held at UCLA was “Teaching Architectural History to Students of Architecture, Urban Design and Urban Development.” At the time a faculty member at UCLA, Denise Scott Brown wrote an article for the journal Arts and Architecture commenting on the different positions scholars were taking at the conference.88 For Peter Collins the goal of an architectural history course was not to add “‘cultural frills’ to a technical education,” but to develop students’ critical thinking, a skill that they could apply in their own work.89 (Bringing up the question of choice in the curriculum, Collins suggested that the practitioner-teacher might omit even subject-matters that bore him!90) Taking a different stance, Spiro Kostof did not believe that architectural history could enhance one’s critical thinking, nor would it have a significant influence on one’s work; instead, he saw the role of architectural history as a “broadening personal experience” for the student.91 Scott Brown proposes to bridge the gap between these two positions through an approach to architectural “history” as analysis and comparison of examples that go across time and space, rather than chronologically, while at the same time bring forth topics relevant to studio work. (This comparative methodology was common in the teaching of art and architectural history and was applied in the classroom through parallel slide projections, a practice that survives past the twentieth century. The comparison between boring and interesting architecture from Learning from Las Vegas) Without acknowledging specifically the course on “Theories of Architecture” that she had collaborated on with Venturi, she makes the case for a course in which, she argues, these principles and techniques have been successfully applied.92

Drawing from both architectural precedents and his own interests (New Criticism, Gestalt, and Pop Art), Venturi designed his architectural theory course – taught in the Department of Architecture in the Graduate School of Fine Arts at University of Pennsylvania –

89 Ibid., 30.
90 Ibid., 30.
91 Ibid., 30.
92 Ibid., 30.
around a variety of topics, usually as pairings. The course – developed and taught during the years in which Venturi was preparing his manuscript for *Complexity and Contradiction* – provides the content for his book and some of the ideas developed later first appear in his lecture notes. For example, early thoughts about boredom are already present in the course outline – the idea of balancing unity with variety within the whole (derived from Gestalt psychology) translates as the opposition between boredom and chaos, which later finds its place in Chapter 7, “Contradiction Adapted” of *Complexity and Contradiction*.94

It seems our fate now to be faced with either the endless inconsistencies of roadtown, which is chaos, or the infinite consistency of Levittown (or the ubiquitous Levittown-like scene illustrated in figure 89), which is boredom. In roadtown, we have a false complexity; in Levittown a false simplicity. 95

Little attention has been paid, however, to the notion of learning implicit in the selection of images for *Complexity and Contradiction*, in spite of the book having its origin in a graduate course. Throughout the entire book, the abundance of historical precedents taken out of their original field and stripped of habitus (in Bourdieu’s terms), are used to provide architectural lessons, and gives us an insight into strategies of teaching and learning. The educational display of images constitutes what Bourdieu has defined as a “series of figures, which can be learnt only gradually, through repeated attempts and with continuous predictable progress,” unlike “numerical series” whose internal logic and structure make for an easy appropriation and assimilation.96 *Complexity and Contradiction* deliberately assumes a didactic role. However, the wealth of images does not translate into a wealth of relationships and, paradoxically, instead of bringing history closer, distances one from a deeper understanding of the past. Images operate not as models, but rather as samples disconnected from each other.

In *Complexity and Contradiction*, but also later in *Learning from Las Vegas*, as well as in studio and research projects, Venturi and Scott Brown analyze and observe people’s material

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93 They ranged from “Site and Context” (Lecture 2), “Program and Use” (Lecture 3), “Structure and Form” (Lecture 4) to “Materials and Texture” (Lecture 5), “Composition: Proportion, Unity” (Lecture 11), and “Balance and Rhythm” (Lecture 12). Venturi Scott Brown Collection at the Architectural Archives at University of Pennsylvania.
94 Venturi Scott Brown Collection at the Architectural Archives at University of Pennsylvania. 225. RV 187.
culture or, as they will later summarize in the title of an exhibition, “signs of life.” In his first book, Venturi displays photographs of buildings’ exteriors as evidence of formal composition strategies (plans, site plans, and particularly sections are extremely scarce). Showing empirical evidence and gathering measurable facts is a scientific method that builds a body of knowledge based on experimentation and observation. As we have already seen, in American psychology it was behaviorism that applied the scientific methods specific to natural sciences to the study of human behavior. While Venturi explicitly acknowledged the influence of Gestalt psychology on his work, he also employed, perhaps unknowingly, a behavioristic approach to construct his theory. This strategy accounts for his reliance on historical precedents as legitimating instances, as facts that can be collected and assembled in order to construct a proof. As images accompany and reference the text, they aim to become explanatory in a scientific, objective manner. The dissociation of mind from emotions (appropriated from New Criticism), along with the emphasis on laws of visual form (derived from Gestalt psychology), result in a sequence of “disembodied” images.

Personal correspondence between Venturi and Scott Brown in 1963 includes Scott Brown’s critique of an early draft of Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction. Responding to what we presume was Venturi’s request for comments on his manuscript, she begins her letter by criticizing the relationship between images and text: “I found it difficult to read in the middle chapters,” she says, because:

Of format – the tennis syndrome between 2 books, not helped by unclear pictures some of which don’t reveal to me what you intended. Can you find ways of relating text +


98 There are multiple instances in *Complexity and Contradiction*, as well as in Venturi’s later works, where he reads architecture in a Gestalt key. “Gestalt psychology maintains that context contributes meaning to a part and change in context causes change in meaning. The architect, thereby, through the organization of parts, creates meaningful contexts for them within the whole.” (43) “Gestalt psychology considers a perceptual whole the result, and yet more than, the sum of its parts.” (88) “Gestalt psychology also shows that the nature of the parts, as well as their number and position, influences a perceptual whole and it also has made a further distinction: the degree of wholeness can vary.” (88) In chapter 10, which wraps up the analytical and critical theory before showing examples from his own work, Venturi concludes: “Some of the vivid lessons of the Pop Art, involving contradictions of scale and context, should have awakened architects from prim dreams of pure order, which, unfortunately, are imposed in the easy Gestalt unities of the urban renewal projects of establishment Modern architecture and yet, fortunately, are really impossible to achieve at any great scope.” (104)
pictures very closely because when you use so many pictures (& I think you should) +
give each so few words, you need all your wits about you to follow, & as it is now,
considerable staging power too. An alternative would be to reduce drastically the no of
egs & spend more time on each + use really big clear pictures. I don’t think that would be
as good.99

She concludes at the end of the letter by criticizing the excess of precedents used
throughout the book to the detriment of a more in-depth analysis:

But I think you use too many devices (always remembering that I don’t approve of any of
them) & will do till you get more work & can spread them fewer per building. None of
this is insulting. I respect your work (& since reading your book, understand it more,
which increases my respect) but disagree with it – mainly because I think there are other
constraints acting upon us today. I like the things you like, have learned from them what
you have taught, but I would apply the lessons differently.100

In a dialogue, if imaginary, with his future wife, Venturi replies on the margin of the
letter: “You are mean.”

Problematizing the question of teaching / learning is essential for understanding Venturi’s
stance in Complexity and Contradiction. Both the Gestalt and the behaviorist models of learning
differ from the model of learning uncovered by Bourdieu through the concept of habitus. Gestalt
emphasizes how the mind finds patterns in things, thus building the process of learning and
particularly what is called insight – “the recognition by the subject of the relationships of
different perceived objects.”101 (Some scholars have argued that, while the insight is a product
of learning, it does not explain how one comes to recognize these relationships.102) The behaviorist
model of learning is based on natural sciences and the direct connection between stimulus and
response: exposed repeatedly to the same stimulus, the subject learns how to respond to it.
Behaviorism attempts to demonstrate the existence of fixed routes that determine a response to a
stimulus. Gestalt sees the impossibility of learning “as dependent upon any fixed and invariable

99 Venturi Scott Brown Collection at the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Box 70 225.II.F.1037
100 Ibid.
101 Robert Leeper, “The Relation between Gestalt Psychology and the Behavioristic Psychology of Learning,”
102 Ibid., 269
routes in the nervous system … .” Despite their differences, both psychologies emphasize learning as problem-solving through either perceptual or physiological mechanisms.

Relying on the perception of form (derived from Gestalt) and (indirectly) on the relationship between stimulus and response (found in behaviorism), the methodology exposed in Complexity and Contradiction privileges learning as problem-solving, but seems to overlook the form of learning implied through habitus: learning as discovery. While Venturi grounds the work of the architect in a particular world-view, his role, Venturi tells us from the first pages of the book, is ultimately to solve problems:

The doctrine “less is more” bemoans complexity and justifies exclusion for expressive purposes. It does, indeed, permit the architect to be highly selective in determining which problems he wants to solve. But if the architect must be committed to his particular way of seeing the universe, such a commitment surely means that the architect determines how problems should be solved, not that he can determine which of the problems he will solve.  

As Venturi explicitly declares his preference for Mannerism and Baroque, it is not just the ambiguity, the tension, and the variety of forms present in these stylistic movements that appeal to him, but – perhaps inadvertently – also a certain desire to overcome the monotony and dullness typically encountered toward the end of a stylistic era. An implicit comparison emerges between the height of Renaissance and the height of Modernism both of which, arriving at a stalemate, are seeking for change. In Mannerism, as in Venturi’s proposal, change is found in various forms of excess and overload. This position brackets the connotation aspect of signs and symbols and results in a reliance on their denotative aspect, the approach advocated by Venturi in the name of clarity and precision. However, is this truly clarity or perhaps an iteration of forms not unlike, though different from, the criticized modernist approach? In the words of art historian Leo Steinberg, this resembles a “domesticated state” fundamentally different form the original:

\[103\] Ibid., 272.
The mannerist … he who displays Michelangelo’s musculature over again, is not at all repeating Michelangelo, since what he arranges on the canvas lives already in the domesticated state. It had been won for art already.\footnote{Leo Steinberg. “The Eye is a Part of the mind,” 295.}

Moving forward past both Renaissance (though Mannerism) and Modernism, requires new forms of learning and Venturi’s first book also brings forth a model for architectural education that he will later develop with Denise Scott Brown in their subsequent studio work together. This model relies on learning through observation and collection of evidence (i.e. images), rather than learning through discovery. While the former requires objective proof, the latter implies the presence of mystery, never fully uncovered or explained. The former operates outside the \textit{habitus}, the latter within it. The former teaches skills, the latter a way of thinking. It is the difference, pointed out by Leo Steinberg, between a Pollaiulo nude and a Bouguereau one:

The one [Pollaiulo’s] was born of nature’s union with an avid sensibility; the other makes a parade of a habitual skill. One says, pointing to the array of anatomic facts – “Here lies the mystery;” the other says – “Here lies no mystery, I know it all.”\footnote{Leo Steinberg. “The Eye is a Part of the mind,” 295.}

\textbf{Disembodied images.} As a display of (mostly) historical precedents, images in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}, act as signs and symbols that validate Venturi’s undertaking, also showing how relying on a “disembodied mind” results in disembodied signs and symbols. Less evident in this work than in subsequent writings of Venturi and Scott Brown, the excess of disembodied signs nonetheless exhausts the viewer’s ability to internalize and appropriate the images, which are used only as formal principles.

Lacking the underlying fabric of \textit{habitus}, the photographs in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} become signs and symbols, stripped of the historical depth they claim to recover. Of the two hundred and fifty-three precedents in Complexity and Contradiction, only fifty-nine are buildings or artwork from the twentieth century, but the time-period or context are never identified. As Venturi resorts to history as a way of validating and legitimizing a new role of the architect, Bourdieu’s notion of \textit{field} helps understanding this position. Critical in the constitution of the \textit{field} are the mechanisms for constructing and protecting the definition of the artist or the

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnotesize 105 Leo Steinberg. “The Eye is a Part of the mind,” 295.
\item \footnotesize 106 Leo Steinberg. “The Eye is a Part of the mind,” 295.
\end{itemize}
writer that come about through the struggles between authority and individual agents. Bourdieu identifies “three competing principles of legitimacy:” the recognition of the peers (art for art’s sake), the recognition bestowed by institutions (salons or academies), and the recognition granted by the public (lay audience).\textsuperscript{107} He situates the practices of artists and writers at the intersection of the “history of the positions they occupy,” i.e. the level of their recognition, and the” history of their dispositions,” i.e. their aspirations and expectations.\textsuperscript{108}

Not unlike nineteenth-century artists seeking recognition in the \textit{Salon des Refuses}, Venturi attempts to break away from the establishment – the “architectural bourgeoisie” and the institutions of his time – by re-organizing and re-assessing the system of architectural values, along with the definition and role of the architect. He resorts to history, largely abandoned during the height of modernism, as a validating authority. In this process, historical precedents are often reduced to flat images displayed on the pages of the book as signs and symbols that legitimize his new stance. In one of his interpretations of the everyday and the everydayness, Henri Lefebvre remarked that in the modern world “signs, rational in their way, are attached to things in order to convey the prestige of their possessors and their place in the hierarchy.”\textsuperscript{109} This statement offers an inadvertent explanation to the underlying theme of Venturi and Scott Brown’s famous diagram of a generic, non-descript building bearing the sign “I am a Monument.” (\textit{Figure 1.1.})

The first edition of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}, published in 1966 by The Museum of Modern Art (New York) in association with The Graham Foundation (Chicago) was followed in 1977 by the second edition, the one that has been reprinted frequently ever since. While the content stayed the same (except for two additional introductory notes in the second edition), the formats changed substantially. The second edition – the most well-known – is printed on landscape format and the images are significantly larger than those in the first edition, which was almost half the size of the second one.

The elegant page layout of the first edition was organized on a three-column grid and comprised three types of pages: text only (where the text occupies two columns) (\textit{Figure 1.2.});

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Bourdieu, \textit{The Field of Cultural Production}, 51.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 61.
\end{itemize}
text + images (where two columns are occupied by text and one column by images) (Figure 1.3.); and image only (where the images are distributed on three columns) (Figure 1.4.). Identified by numbers corresponding to the numbers in the text and never by captions, the images are small and column-wide. Unlike the second edition, in the first one the text predominates. Small in size but numerous (three hundred and fifty altogether), the images do not communicate outside the text. Without an immediate identification and constrained to the same width, they remain anonymous. (The second edition will introduce individual captions.)

Of the two hundred and fifty-three images, more than half (one hundred and thirty-two) are photographs of exteriors of elevations. There are fifty-one interiors, fifty-one plans and site plans, and no more than eight sections. The images offer a rather flat background in a muted voice. Placed next to the text they turn into abstract signs. In an objective manner, they illustrate the claims made in the text, but fail to construct their own stories. Without a doubt, there exists a certain ambiguity – most likely deliberate – as to what they mean outside the text. The intriguing character of the visual discourse spawns primarily from the unexpected adjacencies of images. Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye appears next to Vanbrugh’s pavilions at Grimsthorpe and Bernini’s Palazzo Propaganda Fide (Figure 1.5.). The Lascaze and Howe’s PSFS Building in Philadelphia is next to the Karlskirche in Vienna (Figure 1.6.). Rauschenberg’s Pilgrim is adjacent to Katsura Imperial Villa (Figure 1.7.). The Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the Baoque chapel at Fresnes, and the Richards Medical Center are all on the same page (Figure 1.8.). However, the comparisons do not go any further and the visual discourse does not gain depth. It seems that what matters is the denotative aspect of images as illustrations of the text. Taken out of their own field, they remain remote objects, not unlike the images on slide projectors that generations of students were asked to identify during exams for architecture history courses.

*Complexity and Contradiction* generally received positive reviews. Writing for the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Naomi Miller, an architectural historian at Boston University specializing in the Renaissance, welcomed the book as a “valuable guide to the architecture of the past – especially in terms of the present” while criticizing the small size of the images and the absence of labels.¹¹⁰ At the same time, she deemed Venturi’s use of his own

projects to illustrate architectural principles as the least successful aspect of the book.¹¹¹ (Venturi wrote back to Miller to thank her for the review.¹¹²) Thirteen years after the publication of the book, Philip J. Finkelpearl, Venturi’s old friend from Princeton and by that time an English Professor at the University of Massachusetts, wrote a review of the work of Venturi and Scott Brown that included *Complexity and Contradiction, Learning from Las Vegas*, and several projects of the firm published in different professional journals.¹¹³ Finkelpearl’s central argument emphasized the consistency between theory and practice in the work of the team.

The abstract and disembodied character of signs appealed to Venturi and Scott Brown who will rely on this in their later projects as a team, as well as in theoretical writings. After *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), their various collections of essays such as *A View from the Campidoglio* (1984), *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture* (1996), *Architecture as Signs and Systems* (2004) all propose a view of architecture as shelter with added signs. However, the attitude towards signs and symbols was different in Venturi’s early projects. The work of Venturi and Rauch from the last chapter of *Complexity and Contradiction*, for instance, shown as evidence of applying in practice the theoretical principles presented in the previous chapters, proposes an approach to signs and symbols that is critical in nature and acknowledges their material presence. Unlike the display of historical precedents that, on the pages of the book, turn into disembodied signs, the use of signs in the projects of the firm raises valid concerns about how we communicate meaning and the nature of that communication. Two projects in particular (the 1962 renovation of the Grand’s restaurant and the 1966 Copley Square competition) demonstrate a critical use of signs in architecture.

One of Venturi and Rauch’s early projects was the remodeling of a family-owned restaurant in West Philadelphia. Catering to students, it occupied the unified ground floor of two adjacent row houses whose two upper levels were transformed into the family’s apartment. A particular feature of the place was the bearing wall separating the two original houses that was to be integrated into the new design *(Figure 1.9.).* For Venturi, the project was an opportunity to work with some of the principles he later articulated in his *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: elements that were both functional and decorative (A/C ducts), ordinary and fancy

¹¹¹ Ibid., 318.
¹¹² http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/robert-venturi-letter-to-naomi-miller-6189
(Thonet chairs), cheap and elegant (industrial lighting fixtures), modest yet carefully designed (restaurant booths). The use of conventional elements in a way that made them acquire new meanings in a different context, exercised the Pop Art strategies that the architect so fondly adhered to. Venturi explicitly explored duality and unification, best illustrated through the relationship of the central bearing wall with new layout of the ground floor and through the exterior signs on the building.

Deliberately marked on the front façade, the wall separates the west side of the restaurant, which accommodates the main dining area, from the east side that houses the kitchen, services, counter and entry. (Figure 1.10.) On the upper level, the wall unifies the two sides of the dwelling unit and disappears in the rhythmical row of windows (Figure 1.11.). Hand-written notes on the construction documents indicate the unifying treatment of the interior and exterior surfaces:

Furnish notes. Second and third floors

Exterior

- Scrape + paint all windows and other existing woodwork
- Front façade: paint (enamel) all brickwork

Interior

- Remove all wallpaper
- Paint all [illegible] and plaster
- All new walls and partitions plaster except as noted
- Existing doors may be re-used

Venturi traced interpretations of duality throughout the history of art and architecture, from Piero della Francesca to Ellsworth Kelly and his approach to the design of Grand’s

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115 Ibid., 112.
restaurant echoes his reading, published later in *Complexity and Contradiction*, of Louis Sullivan’s *Farmers’ and Merchants’ Union Bank* in Columbus, Wisconsin where

[t]he difficult duality is prominent. The plan reflects the bisected inside space, which accommodates the public and the clerks on different sides of the counter running perpendicular to the façade. On the outside the door and the window at grade reflect this duality: they are themselves bisected by the shafts above. But the shafts, in turn, divide the lintel into a unity of three with a dominant central panel. The arch above the lintel tends to reinforce duality because it springs from the center of the panel below, yet by its oneness and its dominant size it also resolves the duality made by the window and the door.  

Following the lesson of Sullivan, the distinctive feature of *Grand’s* restaurant is the play between a porcelain-enamel sign at the level of the second floor that spells, while separating, the name of the restaurant (*Grand’s*) and an over-sized cup marking the dividing wall on the main façade (Figure 1.12.). The color scheme highlights the intended duality with half of the sign blue and the other half yellow, while the cup made of colored “slices” blue on one side and yellow on the other, makes the transition between the two colors. The question of signs as decoration was a recurrent one in the work of the office and was part of contemporary explorations with lettering, stencils, and the ambiguity between words and images present in the explorations of visual artists such as Ed Ruscha or Jasper Johns. As “the function of this inscription is more ornamental in nature than informative,”

The information that comes across is the “sign-quality” of the bold characters as decoration – not the name of the establishment. In this way, the sign does ultimately follow the advertising principle of making a sign difficult to read to ensure that it will be read … .

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Later removed from the façade, the cup was re-used above the portal of New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art for the 1985 exhibition High Styles.\textsuperscript{120}

What else is there to say? Made transparent, the meanings of the work seem to have been exhausted. Everything appears to be clear. The wall \textit{does} cut open the ground floor, it \textit{does} separate and expose its different functions while at the same time bringing them together. The sign on the façade \textit{does} unify the two parts of the building while being itself cut in two by the oversized cup, which, in turn, marks the original dividing bearing wall (rather than the entrance), thus completing the story where it started.

However, these are not the main reasons that make the \textit{Grand’s Restaurant} intervention a critical piece. It is critical because it questions the relationship between signified and signifier in architecture and the validity of too explicit narratives. Critique here does not infer that change in meaning occurs with the change in context or that double-functioning elements should be more present in the architectural vocabulary, to follow Venturi’s rhetoric, but rather argues for a type of architectural narrative that leaves the story open to interpretations the way the punch-line in a well-crafted joke reshuffles at the very end the anticipated meanings of the story. In several process drawings, the cup is rendered as a solid object hovering above pedestrians on the sidewalk (Figure 1.13). A section drawing shows it as big as almost two-thirds of the story height (Figure 1.14). In an elevation drawing, the cup appears as standing on a pedestal, an impression resulted from the orthogonal projection. The illusion is deliberate: “The cup similarly attracts the eye by being unifying and disrupting at once. With it the sign evolves from two dimensions to three, so that it can be seen by pedestrians as they approach parallel to the façade, in contrast to the flat part of the sign which can be seen at a distance.”\textsuperscript{121}

The cup embodies habits and a certain \textit{habitus} of the place. In preliminary drawings and sketches, we see people go about their daily lives, hanging out in the restaurant booths, stretching, chitchatting or flirting (Figure 1.15). The modest neighborhood restaurant catering to students ironically bears the name “Grand,” an irony also reflected in the oversized illusion of a cup hanging off the main façade. The cup is not a cup, just as the \textit{Grand} restaurant is not grand. While there is nothing majestic about the place, the sign twists the linear relationship between

\textsuperscript{120} Von Moos, \textit{Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown: Buildings and Projects}, 299.
\textsuperscript{121} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 112.
signified and signifier. The cup no longer simply signifies in a humorous, if direct, way the use and the name of the place, but also points at – like Claes Oldenburg’s sculptures – the overwhelming, overbearing presence of our daily habits and everyday objects.

The 1966 entry for the Copley Square competition in Boston introduced, along with subtle ideas about play, density, and scale, explorations of symbolism and signage in relation to *habitus* (Figure 1.16). One of the starting points of the project was the architects’ insight that, despite what is often stated, open space in the American city is not precious.\(^{122}\) Therefore, the square they proposed was not “an open space to accommodate non-existing crowds,” but a “non-piazza” based on a grid system intended to mirror the street-grid of Boston.\(^{123}\) The project offered a critique of the Italian piazza transplanted in an American context. Born from “our justifiable love for Italian towns,” the fascination with piazzas as open spaces does not, in fact, reflect the American way of life:

But the open piazza is seldom appropriate for an American city today except as a convenience for pedestrians for diagonal short-cuts. The piazza, in fact, is “un-American.” Americans feel uncomfortable sitting in a square: they should be working at the office or home with the family looking at television. Chores around the house or the weekend drive have replaced the passeggiata.\(^{124}\)

In the design of the piazza, Venturi and his partners recognize and engage a different *habitus* of American life, namely its busyness, restlessness, and impatience. The empty space is deliberately filled in with a “non-dense matter, a consistent, but rich grid of trees.”\(^{125}\) The species selected (one Plane tree planted for every two Scholar trees) are chosen because their proportions are similar but their heights are different (the former is 35 feet higher than the latter).\(^{126}\) Thus, while the grid appears uniform, it provides, in fact, subtle variations: seen from afar, the trees

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 131.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., 129-131.
\(^{124}\) Ibid., 130.
\(^{125}\) Ibid., 129.
\(^{126}\) Ibid., 130.
read as a solid mass, whereas experienced from within their spacing allows light to filter through the canopies.\textsuperscript{127}

Having his mind set on the critique of modern architecture, Venturi resorts to Philip Johnson’s text on the “seven crutches of Modern architecture,” suggesting that an eighth crutch could be that of “relationships,” which are not always all right.\textsuperscript{128} In a 1954 address at Harvard, Johnson warned architecture students not to fall for the easy justifications that supposedly make a good building: history, pretty drawings, utility, comfort, cheapness, serving the client, and structure. In this context, Venturi’s addition of “relationships” suggests that things (specifically the Trinity Church and the Boston Public Library) “don’t have to be ‘related’ in easy and obvious ways.”\textsuperscript{129} Along with ideas about complexity and the “obligation toward the difficult whole,” this seems to suggest an approach to signs and symbols that goes beyond their denotative aspect. Moreover, Venturi remarks: “when form follows function explicitly, the opportunities for implicit functions decrease.”\textsuperscript{130} Although his reading of Louis Sullivan is certainly reductive, Venturi attempts to embrace connotation as a richer and more generous alternative to the denotative aspect of the sign. So how does he do it? Venturi offers a critique of the linearity of meaning derived from denotation through the concept of \textit{play}.

\textit{Play} constitutes the key notion of the project. The concept of \textit{play} has a long intellectual history. Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga has situated it at the core of civilization. He has argued that “culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning,”\textsuperscript{131} which is different from proposing that every civilization simply reserves a provision of time for play. Play is part of rituals, contests, and competitions, it implies specific rules and laws, but also tension and uncertainty regarding the outcome.\textsuperscript{132} Through virtue, honor, nobility and glory that fall within the field of competition and play, the latter has a civilizing function.\textsuperscript{133} French sociologist Roger Caillois has built upon and distanced himself from Huizinga’s theories. Caillois identified several core-attributes of play: freedom, separation from routines, uncertainty, uncertainty,

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{128} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 130.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 47-58.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 64.
un-productivity, and governance by laws that suspend ordinary rules.\footnote{Roger Caillois, \textit{Man, Play and Games}, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1961).} For artistic practices, one of the most significant characteristics of play is the exercise of make-believe that creates imagined, not-yet there, but always possible, realities.

In Venturi’s project, \textit{play} occurs between rules and exceptions, between large scale and small scale, between elevations and depressions in the topography. The Copley Square competition remains one of the few projects in which Venturi explicitly explores \textit{play} not as a subspecies of irony, but rather as a thoughtful and creative complicity between designer and inhabitant. The game of make-believe is at work to create an imagined narrative for the future inhabitants. “To condense experience and make it more vivid, to pretend, that is, is as a characteristic of play: children play house. Adults play Monopoly.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.} Also specific to play (and lacking in modern architecture) is the “opportunity for choice and improvisation.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.}

As an urban space, the project caters to both adults and children, and pays particular attention to the latter’s perception of space and their learning experience, hence a certain didactic character of the design. A miniature replica of the Trinity Church placed in front of the Trinity Church itself plays “sculpture for children.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.} Blocks made of pre-cast concrete create an artificial topography and receive inscriptions of nursery rhymes “cast into the concrete to interest children who cannot see over the blocks.”\footnote{Ibid., 130.} On the competition boards, a section drawing offers a glimpse into everyday life: next to the concrete blocks inscribed with “alphabet, numbers and nursery rhymes in giant incised characters,” a mother and child walk hand in hand (Figure \textbf{1.17}). Pointing to the blocks, the child exclaims: “Mommy, look at the A, B, C’s.” A nod, perhaps, to Roy Lichtenstein’s 1961 “Look Mickey!” – the Pop artist frequently referenced by Venturi – the drawing shows the multifaceted character of signs: described as incised fonts (rather than the detached billboards from later diagrams and studies), they possess a certain materiality; being oversized (not unlike the cup on the \textit{Grand’s} restaurant façade), they become playful; showing the alphabet, they perform a didactic role.

\footnote{Ibid., 129.}
Closely related to the idea of play and employed as the overarching principle of composition, the grid of the Copley Square project recovers a materiality and multidimensionality lost in Modern architecture and “allows for improvisation and variety of use.”\(^\text{139}\) (Figure 1.18.) Venturi worked the numerous study diagrams that preceded the final project through overlaying sheets of yellow trace paper. (Figure 1.19.) The “thickness” of the working process itself was eventually reflected in the design, which explored not a one-dimensional grid, but rather an overlapping of multiple veils. The studies show the transformation of rigid geometries into more sophisticated layers that account not simply for alley layouts but also for trees, various forms of vegetation, urban furniture, artificial topography. Venturi attempts to break away from the inflexible grid of the International Style conceptualized as one of the principles of Modern architecture in Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson’s seminal book.\(^\text{140}\) With the International Style, the grid has become a prescribed, \textit{a priori} condition – a sign identifying a building as Modern. What Venturi explores, on the other hand, is the connotative aspect of this sign, the infinite possibilities embodied within the grid: “The grid, whether in the form and scale of the town plan or countryside of the American mid-west or the columned interiors of a mosque in Cairo or Cordova, allows for improvisation and variety of use.”\(^\text{141}\) He defines the character of the square as a “spatial plaid” or a “plaid pattern” which reveals itself in different ways from different distances and doesn’t necessarily relate explicitly to the near-by architectures of Richardson, and McKim, Mead, and White.\(^\text{142}\) He turns the abstraction of the grid as sign into a material texture that embodies ways of life and everyday practices. The project is also an opportunity for Venturi to address, as we will see later, ideas about \textit{the boring} and \textit{the interesting}.

\textbf{Discursive images.} Profusely illustrated, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} demonstrates that \textit{Less is a bore} in the most obvious, if overlooked, way, through the numerous images acting as evidence of the claims made in the text.

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\textsuperscript{139} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 130.
\textsuperscript{140} Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, \textit{The International Style} (New York: Norton, 1932).
\textsuperscript{141} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 130.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 130.
\end{flushleft}
As modernity advances, the desire for excess and overload aims to compensate for lack of meaningful experiences. The diversity of forms and products attempts to overcome the uniformity of meaning pervading the routines of life that unfolds between the linear rhythms of work and those no less linear of entertainment and distraction. Venturi, later with Denise Scott Brown, put a special emphasis on the infraordinary as the necessary source of inspiration for an architecture reflective of, and reflecting on, its time. From early architectural and urban design projects onward, the idea of the everyday was reinforced through imagery and theoretical stances. The ordinary takes two main directions in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown: on the one hand, there is the mundane of early projects that embraces images of domesticity (theorized mostly in *Complexity and Contradiction*). On the other hand, there is the everyday prevalent in later works that brings forth the consumerism of the commercial strip (brought to light in *Learning from Las Vegas*). The ordinary window (Vanna Venturi House, the Guild House), the ordinary frame construction (the Beach House, the North Penn Visiting Nurse Association, the Trubek House, the Wislocki Houses), the ordinary pitched roof, and ordinary materials evoke, even in public projects, the domesticity that modernism has hijacked from ordinary people (Figures 1.20-1.21.). Similarly, urban design projects aim to bring back the human scale along with a certain familiarity of objects and materials (the Copley Square Competition, the FDR Memorial competition). In later projects, Venturi and Scott Brown will bring forth the ordinary of the consumerist society: MERBISC Mart in California City (1970), the BASCO Showroom (1976), the Best Products Catalog Showroom (1978), the ISI Corporation Headquarters (1978) (Figures 1.22-1.23.).

Evidence of Venturi and Scott Brown’s concerted efforts to extract and apply the values of the everyday is consistent throughout their work and begins years before the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas*. In the foreword to the first edition of *Complexity and Contradiction*, Arthur Drexler, then the Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA, noticed “Venturi’s delight in reality – especially in those recalcitrant aspects most architects would seek to suppress or disguise.”143 Throughout the book, Venturi argued for a re-evaluation of the ordinary: “An architect should use convention and make it vivid. I mean he should use convention unconventionally. … The main justification for honky-tonk elements in architectural

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order is their very existence.” Writing in 1969 with Scott Brown in defense of Edwin Lutyens’s architecture, he wrote: “Commercial strip architecture and Lutyens’s houses are relevant to an architecture of meaning.” An advocate of non-judgmental perspectives on the built and social environment, Denise Scott Brown proposed that “Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Levittown, the swinging singles on the Westheimer Strip, golf resorts, boating communities, Co-op City, the residential backgrounds to soap operas, TV commercials and mass mag ads, billboards and Route 66 are sources for a changing architectural sensibility.” It is in Learning from Las Vegas that they assume and celebrate Phillip Johnson’s earlier description of their work, intended to be critical and dismissive, as being “ugly and ordinary.” Embracing these attributes, they turn them rhetorically into desired objectives rather than the harsh criticism originally intended. Following the publication of Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi wrote the article “A Definition of Architecture as Shelter with Decoration on It, and Another Plea for a Symbolism of the Ordinary in Architecture” in which, using a sequence of six comparisons, he attempted to justify the use of ordinary symbolism in architecture.

Despite the couple’s interest in the quotidian, critiques are made that in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown the everyday lacked a structured theoretical base. Deborah Fausch proposed that “if Venturi and Scott Brown’s diverse responses to the problem of an ‘architecture of the everyday’ lacked a formal conceptual apparatus, they did possess a loose coherency.” The prevalence of the quotidian makes it a challenging concept to frame, hence the unclear stance of Venturi and Scott Brown. The culmination of their position on the everyday was demonstrated in the Signs of Life exhibition that the two curated at the request of the Smithsonian Institution for the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976. The show presented an overwhelming collection of images of the everyday landscape in mid-century America: the city

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144 Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd ed., 42.
street, the highway, the commercial strip, and the suburb.¹⁵¹ (Figures 1.24.) (Spawned from the exhibition and the years of research that preceded it, a manuscript for a forthcoming book was never published.) The exhibition received mixed reviews and “the majority of the architectural press expressed its bafflement and incomprehension with the inductive, anthropological aggregation of examples in ‘Signs of Life’.”¹⁵²

Analyzing the politics of display in Signs of Life, Deborah Fausch wrote:

This paratactic mode of exposition, which built up examples without explicitly disclosing the principle connecting them, was not without its own inductive logic: the first reports of a fascination for this visual material in the earliest drafts of the manuscript yielded, in the final draft, to an organization by subheading broken up into text and illustration captions. Thus it is clear that the stylistic predilection for the assemblage of particulars revealed more than merely an aesthetic; it also entailed a form of logical construction in which the example was adduced as proof.¹⁵³

Ten years apart, Signs of Life and Complexity and Contradiction shared similar approaches in their construction of the visual discourse, also present in Learning from Las Vegas (particularly in the second edition of the book that followed more closely the intentions of the authors¹⁵⁴). The display strategies in the exhibition find an early precursor in the photographic display in the book. While the everyday itself might appear banal, boring, and irrelevant, one way to elevate it from the lowbrow to the highbrow is through its representation as sheer quantity. The numbing of senses resulted from the accumulation of “stuff” puts a distance between the viewer and the ordinary objects or scenes represented, which otherwise belong to the invisible realm of the everyday. Less is a bore reveals not only a discontent with the modernist minimalist aesthetic, but also the less explicit desire underlying the ethos of the time to re-examine the more of the everyday.

¹⁵¹ For a detailed analysis of the exhibition, its policies of display, and echoes in the popular and professional press, see Fausch, The Meaning of Context Is Everyday Life.
¹⁵³ Ibid., 228.
¹⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion on the book design in the first and second editions, see Aron Vinegar, I am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008).
The question of boredom and the boring was central in visual arts in the 1950s and 1960s and directly related to the everyday. Venturi and Scott Brown drew heavily on the art scene of the era. Pop Art embraced the everyday and Minimalism appropriated boredom as means to revitalize artistic sensibilities. On the one hand, championing Pop Art, Andy Warhol famously declared “I like boring things,” a statement quoted as a motto in the chapter “Ugly and Ordinary Architecture or the Decorated Shed” from Learning from Las Vegas. On the other hand, minimalist Donald Judd claimed that “A work needs only to be interesting.” Pop Art and Minimalism had in common a shift in the nature of emotions and posed a new problem in art: reversing the modernist model, artists sought to produce emotion without representing it. In doing so, they offered the viewers exactly the distance from the everyday life they needed to have insights into their own emotions.

Judd’s and Warhol’s task was to create work that did not promise to distract, nor claim to represent repressed feelings (like Abstract Expressionism), but instead create a space in which one’s affective experience of everyday life could come into being. By mimicking the lack of affect that one might feel toward the everyday world of things and images, … Judd’s and Warhol’s works allows boredom … to come into existence as such. And then something interesting happens: different boredom emerges, one that is “an apogee of mental relaxation” rather than withdrawal.

Central for understanding the complexity and elusiveness of the everyday are the writings of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. De Certeau’s primary interest resides in exploring how people, “commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules,” take ownership of their everyday practices, spaces, language, in other words how they act on a daily basis. Henri Lefebvre’s examination of the everyday, on the other hand, ties together boredom, modernity, and the everyday.

De Certeau places how live people in opposition with the rules imposed by various establishments and sees them primarily as subversive practices of resistance. “Everyday life,” he

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157 Ibid., 53.
158 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, xi.
writes, “invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.” In order to
distinguish between the rules received from top down and life practices, he proposes to
differentiate between strategies and tactics. Both strategies and tactics have a strong grounding
in spatial practices.

A strategy, according to De Certeau, becomes possible when a structure of power (such
as the political establishment, an institution, an administrative body, etc.) isolates itself from the
environment, delineates its own place, and generates rules that the others have to abide by. A
tactic, on the other hand, belongs to those who do not have a circumscribed spatial or
institutional localization, “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it
over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.” In other words, strategies are
imposed top-down by various forms of institutions, whereas tactics are generated bottom-up by
the weak, the marginalized, the powerless. De Certeau observes that the most common everyday
activities, such as walking, talking, reading, cooking, etc., are tactical. People adapt and adjust to
their environment, detect clues, make decisions, and move forward based on a logic that
interprets the events and thus seizes opportunities. A similar distinction between “strong” and
“weak” modes of operation proposed the philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1953. He described the two
major forms of thinking as the hedgehog and the fox: the former functions according to one big
overarching idea (like Plato, Dante, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky), whereas the latter draws from
multiple experiences (Aristotle, Shakespeare, Balzac, Joyce).

Venturi’s position toward modern architecture criticizes its principles-turned-strategies
abiding by a limited set of governing rules. As a way to revitalize architecture, he proposes to
discover the tactics of the everyday and embrace their variety. Each chapter in Complexity and
Contradiction and most of the images, celebrate design tactics, as opposed to strategies:
“Ambiguity,” “The Phenomenon of ‘Both-And’ in architecture,” “The Double-Functioning
Element,” “Contradiction Adapted,” “Contradiction Juxtaposed,” etc. Venturi recognizes the
value of what philosopher Charles Peirce has called “abductive reasoning,” a form of logic based
on inference, on the most probable, though not always demonstrable, leap from observation to

159 Ibid., xii.
160 Ibid., xix.
161 Ibid., xix.
162 Isaiah Berlin, The Fox and the Hedgehog: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History (London: Weidenfeld and
Nicholson, 1953).
conclusion. Thus Venturi proposes that architecture should not apply predefined rules, but rather examine present conditions and re-shuffle them into new meanings. The firm’s 1979 intervention in Jim Thorpe, a small town in Pennsylvania, was specifically described in terms of tactics such as conversions, restorations, paving, street furniture, etc. that resulted in a successful revitalization of the town. Tactics as prevalent modes of operation also became integral to the family life of the Venturi and Scott Brown couple. In an article first published in 1983 that analyzed the challenges faced by architects and planners confronted with the changing dynamics of modern family life, Scott Brown described their own life as an “ersatz family” in which friends, students, fellow architects, and neighbors substituted the “real” family scattered all around the world:

Bob and I have a joint career in child-raising, home-making, architecture and urban planning. … There is no clear seam between our work and family lives, both because we prefer it that way and because it makes our lives possible. … We have a housekeeper who lives in during the week. She has been with us more than ten years, is a grandmother, and is virtually a third parent in our household. We rent a small apartment in our basement to an architecture student who partly pays his rent by helping around the house and yard. … [t]wo elderly ladies help out on occasion, and the cook in our local restaurant uses his spare time in the afternoon to fetch our child from school and do the ferrying that suburban mothers do.  

Several questions must be raised. As Bourdieu has shown, habitus generates meaningful practices not because it is taught or prescribed, but precisely because it is tacit and embodied in the everyday. Tactics require a form of imagination that appropriates the banal and the boring of the quotidian and finds creative ways to give them new meanings. This is one of Venturi’s objectives in Complexity and Contradiction which will later become a central concern of the Venturi-Scott Brown team. However, doesn’t the inherent nature of the everyday make tactics impossible to systematize? Once structured, don’t they, perhaps, turn into strategies? The richness of ideas brought to light in Complexity and Contradiction is without a doubt refreshing

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and fertile, but once they are institutionalized, structured, and scientifically “named” do they still have the power to operate as tactics? Will they not, eventually, join the stale rules of modernism that they originally attempted to subvert? Tactics turn into strategies when abductive reasoning loses its bodily dimension and uses disembodied signs and symbols. Part of de Certeau’s critique of the everyday addresses the overemphasis of modern society on visual stimuli: “From TV to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey.”

Henri Lefebvre summarized the difference between traditional and modern societies through the idea of *diversity*, inherently present in the former, but lacking in the latter. This lack of diversity, however, remains disguised behind a mask that offers infinite options and possibilities. He wrote:

Before the series of revolutions which ushered in what is called the modern era, housing, modes of dress, eating and drinking – in short, living – presented a prodigious diversity. … The diversity has never been well acknowledged or recognized as such; it has resisted a rational kind of interpretation which has only come about in our time by interfering with and destroying that diversity. Today we see a worldwide tendency to uniformity. Rationality dominates, accompanied but not diversified by irrationality.

This uniformity and lack of diversity is the boredom of modernity resulting from the autonomy of forms, functions, and structures, once forming an undifferentiated whole that constructed the fabric of life itself. Now overstated, over-explained, and over-exposed, forms, functions, and structures have become transparent, losing the overarching symbolic meaning and the ability to construct a unified whole. The result is the advent of autonomous sub-systems, each confronted with an only apparent, in fact arranged, diversity. Underlying these

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166 Lefebvre, “The Everyday and Everydayness,” 7.
167 “Things as well as institutions, ‘objects’ as well as ‘subjects’ offered up to the senses accessible and recognizable forms. People … performed various functions, some of them psychological (eating, drinking, sleeping), others social (working, traveling). Structures … allowed for the public or private performance of these functions … .” (Lefebvre, “The Everyday and Everydayness,” 7.)
169 Ibid., 8.
circumstances is the emergence of boredom, which enters each of these sub-domains and its products, from architecture to industrially produced foods, and the culture of automobile: “… in the domain of architecture, a variety of local, regional, and national architectural styles has given way to “architectural urbanism,” a universalizing system of structures and functions in supposedly rational geometric forms."170

In concert with Bourdieu’s *habitus* and its paradoxical definition around opposites, Lefebvre defines the everyday as

a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct. … The everyday is therefore the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden. … The concept of everydayness does not therefore designate a system, but rather a denominator common to existing systems including judicial, contractual, pedagogical, fiscal, and police systems.171

Situating the everyday in the larger context of the consumerist society, Lefebvre brings forth two interconnected concepts: abundance and planned obsolescence.172 They account for both the excess of products and their brief life, in short for the boredom inherent to the modern world where consumers constantly chase the newest and trendiest merchandise in the form of physical goods or abstract ideas. Making an argument for the study of the banal in a world where everything eventually becomes obsolete and transitory, Lefebvre invites one to change the terms of discussion and uncover the relevance of the overlooked, the dull, and the boring: “Banality? Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? … Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?”173

Lefebvre introduces two ideas that help us conceptualize boredom in relation to the elusive notion of the everyday: *repetition* and *passivity*. Thus he distinguishes between *cyclical* and *linear* repetition, where the former refers to the cycles of days, seasons, crops, life and death,
and the latter implies “the repetitive gestures of work and consumption.” In the modern world, he argues, “the repetitive gestures tend to mask and to crush the cycles.” This distinction illuminates a critical aspect of the relationship between boredom and repetition: repetition turns into boredom when it is linear, when subjects fail to take into account the world at large and their positioning within it. As Elizabeth Goodstein remarked in her investigation of modernity and boredom, the experience of boredom developed not from the rhythms of pre-industrialized societies (cyclical repetition), but “in response to the superabundance of stimulation, the superfluity of possibilities for personal achievement, the sheer excess of transformation, offered by the modern city.” Thus boredom became an ominous presence in the city life.

Boredom is both an urban and a suburban phenomenon, manifested either as frustration or as disenchantment. In 1903, Georg Simmel identified the “blasé attitude” as a phenomenon specific to urbanity, growing from the “rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves.” As a consequence, things themselves appear “in an evenly flat and grey tone,” in other words boredom prevails. At the turn of the 20th century, fiction ties together the city, the everyday, and boredom. Sherlock Holmes’ rejection, on the one hand, and astute observation, on the other, of the everyday in Arthur Conan Doyle’s series, presents an everyday tedium resulted from seriality. Seriality is another way of describing Lefebvre’s notion of linear repetition.

Passivity, the other important concept that Lefebvre proposes, and more specifically organized passivity, engenders boredom at all levels of human life: leisure presents the spectators with images they cannot appropriate; workers have no decision-making power in the workplace; the imposition of consumption through advertising preempts private life. Modernity distorts the relationship of work and leisure. “The form of free-time busy-ness necessarily corresponds to

174 Ibid., 10.
175 Ibid., 10.
the form of business.” Modern forms of entertainment such as television, radio, advertising, and movies keep people in a state of perpetual agitation. Leisure turns into entertainment and, although apparently opposed to work, they are both disengaging, pass-time activities. Joseph Pieper has argued for an understanding of leisure as contemplative activity that is not dissociated from work – a status lost, however, in modernity with the split between work and leisure. Pieper defines boredom as the “inability to enjoy leisure; for one can only be bored if the spiritual power to be leisurely has been lost.” The excess of leisure time torments the modern man just as much as the Marxist alienating labor. Writing a literary history of boredom as a state of mind, Patricia Meyer-Spacks has identified the split between work and leisure that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries as one of the four major causes of the emergence of boredom in modernity. The modern disenchantment with the world thus affects the structures of *habitus*, which in turn changes the practices of everyday life.

In the mid-decades of the twentieth century, boredom was experienced as a discontent with everyday life across spaces, geographies, art forms, literary genres, and disciplines. Boredom is a state of mind and a situation, a subjective, as well as an environmental matter. It was declared “an aesthetic or intellectual or emotional category, not an ethical one.” As such, it became a topic of interest not only in visual arts, but also in poetry, fiction, and film.

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.

After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,

we ourselves flash and yearn,

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185 Ibid., 59.
187 The others are the decline of Christianity that conjured up disinterest in after-life along with an increased importance of everyday life; the advent of individual rights that infers people’s right not to be bored – an idea marking a postmodern moment; lastly, the rise of individualism that brings forth a sense of entitlement along with a focus on inner experience. (Meyer Sacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, 17-24.)
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no
Inner Resources.’ I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.190

Alberto Moravia, known to his friends as a perpetual victim of boredom, published in
1960 the novel La Noia, originally translated as The Empty Canvas, most likely out of fear that a
direct translation – Boredom – would not appeal to an English-speaking audience.191 The
neurotic love of Dino, a disenchanted urban painter, for Cecilia, a girl whom he fails to know
beyond their sexual encounters, develops at the same time with his indifference toward and
disengagement with, himself and the world.192

“We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. … we really have to
strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humor and poetry,”
declared a precursor of the Situationists in 1953.193 “What currently marks our public life, is
boredom. The French are bored.,” wrote the journalist Pierre Viansson-Ponte in the March 15,
1968 issue of Le Monde.

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191 “But, on encountering him, I would first, automatically, ask him how he was. ‘Mi annoio,’ he would usually
reply, in his clipped, telegraphic way.” (William Weaver, “Introduction,” in Alberto Moravia, Boredom (New York:
192 “The feeling of boredom originates for me in a sense of the absurdity of a reality which is insufficient, or anyhow
unable, to convince me of its own effective existence. For example, I may be looking with some degree of
attentiveness at a tumbler. As long as I say to myself that this tumbler is a glass or metal vessel made for the purpose
of putting liquid into it and carrying it to one’s lips without upsetting it – as long as I am able to represent the
tumbler to myself in a convincing manner – so long shall I feel that I have some sort of a relationship with it, a
relationship close enough to make me believe in its existence and also, on a subordinate level, in my own. But once
the tumbler withers away and loses its vitality in the manner I have described, or, in other words, reveals itself to me
as something foreign, something with which I have no relationship, once it appears to me as an absurd object – then
from that very absurdity springs boredom, which when all is said and done is simply a kind of incommunicability
and the incapacity to disengage oneself from it. … For me, therefore, boredom is not only the inability to escape
from myself but is also the consciousness that theoretically I might be able to disengage myself from it, thanks to a
miracle of some sort.” (Moravia, Boredom, 5-6)
A certain impatience specific to moments of crisis, along with an undeniable sense of breaking moral barriers, transpires from Venturi’s text. “Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture,” he states in his “gentle manifesto.” While criticizing the revolutionary Modern movement, Venturi nonetheless proposes his own revolution, quoting from Christopher Alexander’s *Notes from a Synthesis of Form*: “At the same time that the problems increase in quantity, complexity, and difficulty, they also change faster than before.” This sense of speed and restlessness is implicit in the wording of phrases, in the short, alert, well-constructed sentences, in the quick leaps between different precedents, different ideas, different critiques. A few examples of those that abound in the text:

I welcome the problems and exploit the uncertainties. By embracing contradiction as well as complexity, I am for vitality as well as validity.

Ambiguity and tension are everywhere in an architecture of complexity and contradiction. Architecture is form and substance – abstract and concrete – and its meaning derives from its interior characteristics and its particular context. An architectural element is perceived as form and structure, texture and material.

Much of the function of ornament is rhetorical – like the use of Baroque pilasters for rhythm, and Vanbrugh’s disengaged pilasters at the entrance to the kitchen court at Blenheim which are an architectural fanfare. The rhetorical element which is also structural is rare in Modern architecture, although Mies has used the rhetorical I-beam with an assurance that would make Bernini envious.

As in the preliminary scheme of Kahn’s Unitarian Church in Rochester, the residual spaces are closed. In contrast, the linings of columns and piers in SS. Sergius and Bacchus, St. Stephen Walbrook, Vierzehnheiligen, and Neresheim define residual spaces

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194 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 16.
195 Ibid., 16
196 Ibid., 16
197 Ibid., 20.
198 Ibid., 40.
which open on the dominant spaces, although they are separate from them in varying degrees.\textsuperscript{199}

Eager to change the architectural products of repetitive habits, Venturi proposes a quick remedy. However, to those who treat the everyday with impatience, attempting to change life quickly, Lefebvre responded:

… transforming the everyday requires certain conditions. A break with the everyday by means of festival – violent or peaceful – cannot endure. In order to change life, society, space, architecture, even the city must change.\textsuperscript{200}

Although never referenced directly, \textit{habitus} is a looming presence in Venturi’s early work. While in Bourdieu’s definition, \textit{habitus} is a physical embodiment of cyclically repetitive practices, Venturi approaches it as a mere repetition of gestures without content, as empty \textit{habit}, which he identifies as one of the core issues of modern architecture. In the first edition of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, Venturi’s motto \textit{Less is a bore} underlies the overall organization of the visual discourse. The disconnect between writing and illustrations results in images that act as disembodied signs and symbols, lying flat on the page. Influenced by pedagogical principles derived from Gestalt and behaviorism (particularly the stimulus – response model), Venturi attempts to change architectural practices, but overlooks the embodied nature of \textit{habitus}.

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 78-80.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 11.
1.2. **Boredom in midcentury architectural thought**

The critique of modern living and, implicitly modern architecture, as *boring* permeates architectural practice during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

The discontent with modern architecture is at work in the writings and design proposals of the Austrian-born architect Josef Frank. One of the pioneers of the modernist movement in Austria, in 1933 Frank immigrated to Sweden where he stayed until 1939 when he moved to New York and lived there during the war years. Back to Stockholm in 1946, somewhat isolated from the main architectural circles in the country, and increasingly dissatisfied with modernist architecture, he began experimenting with theoretical projects to counteract the dullness of the post-war mass-produced architecture.\(^{201}\) Shortly after his return to Stockholm in the mid-1940s, Frank was already manifesting his longing for the raw vitality of New York in contrast with the monotony of the European cities.\(^{202}\) He wrote in a letter:

> I am now preoccupied here with the problem of boredom in art and architecture. Why, one must ask oneself, are the streets and dwellings here so uninteresting? … What good is the art here and carefulness in building if everything is so dull. I am now completely of the opinion that much that is good comes about merely through chance and not through careful planning.\(^{203}\)

He will further elaborate on the notion of chance in the essay “Accidentism,” published in Swedish in 1958 in the journal *Form*. For Frank “chance” or “accidentism” does not imply randomness and, I suggest, it is directly related to the notion of habit. Criticizing the “so-called designer” for assuming the task of continuously searching for innovation, Frank is condemning, in fact, the idea of perpetual change as an antidote to boredom, along with added decoration as an escape from the impasse of style.\(^{204}\) He acknowledges the cyclical nature of various styles in history and observes that the staleness of the rigid laws which “soon become monotonous and

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\(^{202}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{203}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{204}\) “These activities transform everything into fashion items, which in turn influence the art created in its surrounding environment. Fashion sensations are … extremely seductive, as they can relieve the monotony inherent in the standardization necessitated by mass production.” (Frank, *Accidentism*, 19).
"dull" is usually overcome through a variety “achieved by enriching the forms with the help of decorations and playful constructions.”

What modern architecture is lacking with the logic of its flat roofs, is the “irrational space full of mystery” of the attic. The same year Frank published “Accidentism,” philosopher Gaston Bachelard published in French The Poetics of Space, his phenomenological study on house and inhabitation. Bachelard’s house is a place for day-dreaming situated between the dark, irrational space of the cellar and the more luminous, rational space of the attic. The presence of the childhood attic as the room for solitude and imagination, Bachelard maintains, remains imprinted into one’s memory forever:

… even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. … In the past, the attic may have seemed too small, it may have seemed cold in winter and hot in summer. Now, however, in memory recaptured through daydreams, … the attic is at once small and large, warm and cool, always comforting.

Frank’s critique of modern architecture echoes Bachelard’s proposition, perhaps unknowingly. Frank dreams of an architecture with “rooms that allow scope for the imagination” and of cities with streets “that are something other than simply traffic problems.” For him, people’s everyday life and habits offer the necessary resources to overcome both uniformity and ephemeral fashions. What he calls “accidents” are not exceptions to rules or formal figures within a field, but rather the coagulation of events, practices, individual choices and preferences that constitute one’s life and which manifest themselves through architecture.

A sitting room in which one can live and think freely is neither beautiful, nor harmonious, nor photogenic. It is the result of a series of random accidents; it is never

205 Frank, Accidentism, 21-22.
206 Ibid., 21.
209 Ibid., 10.
210 Frank, Accidentism, 22.
really completed and it has sufficient scope to include whatever may be needed to satisfy its owner’s shifting requirements.\textsuperscript{211}

Decrying the modern uniformity resulted from ideology, Frank envisions an “environment that appears to have arisen by accident.”\textsuperscript{212} Frank’s “accidents” are not merely formal structures with a spatial dimension that create a tension / contrast within a uniform field, but rather places resulting from the accumulation in time of practices of inhabitation, from everyday things and customs. For Frank, the answer to the question of architectural boredom resides not in the search of the exceptional, but in the careful examination of habits, daily routines, and commonplaces.

Frank constructs a different meaning of “accident” from the one that Venturi suggests, for instance, in his firm’s 1965 project for three buildings for a town in Ohio (the town hall, Y.M.C.A., and the extension of the public library). The windows punched on the free-standing wall that constitutes the front façade of the YMCA building construct a rather uniform field: “The relationship of the openings which are the dominant elements of the façade make up a relatively constant rhythm without focus in the center or emphasis at the terminations.”\textsuperscript{213} A secondary, more irregular rhythm of the building-proper behind reads as a “contrapuntal juxtaposition” against the uniformity of the front façade.\textsuperscript{214}

In 1955, architect Bernard Rudofsky published \textit{Behind the Picture Window} – a series of essays on everyday life in the United States whose concluding chapter, tellingly titled “On Boredom and Disprivacy,” criticized the modern house as being conducive to solitude, alienation, and boredom. Transparency of the walls along with the noises of the mechanical systems of the house, Rudofsky argued, prevent people from building intimacy, conversation, and a sense of privacy. His answer to the problem of modern boredom was the return to the house as an \textit{instrument for living} that would replace the machine for living dear to modern architects from Le Corbusier onward. He associated that distinction with the difference between

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 20.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 126.
\end{itemize}
“playing a violin and a jukebox.” In other words, while the machine responds to external stimuli received from the user (such as pushing the button of the jukebox) and generates the same response no matter who the user is, the instrument is attuned to the rhythms and bodily movement specific to each player.

As boredom inflicts itself on people’s lives, the easiest way out appears to be a quick change – just as Arthur Townsend, Henry James’s character from Washington Square, frequently changed his residence, so does the modern man falsely believes that his problems will be solved through trading his house for another one – perhaps, bigger, yet so similar. Rudofsky echoes here Kierkegaard’s reflections on boredom. Kierkegaard criticized an extensive response to boredom that involved a variation of the surface rather than a deeper and more substantial change: bored with the countryside, he argued, people move to the city; bored with their native lands, people go abroad; bored with Europe, they travel to America; bored with eating on porcelain, they eat on silver. Instead, he suggested, limitations and restraints make one more resourceful and more creative. Similarly, Rudofsky noticed that modern “man’s periodical changes of address are no more than futile attempts to escape the boredom of his environment.”

Rudofsky’s later studies on footwear and clothing reflect the same concern for nurturing not ephemeral fashions, but the particulars of the human body. He argued that while “primitive man” has and sticks to an unchanging body ideal, “industrial man” has vague and unclear tastes and objectives. The reason for his unsettling attitude is boredom:

… the factor that goes farthest to account for this unholy obsession is his boredom. Bored with the natural shape of his body, he delights in getting away from himself, and to judge from past and former performance, the resources at hand for making his escape are

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218 Ibid., I 264, 292.
219 Rudofsky, Behind the Picture Window, 198.
inexhaustible. … instead of striving for perfection he is consumed by a passion for unceasing experimentation. Only rarely does he exercise self-restraint.\textsuperscript{221}

For Rudofsky, the man dwells in his clothes the same way he dwells in his house, hence the overarching theme of boredom extends from impersonal mechanized houses to impersonal fashions.

Whether deliberately paraphrasing Rudofsky’s \textit{Behind the Picture Window}, or simply voicing a common concern of the time, John Keats’s novel \textit{The Crack in the Picture Window} from 1956 was an open critique of American post-war suburban developments.\textsuperscript{222} A journalist and writer, Keats based his novel on various articles and books published from 1947 through 1955, and identified the main problems of suburban sprawl: financial machinations, land speculation, manipulation through advertisement, bad design, lack of a true sense of community. The book follows the Drones – John, Mary and their two children – as they move to the suburbs in search of a better life but are trapped in an existence of boredom, monotony, and financial debt. They are no different from their neighbors – the Amiables, the Fecunds, the Wilds – all living in identical houses, with identical picture windows, and equipped with identical furniture and appliances bought under the influence of advertising.

The house proves inadequate for the family of four: brand new, but poorly finished, small and inefficient. It becomes Mary’s arch-nemesis as she struggles to make a comfortable life for her family. Mary herself is far from resourceful, she blindly follows the initiatives and customs of the other homemakers in the development. Her main problem – boredom – seems to find its cure with the advent of the latest fad: the television set, which, eventually, only reinforces the loop of ennui:

Lacking stimulation from their neighbors …, oppressed by ennui, development people turn to the mass communication media to find new ideas. Then, because everyone sees the same TV shows, reads the same article in the same magazine, they all come up with the same idea at the same time, and the result is more ennui.\textsuperscript{223}

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\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 81.
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The ennui settles in surreptitiously not only as a visual trap, but also as a multi-sensorial tedium. In front of their TV sets, all families eat the same Yummy Gummy mix that comes in “six distinctively similar flavors” creating the illusion of diversity while, in fact, allowing “gustatorial boredom” to settle in.224 Any relief from boredom is temporary. People make home improvements based on other people’s ideas, buy the same gadgets as the neighbors, attend the same parties, or take on a hobby imposed by someone else. When Mary seeks medical advice for the unhappy state she finds herself in, the local psychiatrist, Dr. Sly, explains to her that there is nothing wrong, she is simply bored, just like himself and everyone else.225 For Dr. Sly, boredom is no longer a disease, but rather a natural state of mind. For the Drones, the solution appears to be moving away to a more expensive, yet predictably similar development where the exact same problems will soon surface in their lives. Unknowingly, they resort to what Søren Kierkegaard criticized in the nineteenth century as the “rotation of crops that depends upon the boundless infinity of change, its extensive dimension.”226 Condemning the change in surface as a superficial and ultimately pointless response to boredom, Kierkegaard proposed “the principle of limitation” as a substantial and more resourceful way to address the ennui of everyday life.

Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* from 1961 looks at dullness as a disease that infects city life. The lack of diversity, Jacobs argues, in the new neighborhoods built all at once eventually leads to stagnation and immobility.227 “The practical penalties of dullness, from this and other causes, stamp the neighborhood early. It becomes a place to leave.”228 Mixed used urban neighborhoods, where “bars, theaters, clinics, businesses and manufacturing” are intermingled within residential areas would prevent the proliferation of “dull, inherently dangerously gray areas” that similar structures would produce in the suburbs.229 In

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224 Ibid., 82.
225 Ibid., 94-95.
228 Ibid., 198.
229 Ibid., 231.
Jacobs’s narrative, gray, dull, boring are all synonyms to urban blight while she is advocating for urban diversity, both human and programmatic.\textsuperscript{230}

As the principles of modernist architecture were being seriously questioned all over Europe, in the early 1960s British architect Cedric Price along with Joan Littlewood, one of Britain’s most radical theater directors, producers, and social activists, embarked together on the challenging adventure of designing “The Fun Palace.” Never raised as a physical structure, the Fun Palace was conceived with the purpose of bringing together education and leisure. Due to automation and prefabrication, the post-World-War-II British economy was predicted to become leisure-driven.\textsuperscript{231} In that context, Price and Littlewood attempted to make both education and leisure accessible to the working class\textsuperscript{232} and to erase the modernist distinction between work and leisure.\textsuperscript{233} I suggest that one of the underlying stakes of the project was to overcome the boredom of the urban dweller, soon to be faced with too much free time and too little engaging activities.

Developed over the course of several years by an interdisciplinary team that would eventually comprise architects, designers, sociologists, cyberneticians, scientists and politicians, the Fun Palace challenged the conventional understanding of architecture as a fixed, immobile structure. It proposed, instead, an “interactive machine” that could be changed, modified, adapted, and reconfigured by the inhabitants themselves, based on their own desires, needs, and actions.

When Cedric Price started his architectural education in the early 1950s at St. John’s College in Cambridge, he was mostly interested in prefabrication.\textsuperscript{234} His take on history in general and architectural history in particular was soon to be guided by an understanding of change and transformation (in culture and society) as the driving forces that shape the built

\textsuperscript{230} Peter Laurence has noticed that Jacobs considered “blight” a strong enough idea in her book to list it in the index. [Peter L. Laurence, “Contradictions and Complexities: Jane Jacobs’s and Robert Venturi’s Complexity Theories,” \textit{Journal of Architectural Education} 59, No. 3 (February 2006): 49-60].


\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., 70-71.

\textsuperscript{234} “Prefabrication was the only thing that interested me, but we weren’t taught anything about it.” (Matthews, \textit{From Agit-Prop to Free Space}, 22).
His conviction that “life was a matter of change and complexity” led to his idea of the ephemeral nature of architecture and his interest in the rising sciences of indeterminacy: cybernetics and game theory. Spawnsed by an accidental encounter with Joan Littlewood shortly before her departure for Nigeria, Price’s collaboration with the theater director and activist began in 1962 and continued for several years as they worked closely together to develop the concept of the Fun Palace.

Making use of Price’s combined interests in prefabrication, change, and indeterminacy, the Fun Palace offered the opportunity to address the rising issue of modern boredom. As Price and Littlewood were also invested in publicly promoting the project to the local government, politicians, and local neighborhood associations, one of their publicity pamphlets suggested a remedy to the problems of daily routines, urban boredom, and alienation:

Have you changed your job?
Did you want to?
Do you enjoy routine?

…
Do you suffer from boredom?
overwork?
loneliness?
overcrowding?

12 or more yesses [sic], read on.

Described as a complex tool for self-discovery, education, and leisure, the Fun Palace promised to engage people in a variety of activities such as eating, drinking, dancing, skiing, bowling, swimming, but also vintage car restoration, photography, finger painting, mutual

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235 Matthews, From Agit-Prop to Free Space, 23.
236 Matthews, From Agit-Prop to Free Space, 40-41.
237 Matthews, From Agit-Prop to Free Space, 92.
admiration, and even sex. An experiment in programmatically addressing large-scale boredom, the Fun Palace invited people to physically change and adapt its configuration to respond to their own desires. Price seems to offer the answer to boredom in the possibility of perpetual change. Built upon the indeterminacy of change and the idea of an open, never-completed work, the structure was conceived upon the assumption that people need variation and constant stimulation to overcome the dullness of their individual lives. Interpreted as one of the earliest examples of virtual reality, and with the hindsight of current discussion on simulation and virtual reality, the Fun Palace prompts larger questions about the relationship of distraction and entertainment to boredom.

First published in 1963, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander’s *Community and Privacy: Toward a New Architecture of Humanism*, shared similar concerns with Rudofsky and Jacobs. Modern man’s “fundamental monotony of his anxiety-ridden existence” lacks daily variety, the physical transparency of the walls along with the deafening sounds of the new machines and mechanical devices are threatening “the provision for relaxation, concentration, contemplation, introspection.” As “more and more becomes less and less,” overstimulation leads to boredom, a state that the authors describe as a disease whose pathology they identify in the proliferation of artificial, machine-controlled environments. The subchapter titled “The pathology of boredom” concludes with an illustration by Saul Steinberg of a man holding up his

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238 Ibid., 88.
239 Ibid., 88.
240 Born in 1900 to a prosperous family in Grozny, Serge Chermayeff was sent to a boarding school in England when he was ten and there he would eventually complete his education (while supporting himself as a ballroom dancer!). For a short period of time, he partnered with Erich Mendelsohn in the 1930s and in 1940 immigrated to the United States. After teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, from 1946 until 1951 was the director of the Institute for Design in Chicago and later taught at Yale, Harvard, and MIT. Born in Vienna in 1936, Christopher Alexander moved to England where he received a Bachelor’s degree in architecture and a Master’s degree in mathematics. He moved to the United States in 1958 and started teaching at the University of California, Berkeley in 1963.
242 Ibid., 78.
243 Ibid., 78-79.
oversized fingerprint – perhaps a desperate attempt at preserving individuality and privacy in face of the “uniformity of the air-conditioned nightmare.”\textsuperscript{244}

Chermayeff and Alexander’s book resides at the intersection of their interests. Chermayeff examined the idea of community as the core of human existence (an interest later developed in his 1971 \textit{Shape of Community: Realization of Human Potential}, co-authored with Alexander Tzonis). Alexander was searching for mathematical, computer-generated models capable of objectively solving subjective issues (which he expanded in his 1977 \textit{A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction}). While the first part of \textit{Community and Privacy} is a critique of the fragmented and alienated nature of modern life, the second part proposes a strategy to identify a specific number of functions necessary for the wellbeing of both the individual and the community and then to combine them in an optimal way to best satisfy those functions. The book received mixed reviews. Critical of authors’ confusion between fact and value, sociologist William H. Key wrote that they “propose a naïve theory of human nature, and completely ignore the role of culture and social structure in human affairs,” but recognized its relevance in highlighting the disconnect between architects, city planners, and sociologists.\textsuperscript{245} Other authors have recognized the seeds of Alexander’s “pattern language that he will fully develop years later.”\textsuperscript{246}

Dedicated “To Walter Gropius with admiration affection and gratitude,” the book shows the authors’ commitment to modernism while at the same time voicing a common discontent of the era with architecture turning into a stale international style. Venturi was familiar with the work of Christopher Alexander from whose book \textit{Notes on the Synthesis of Form} he quotes in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} to support his own argument for a architecture of complexity.\textsuperscript{247} Proposing a rational, positivist, and problem-solving approach to design, Alexander makes the claim that “the ultimate object of design is form.”\textsuperscript{248} His argument “is

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\item \textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 79.
\item \textsuperscript{245} William H. Key, Book review, \textit{The Sociological Quarterly} 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1966): 106.
\item \textsuperscript{247} “But now our position is different: ‘At the same time that the problems increase in quantity, complexity, and difficulty they also change faster than before’ … .” [Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 16 – from Christopher Alexander, \textit{Notes on the Synthesis of Form} (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1964), 4].
\item \textsuperscript{248} Christopher Alexander, \textit{Notes on the Synthesis of Form}, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass. 1964; 7\textsuperscript{th} printing, 1973), 15.
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based on the idea that every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form in question and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem.”

Amos Rapoport and Robert E. Kantor’s already discussed 1967 article built upon New Criticism and cognitive psychology (Gestalt and behaviorism) to argue for an urban environment designed on the principles of ambiguity and complexity. They identified the problem of contemporary architecture in that “it has been simplified and cleaned up to such an extent that all it has to say is revealed at a glance. A range of meanings and possibilities has been eliminated.” Underlying the argument is the notion of boredom. Their observation that “we may visualize a range of perceptual input from sensory deprivation (monotony) to sensory satiation (chaos)” echoed Venturi’s claim from *Complexity and Contradiction* that that “it seems our fate now to be faced with either the endless inconsistencies of roadtown, which is chaos, or the infinite consistency of Levittown … which is boredom.” (Venturi is referenced not only through the paraphrase of the article’s title, but also through an explicit quote from *Complexity and Contradiction*. A key concept of their argument is the “optimal perceptual rate,” i.e. the right balance between simple and complex stimuli. Experimental studies in cognitive psychology have shown that, on the one hand, “stimuli which are too simple lead to boredom; those which are too complex lead to confusion and avoidance,” in other words the optimal perceptual rate depends on the individual. On the other hand, they observed that an “average” value of this “optimal perceptual rate” applies to most people. Another observation central to their argument brings forth the prominence of vision in the perception of the environment:

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249 Ibid., 15.
251 Ibid., 211.
252 Ibid., 211.
255 Ibid., 214.
256 Ibid., 214-215.
Investigators have emphasized the visual sense in these studies, and indeed, in most of the research on perceptual preference. … with few exceptions, the visual sense dominates completely. The conflict between visual and tactile evidence as to the object size was resolved in almost every case completely in favor of the visual. These results have suggested that we concentrate wholly on the visual aspects of perception. Indeed, we must do so, for we have not been able to find any studies, which include the other senses. 257

It is remarkable how at this point the problem of boredom in architecture focuses exclusively on visual aspects and entirely overlooks any other senses that might have a role in the process. Boredom as profound disengagement with the immediate reality is addressed through the same disembodied visual stimuli that have generated the tedium in the first place and which only keep reinforcing it even further.

In France, the mid-century witnessed growing unrest, increasingly leftist orientations, and a deep sense of alienation that all culminated with the political upheaval of 1968. The French left began to realize the necessity for changes without which a world where one died of starvation would be replaced by one where one died of boredom. 258 The situationists were long concerned with the issue of boredom in architecture. 259 Present on the political, social, and cultural scene, Henri Lefebvre continued his investigation of the everyday with a study of the city of Mourenx, a town of 12,000 inhabitants built in 1958. 260 There he noticed that the “new working class is engaged in a struggle of immense importance against the wound of the modern world: boredom, the monotony of the processes of work, the order of the functional, bureaucratic city.” 261 In that context, a group of like-minded individuals founded the group Utopie that comprised sociologists, urban planners, architects, and a landscape architect. 262 As a form of resistance to Beaux-Arts architectural practices, but also to the stifling norms of the society, the group studied

257 Ibid., 214.
259 Ibid., 39.
260 Ibid., 39.
inflatable structures from houses to public buildings. (The British group *Archigram* was experimenting in similar directions.) Manifesting a strong discontent with the current urban practices, the inflatable “represented … a festive symbol of the new energy. It did so through its fragility, its will to express the ideas of lightness, mobility, and obsolescence, through a joyous critique of gravity, of boredom with the world, and of the contemporary form of urbanism that had been realized.”263

The pervasive issue of boredom found its way into the discourse of American magazines reflecting the concerns of leading practitioners. In the 1960s, *Progressive Architecture (P/A)*, one of the leading architectural publications, was discussing issues such as the value of novelty, meaning, and communication in architecture, the boring and the interesting, architecture as problem-solving. Starting in 1954 the journal granted annual awards in different architecture and urban planning categories and published them in the January issue of the following year, along with selections from the jurors’ comments. These notes and transcripts reveal the underlying themes of the era and show that Venturi’s ideas and propositions from *Complexity and Contradiction* were neither unique, not unheard of, but were crystalizing, in fact, many of the concerns of the time.

Before Venturi launched his campaign against novelty in architecture, the jurors of the 1959 competition remarked that “Perhaps we can shock the profession into a realization that when a thing rests only on the value of novelty it ceases to be novel in a few years.”264 They saw the excitement of a building coming from the relationship of interior spaces265 and advocated for a “thoughtful variety,”266 a term dear to Venturi and repeated often in *Complexity and Contradiction*.267 The following year brought what jurors called “a shift in design interest:”268 while most awards and citations were received in residential and commercial architecture, there were no significant projects in education, religion, industry, or urban design. The jurors wondered: “What has caused this shift in design interest?” … “Is it simply a bored reaction? Is it

265 Ibid., 99.
266 Ibid., 100.
school boards inhibiting the architect?”269 Defending his own interest in history and visual forms, Philip Johnson noticed a particular direction of the projects, “which is the most unpopular one today – the historical tendency.”270

In January 1962, Charles Moore’s project for his own house, which received a citation in the residential category, reclaimed several “10-ft-high Tuscan columns of solid fir complete with entasis” from a demolition site in San Francisco and used eight of them to define a pyramidal domed skylight and another smaller square.271 (Figure 1.25.) This use of architectural spolia indicates an appreciation for the past as the modern clean slate becomes increasingly dissatisfying. The jurors also noticed a recurrence of pyramid-shaped roofs – perhaps also a sign of a renewed interest in history – which they deemed “largely a stylistic preoccupation, which, one imagines, will be over shortly as soon as someone comes along with the next entertainment.”272

In 1965, a school for girls designed by Charles Colbert received a citation in the education category for a delightful space in which “one would never be bored.”273 (Figure 1.26.) A member of that year’s jury, Serge Chermayeff noticed the emergence of a new, non-architectural category. Commenting on one of the winning projects, an aquarium that he described as “partly an exhibition, partly a new type of civic space,” Chermayeff remarked – in many ways foreseeing Venturi’s future position – that this “disembodied architecture” involved “several specialized communication techniques – typography, graphics, lighting.”274 As if confirming Chermayeff’s insight into new forms of architectural representation, the cover of the February issue of Progressive Architecture borrowed from cartoon vocabulary and showed two young children, a boy and a girl, staring at a remote industrial-looking architecture. Pointing to the building, the boy tells the girl, in a Lichtenstein-ian manner: “Look Jane. Look and see. See the environment for learning. See, see, see.”275

269 Ibid., 97.
270 Ibid., 97.
274 Ibid., 170.
275 Progressive Architecture (February 1965): cover.
One of the jurors of the 1966 awards harshly critiqued what he began to see as a new residential typology: “These houses are popular because they’re like pop art. That’s why they’re replacing the box: The box had no irony to it at all. The flat boxes are really a kind of seriously considered architectural statement. This isn’t. This is pure pastiche. It’s absurd.”\textsuperscript{276} The same project (a beach cottage designed by Hobbart D. Betts) was described by another juror as “the simplest, clearest, and most controlled use of an idiom that now seems to be everywhere. In terms of space, however, it’s just a box that happens to shed a couple of roofs for not much reason.”\textsuperscript{277} By 1966, Venturi’s ideas about architecture as “decorated shed” seem to be present in the architectural discourse.

1966 was Venturi’s year. In addition to the publication of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}, the firm of Venturi and Rauch received numerous accolades in the \textit{P/A} awards competition, published in the 1967 January issue of the journal. The Frug House (\textbf{Figure 1.27}), a summer residence for Mr. and Mrs. Bradford Mills, was granted an award, while the project for the three buildings for a town in Ohio (\textbf{Figure 1.28}) and the Princeton Memorial Park (\textbf{Figure 1.29}) received citations. The Firehouse 4 in Columbus, Indiana, the forth project submitted by the firm, received particular attention and, although it did not win anything, a photograph of the model was published.\textsuperscript{278} For the first time in the history of the competition, the jurors decided to grant the awards based not on the previously accepted design categories (e.g. residential, education, health, recreation, urban design, etc.), but rather on various “design problems” identified in the six hundred and fifty-two submissions:

The design problems that the 19 winners successfully broached range through most aspects of architecture today: the design of open spaces, buildings as connective topography, the allusive quality of design, city planning for agencies vs. the developer client, handling super-scale, solving social problems, and designing for the good life.\textsuperscript{279}

\textsuperscript{276} \textit{Progressive Architecture} (January 1966): 158.
\textsuperscript{277} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{278} The five members of the jury were Joseph Passonneau (Dean of the School of Architecture, Washington University, St. Louis – elected Jury Chairman), David Crane (Chairman, Civic Design program, Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania and practicing architect), Edward D. Dart (partner in Loebl, Schlossman, Bennett & Dart, Chicago), Charles Moore (Chairman of the Department of Architecture, Yale University and practicing architect), and Sepp Firnkas (structural engineer and Associate Professor of Civil Engineering, Northwestern University).

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One section occupying an entire page (and illustrated with Venturi and Rauch’s Firehouse 4) has the title “An Architecture of Allusion” and revolves around the four projects the firm has entered in the competition.\textsuperscript{280} Perhaps conversing more about Complexity and Contradiction than about the projects themselves, the jurors had different opinions about Venturi’s position. The discussions around topics such as an “architecture of exclusion,” T.S. Eliot, pop life, Pop Art and Pop architecture indicate, on the one hand, that ideas from and even terminology of, the book were already circulating, and, on the other hand, that they were fairly controversial. The opinions ranged from harsh criticism to full support. One juror didn’t see anything particularly innovative in Venturi’s work (“McKim, Mead & White did the same thing, so this is nothing new. They reflected the art and the fashion of their time.”\textsuperscript{281} ) Another believed it was very valuable but remained a private architecture in the sense that the ideas would not be embraced by everyone.\textsuperscript{282} A juror completely dismissed the Memorial Park project for lack of meaning, pointless use of large lettering, and resemblance to contemporary art that has become undignified, “a big joke” evoking a giggle.\textsuperscript{283} The same juror, however, applauded the Firehouse 4 precisely for avoiding “the arbitrary zips and zaps, little curves and doodads.”\textsuperscript{284} At the other extreme, a juror enthusiastically welcomed the new direction expressed in the work of Venturi and Rauch for leaving behind the “architecture of exclusion” (a terminology clearly borrowed from Complexity and Contradiction) and introducing allusions both to an “intellectual heritage” and to pop life.\textsuperscript{285}

While the publication of Complexity and Contradiction certainly brought Venturi to the center of the discussions on the future of architecture, the ideas expressed in the book were already present, although perhaps not fully crystallized, in the debates of the time. In many ways, the book provided the opportunity to open up the conversation about “the elephant in the room.” These exchanges on the margins of the P/A awards reflect the tensions already present among architects, the various forms of discontent with both Modernism and Pop Art, the role and
mission of architecture, the value of its past, the relevance of its present, and, more importantly, the direction of its future.

Sigfrid Giedion summarized the state-of-affairs in architecture during the mid-decades of the twentieth century in his introduction to the 1967 edition of *Space, Time, and Architecture*, subtitled “Hopes and Fears.” He succinctly described the situation as “Confusion and Boredom:”

In the sixties a certain confusion exists in contemporary architecture, as in painting; a kind of pause, even a kind of exhaustion. Everyone is aware of it. Fatigue is normally accompanied by uncertainty, what to do and where to go. Fatigue is the mother of indecision, opening the door to escapism, to superficialities of all kinds. … A kind of playboy-architecture became *en vogue*: an architecture treated as playboys treat life, jumping from one sensation to another and quickly bored with everything.\(^{286}\)

The premise of Giedion’s position was a 1961 symposium at The Metropolitan Museum of New York that discussed the theme of Modern architecture in terms of death or metamorphosis. He criticized the approach to architecture in terms of fashion or style, foreseeing neither death, nor metamorphosis in its future, but rather the formation of a new tradition.\(^{287}\) His suggestion for the basis of this new tradition – a brief comment perhaps surprising and largely overlook – is the implicit notion of *habitus*: “Contemporary architecture worthy of the name sees its main task as the interpretation of a way of life for our period.”\(^{288}\) In other words, he recognizes in the appropriation of and engagement with, *habitus* the answer to the exhaustion and boredom of contemporary architecture. Confidently, he predicted that “the playboy attitude of the sixties will vanish too.”\(^{289}\) That his optimism was largely contradicted by history and architecture continued to follow trends and fashion, is yet another topic of conversation.


\(^{287}\) Ibid., xxxii-xxxiii.

\(^{288}\) Ibid., xxxiii.

\(^{289}\) Ibid., xxxiii.
1.3. **Less is a bore.**

Venturi’s quip *Less is a bore* is often repeated but rarely considered anything else than a rhetorical pun on Mies’s *Less is more*. However, references to *boredom* and the *boring* are hardly scarce in Venturi’s first book and later in the works co-authored with his wife.

The title of Venturi’s treatise has – during its drafting – oscillated between *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Complexity and Adaptation*.\(^{290}\) While the final version has eleven chapters, the last covers the design work of the firm, the table of contents of a draft from 1965 shows the book to have a Vitruvian structure: ten numbered chapters preceded by a “Preface” and followed by “Works.”\(^{291}\) (That Venturi’s book was a nod to Vitruvius’s treatise is also suggested by a direct reference in the first chapter: “But architecture is necessarily complex and contradictory in its very inclusion of the traditional Vitruvian elements of commodity, firmness, and delight.”\(^{292}\))

Revisions to the manuscript to the published book show a deliberate expansion of the topic of *boredom*. Two projects were replaced from the first lineup and two more were added. As we will see later, the two additional projects included in the final version (Three Buildings for a Town in Ohio and the Copley Square Competition) discuss at length the issue of *boredom* and the *boring*.\(^{293}\)

A few differences between early and final versions of the chapter titles indicate particular nuances the author intended to convey. The title of the first chapter, for instance – “Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Gentle Manifesto” – went through several changes:

\(^{290}\) Venturi and Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225.RV.164 – folder: Complexity and Contradiction “Clean Copy” (2/1965)

\(^{291}\) Venturi and Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225. RV.157, 164.

\(^{292}\) Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st edition (New York: MoMA, 1966), 22; also present in the preliminary versions of the manuscript.

“Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Manifesto”\textsuperscript{294} and “Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Straightforward Manifesto.”\textsuperscript{295} It is in this manifesto that the first references to boredom appear.

The publication of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} in 1966 was preceded by a lengthy article published in \textit{Perspecta}, in 1965, and titled “Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture: Selections from a Forthcoming Book.”\textsuperscript{296} The article was structured in three sections (“A Gentle Manifesto,” “Complexity versus Picturesqueness,” “The Inside and the Outside”) and presented at the very end two of Venturi’s projects as illustrations of his ideas (Headquarters Building, North Penn Visiting Nurse Association and the House for Mrs. Robert Venturi, later known as the Vanna Venturi House). The “Gentle Manifesto” published in \textit{Perspecta} reads:

\begin{quote}
I am not intimidated by the puritanical, moral language of modern architecture. I like forms that are impure rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” allusive rather than simple, perverse rather than impersonal, accommodating rather than excluding.\textsuperscript{297}
\end{quote}

This particular fragment has gone through different revisions. In a working draft of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} the same passage reads:

\begin{quote}
Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” perverse rather than impersonal, accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I include the non-sequitur and proclaim the duality.\textsuperscript{298}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{294} Venturi and Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225.RV.164.
\textsuperscript{298} Venturi and Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225.RV.157.
To this sequence, right after “impersonal,” Venturi added – in a hand-written note at the bottom of the page – “boring as well as ‘interesting,’ conventional rather than ‘designed.’”\(^\text{299}\) (Figure 1.30.) Thus the final version published in 1966 will read:

Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as “interesting,” conventional rather than “designed,” accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality.\(^\text{300}\)

The “gentle manifesto” concludes with a twist of Mies’s *Less is more*. Venturi writes: *More is no less.*\(^\text{301}\) The following chapter – “Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification and Picturesqueness” – is essentially a critique of Mies’s claim.

I propose that while Venturi’s concern with boredom has been a constant theme from his early work through later projects designed with Scott Brown, as well as authored and co-authored texts, the understanding of and approach to boredom has changed. *Complexity and Contradiction* tackles this issue with an openness that will be lost in subsequent writings and projects where the *boring* turns into and remains a purely formal attribute, usually described as the antithesis of the *interesting*. More than a rhetorical pun on Mies’s *Less is a bore* I suggest that *Complexity and Contradiction* brings forth perspectives on boredom with larger implications for design and society.

**Boredom as public concern.** I propose that, building upon ideas from August Heckscher’s *The Public Happiness*, Venturi’s early interest in boredom addresses primarily issues related to the

\(^{299}\) Ibid.
city and public life. An overview of the projects in *Complexity and Contradiction* that bring up the question of boredom shows they are all civic interventions.

**Boredom as lack of complexity.** Drawing from architectural precedents, but also from other sources, immediately following the claim that *More is no less*, Venturi elaborates on complexity, simplification, simplicity, and blandness. The implicit claim is that boredom ensues from lack of perceptual complexity.

**Boredom as relational condition.** In response to his own understanding of habit as routine, convention, and norm, Venturi proposes to explore neither the object, nor the subject or their context, but rather the relationship between them. Underlying this position is the idea that boredom resides in a field of relationships.

**Boredom as public concern.** “Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification and Picturesqueness,” the second chapter of *Complexity and Contradiction*, begins with a critique of modern architects who have ignored ambiguity and “the diverse and the sophisticated” while idealizing “primary forms,” like Le Corbusier, or “visions of simplicity,” like Frank Lloyd Wright.302 In contrast, Venturi quotes from Christopher Alexander’s *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* and August Heckscher’s *The Public Happiness* to support his view for the need to embrace complexity in architecture.303

303 “At the same time that the problems increase in quantity, complexity, and difficulty they also change faster than before” (Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 4); “The movement from a view of life as essentially simple and orderly to a view of life as complex and ironic is what every individual passes through in becoming mature. But certain epochs encourage this development; in them the paradoxical or dramatic outlook colors the whole intellectual scene. … Amid simplicity and order rationalism is born, but rationalism proves inadequate in any period of upheaval. Then equilibrium must be created out of opposites. Such inner peace as men gain must represent a tension among contradictions and uncertainties. … A feeling for paradox allows seemingly dissimilar things to exist side by side, their very incongruity suggesting a kind of truth.” [August Heckscher, *The Public Happiness*. (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 102]. Both sources cited in Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* 1st edition, 24.
Alexander’s book offers a positivist approach to design as problem-solving. It exposes a rational and logical path to solve the problem of contemporary complexity of systems and structures.\textsuperscript{304}

Heckscher’s book was of a different nature and addressed the issue of boredom from its very outset. Heckscher was a liberal writer and political activist who at different times has served as the chairman of the New School for Social Research, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and the Parsons School of Design.\textsuperscript{305} He had been a Parks Commissioner under New York’s Mayor John V. Lindsay, the chief editorial writer at the New York Herald Tribune (1952-1956), coordinator of cultural affairs at the White House in 1962 under John F. Kennedy, and served as a special consultant on the arts in the Kennedy Administration. Committed to and deeply engaged with civic matters, Heckscher acknowledged the great influence that Hanna Arendt’s \textit{The Human Condition} exercised on his own \textit{Public Happiness}.\textsuperscript{306} In a world increasingly concerned with the happiness of the individual, Heckscher felt that larger issues such as the happiness of the state and the very idea of citizen were being neglected.\textsuperscript{307} His perspective on politics is founded on the notion of \textit{polis}, “not the politics of management and elections, but politics in the old, classical sense of man in relation to his fellows and the community in relation to a good and meaningful existence.”\textsuperscript{308}

Heckscher begins his introduction to \textit{The Public Happiness} with a personal story:

In Copenhagen, an autumn ago, we were discussing some of the political and economic questions which habitually recur at international conferences. A young Dane got up in the back of the room. “It is very well to worry about satisfying the material needs of the people,” he said in effect. “But these are not the real problems of our society. These real problems are deeper – \textit{boredom, loneliness, alienation}. Unless the politics of our time can give relevant answers in this sphere, they will not engage the central interest of the

\textsuperscript{304} Eventually, Alexander will formalize his studies in \textit{A Pattern Language}, a book informed by mathematics and cybernetics and intended as a manual that offered a design method for any design problem of any scale.

\textsuperscript{305} Eric Pace, “August Heckscher, 83, Dies; Advocate for Parks and Arts” in \textit{The New York Times}, April 7, 1997.

\textsuperscript{306} Heckscher, \textit{The Public Happiness}, 45.

\textsuperscript{307} Ibid., v.

\textsuperscript{308} Ibid., vi.
citizen. They will cease being exciting, or even amusing, and become more and more the preoccupation of a small professional group.”

Thus Heckscher situates collective boredom at the core of civic responsibilities of the time and discusses this topic at length throughout the book, including in a chapter specifically addressing architectural and urban issues. Understanding the modern condition as increasingly abstract and remote from things, he proposes an approach to the objective world through “an attitude essentially playful, ironical and detached.” He believes that while the Puritanism and rationalism quintessential to the American character have muted the ironical voice, there is still hope for play in the contemporary world. Like Joseph Pieper, Heckscher reclaims the higher notion of leisure – lost in the modern world – through the notion of play: “Leisure, if it is not to consist of mass orgies and mass boredom, must cultivate an attitude of play.” Play, as showed earlier in this chapter, was the key concept of Venturi’s design for the Copley Square Competition, a project that, we will see later, also places boredom at its generative core.

Many of Heckscher’s ideas revolve around the topic of boredom. In the age of communication, assaulted by images and sounds, humanity suffers from a profound and debilitating boredom that emerges in response to a hostile world: “It is not the boredom of the haphazard or even involuntary kind; rather it is a deliberate boredom, a carefully contrived blank, a sublime disregard that might be thought worthy of the sage or seer. There is nothing that completely abolishes the world as boredom of this kind.” What this boredom entails is not a contemplative state, but on the contrary, “a gray thought in a gray and milky shade,” the desire for more entertainment, and a “search for new sensations.” A few decades earlier, Benjamin and Kracauer have uncovered the unexpected delight hidden under the deadening appearance of tedium. Benjamin described it as “a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks.” Kracauer argued that if one is patient enough in his boredom, he will experience “a kind of bliss that is almost unearthy.” Boredom as a contemplative state is hard to achieve. ARaw Text Start

309 Ibid., v.
310 The chapter “The Organization of Space,” 253-274.
311 Heckscher, The Public Happiness, viii.
312 Heckscher, The Public Happiness, viii.
313 Ibid., 79.
314 Ibid., 79.
315 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, D2a, 1.
to reach for the modern man because, Heckscher observes, “the bored man is not satisfied with his own boredom.”

The built environment also contributes to the alienation of the modern individual. The fear of overcrowding on the one hand, and that of emptiness on the other, spawn a generalized discontent: “Thinking of the United States today, one sees in the mind’s eye this bareness and this crowdedness alternating uneasily, producing a psychological state where boredom succeeds to nervous agitation.”

In *Complexity and Contradiction*, Venturi quotes from the chapter “The Approach to Reality” in which Heckscher examines people’s attitude toward modern life. Again, boredom is central to Heckscher’s analysis. He distinguishes between different groups of people. One category embraces the vagueness of their time and people “are not really bored” because they are in constant motion, following the trends and fads of their time. Another category includes those who make the best of the moment. Lastly, there are “the true citizens of their time” who have liberated themselves from the constraints of consumerism, without renouncing the pleasures of life and thus are able to find the deeper meaning and value of their existence. They are “not bored because even deceptions can be interesting to the enlightened, and not despairing because the only despair can be within themselves.” People in this latter category have succeeded in turning alienation into detachment and the flimsiness of things into a new set of values. What they all have in common, Heckscher believes, is a view of life as essentially complex, an attitude that embraces irony and playfulness, and a “feeling for paradox.” Reaching this particular state of higher understanding shows the level of maturity of an individual, but also of an epoch, as proved, he suggests, in the evolution of Shakespeare’s work during the Elizabethan time toward appreciating the variety and absurdity of worldly things, along with the belief in the transformative power of the spirit. Not only are all these ideas present in Venturi’s first book, but he conducted studios at University of Pennsylvania focused on the design of a

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318 Ibid., 254.
319 Ibid., 101.
320 Ibid., 101.
321 Ibid., 102.
323 Ibid., 102.
Shakespearian theater. (His interest in Shakespeare was also nurtured by T.S. Eliot’s writings)

While having a clear bias for the world of Classical Greece, Heckscher is far from dismissing contemporary art and architecture. He believes in achieving a relationship between high art and popular art and is open to unconventional artistic visions that embrace and re-imagine trite everyday objects such as commercial signs and lights, which “carry within themselves the elements of a fresh creativeness.” Seeing Times Square as a form of jazz and reading the “emphasis on drama, symbol and allusion” as the elements of a “new Baroque” manifested in modern architecture, Heckscher notices the contemporary desire and need to overcome the “colder forms of functionalism.”

In 1965, Venturi and Rauch made a proposal for the downtown of North Canton, a small town in Ohio, hometown to the Hoover Company, one of the largest manufacturers of vacuum cleaners in the world. The intervention included a town hall, a Y.M.C.A. building, and an extension of the public library (Figure 1.31). Venturi compared the design of the town hall with that of a Roman temple, where the giant columns and the pediment of the porch were replace by a free-standing screen – “partially disengaged wall in front with its giant arched opening superimposed on the three-storied wall beyond.” The building faces Main Street and ends the longitudinal axis of the central plaza across Main Street. Various study sketches and perspectival drawings show the prominence of this wall that creates a façade toward the plaza and also a secondary circulation channel (Figure 1.32). The finishing material of the town hall is dark brick, a reference to the Hoover factory, while the screen wall is covered in thin white marble slabs.

The screen constitutes a common theme to all three building proposals. The library addition is essentially a wall that wraps around the existing building; through the openings

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324 Archival evidence shows these studios were taught from 1961 through 1964. Venturi Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225.RV.162-3
325 “Eliot called the art of the Elizabethans ‘an impure art,’ in which complexity and ambiguity are exploited: ‘in a play of Shakespeare,’ he said, ‘you get several levels of significance.’ …” (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1st edition, 28)
326 Heckscher, The Public Happiness, 284.
327 Ibid., 284.
329 Ibid., 125.
punctured in this wall one gets a glimpse of the older building behind. Sitting opposite the Hoover factory, the Y.M.C.A. building receives a false front façade – a free standing wall resembling the one of the town hall (Figure 1.33.). Its design is based on a play between different rhythms. The façade has no beginning, middle or end, “it is just one continuous thing resulting from the constant, even boring rhythm” of the large openings.

The almost constant rhythm of grid-opening is played against the smaller and more irregular rhythms of the two-story building-proper behind. A contrapuntal juxtaposition contrasts the “boredom” of the false façade with the “chaos” of the back façade which reflects the interior circumstantial complexities.\(^{330}\)

While boring here seems to describe the uniformity of monotonous formal rhythms, I believe it reflects, in fact, a larger social condition: a certain tedium of the small town, the repetitive rhythms of mass produced goods and factory life taking place in the Hoover facility nearby. Both the free standing wall of the town hall and the one of the Y.M.C.A. building act as screens, but also as stage sets against which everyday life with its habits and routines takes place. A close examination of different sketches shows not only the conventional silhouettes of people in motion, but also less predictable situations: a person in a wheel chair with their caregiver, toy boats floating on the artificial pond in the center of the plaza, and people skating (Figure 1.34.). One of the justifications for the Y.M.C.A. false façade spawns from the way it is inhabited: “The front wall contains a buffer zone between building and plaza for skaters in the winter on the left side, and an outdoor niche with fireplace for them on the right where it becomes a retaining wall, and also a great ramp on axis with the existing church on Main Street.”\(^{331}\) The rhythm of the façade, as well as the rigor of the plans designed with practicality in mind, reveal the dullness of administrative duties, while at the same time permitting everyday life to follow its own course. Boredom overflows its immediate presence as formal device with repetitive elements and opens up larger questions about modern society.

The twelfth and last project shown in Complexity and Contradiction, the entry for the Copley Square Competition co-authored by Venturi and Rauch with Gerod Clark and Arthur Jones, revolves, as shown earlier, around the issue of play (Figure 1.16). The other significant

\(^{330}\) Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1\(^{st}\) edition, 126.

\(^{331}\) Ibid., 126.
topic is **boredom**, which, like in the previous project, goes beyond a formal understanding related to the repetitive nature of the grid. The main compositional tactic of the project is a multi-layered grid that “reflects in miniature the gridiron pattern of the part of Boston surrounding Copley Square.”  

(Figure 1.18.) The Trinity Church acts as an accent in the “three-dimensional repetitive pattern without a climax.”  

The design of this public plaza reflects the everyday rhythms of life and its “thickness.” Multiple grids constitute this three-dimensional pattern: the alleys, the trees, lampposts, and street furniture, the variations in topography. Different “accents” or “slight and violent exceptions” – *accidents*, Josef Frank might have called them – nuance the composition: the big Trinity Church and its miniature replica, inscriptions of nursery rimes, variations in elevation (Figure 1.17.). Venturi writes: “In the context of the ‘boring’ consistent grid inside the square the chaotic buildings to the north become ‘interesting’ and vital elements of the composition.”

Drawing upon Gestalt psychology, Venturi conceptualizes the proposal in terms of visual perception. The “spatial plaid” is perceived in different ways from a distance (as a plain blur) and from close by (as “intricate, varied and rich in pattern, texture, scale and color.”) Bringing together matters of Gestalt perception and boredom was an earlier concern of his, as shown in the theory course taught at the University of Pennsylvania. The outline of the eleventh lecture, on “Composition; Proportion, Unity” addresses these topics directly:

Unity as the relationship of parts to form a whole.

Perceptual basis: Gestalt psychology

Necessity of balance of unity with variety; boredom vs. chaos; examples in housing too fragmental or too independent

Varying relationships of the parts and the whole to create unity.

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332 Ibid., 130.
333 Ibid., 130.
334 Ibid., 132.
335 Ibid., 130.
337 Venturi Scott Brown Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. 225.RV.187. [0065]
Boredom (as the ultimate monotonous order) and chaos (as the ultimate disorder), the two extreme poles, have a double role in the Copley Square project: on the one hand, they refer to the nature of the built environment, and on the other hand, they reflect the nature of the urban life itself. Venturi discusses the American way of life in opposition to the Italian one in terms of appropriating the square: while Europeans spend time outdoors in the city in long passeggiate, Americans prefer to stay home watching TV.\(^{338}\) Thus he replaces the boring empty open plaza dear to Modern architects, but no longer relevant for contemporary life, with a thick plaid, “boring” only in name.

There are opportunities to see the same thing in different ways, the old thing in new ways. As there is not a single, constant accent – a fountain, reflecting pool nor the great church itself, for instance, neither is there a single static focus when you move within and around the square. There is the opportunity for a variety of focuses, or rather for changing focus. The main paradox of this design is that the boring pattern is interesting.\(^{339}\)

The rhetoric of boredom concludes Venturi’s presentation of the Copley Square project. He extends the critique of open spaces in the city to the emptiness of parking lots, the deserts of urban renewal, and the amorphous suburbs.\(^{340}\) Heckscher has decried the alienating transition from bareness to crowdedness in public spaces. Venturi’s response is to address the void – spatial and social – through the density of a “non-piazza” that offers a variety of experiences, perceptions, and relationships. This position will gradually change as he will fully embrace the spatiality of parking lots and of suburban developments. At this point, however, his explorations in addressing the issue of collective boredom, while privileging visual relationships, involve materials, forms, and a concern for people’s habitus and ways of life.

**Boredom as lack of complexity.** At the end of his “gentle manifesto” Venturi takes a stance against the principles of Modern architecture embodied in Mies van der Rohe’s dictum *Less is more.* He writes:

\(^{339}\) Ibid., 132.
\(^{340}\) Ibid., 133.
But an architecture of complexity and contradiction has a special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or in its implications of totality. It must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less.  

The following chapter expands his critique of Mies’s “magnificent paradox” and argues for an approach to architecture that takes into account the complexities and contradictions of everyday life. Venturi derived his ideas about complexity from different sources. Throughout Complexity and Contradiction he referenced mathematician and philosopher Kurt Gödel, T.S. Eliot and New Criticism, Gestalt psychology, Christopher Alexander’s Notes on the Synthesis of Form, Herbert Simon’s article “The Architecture of Complexity,” August Heckscher’s The Public Happiness. Never quoted directly, perhaps because it was too close to Venturi’s own ideas, Heckscher’s introduction to The Public Happiness advocated for an approach to reality that “involves a recognition of life as essentially complex and contradictory,” perhaps a source of the very title of Venturi’s book.

Venturi proposes a take on contemporary architecture as a problem-solving endeavor. He quotes Paul Rudolph (whom he will severely criticize later in Learning from Las Vegas) and his critique of Less is more. Rudolph has posited that Mies’s point of view entails a deliberate selection of the problems that need to be solved, while many others remain unaddressed. Venturi distinguishes between simplicity and simpleness, where the former arises from inner complexity and is highly desirable, while the latter derives from oversimplification and should be avoided. The Doric temple belongs to the first category, Philip Johnson’s Glass House to the second. He states: “Where simplification cannot work, simpleness results. Blatant simplification means bland architecture. Less is a bore.” Venturi’s statements about complexity in architecture are constantly opposed to blandness, banality, and simplification. His implicit

342 In his article “Contradictions and Complexities: Jane Jacobs’s and Robert Venturi’s Complexity Theories,” Peter Laurence offers the most comprehensive account of Venturi’s understanding of “complexity.”
343 Heckscher, The Public Happiness, viii.
344 “Paul Rudolph has clearly stated the implications of Mies’ point of view: ‘All problems can never be solved. … Indeed it is a characteristic of the twentieth century that architects are highly selective in determining which problems they want to solve. Mies, for instance, makes wonderful buildings only because he ignores many aspects of a building. If he solved more problems, his buildings would be far less potent.’” [Paul Rudolph quoted in Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 1st edition, 24 from Perspecta 7, The Yale Architectural Journal (1961): 51].
claim is that boredom grows from lack of variety and lack of visual perceptual complexity. He recognizes “the desire for a complex architecture, with its attending contradictions” in Mannerist periods such as sixteenth century Italy or the Hellenistic age, as well as in the works of Soane, Ledoux, Furness, Sullivan, Le Corbusier, Aalto, and Kahn.\textsuperscript{346}

Venturi proposes two avenues to address the issue of complexity as an implicit remedy to boredom: the \textit{medium} (appearance) of architecture and the \textit{program} in architecture.\textsuperscript{347} The former refers essentially to architecture as form and its visual perception: “Simplified or superficially complex forms will not work. Instead, the variety inherent in the ambiguity of visual perception must once more be acknowledged and exploited.”\textsuperscript{348} The latter indicates the relationship between architecture and the increasingly intricate demands of everyday life, encompassing everything from the small scale of the house to the large scale of space rockets and city planning. In the following chapter (“Ambiguity”) Venturi elaborates on the notion of \textit{medium} as a perceptual paradox between what an image is and what it appears, in other words the psychological effect of art.\textsuperscript{349} Quoting from the New Critics (T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, Stanley Edgar Hyman) and showing architectural precedents (Bernini, Lutyens, Le Corbusier, etc.) Venturi makes an argument for “the calculated ambiguity of expression” that “promotes richness of meaning over clarity of meaning.”\textsuperscript{350} Ambiguity as a sign of complexity remains a recurrent idea throughout the book.

Venturi’s ideas about complexity, perception and experience in the built environment were preceded by Kevin Lynch’s 1960 \textit{The Image of the City} and Jane Jacobs’s 1961 \textit{The Death and Life of Great American Cities}. Venturi brings forth the issue of boredom – architectural, urban, and social – as the underlying theme of Modern architecture. Born with modernity, boredom became one of its widespread maladies from the stimulation overload experienced by the urban \textit{blasé}, to the scarcity of sensations found in hardscape plazas, from the loudness of leisure time to the repetitiveness of production lines, from the excess of visual stimuli to the emptiness of the International Style. Paradoxically, boredom’s pervasive presence also signals

\textsuperscript{346} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{347} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 1\textsuperscript{st} edition, 26.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 29.
the very demise of modernity that Venturi intuitively maps in *Complexity and Contradiction*. Between *Less is more* and *Less is a bore*, boredom undermines the modern project from within.

**Boredom as relational condition.** In response to his understanding of *habit* as routine, convention, and norm, Venturi proposes to explore neither the object, nor the subject or their context, but rather the relationships between them. Underlying this stance is the idea that boredom resides in a field of relationships, a position explored in the sixth and seventh chapters of the book, “Accommodation and the Limitations of Order: The Conventional Element” and, respectively, “Contradiction Adapted.”

The two chapters examine the relationship of formal order and exceptions, the relationship of program and form, and what it means to break the rules. (The design methods analyzed here will be applied, among others, in the project for the Copley Square competition.) While acknowledging the necessity of a formal ordering system, Venturi emphasizes the importance of exceptions to the order without which the composition remains “imperfect.” In the vein of de Certeau’s distinction between *strategies* and *tactics*, he proposes a series of design *tactics* to undermine the strong rules of modernism: employing conventional elements unconventionally, using irony, and revisiting standardization. Precedents exist in other fields and other time-periods (e.g. use of architectural *spolia*, Surrealism, Conceptual Art, the machine aesthetic), but Venturi introduces boredom as an underlying concept for this approach. For him boredom, as well as its remedy, are found in the relationships (or lack thereof) between what he had defined earlier in the book as *medium* (or form) and *program* (or the complex demands of everyday life).

Venturi raises an important question about the nature of invention, urging architects to work with what they have, rather than exercise their “visionary compulsion to invent new techniques.”351 “The architects selects, as much as he creates,” he says.352 Talking about convention and cliché, the banal and the obsolete, Venturi implicitly addresses the tedium and dullness underlying familiar things that we know too well. Not unlike Kracauer who looked for

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352 Ibid., 43.
the bliss hidden deep down in profound boredom or Benjamin who saw the colorful silk lining the gray fabric of boredom, Venturi seeks the value of what is being neglected, of the “the honky-tonk elements,” present, yet unseen.\textsuperscript{353} Unlike Kracauer and Benjamin, however, who uncovered the contemplative dimension of boredom, Venturi proposes a positivist approach focused on form and program. From Gestalt psychology he derives the relationship of things with their contexts (“Familiar things seen in an unfamiliar context become perceptually new as well as old.”\textsuperscript{354}) From New Criticism he borrows the concept of irony (“The architect who would accept his role as combiner of significant old clichés – valid banalities … can ironically express in this indirect way a true concern for society’s inverted scale of values.”) From Pop artists he gets ideas about changes in scale and changes in context to construct new meanings (“…old clichés in new settings achieve rich meanings which are ambiguously both old and new, banal and vivid.”\textsuperscript{355})

Building upon these tactics, as well as a series of architectural examples collected from various time periods, Venturi puts forward four “techniques of accommodation” to revitalize the relationship between \textit{medium} and \textit{program}: the “circumstantial distortion,” the “expedient device”, the “eventful exception,” and the “circumstantial exception.”\textsuperscript{356} An example from the first category is the plan of the Villa Savoye, where some columns in the rectangular bay system are displaced to accommodate spatial needs.\textsuperscript{357} An “expedient device” is, for instance, the central post of the portal at the Vezelay monastery that blocks the axis to the altar.\textsuperscript{358} (Venturi will apply this technique in the design of the street façade of the Guild House with its oversized central column.) An “eventful exception” is the not-quite-symmetrical disposition of the windows at Mount Vernon resulting from earlier renovations and which breaks the dominant symmetrical order of the façade.\textsuperscript{359} Lastly, the “circumstantial exception” appears in the relationship between rectilinear order and the diagonal, such as in Aalto’s apartment building in Bremen, where the

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 45-50.
\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., 48.
orthogonal geometry of the dwelling unit plays with the general diagonal orientation following the southern light.\textsuperscript{360}

Clear distinctions between these “techniques of accommodation” are often blurred and the various categories are overlapping. Nonetheless, Venturi presents them as design tactics at both architectural and urban scale. His comparison between Piazza San Marco in Venice and Times Square in New York suggests how these “techniques of accommodation” construct a similar vitality of these two public places, despite them being very different in nature. Venturi argues there is room to accommodate the honky-tonk elements as long as they are confined to well-defined spatial boundaries (such as the spaces of Piazza San Marco and Times Square). It is when they “spill out … to the no-man’s land of roadtown” that they turn into “chaos and blight.”\textsuperscript{361} Venturi summarizes his critique of the contemporary built environment and boredom – the underlying theme – is understood as a field of relationships between architecture, urban design, and everyday life:

It seems our fate now to be faced with either the endless inconsistencies of roadtown, which is chaos, or the infinite consistency of Levittown (or the ubiquitous Levittown-like scene …), which is boredom. In roadtown, we have a false complexity; in Levittown, a false simplicity. One thing is clear – from such false consistency real cities will never grow. Cities, like architecture, are complex and contradictory.\textsuperscript{362}

Conclusions

A particular understanding of habit and \textit{habitus} as disembodied practice informs Venturi’s visual and theoretical discourse in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}. Influenced by elements of cognitive psychology (such as Gestalt) and behaviorism, as well as New Criticism and complexity theories from the first decades of the twentieth century, Venturi addresses architecture as a positivist problem-solving endeavor. Underlying his ideas, boredom, born with

\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{361} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 1\textsuperscript{st} edition, 54.
\textsuperscript{362} Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 1\textsuperscript{st} edition, 54.
modernity, indicates the beginning of modernity’s slow demise, as shown in an overview of ideas about boredom in architecture during the mid-decades of the twentieth century. More than a clever pun, *Less is a bore* is a product of the *habitus* of the time that Venturi charts throughout his treatise. I suggest that the illustrations in the book operate at different levels as *didactic, disembodied, and discursive* images. Venturi’s interest in boredom is addressed in his theoretical arguments, as well as his own design work. I propose that he understands boredom as public concern, lack of complexity, and as a relational condition. I suggest that in this early stage of his work, boredom has a deeper dimension and the potential to become a contemplative state, an opportunity missed, as we will see in the last chapter, once *the interesting* enters the polemic against *the boring*. This later approach originates in Venturi’s understanding of *habitus* as disembodied practice, already manifested in *Complexity and Contradiction*, which will further develop into disembodied signs and symbols.
Chapter 1. Figures.

Figure 1.1. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, “I am a monument,” 1972.

Figure 1.2. Excerpt from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st ed., 1966, p.22-23.

Figure 1.4. Excerpt from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st ed., 1966, p.82-83.

Figure 1.5. Excerpt from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st ed., 1966, p. 28.


Figure 1.7. Excerpt from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st ed., 1966, p. 40.
Figure 1.8. Excerpt from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1st ed., 1966, p. 41.


Figure 1.20. Venturi and Rauch: *Vanna Venturi House*, 1966; *North Penn Visiting Nurse Association*, 1960. Public domain.


Figure 1.22. Venturi and Scott Brown, *BASCO Showroom*, 1976. Public domain.

Figure 1.23. Venturi and Scott Brown, *BEST Products Catalog Showroom*, 1978. Public domain.


Figure 1.30. Robert Venturi, page from a working draft of the manuscript for *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Figure 1.32. Venturi and Rauch, *Three buildings for a town in Ohio*, 1965. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Figure 1.34. Venturi and Rauch, *Three buildings for a town in Ohio*, 1965. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.
First Interlude: Boredom and Dor

Boredom and the Nature of Invention

To that friend who tells me he is bored because he cannot work, I answer that boredom is a higher state, and that we debase it by relating it to the notion of work.

Emil Cioran, *Drawn and Quartered*

Born in 1914 to a Jewish family in the small city of Râmnicu Sarat, Romania, the artist Saul Steinberg grew up in the capital city, Bucharest, on Palas Street, “a little street completely apart from traffic” that he described as his “homeland.” After having studied philosophy for a year at the University of Bucharest, in 1933 he left his native Romania to study architecture in Italy, at the Regio Politecnico in Milan, where he earned his degree. In Italy Steinberg built a reputation as a cartoonist for *Bertoldo*, a humor newspaper that welcomed young artists and writers. Beginning in 1938, he was subject to Mussolini’s anti-Semitic racial laws and tried to find refuge in another country. By 1941, he was sought by the police as a stateless foreign Jew with no rights to remain in Italy. On April 27, 1941 he turned himself in and was taken to the Italian internment camp of Tortoreto in the province of Teramo. After six weeks’ internment, he managed to obtain the necessary visas to fly to Lisbon and board a ship to New York in transit to the Dominican Republic, for which he had a residency visa. He spent a year in Ciudad Trujillo before securing a US visa. In the United States, Steinberg settled in New York City, married fellow Romanian artist Hedda Sterne and never returned to Romania.

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2 For a detailed account of Steinberg’s immigration ordeals, see Mario Tedeschini Lalli, “Descent from Paradise: Saul Steinberg’s Italian Years (1933-1941),” in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, n.2 October 2011 www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=221
Steinberg’s artistic work has borne the influence of his training as an architect. In a brief letter from 1956 praising the architectural character of Steinberg’s art Le Corbusier wrote:

I can’t help but tell you that you are a great artist. I revisit with infinite joy your “Passports.” You have the gifts of grandeur and style that belong to a great character. Your passing through architecture gave you a vision and a quality of construction and simplification that will allow you, the day you decide to start, to make magnificent paintings. And by paintings I think mostly of murals.³

Steinberg arrives at “construction and simplification” by observing, recognizing, and describing people’s *habitus*, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept that was examined in the first chapter. For Steinberg, embodied *habitus* is a practice that he relates back to his childhood years and which also shows, I propose, the creative potential underlying the mood of boredom. Boredom can surface from the tedious repetition of simple, domestic acts, and accounts for Steinberg’s understanding of the nature of invention.

Bourdieu constructed the notion of *habitus* from his ethnographic studies of the Kabylian house. Central to his concept is the *body* - the physical body of each individual, male or female, that occupies the house, the ritualistic body of the inhabitants, which situates the house in relation to a larger social ordering system, and the collective body of the community. The relationship of the body to the world is a circular one that Bourdieu defines as “the em-bodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world.”⁴ Opposed to behavioral determinism as a cause-effect explanation for how individual and collective habits and skills are generated in a community, Bourdieu observes that the structures producing practices assign limits to “the *habitus*’s operations of invention.”⁵

⁵ Ibid., 95.
Because the *habitus* is an endless capacity to engender products - thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions - whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings.\(^6\)

*Habitus* neither generates novelty, nor does it endlessly repeat, but rather accounts for the nature of invention as the outcome of embodied practices, specific world views, and cultural and historic structures.

In an undated document from his personal archives, Steinberg described what motivated his work. Opposed to finding inspiration in surprising, shocking or unusual facts and events, he stated: “Amazement has no place, anyhow, anywhere – but then – what drives me to work?”\(^7\) He concluded in what appears to be a brutally honest but no less dramatic confession: “Money, success, boredom, vendetta.”\(^8\) Having lived years of unstable and insecure life, having moved around from place to place and country to country, *money* represented a complicated topic: on the one hand, it secured financial stability, but on the other hand it also stood for what he described as the eastern fear of materialism that menaced to taint high artistic ideals.\(^9\)

In this sequence, *boredom* constitutes the moment of awareness that elicits a fresh look at the work:

Boredom will make me eventually return to work … work that derives from work (and not from an experience). This may not be true, because the accumulated [sic] experience

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\(^6\) Ibid., 95.
\(^7\) *Saul Steinberg Papers* at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75, folder “Notes about dreams.”
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) “Money - the year of poverty scared me - I feel that I wouldn’t be so scared now, but I’m not sure. I would have tried to make money in any other profession. But I don’t want a great fortune. I talk a lot about money, still snobbish and proud about it, childish, poor administrator, petty. I had the luck of the idiot. (eastern idiot fearful of materialism - also in opposition to parents and Jewish reputation.)” (*Saul Steinberg Papers* at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75, folder “Notes about dreams.”)
stored in the mind will eventually come out and boredom is the instrument for this consolation as good a motive reason. In this dept. of boredom goes the sense of duty.\textsuperscript{10}

What Steinberg describes as “accumulated experience” is another way of talking about an embodied \textit{habitus} that he strives to make present in his work. Particular instances that reveal this \textit{habitus} are Steinberg’s drawings of his childhood years, a theme he returns to over and over again and which he never seems to exhaust. Boredom plays a key role in continuously re-defining the limits and terms of his pursuits, as he states in a 1967 interview with a German TV station: when

I get slightly bored with my work, I don’t find the excitement, real excitement, now this boredom tells me something, it’s a message, it means that I grow up and that what used to be entertainment once, it’s no more so, and I have … to invent new things, more difficult maybe, more subtle, new anyway that will certainly interest me.\textsuperscript{11}

Steinberg’s approach to entertainment has changed from his erstwhile understanding of it as “movies and newspapers:” now “I find entertainment and amusement only in what I discover by myself, either nature or work.”\textsuperscript{12} In the same interview, Steinberg describes the nature of invention as a

spiral that goes in three dimensions. … As you go up the circle becomes more and more restricted, smaller but higher. The difference is the difference of altitude, of height. … [w]hen you are entering to the third dimension, the spiral, and especially conical spiral … then you have a certain assemblance [sic] of going though the same territory, but it’s quite different because this is on a higher level.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Saul Steinberg Papers at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 100.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
In this light, the “construction and simplification” that Le Corbusier’s in Steinberg’s work might be interpreted as a process of revisiting the same familiar territories while gradually eliminating the superfluous and the excess, and offering every time a tighter and deeper perspective. Steinberg’s notion of invention, therefore, does not imply novelty, it requires, instead, a disciplined exercise in defining limitations and restrictions, in seeking individual practices that speak about collective histories, and in finding those particulars that reveal the nature of the whole. Boredom signals not so much the need for a superficial change, but rather the necessity of a closer look. Steinberg further elaborating in 1978: “The life of the creative man is led, directed and controlled by boredom. Avoiding boredom is one of our most important purposes.” For Steinberg, boredom is a mood, a state of the soul akin to nostalgia and, as we will see later in this chapter, to the Romanian concept of dor, and a form of introspection. The temporal aspect of boredom (present in the German word Langeweile, i.e. “long while”) plays a key role in his slow-paced appropriation of the world.

A way of understanding how Steinberg negotiates the tension between boredom and invention is through Bourdieu’s concept of embodied habitus reflected in Steinberg’s drawings of his childhood street and home.

This interlude looks at a series of three drawings by Steinberg. First, two ink sketches of the layout of Steinberg’s childhood street and home made during his stay in Ciudad Trujillo (today Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic) from 1941 to 1942 (Figure 1.1, 1.2.). Born from the tedium of being confined to his room while waiting for a resolution of his immigration case to the United States, these drawings bring together the boredom of mind-numbing routines with the seemingly dull details of an ordinary street in an ordinary neighborhood in Bucharest. The second drawing is titled Strada Palas – a watercolor of the interior of his childhood home made in 1942 showing a serious ten-year old Saul in the process of observing a domestic scene (Figure 1.3.). Building upon Bachelard’s proposition that children have similar experiences of boredom and daydreaming, I interpret the drawing as a play between real and imagined houses,

customs, and habits. The third drawing is yet another *Strada Palas*, this time from 1966 depicting a street parade in Bucharest in the 1920s (Figure I.4). Elaborating on Steinberg’s remark on the “infinite boredom” of parades and indirectly the temporal aspect of boredom, I interpret this drawing as a commentary on parallel lives of the city: on the one hand, the *habitus* embodied in the everyday life of ordinary people and on the other hand, the constructed image of the *habitus* expressed in official processions and their display of power.

*Strada Palas* (1941-1942)

[Boredom] is the anticipation of that inanimate infinity that accounts for the infinity of human sentiments, often resulting in a conception of a new life.

Joseph Brodsky, *In Praise of Boredom*

In 1933, at the young age of nineteen, Saul Steinberg left his native Bucharest to study architecture in Milan. Years passed and after settling in New York City he never returned to his homeland because there are places:

…that don’t belong to geography but to time. And the memory of these places of sadness, of suffering, but above all of great emotions, is spoiled by seeing them again. It’s better to leave certain things in peace, just the way they are in memory: with the passage of time they become the mythology of our lives.

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15 “What special depth there is in a child’s daydream! And how happy the child who really possesses his moments of solitude! It is a good thing, it is even salutary, for a child to have periods of boredom, for him to learn to know the dialectics of exaggerated play and causeless, pure boredom.” (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 16.)
16 Steinberg and Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, 41.
One day however, the well-established artist living in New York City asked a friend who was traveling to Bucharest to take photographs of his childhood street – *Strada Palas* – and later projected the color slides on the wall of his apartment. They showed him “that nothing has changed except for some trees, which have grown taller, and a wall that’s now covered with ivy. I was horrified to see an automobile in the courtyard of my house.”\(^{17}\) Looking at the huge images he suddenly sensed the overwhelming realization and pain that something was gone forever, something that will never be retrieved or accessible again. Observing the street from a distance appeared both as a sacrilege and a legitimate desire: “I felt as though I were peering into a tomb, lifting the sheet from a corpse. I felt angry as well as curious to see, and then angry for having seen – as though I had lost something.”\(^{18}\) What was experienced as a sickness with unknown causes found a temporary remedy, strange as it may seem, in the very same things that had triggered it: “To cure myself of this illness I sent two other friends to take pictures. One of them took the same pictures, but in winter with snow, which was more beautiful because the changes were less obvious.”\(^{19}\) (Figure I.5.)

Steinberg describes an ailment familiar to many. Once installed, this unusual condition surreptitiously takes over one’s soul and never goes away. As one learns to live with it, the pain sometimes grows more intense, while other times stays dormant, but remains present, unmistakably there. Regret and anger, love and pain, nostalgia and wrath – Steinberg experiences the strange symptoms of a disease bearing, in his native Romanian, the name *dor*.

*Dor*. Explored mainly in literary studies and philosophy, but overlooked in visual arts, *dor* as a creative emotion activates the imagination. Missing and longing for a certain being, place, or situation, constructs a tension between what is lost, and often no longer attainable, and what is desired, and equally unreachable, between memories from the past and the anticipation of the future. *Dor* transforms reality into an imagined reality. Animated by *dor*, Steinberg returned to his childhood homeland over and over again. While his drawings and sketches record in

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\(^{17}\) Ibid. 42.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 42-43.
\(^{19}\) Steinberg and Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, 43.
minute detail both in written and drawn form, neighbors, objects, rooms, they are not intended to construct an accurate depiction of a lost reality. Instead, I suggest, they are daydreams that propose stories about habitus and cultivate the rich ambiguity between two seemingly contradictory manifestations of dor: homesickness (dor de acasă) and wanderlust (dor de ducă).

Every language has certain untranslatable words and the Romanian dor is one of them. Similar, but not fully overlapping with the English longing, spleen, melancholy, the German Sehnsucht and the Portuguese saudade, dor describes a malaise turned “toward an object or toward being.”\textsuperscript{20} Both an emotion present in Romanian folklore, and a philosophical concept, dor confronts finitude with the anxiety of the infinity, pain with pleasure, desire with restraint. Romanian philosophers Lucian Blaga and Constantin Noica, both of whom had affinities with Heidegger’s phenomenology, have proposed dor as a specific Romanian metaphysical concept.

Steinberg’s dor is a complicated mood that can be understood only in the larger historical and political context of Bucharest in the early decades of the twentieth century when anti-Semitism pervaded all levels of society and trickled down into people’s private lives. Steinberg’s relationship with his home country was not an easy one: “I don’t want to go back to Romania,”\textsuperscript{21} he confessed to his life-long friend, Aldo Buzzi, and he never did. Affected by those early memories, in his official statements Steinberg has denied any emotional connections with Romania, showing disdain and skepticism toward his homeland. His personal archives, however, tell the rest of the story: “Fucking Patria [homeland] who murdered millions, who never accepted me. Unfortunately all my landscapes, smells, sounds, tastes – are there. Houses, courtyards, sky, mountain air, snow,”\textsuperscript{22} he wrote in his diary on June 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1991, the day he turned 77. Countless collections of old and new postcards from Romania spanning the years between his childhood

\textsuperscript{20} See Anca Vasiliiu, “Dor,” in Barbara Cassin (ed.), Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 227-228. In addition to homesickness and wanderlust, the word makes other expressions such as mi-e dor de... (I miss someone or something), în dorul lelii (to accomplish something reluctantly and without a precise objective). Etymologically derived from the Latin dolus (pain, suffering), it shares the same root with the verbs a dori (to desire, but also to wish something to someone) and a durea (to be in pain, to feel pain, to hurt).

\textsuperscript{21} Steinberg and Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 41.

\textsuperscript{22} Saul Steinberg Papers at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75.
and communist times that he often re-interpreted in collages and photomontages, inventing new images, situations, and people (Figure 1.6.); copies of Bucharest maps on which he marked the location of the house in which he grew up (Figure 1.7.); letters in which friends traveling to Bucharest gave him reports from the city of his youth; personal diary entries recording dreams, memories, family, friends; objects such as pieces of embroidery or various trinkets brought or sent to him from Romania, they all reveal a lasting desire to never forget. This tension between love and rejection, nostalgia and anger, recollection and loss come together in his drawings as expressions of dor.

At no. 4. In the late 1930s in Italy, Steinberg built a reputation as an illustrator for Bertoldo, a magazine that welcomed young artists and writers. He also started contributing pieces to American publications such as Harper’s Bazaar, Life, and The New Yorker. Waiting for a resolution of his immigration case to the United States, between 1941 and 1942 he lived in Ciudad Trujillo (today Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic).

Journal entries throughout 1941 and 1942 are filled with the sense of desperation and doubt of someone who is afraid of not only losing track of the people he cares about, but is also afraid of losing his own identity. The constant worries of not receiving news from Adina, his former lover, or his family also reveal the fear of being forgotten and left behind. Jale – four letters that he writes at the end of a note regarding Adina\textsuperscript{23} - is a Romanian word meaning mourning, deep sadness, grief, despair and sometimes a synonym of dor, jale embodies his struggles and sense of intense loss.

Over the excruciating boredom of not having much to do in Ciudad Trujillo hovered the uncertainty of his complicated legal status. For Steinberg, the boredom of daily routines turned into an introspective state, in which he began to recollect and record habits, situations and people from his childhood. His drawings are simultaneously personal stories spawned by the mood of dor, but also descriptions of certain types of habitus shared at a larger scale by the residents of

\textsuperscript{23} Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.
Bucharest at the beginning of the century. His longing and nostalgia emerge when he is suddenly confronted with the absence of habitus, when outside his habitus. Boredom as a creative state weaves together details of his current everyday life – letters, daily routines, cigarettes smoked – with memories from his past life – lovers, friends, family, places. Georges Teyssot has remarked that “[t]he act of habitation consists in grasping routines that help to organize life, and in rethinking and transposing customary modes of action in response to the need to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances.”

The boredom spawned from the repetitive actions performed out of necessity and constraint engendered for Steinberg the memories of perhaps another form of ‘boredom,’ that of erstwhile familiar practices, habits, and customs from a past life.

A diary entry from Monday, February 9, 1941 records on three columns what seems to be the dull timetable of a regular day:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sirena ore 7 – giornale</td>
<td>1 penso a Adina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sirena ore 8 mi alzo</td>
<td>sirena 2 meno quarto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.30 – 9 – posta</td>
<td>3 biscocho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 si mangia</td>
<td>4-5 posta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Written mostly in Italian – his adopted language, fondly appropriated after the long time he had spent in Italy – his diary is filled with entries that record the tedium and uncertainty of every day, along with the recollections of people dear to him. He spent his days eating, drawing, writing and worrying – about himself (as a life-long hypochondriac fearing real and imaginary ailments) and about his beloved ones: Adina, his long-time lover left behind in Italy col marito e

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25 Siren 7am – newspaper 1 I think of Adina 6 we eat
Siren 8am – I wake up siren at a quarter to 2 7:30 1 cinema
8:30 – 9:00 correspondence 3 cracker / cookie9:30 2 cinema
12 we eat 4-5 correspondence 11-12 going to bed
*Saul Steinberg Papers*, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.
cane (with husband and dog), and his family, still in Bucharest where fascist sympathies and hatred against Jews were becoming stronger and more menacing, threatening the lives of his relatives. Cara poveretta Adina (poor little dear Adina) and povera mama (poor mother) are the two female figures that haunt his memories and his regrets.

Each period of his life seems to be associated with a particular language, as if memories can only be thought and constructed in the language of the original event. While the diary is largely written in Italian, mama (mother) and tăticu (daddy) are always written (and remembered) in Romanian. Homesick and bedridden, he finds pleasure in writing down the Romanian names of the places he had traveled to with his friends Campus and Fronescu from Bucharest; or perhaps the simple act of recording these names of Romanian resorts brings him the joy of remembering an erstwhile carefree life.26

The agonizing boredom makes every insignificant event become a little wonder worth registering: on Monday, October 20th, alle 7 di sera ho buttato un mozzicone di sigaretta ed e caduto in piedi, followed by a tiny sketch of a burning cigarette butt standing upright.27 He remembers his friend Campus giving an onion to a dog and the dog eating it.28 One day, a watch received as a gift from his former girlfriend, Adina, stops working, but then the following day it miraculously starts ticking again.29

Among the drawings made in Ciudad Trujillo, Steinberg sketched his childhood street, courtyard, and house (Figure I.1-I.2). Most likely never intended to be published, these sketches reveal his dor for a time and place forever lost. Just as it seemed important to record the exact time when his cigarette butt fell on the floor and stood upright, or when the watch from Adina stopped working and then inexplicably repaired itself, so it was important to mark the

26 Poiana, Omul si Caraimanul, Brasov, Tampa, Tusnad, Lacul Sf. Ana, Sighisoara, Sibiu, Ocna, Ramnicu Valcea, Predeal – all of these were (and still are) popular tourist destinations in Romania. (Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.)
27 “At 7 o’clock in the evening I threw a cigarette butt and it fell standing.” (Ciudad Trujillo diary, Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89).
28 Ciudad Trujillo journal, Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.
29 Ciudad Trujillo journal, Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.
precise moment when he made these drawings: *fatto questo a Ciudad Trujillo nel 1941 – 19 agosto,*\(^\text{30}\) he writes on a “site plan” of his street (Figure I.1.). Written not as a casual indication at the bottom of the page, the way similar annotations are usually scribbled, but made visible in the white space on the right side of the drawing, the note resembles a speech balloon or perhaps a thought bubble in the manner of cartoons. The voice, however, suggests otherwise: it has the serious, celebratory tone found in old votive inscriptions used to mark royal edifications. It registers the time of the making of the drawing, but also a cross section through a past turned present. The next page of the diary zooms into a detailed plan of the house, now explaining the time of the drawing: *Strada Palas no. 4, (prin Antim) din 1918 (cred) fino al 1930 o 1931.*\(^\text{31}\) The two sketches have the significance of an inaugural act where recollections become material, rather than mental images. It is the materiality of memories that Steinberg constructs through his mood of *dor,* marking two overlapping tenses: the time of the making of the drawing, and the time of the memory within the drawing.

Returning to the “site plan,” (Figure I.1.) Palas Street was fairly short: eight houses on one side and seven on the other.\(^\text{32}\) (Based on the names of the residents that Steinberg locates on their houses - Willy Kaufman, Mantuleasca, Fischer, M-me Schor, M-me Riş, etc. - Strada Palas appears to be inhabited almost exclusively by the Jewish community, but it connects two streets named after the two nearby Christian Orthodox monasteries, Antim and Schitu Maicilor. The neighborhood - *Cartierul Uranus – Izvor* - had mixed demographics and included a Jewish community, but also Orthodox Christians.) For Steinberg, however, the street is much thicker because it is populated with people, events, stories, and characters that construct a depth otherwise invisible. Steinberg looks at them through the lens of his childhood memories, but he is neither the erstwhile child, nor the present adult, or rather he is both of them at the same time. Fully engaged in the drawing, as only a child living in the present moment can be, he is

\(^{30}\) “Made this in Ciudad Trujillo, in 1941 – August 19.” (Ciudad Trujillo diary, *Saul Steinberg Papers,* UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89).

\(^{31}\) “No. 4, Palas Street (from Antim) from 1918 (I think) until 1930 or 1931.” (Ciudad Trujillo diary, *Saul Steinberg Papers,* UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89).

\(^{32}\) The two streets were Antim and Schitu Maicilor. The eponymous monasteries were located in the same neighborhood, on the Arsenal Hill. The entire area was demolished by the communist regime in the 1980s to make room for a new administrative center of the communist party.
nevertheless the grown up that looks back with *dor* at his childhood life. The street might be *short*, but the memories associated with it are “*long*”.

The houses are sometimes identified by different characters associated with them: *un cane* (a dog), *il ragazzo paralitico* (the paralytic boy), *un tâmplar* (a carpenter).\(^{33}\) (Figure 1.8.) Bouncing between Italian and Romanian, he constructs a form of Esperanto that joins together two realities and two times, of the adult and of his child alter ego.

His family house is the only one identified by a number: 4. Without a name, the house appears to lack identity. This, however, is deceiving, because numbers – and number 4 in particular – have special significance in Steinberg’s universe; they are not quantitative entities, but living creatures with character and feelings. To the friend traveling to Bucharest, he would give specific instructions about what to capture in the photographs: “the courtyard seen through the gate, the house number and plate.”\(^ {34}\) Several of his later drawings give life and stories to different numbers. One in particular shows a Steinberg-resembling cat – another recurrent character in his art – looking inside a number 4, which becomes a secret box that allows one to store, then search, but more importantly to remember and imagine.

Four is an interesting number because it is a shape that would arouse the curiosity of a cat. Most numbers are either open or closed. Number 8, for instance, is closed; a cat has no business to look inside. A cat likes to peer into something that is half open – a little bit open – a mystery. Number 3 is obvious; number 1 is nothing; 5 perhaps is more intriguing, but 4 certainly is perfectly designed and engineered for a cat to look inside and find out what is going on. … The abstraction, number 4, became a reality and the cat became an abstraction because it combined itself with this number. It rendered the whole thing plausible and, from a drawing point of view, perfectly workable.\(^ {35}\)

\(^{33}\) *Saul Steinberg Papers*, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89.
\(^{34}\) Steinberg and Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, 43.
Art critic and life-long friend Harold Rosenberg wrote that “readers … may become aware that the number 4 is being dealt with as a shape that has been deprived of its function in the numerical system and has “become a reality.” It is a found object of the same order as a tree or a tin can.” While the number 4 has indeed blurred the distinctions between abstraction and reality, there is more to it than just a found object. To the viewer, the box appears empty – there is nothing inside. But for the Steinberg-cat the container is a memory theater triggering recollections only accessible to him. Similarly, the house at 4, Strada Palas is an almost-enclosed container, the only one on the street represented as a box, rather than an unfinished rectangle. And that is because the mysteries at no. 4 are waiting to be revealed.

**Inhabitation.** Steinberg grew up without purpose made toys, but surrounded by containers of different sizes. His father owned a small factory that made cardboard boxes ranging in size from lipstick holders “covered with colored paper and trimmed with gold and silver,” to large boxes for Passover unleavened bread, “stacked up in big piles that took on the appearance of fantastic cardboard buildings.” Similar to the mysterious cases that fascinated young Saul, the house at no. 4 becomes an enigmatic box hiding many secrets. Standing right outside the fence and marked in the sketch by a radiating sun, a felinar (street lamp) sheds light onto the puzzle. (Figure 1.8.)

Peeking inside the courtyard, we see beyond the fence and the walls become transparent: inside the house, we guess at what could be a butoi (barrel) and a dulap (wardrobe). Then Steinberg invites us to turn the page and zoom in into the courtyard. (Figure 1.2.) Beyond the gate at no. 4 we find cișmeaua (the water pump), a necessary utility at the beginning of the century. Typical for house typologies in early twentieth century Bucharest, several shotgun houses share a common courtyard. The house that directly faces the street belongs to “Sander” – whose name written in big capital letters is an indication of his affluence and social status in comparison to his neighbors. The house itself appears bigger and wealthier.

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37 Steinberg and Buzzi, *Reflections and Shadows*, 6-7.
As we advance toward the back, we pass through grădină (garden) and by a cluster of oțetari (staghorn sumac). In a small nook bordered by a gard lemn (wooden fence) we stumble upon scară, gâleți, gunoi (staircase, buckets, trash). Another curte internă (interior courtyard) leads toward Schitu Maicilor, one of the two streets connected through Strada Palas. This labyrinth of courtyards, fences, open and enclosed spaces would only make sense in plan in the mind of an adult. Children, on the other hand, would remember the qualities of spaces, how big or small they would feel, along with those details closer to the scale of their tiny stature: the wooden planks on the ground, the buckets, the trash, or the stairs.

Past the house of Sander, on the left, in the back of the courtyard and in front of the oțetari, we arrive at a smaller and more modest house, the only one shaded in plan in a sepia wash, the color of old photographs and fading memories: the family house. (Figure I.2.) It is the adult, Italian-speaking Steinberg who explains, in the upper right corner of the drawing, the evolution of the house, which has matured along with the economic growth of the family:

Strada Palas No. 4 (through Antim) from 1918 (I think) until 1930 or 1931. Over the last 3-4 years the street number is changed and becomes 9 – first running water is introduced in the house, then Sander’s apartment is redone, a new level is added above the kitchen, everything is being modernized and we get electricity, we even take the little room next to the kitchen, we redo the interiors, paint the walls with airbrushed drawings, we buy furniture from the Chițales.38

While these notes are written in Italian, everything related to the family house is in Romanian. As Steinberg inhabits the rooms, he simultaneously inhabits his native language, which, conversely, is the only one that can render its reality. Even the drawing conventions need meticulous explanations in Romanian to complete the picture.

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38 Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 89, author’s translation from the Italian.
Unlike the entrance to the Sander residence, clearly marked in plan by a few steps and two columns, nothing indicates where we enter the Steinbergs’ house. In Romanian folklore it is often the window, rather than the door, that carries the significance of thresholds and rites of passage. Popular beliefs mark the window as the place where sick children pass from one side to the other in a specific ritual of name changing associated with curing their illness. The house in the drawing is Steinberg’s home, but also an imagined house that we access through any opening. The main entrance most likely is the antreu (a large vestibule), from which we are taken to the bucătărie (kitchen) to the right and casă (main house) to the left.

A fairly modest house for the family of four occupying it, the Steinbergs’ house has little furniture. A găleată (bucket) sits on the kitchen floor and something that resembles a trapdoor toward the pivniță (basement) – si cadeva dentro (“one would fall inside”), notes Steinberg, in Italian, as his thoughts, along with his steps, suddenly slip and fall into another reality. A bufet (cupboard) and probably a bed and a table occupy the one-window vestibule. What Steinberg designates as the main house is in fact the largest room where we encounter the garderob vechiu (old wardrobe), garderob nou (new wardrobe), canapeaua mică (the small sofa), an etajeră (bookshelf), a large bed and a godin (a cylindrical heat stove). The latter holds a particular significance for him: in the concert of childhood scents, “the metal stove had a special smell when lit for the first time, since the surface had been greased to keep it from rusting.”

In an undated interview he professed the power of smell to evoke memories:

I find that one reliable instrument is the nose. I go back to the house where I lived as a child, at night, and try to sniff a past. I allow the nasal emotions to tell me the truth. I discover myself as a house. In the bedroom and living room are my best friends and relatives – The Senses. Eyes, nose, tongue, fingers etc., in constant conversation and emotion. I suspect the eye and nose to be older than I am, and to have their own brains. They may be angels. Down in the basement I hear the mumbling of my underworld:

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39 People believed that changing the name of the child would confuse the illness, imagined as a character who, being unable to recognize her after the name change, would lose track of the child.
40 Steinberg and Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 5.
furnace and plumbing – my invisible relatives. … And up in the attic, I hear the shrieks of the crazy cousins … We learn to live with them.\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{Strada Palas (1942)}

Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream.

Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project}

\textit{Dor}. Still in Ciudad Trujillo, in 1942 Steinberg made an ink, pencil and watercolor drawing - \textit{Strada Palas} - displayed for the first and only time in an exhibition curated by Betty Parsons at the Wakefield Gallery in New York, in April 1943 (Figure I.3). This drawing appears to have had a special significance for Steinberg, who decided not to sell it and apparently never exhibited it again.\textsuperscript{42}

The drawing depicts a family domestic scene – mother (Rosa), father (Moritz), and sister (Lica) – sitting at the table, while the young Saul is standing in the foreground, somewhat remote from the others. Art critic Joel Smith has interpreted the vignette as a breakfast scene in which Saul, self-represented as a student in uniform about to leave for school, observes the scene from the outside, both as a child and as the draftsman of the scene.\textsuperscript{43} I propose, instead, that, despite his apparent position outside the family circle, the young Saul and the mature Saul are fully engaged with this domestic tableau that depicts the end, rather than the beginning of the day. The

\textsuperscript{41} Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 32.
\textsuperscript{42} Joel Smith, \textit{Illuminations} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 86.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 86.
drawing can be understood only in the larger context of other drawings made over the span of several decades in which Steinberg has revisited his childhood home and street - among them the sketches made during the two years he spent in Ciudad Trujillo and the Strada Palas from 1966 when he was living in New York.\textsuperscript{44} While the accuracy of his memories has not faded with the passing of years and the various renditions of Palas Street are surprisingly consistent across time, each iteration brings new details that nuance the whole by offering clues for understanding larger modes of inhabitation, as well as individual and collective practices. These different drawings build upon each other and articulate a reality that is both historically documented, and imagined, highly personal, and belonging to a community. They depict domestic scenes that are descriptive without being explicit in the way philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written about renditions of the oneiric house that one has grown up in: “[i]n order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading.”\textsuperscript{45}

**At no. 4.** The plan sketches of the childhood street and house and the interior perspective, all drawn in Ciudad Trujillo, rely upon, and talk to each other as architectural drawings that can be read together or separately, consistent without being redundant. Moreover, each and all of them invite Saul the child, Saul the adult, and us – his interlocutors – to complete the picture and fill in the gaps. As we move from the plan (Figure 1.2.) to the vignette made in ink, pencil and watercolor (Figure 1.3.), more details are constructing, and contributing to, the life of the family. If everyday objects are the actors in the plan drawings, people play the main part in this rendition of a domestic moment.

Let’s take a closer look at this tableau. The family is grouped around the table, but what is the time of the day? Joel Smith has written that “the artist’s family is seen breakfasting at home on Strada Palas (Palace Street) in Bucharest. Saul, ready for school in a uniform with an arm patch … assumes an outside observer’s role.”\textsuperscript{46} The setting of the table, however, indicates a

\textsuperscript{44} Other drawings are *Bucharest in 1924* (1972) and several sketches and vignettes some undated, scribbled on sketchpads.


\textsuperscript{46} Smith, *Illuminations*, 86.
late-day meal: the tureen and the saucepan suggest that soup (or a stew) and fried food are served, which in Romanian culinary tradition are part not of breakfast, but rather lunch or dinner. I propose that we are witnessing a different moment of the day and a different family dynamics: it is dinner time, when children have returned from school and parents from their daily chores; they have all gathered around the dinner table except for Saul who is stepping in, rather than out, from another space and another time.

The scene is washed in warm sepia tones: the color of the lamp hanging from the ceiling above the table matches that of the light outside and suggests a later time of the day, perhaps twilight or sundown. Only a few touches of color highlight the most important characters: Moritz and Rosa, Lica, little Saul, and the domestic help. The four members of the family are all dressed in black, somber and joyless. Joel Smith has remarked that “the servant, a Romany girl, is tinted red, after the same graphic convention used in period representations of American Indians.”47 In his autobiographic conversations with Aldo Buzzi, Steinberg recalled the condition of girls coming to the city from mountain villages to work as servants and who “were treated like savages from the jungle, like slaves” with no rights.48 Alluding to conditions of enslavement and servitude in general, the rendition of the bare-foot servant – a young girl, if we gauge her height in comparison to that of Steinberg’s seated parents, but mature beyond her age, if we look at her traits – gives us a brief glimpse into class and society inequalities in inter-war Romania.

Sitting upright, the father – the only one holding a glass – is probably drinking wine from the decanter at the center of the table, while the teal-glass bottle sitting on the floor next to his chair most likely contains seltzer water – another staple of Romanian dinners. Generations of children growing up in Romania have participated in the daily ritual of taking the seltzer-water bottles to be refilled, usually at small neighborhood convenience stores. Apparently withdrawn from the main gathering, Saul is stepping inside the room and examining everything with a grave look. Her thoughts elsewhere, Lica is sitting at the table with her parents. Described as

47 Smith, Illuminations, 86.
48 Steinberg and Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 4.
sleepiness,\textsuperscript{49} her pose and posture resemble the weariness from profound boredom that children often experience.

There is no visible interaction between parents and children who appear absent-minded and distracted. But are they bored or, rather, daydreaming? Steinberg has examined the blurring of boundaries between these two moods in several drawings. These representations describe that particular moment when, after gaining familiarity with certain habits and tasks, one slips from the boredom of routines into a state where imagination takes over the practicalities of reality. The structures of \textit{habitus} build the auspicious circumstances in which boredom emerges as daydreaming, a metamorphosis that children are particularly prone to. Bachelard has observed that the experience of the house one was born in belongs to the realm of daydreaming rather than conscious thought.\textsuperscript{50} Starting from Alexander Dumas’s recollection of his own profound boredom as a six-year-old child, Bachelard has noticed the intertwining of boredom and daydreaming in children’s experience of the world as one of the paths that leads to nurturing imagination.\textsuperscript{51}

It is a good thing, it is even salutary, for a child to have periods of boredom, for him to learn to know the dialectics of exaggerated play and causeless, pure boredom. … This [Dumas’s] is the kind of anecdote people tell in their memoirs. But how well it exemplifies absolute boredom, the boredom that is not the equivalent of the absence of playmates. There are children who will leave a game to go and be bored in a corner of the garret. How often have I wished for the attic of my boredom when the complications of life made me lose the very germ of all freedom!\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{49} Smith, \textit{Illuminations}, 86.
\textsuperscript{50} Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, 16.
\textsuperscript{51} “Alexander Dumas tells is his Memoirs that, as a child, he was bored, bored to tears. When his mother found him like that, weeping from sheer boredom, she said: “And what is Dumas crying about?” “Dumas is crying because Dumas has tears,” replied the six-year-old child.” (Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, 16.)
\textsuperscript{52} Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, 16-17.
A common interpretation of Steinberg’s drawings is that he often assumes the viewpoint of a child as a mode of remembering.\textsuperscript{53} I propose that his perspective bridges the gap between the time of the drawing and the time of making the drawing. For a child, objects close to the floor - the stool, the water bottle, the dog - have a more prominent presence than for an adult. However, it is only from the height of a grown-up that one would notice – as these drawings show – the intricate decorations at the top of the wardrobes, the upper part of the window, and the rooftops of the storage sheds in the courtyard. Real or imagined, these details construct a mode of inhabitation that goes beyond the particular tastes of a specific family and offer a larger perspective on urban life in middle-class households at the beginning of the twentieth century. Upon closer inspection, the young Saul is not depicted as a child. He might be wearing a school uniform, but his serious profile and ceremonial posture suggest the maturity of an adult. As he will later recall, “ever since I was a child I have had a solemn name: Saul. It would have been undignified to apply the diminutive, Saulica, to the name of the king of the Israelites.”\textsuperscript{54}

No one in the drawing is smiling, neither the adults, nor the children. With the rise of the Iron Guard and anti-Semitism, the interwar period is difficult for the Jewish community in Romania.\textsuperscript{55} At the time of making the drawing, Steinberg the adult is haunted by the of uncertainty and despair he experiences in the Dominican Republic and which is surreptitiously slipping into his childhood memories. Disguised as a child, wearing a child-looking mask the way he will wear so many other masks throughout his life, Steinberg returns to his house and reconstructs memories that are faithful not necessarily to the objective reality of the past, but to the structures of habitus.

\textbf{Inhabitation.} Is this scene unfolding in \textit{antreu} (vestibule) or in \textit{casa} (house)? Perhaps in both places at the same time. The servant bringing the food walks from the left to the right, as if she were coming from the kitchen door depicted in plan next to the \textit{antreu}. Two pieces of

\textsuperscript{53} “Certain details (the table’s base assembly, bent into an unblinking eye; the blue-glass seltzer bottle) remind us that the remembered viewpoint is that of someone close to the floor.” (Smith, \textit{Illuminations}, 86.)
\textsuperscript{54} Steinberg with Buzzi, \textit{Reflections and Shadows}, 19.
\textsuperscript{55} The Iron Guard (\textit{Garda de Fier}) was a far-right movement and political party active in Romania from 1927 through World War II with extreme nationalist, anti-Semitic, anti-communist and pro Orthodox views.
furniture are flanking the window in the center of the room. Like in the earlier plan drawing of
the house we see the bufet (cupboard) to the right and the garderob vechiu (old wardrobe) to the
left. The sketch of the old wardrobe drawn in plan has turned into a more elaborate piece in the
color vignette. The large – and old – mirror on the wardrobe door catches faded reflections of the
opposite side of the room: a chair and a sewing machine, perhaps a reference to his mother’s job
as a young girl, but also to practices common to many households:

She had been working when a girl as a seamstress. Doing a trousseau for rich girls (in
Buzău). She became a snob. Everything had to appear nice, we were dressed like
cabbages. I remember a sailor outfit beige & light blue, soie ecru! The home was full of
embroideries, curtains, draperies, antimacassars.\footnote{Buzău is a Romanian city where Steinberg’s parents lived before he was born. Diary entry from Sunday, May 19, 1991 (Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75)}

The habit of decorating the house with doilies and antimacassars spread on tables,
couches, chairs, and at windows has persisted as a common practice in Romanian households for
decades, resisting political changes, modernization, and variations in taste or fashion. Steinberg
himself has saved among his belongings pieces of embroidery most likely sent to him by
relatives or friends from his home country.\footnote{See photos from archives.}

Steinberg’s rendition of the family scene is highly sensorial. The core of the story unfolds
in the center of the vignette which is warmly lit by the gold shades shared by the lamp, the wine
and the bread. The painting on the wall (or is it perhaps a tapestry or an embroidery?) shows
roses in full bloom – Steinberg’s mother’s name was Roza (Rose) and Roza Steinberg was the \textit{de facto} head of the family. Her husband as well as her children knew better than to raise her anger.
In the drawing, the father strategically occupies the position right under the painting depicting a
rose. Much later in his life, Steinberg will write in his diary: “Taticu, a frozen man – the fear of
Roza in his shoulders a paralyzed man. (When I first heard of Sub Rosa I said: That’s us! All of us Under Roza.)" \(^{58}\)

Right behind the table, covered by gold embroidered curtains, the window opens into the courtyard, “the centerpiece,” as Steinberg later recalled, of “a society with no mysteries,” where “the doors were always open and anyone could look in the windows.” \(^{59}\) But mystery is far from missing in his renditions of times past. Through the window in the center of the room we find our way outside, into the courtyard and further away, above the storage area (magazie) indicated in the plan. The plan and the vignette reflect each other revealing corners, perspectives and angles otherwise impossible to grasp only from one drawing. Not unlike Velasquez’s painting Las Meninas, where a mirror shows the reflections of the queen and king situated outside the picture frame, the faded image in the wardrobe mirror is both a reflection of the opposite side of the room and a reflection from the past. As the wardrobe mirror looks back and inside the house, the frontal window looks forward and outside. The depth of the memory constructs the depth of the drawing, which – like a Cubist collage – simultaneously sees and overlaps, the inside and the outside, what is in front and what is behind, the casa and the antreu, the past and the present. The mirror and the window become devices for what Gyorgy Kepes has defined as “a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations,” but also of different temporal instances. \(^{60}\) Building upon Kepes’s observation, Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky have further elaborated the theory of the literal and phenomenal transparency, noting that “the transparent ceases to be that which is perfectly clear and becomes instead that which is clearly ambiguous.” \(^{61}\) Steinberg has constructed this “clear ambiguity” between boredom and daydreaming, different moments in time, and different places.

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\(^{58}\) Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75. Sub is the Romanian translation of under.

\(^{59}\) Steinberg with Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 21.


\(^{61}\) Ibid., 45.
Strada Palas (1966)

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Inhabitation. In Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet,” Juliet tells Romeo that a name is an artificial convention, and that she is in love with the man by the name of "Montague," not with the Montague name. In love with Juliet, Romeo rejects his family name and vows to "deny (his) father" and instead be "baptized" as Juliet's lover.

Names, however, are not abstract entities, but witnesses of our thoughts. How we name people and things – nicknames, pet names, even derogatory names – speak of what things are for us and who we are in relation to them. Names establish complicities and open up the possibility of a conversation. Architects not only construct worlds, but also complicities with those who will inhabit their buildings, give them clues and hints through drawings and other artifacts. Masterfully constructing complicities with his viewers, Steinberg gradually makes them part of his world and eventually turns them from his spectators into his partners in conversation. One of his techniques is dissimulated ignorance – pretending not to know what he knows too well, a form of *docta ignorantia* (“learned ignorance”) that opens up the possibility for wondering and discovering the un-seen concealed behind the seemingly obvious and mundane. By hiding his clues in plain sight, Steinberg engages the imagination of his viewers to complete the drawings.

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62 “I consider wondering (on whose account there is philosophizing) to precede the desire-for-knowing in order that the intellect (whose understanding is its being) will perfect itself by the study of truth.” (Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 4.)
Another drawing bearing the same title (Strada Palas), this time from 1966 (when Steinberg is fifty-two years old), seems to offer little that recalls Steinberg’s childhood street (Figure I.4.). So the question becomes: what’s in this name?

Made at a time when Steinberg had been in the United States for over twenty years, the drawing, however, does not bear an English title. An English speaker could maybe infer that strada means street and that Palas is its name. Perhaps the first question one would ask is where is this place situated?

The first clue he gives us is a flag with a crown in the center that tells us this place is situated somewhere in Romania, most likely between the two world wars when the country was a kingdom, not a republic.⁶³ (Figure I.9.)

Palas is not only the name of the street, but it also resembles the Romanian word palat, that is palace or royal residence. And indeed, in the foreground we see a royal parade. An elegant horse-driven carriage occupies the center of the procession and the center of the drawing. Who are the characters marching in front of us? Riding the horse, comes the king. The sharp, bearded profile and aquiline nose together with the monogram inscribed on the saddle indicate that the royal figure is Ferdinand I, from the House of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (Figure I.10.). King of Romania from 1914 (the year of Steinberg’s birth) until his death in 1927, Ferdinand was married to Marie of Edinburgh with whom he had six children. Portrayed in the carriage, wearing crowns, sumptuous jewelry and luxurious outfits, Queen Marie and two of her children are accompanied by two ladies from the royal court. We infer that the time represented in the drawing is probably 1920-1925, most likely 1924, when Steinberg was ten – in several drawings

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⁶³ Romania became a republic after the forced abdication of King Michael I in 1947 under the pressure of the communist-dominated government which had fraudulently won the 1946 elections.
and collages made throughout his life he represented himself at this particular age and moment in time (Figure I.11.).

However, as we already know, Palas is, most importantly, the name of Steinberg’s childhood street situated in a middle-class neighborhood with courtyards and shotgun houses, but also elegant three-storey-high modernist buildings. Describing the life on Palas Street Steinberg later wrote: “The hen was in the same family as the dog and the cat, a true domestic animal, while it was outrageous to have a duck in the kitchen. The goose came in with no fuss – it had authority. Chickens walked in with dancers’ steps, or at times a military gait.” And here it comes – the chicken! (Figure I.12.) Like in a fable, the chicken imitating the horse and the horse parading in the foreground, stand for characters with specific traits: the elegant dandy, full of himself and oblivious of the rest of the world, and his less-than-perfect copy aiming to replicate a distinction he does not, in fact, possess, and will never acquire. The destiny of the copy is to remain in the realm of simulated elegance. These characters are both human and architectural: in the middle-class environment where Steinberg grew up, shotgun houses and luxuriant courtyards coexisted with elegant three-level modernist buildings. In a socially and economically segregated society, people from different backgrounds inhabited an eclectic and vibrant neighborhood.

Palas is also the name of an asteroid discovered in 1802 and many streets in Steinberg’s neighborhood – itself called Uranus – bore the names of celestial bodies and constellations: Meteorilor, Minotaurului, Orfeu, Olimpului, Ceres, Jupiter, and Uranus. In Greek mythology, Palas was also the name of Athena, the goddess of wisdom that was worshipped on the Acropolis in Athens under many names and cults. One of her cult images was a piece of olive wood housed in the Erechteum temple. This piece was at the core of the Panathenea, the festival honoring Athena that was taking place every four years and during which her effigy was carried in a

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64 See, for instance, Bucharest in 1921 (1970) or a collage in which the adult Steinberg is holding the hand of his 10-year old self.
65 Steinberg and Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 21.
66 Meteorites, Minotaur, Orpheus, Olympus, Ceres, Jupiter, Uranus (author’s translation.)
procession throughout the city. Steinberg constructs his own procession, his own festival dedicated to Palas that brings together myths, royalties, and commoners in the city.

Parades are a recurrent motif in Steinberg’s art and they contain the seeds of irony and parody. The orchestrated display of power, the ostentation and pomp associated with them offer him the opportunity to scratch their surface and discover the less-than-glamorous truths hidden behind. In 1991, two years after the fall of communism in Romania, watching a TV documentary about his homeland, Steinberg wrote in his diary: “Last night (ch. 13) brutal documentary of Romania made mostly of B + W Calea Victoriei followed by Marxist parades and all the terror of dictatorship: ritmic [sic] applause, infinite boredom. They learned nothing. More bloodshed to come.” The parade in Strada Palas from 1966 brings together real and mythical characters unlikely to co-exist in the same place who talk about habitus – the habitus embodied in the everyday life of ordinary people with their beliefs, customs, and traditions, and the constructed habitus of official processions and their display of power.

With the passage of time, memories fabricate a construction that intertwines reality and fiction. Bringing together real and mythical characters unlikely to co-exist in the same place, Steinberg positions Palas Street in a physical, yet invented city. Opening the parade, the priest carrying a cross and a censer is pointing, perhaps, to certain social habits and customs at work in the Bucharest between the two world wars. (Figure I.13.) Next to the priest, Steinberg places Death, a character holding a sword and a flag with a bull’s head, where the latter is a reference to an earlier Romanian flag. How is one to interpret this association? Daunting childhood presences, lingering in one’s memory? An ironical take on concealed forms of governance? An immutable memento mori? Or, perhaps, a sarcastic celebration of beginning and end, heaven and hell, walking hand in hand? One becomes the other in a world where the boundaries between good and evil are often fluid and transgressions are common. Growing up Jewish in an increasingly anti-Semitic world, left deep marks on Steinberg the child: “I had no rights, and went to school wearing a name plate with a number, like an automobile. […] And above all, as

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67 Journal entry from Thursday July 4th, 1991. (Saul Steinberg Papers, UNCAT MSS 126, Box/Vol. 75.)
long as you had no money, you couldn’t enjoy the dreadful freedoms of Romania, which were invariably abuses, or lead the life of a gentleman, the sort of man who, if he has money, can always find people to buy,” he recollected about his childhood in Bucharest.

Coming of age in Bucharest in the early decades of the twentieth century, Steinberg had experienced first-hand the social and urban turmoil of the Romanian capital in the aftermath of World War I. The post-war agreements between the powers involved in the conflict had immediate geographical and demographical consequences for the Kingdom of Romania. Following the Trianon treaty, Romania acquired Transylvania and two-thirds of Banat from Hungary, Bukovina from Austria, Bessarabia from Russia, and consequently its land mass and population doubled. According to a 1930 census, 29.1% of the population consisted of minorities and thus a former ethnically uniform country was confronted with new identity issues. Part of this search for identity was a new awareness of Eastern Orthodoxy as an integral part of being Romanian. The complex history of failures in the process of building a national cathedral, illustrates the struggle to define the complicated relationship between political and religious powers and the very designation of the cathedral is reflective of this tension. The various names successively assigned to this project reflect a gradual shift from looking at the building merely as a religious symbol (Christ’s Resurrection in 1881), to bringing together nation-building and religion (The Cathedral of the Nation in 1891), and, eventually, to claiming a collective historical restoration (The Cathedral for the Redemption of the Nation in 1920). In this context, the Romanian capital, as well as smaller provincial towns, frequently witnessed acts of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, which led to discrimination and violence.

Mixing fact and fiction, Steinberg’s festival brings forward the eclectic demographics of the Romanian society: crowned heads, regular people, religious figures, and symbolic characters.

68 Steinberg and Buzzi, Reflections and Shadows, 3.
70 Scurtu and Buzatu 1996, 22 quoted in Gallagher, 29.
Among them, the Muslim street vendor closing the parade is rendered vibrantly in golden tones (Figure I.14.). Selling *braga*, *salep*, sesame, and Turkish delight, Muslim vendors were a fairly common presence in the streets of Bucharest at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^72\)

At no. 4. Starting with an Eastern Orthodox priest and ending with a Muslim street vendor, this unlikely procession speaks about the city and its inhabitants, about the ordinary and the extraordinary, the time of the everyday and the time of the festival. Royals become commoners and commoners become royals. With ruthless irony, Steinberg cuts a cross section through the Romanian society between the two World Wars. As the drawing unfolds along two parallel lines, two parades seem to exist in parallel universes: the royal procession and the parade of Steinberg’s middle-class neighborhood that, despite their differences, cannot exist without each other and have more in common than revealed at a first glance.

In the upper left part of the drawing we begin to see one end of Palas Street: the houses with their gardens, fences, and luxuriant vegetation – particular features of the city fabric at the beginning of the twentieth century (Figure I.15.). The earlier sketches from 1941 made in Ciudad Trujillo marked in plan the presence of *oțetari* (Figure I.2.) – in this 1966 drawing they are vividly depicted in bright colors (Figure I.15.). *Rhus typhina*, or staghorn sumac, the *oțetar* is an ornamental tree whose fruit is a dense cluster of red drupes; the plant flowers from May to July and the fruit ripens until September. In the fall, the foliage turns to luxurious shades of red, orange and yellow. What was an annotation in the 1941 plan becomes decades later, in 1966, a lavish garden that captures the royal golden shades of the staghorn sumac, punctured by the blood-red color of its fruit.

At the other end of the street we see a rather curious collection of buildings (Figure I.16.). The warehouse-looking construction on top of a hill is the arsenal, a building housing weapons and ammunition. Palas Street was located in the proximity of the Arsenal, the building

\(^72\) Both *braga* and *salep* are drinks that originated in the Ottoman empire. *Braga* is a refreshing drink made from fermented grains (wheat, millet, etc.). *Salep* is obtained from grinding the bulbs of certain orchids and is used in the preparation of a hot drink with milk, for making ice cream or in traditional medicine.
that gave the name to the hill on which it was situated – Dealul Arsenalului (the Arsenal Hill). At the bottom of the hill Steinberg sketches a cemetery and the towers of a church, the pendants of the Priest and the Death characters opening the royal parade in the foreground. Palas Street was located between two streets both of which were bearing the names of two old local churches (Schitu Maicilor and Antim). As Bucharest was thriving in the 1920s, modernist architecture was on the rise. In an eclectic neighborhood like Uranus (where Strada Palas belonged), new, modernist immeubles de rapport coexisted next to picturesque houses that in Steinberg’s rendition resemble cheerful Romanian embroidery.73

**Dor.** As one reads the drawing from left to right and from right to left, the eye keeps returning to the center of the image (Figure 1). And how do we know *that* is the focal point? Strategically placed right above the overpowering image of the king riding the horse, this center is protected by an oversized tree hovering in the background whose color matches the green color of the king’s royal cape-lining. Everything points to this space as the most important part of the drawing (Figure I.4).

At the center, we see a courtyard that appears huge, just like in our childhood memories when our mind remembers things and places much larger than they actually are. In this 1966 drawing of the *Strada Palas*, the street lamp outside the fence and the water pump inside are present in the exact same position registered in Steinberg’s memory 25 years earlier, in 1941 in Ciudad Trujillo. To the right, just as it has been depicted in 1941, there is the entrance to Sander, marked by a classical pediment mounted on two columns, carefully detailed along with the windows and even the brickwork. However, this is not the focus of the drawing.

Recessed from the street, we see Steinberg’s childhood home. Its physical dimensions and those of the courtyard were in reality much smaller, but what makes them larger-than-life is the people, events, and stories that construct a depth of memories otherwise invisible. How do all

73 A housing typology developed in Paris from the eighteenth century onward, the immeuble de rapport is a multi-storey building with apartments for rent and / or purchase that was assimilated in Romanian architecture, particularly in Bucharest at the turn of the twentieth century. In many instances, these buildings provided opportunities for experimenting with the emerging modernist architecture.
these fragments of inhabitation come together? Why did Steinberg continually return to a not-particularly happy childhood and keep drawing that modest, yet royal, house year after year, despite his open contempt for his country of birth? If every history is a story, then how are they woven at 4, Strada Palas?

And Beyond. An inconspicuous detail reappears in different renditions of Strada Palas throughout the years. In the upper left corner of the 1941 sketch from Ciudad Trujillo, the eye is drawn to this detail by the thick, heavy lines that reverse the drawing conventions usually requiring the use of sharp, dark outlines in the foreground and fuzzy, blurred lines in the background (Figure I.17). The family dinner vignette made the same year and entitled Strada Palas, guides us toward this detail by the central strip of sepia sky shimmering between the gold embroidered curtains (Figure I.18). The 1966 view of Strada Palas renders this minuscule object next to the oversized tree, larger than the houses themselves and hovering above them (Figure I.19).

This discreet detail is a fragile ladder leading to a closed door – the door to the pod (attic)? A door to the sky? Or perhaps a door to nowhere? As Steinberg consistently remembers and brings it into presence, the ladder speaks of wanderlust and desire to escape. The adult attempts to free himself from the memories of his alter-ego child and the convoluted feelings about his homeland, perhaps from the past, as well as from the present. In the story of Jacob’s ladder, the angelic stairway opened up the path to dreams and to a world invisible through the eyes of the mind, yet engraved in the bodily action of climbing up and down the stair. Describing the childhood home as an “oneiric house, a house of dream-memory” that is “physically inscribed in us,” Gaston Bachelard wrote:

After all these years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the “first stairway,” we would not stumble on that rather high step. The
house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic.\textsuperscript{74}

Steinberg’s stairway to the attic joins dor as homesickness with dor as wanderlust, the complicated mood that constantly drives him toward, and at the same time away from, his memories. Dor constructs the scaffolding of his drawings, reminding him (and us) about the intricate connections between here and there, now and then, love and hate. Dor and daydreaming inhabit the ladder to the garret as a place of becoming, of not-yet there, full of possibilities. Steinberg reshuffles the objects in the memory box at no. 4 re-writing over and over again the same, though different, onfabulations.

**Epilogue**

Steinberg’s old neighborhood no longer exists. In the 1980s, the area was targeted by the communist regime to become the location of the brand-new civic center envisioned as a center of political and administrative power. The entire hill (*Dealul Arsenalului*) was leveled and the 19th century Uranus neighborhood was torn down together with churches, the Old Arsenal, other historic and architectural monuments, as well as ordinary houses that had witnessed simple, everyday life. Steinberg never returned to his homeland and made all these drawings from his childhood memories kept alive through period photographs, postcards that he had been collecting for some time, and memorabilia brought to him by friends who were traveling to Bucharest.

The tragic end of Strada Palas that – along with the entire neighborhood – was buried under communist bulldozers recalls the ancient story of the Greek Simonides of Ceos recorded by Cicero in his *De Oratore*. Simonides was invited to the dinner party of a wealthy noble man in whose honor he composed an ode. To the displeasure of the host, the ode, however, also honored Castor and Pollux, the twin deities who were patrons of hunters and horsemen. When two mysterious young men requested Simonides’s presence outside the house, the roof of the

\textsuperscript{74} Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 15.
dining hall caved in and everyone inside was killed. Simonides, the only survivor saved by the two gods in disguise, was able to identify the guests buried under the rubble by remembering their physical positions in the *triclinium*.\(^{75}\)

Architecture remembers us and we remember architecture. Not unlike Simonides, years after *Strada Palas* had crumbled, Steinberg recalls people through their houses, and houses through their people. Boredom and daydreaming, the ordinary and the extraordinary, embodied and constructed forms of *habitus* are brought to life in his fictions.

\(^{75}\) In the Roman dining hall (*triclinium*), people were seated not on movable chairs, like in modern dining rooms, but on fixed benches made of wood or stone that were an integral part of the architecture of the room.
First Interlude. Figures.

Figure I.1. Steinberg’s drawing of his childhood street in Bucharest, from a journal, December 1940-January 1943; Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.2. Steinberg’s drawing of his childhood street in Bucharest, from a journal, December 1940-January 1943; Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.3. Saul Steinberg, *Strada Palas*, 1942. Ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper, 37.8 x 55.2 cm. The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.4. Saul Steinberg, *Strada Palas*, 1966. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.5. Photographs of Strada Palas. Unknown author. Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.6. Postcards from Romania. Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.7. Copies of maps of Bucharest. Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.8. Steinberg’s drawing of his childhood street in Bucharest, from a journal, December 1940-January 1943; Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.9. Saul Steinberg, Strada Palas, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.10. Saul Steinberg, Strada Palas, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.11. Saul Steinberg. Collage of himself as a child and an adult. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.12. Saul Steinberg, *Strada Palas*, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.13. Saul Steinberg, *Strada Palas*, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.14. Saul Steinberg. *Strada Palas*, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.15. Saul Steinberg. *Strada Palas*, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.16. Saul Steinberg. *Strada Palas*, 1966. Detail. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.17. Steinberg’s drawing of his childhood street in Bucharest, from a journal, December 1940-January 1943. Detail. Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure I.18. Saul Steinberg, *Strada Palas*, 1942. Detail. Ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper, 37.8 x 55.2 cm. The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure I.19. Saul Steinberg. *Strada Palas*, 1966. Graphite, pen, colored inks, watercolor, gouache, colored chalks and gold enamel on paper, 58.4 x 73.7 cm; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Gift of the artist, through the America-Israel Cultural Foundation; Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Chapter 2: Between Boredom and Flatness

Introduction

Less is a bore and the decorated shed are arguably two of the most significant contributions that Robert Venturi (later with Denise Scott Brown) has brought to architectural theory. Published six years apart, in 1966 and, respectively, 1972, the two propositions contain the seeds of a curious paradox. The former, in response to Mies van der Rohe’s dictum Less is more, is a direct critique of modernist architectural language and implies a re-valorization of the excess and surplus carefully shunned by modern architects. The latter, while reducing a meaningful building to a structure with applied decoration is both more and less: more ornament and less architecture. Venturi was no stranger to ideas about paradox: from his early projects published in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, he has programmatically employed flat and plain surfaces while at the same time stating: “the examples chosen [in the book] reflect my partiality for certain eras: Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo especially.”¹ The numerous precedents showed in his book support his position. On the one hand, he championed flat surfaces in architecture, but on the other hand, he turned toward an architecture of complex and convoluted surfaces. How are we to explain this paradox? How are we to understand this apparent inconsistency of thought? Are these two positions contradictory or do they perhaps stem from the same source? Is the paradox of both/and first articulated as a theoretical position in the “gentle manifesto” and later illustrated in his own practice, a rhetorical device meant to validate any type of approach, or, perhaps, does it stem from different sources?

A biographical detail largely overlooked in architectural scholarship is Venturi’s upbringing as a Quaker. I propose that the Quaker influence accounts for his particular understanding of paradox, of a world in which apparently opposite positions coexist simultaneously, where a theory of both/and is not only legitimate, but, more important, resourceful. From this particular perspective, flat surfaces have depth, less and more are not contradictory concepts, and a remedy to modernist boredom may emerge, in fact, from plain planes, which are cut, reshaped, and reassembled.

The appeal of both Venturi and Mies’s quips lies in their rather obscure and ambiguous nature, which to this day allows for a rich range of interpretations and paraphrases. As such, they have become common places in the architectural vocabulary. At a closer inspection, their opposition is not that clear. “Less is more” encompasses some of the modernist principles associated with a minimalist approach to architecture: stripping off ornament, minimizing costs through prefabrication and standardization, exposing structure and the nature of materials, streamlining design, in short simplifying. I suggest that “Less is a bore” proposes another type of simplicity, which, Venturi will elaborate, results from people’s direct understanding of the architectural form as symbol. In fact, in Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi distinguishes between simplicity and simpleness (or simplification), criticizing the latter, not the former. “Where simplicity cannot work, simpleness results. Blatant simplification means bland architecture. Less is a bore.”

To an untrained eye, Venturi’s early projects appear, in fact, rather unsophisticated and “boring,” begging the question of how to interpret his statement manifesto, on the one hand, and his acceptance of simplicity, on the other. Although never stated explicitly as a theoretical position, “less is a bore” begins to theorize the “architectural boring” as a matter of architectural form. The motto rightly recognizes architectural boredom as a legitimate concern but, as we will see in the third chapter, opens the way to understanding the dichotomy boring – interesting as the main concern of architectural practice.

Venturi’s interest in the flatness of commercial billboards as an inspiration for architecture is grounded in the general ethos of the time, but also, an aspect unaccounted for, in his own Quaker upbringing. This chapter examines the intersections between Venturi’s Quaker background (and particularly the concept of paradox in Quaker doctrine) and the culture of billboards in mid-century America. Venturi’s approach to simplicity and flatness was rooted in the apparent oxymoron plain and fancy, a common concept in Quaker culture. I propose an alternative reading of Venturi’s interest in flatness. A largely unquestioned view, which he has affirmed repeatedly, posits the direct influence of commercial billboards on his architectural theory and practice. However, I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of his position

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should take into account Quaker beliefs and practices, with their emphasis on *paradox, bi-dimensional, flat* art, and *understated* presence.

Architectural and cultural theorists such as Kenneth Frampton and Karsten Harries have strongly criticized the use of billboards in architecture, and specifically Venturi’s interest in commercial advertising, from an ethical standpoint.³ I propose to examine how Venturi’s use of billboards in architecture introduces a mode of perception that turns the active inhabitant of architecture into a passive spectator primarily through two conditions: the *distraction* (with its double meaning of entertainment and lack of attention) inherent to the nature of billboards and their *frontality*. Boredom is central to this conversation, as billboards ultimately propose a solution to the problem of modern tedium through distraction, visual overstimulation, and message whose meaning is direct, and immediate. The flatness of the surface cannot be dissociated from the flatness of meaning.

The first section discusses Venturi’s Quaker upbringing and the role of *paradox* in Quaker thought and culture. The second one looks at the presence of commercial billboards in the midcentury landscape and the mode of perception they engender through *distraction* and *frontality*. The third part, proposes speculative readings of three of Venturi’s projects where ideas borrowed from billboard design are intertwined, more or less explicitly, with ideas drawn from Quaker aesthetics and practice. The three projects are his Princeton thesis design for a Chapel for the Episcopal Academy in Merion, PA (1950), the *billingboard*; the entry of the firm Venturi and Rauch for the National Football Hall of Fame competition (1967); and the Guild House in Philadelphia, PA (1963-1966).

### 2.1. Learning from the Friends

**Robert Venturi’s Quaker upbringing.** The Quakers (or the Society of Friends) have historic ties with the state of Pennsylvania in general and the city of Philadelphia in particular. Critics have largely disregarded the influence of their beliefs and aesthetics on Venturi’s work. An exception is a short article by Esther McCoy, Venturi’s long-time friend, who proposed that

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his connection with the Quakers offered possible clues to his “strict code of ethics and his love of simplicity.”

Commenting on the plans of the Vanna Venturi House (Figure 2.1.), the Guild House (Figure 2.2.), and the North Penn Visiting Nurses Association (Figure 2.3.), McCoy remarked they were in disagreement with the Modernist space, and carried a conflict between “the German mysticism of the universal space,” on the one hand, and Venturi’s Italian roots and Quaker education, on the other. Further, she interpreted the plan of the Vanna Venturi House as a “safe and sound Quaker letter in second person singular.”

Against the general background of Quaker Philadelphia, the Society of Friends has had a significant, though discreet presence in Venturi’s life. In several interviews given over the years, he has unassumingly mentioned his affiliation with the Friends, however without further elaborating on any possible influence they might have had on his thinking.

Toward the end of his architectural studies, Venturi was planning to join the American Friends Service:

“I was brought up as a Friend. I acquired my training from the sympathetic attitude and convictions in my home and at Friends Meeting which my family joined in 1931. … I have been influenced by no one individual, the Society of Friends has no minsters – but have relied generally upon the principles of my religious education. … As a student immediately interested in architecture, and one whose opinions have only recently been clarified, I have had little opportunity until now expressively to demonstrate my conviction beyond intimate conversation. My application for and probable future service with the American Friends Service after I will have finished my formal education in June demonstrate my belief.”

Maybe part of a local tradition, but perhaps also related to Venturi’s family’s affiliation with the Friends, a catalogue of Quaker publications was sent to the newlyweds Venturi and

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5 Ibid., 294.
6 An undated document from the Architectural Records of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown at the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania shows the commitment of the young Robert Venturi to the cause of the Friends. (225.RV.113)
Scott Brown after their wedding in July 1967. Venturi has been exposed to Quakerism both in his education (he attended grade school at Lansdowne Friends School) and at home. Although his parents were of Italian Catholic descent, his mother initiated the conversion of the entire family to Quakerism and the three of them began to attend Quaker meetings on Sunday. Describing his upbringing in a book celebrating the Italian heritage of noted Americans, Venturi explained his parents’ conversion:

My mother and father were born Catholics but did not practice. When I was about five years old, they decided they needed a religious affiliation for my sake. Being a pacifist, my mother was attracted to the Quakers because of their stand against the war, and so she became a member of the Society of Friends. My father went along with her and the three of us went to meeting on Sunday morning. I was sent to a Friends School in Philadelphia. … I went to Landsowne Friends School until I was ten years old.

In an interview from 1995, Denise Scott Brown found two sources of the concern with social justice of the Venturi-Scott Brown partnership: her African upbringing and Venturi’s Quaker background:

A heritage of Socialism and Quakerism in Bob’s family and my African social and racial concerns, tied in with movements for social justice in America of the 1960s, have caused us to try in our practice to join social concern with design and to remain committed as architects to achieving social justice.

In an interview published in *Perspecta* in 2008, Venturi simply stated: “I was an Italian-American Quaker.” In a 2009 interview posted on the architectural website *ArchDaily*, Denise Scott Brown credited her mother-in-law for Venturi’s interest in social issues. Scott Brown

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7 The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, 225.II.F.1553.
8 The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, (225.II.F.1037, Box 70). This is the manuscript of the chapter “Robert Venturi: Upbringing among Quakers,” in *Growing Up Italian*, ed. Linda Brandi Cateura (New York. William Morrow and company, Inc., 1987). See also the interview part of the oral history project of the Archives of the American Art.
described Vanna Venturi as “a socialist and a pacifist.” To which Venturi added: “And a Quaker.”

I propose that Venturi’s architectural theory of both/and, his admiration for “elements which are hybrid rather than “pure,” compromising rather than “clean,” distorted rather than “straightforward,” ambiguous rather than “articulated,” boring as well as “interesting” … redundant rather than simple, … inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear,”

builds upon a tension inherent to the Quaker doctrine. Manifested at different levels, it is the tension between the spiritual world and the material world, inclusion and exclusion, revelation and concealment. While the Quakers embrace a set of beliefs that is inclusive of all human beings, welcomes diversity and is non-judgmental, at the same time they set themselves apart from the world as a separate group. The contradictory nature of being “in the world, but not of it” complicates the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical where the latter is not manifested in the former. The expression “live in the world, but not of it” is attributed to the English rebel George Fox, who in the seventeenth century founded the Religious Society of Friends.

As simplicity and excess are contentious subjects in the Quaker doctrine, Venturi relies upon and at the same time departs from the Quaker paradigm of simplicity. Brought up in the tradition of Philadelphia-based Quakerism, he was most certainly familiar with the Quaker principles that separate spiritual matters from material ones: the individual has access to spirituality not through their own will, but through the Inner Light. Manifested only through revelations, the Inner Light does not engage with the sensible world. Quakers passively wait for and receive revelation in a physical world devoid of spiritual qualities. There are no corporeal mediators between the divine and the human. This act of passive waiting might contain the seeds

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of what Venturi and Scott Brown will later refer to as “deferred judgment.” However, the very same act of patient waiting could instill a boredom resulted from the disengagement with the physical realm and a dearth of worldly experiences. Venturi’s early exposure to Quaker practices has most likely influenced his attitude toward material culture. His focus on architectural surfaces, his interest in iconology expressed through words and letters, his emphasis on correctly deciphering signs and symbols, and the collective dimension of a message shared and understood by the entire community, are fundamental to understanding the Quaker mode of being in the world. Venturi’s exposure to paradox had more than one origin. T.S. Eliot, one of his main sources of inspiration (who was brought up as a Unitarian, converted to Anglicanism and proclaimed himself Anglo-Catholic), embraced contradictory positions and commented that his religious views combined a “Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament.”

However, if Quaker aesthetics favors simplicity, starkness and lack of ornamentation, dear also to architectural modernism, then why is Venturi moving away from the modernist tenets? Would he not feel more comfortable with the puritanism of Mies and his followers? Faithful to and discovering the richness of his Italian heritage, he is fascinated with the exuberance of Mannerist and Baroque architectures fundamentally opposed to Quakers’ strict visual code. So how does he reconcile the two types of aesthetics? How does he move between Quaker minimalism and Mannerist excess?

Venturi’s statement Less is a bore is more than a pun on Mies’ Less is more. In the previous chapter, we saw that Venturi’s quip did not exist in a vacuum, nor did it suddenly manifest a new and unusual interest in boredom, but rather it brought together ideas and concerns already part of the ethos of the time. The closing line of Venturi’s “gentle manifesto” – More is not less – gives us another clue for reading Less is a bore. Venturi himself identified the sources of his manifesto in Baroque and Mannerist architecture, literary theories, New Criticism

15 It was Denise Scott Brown who first proposed “deferred judgment” as the attitude the designer should have toward the world. Inspired from Ed Rusha’s photography which she uses to illustrate her article “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” Journal of the American Institute of Planners 35:3 (1969): 184-186.
17 Frederick B. Tolles suggested that “Much of modern architecture … is only a reassertion of the principle which guided the builders of the early Quaker meeting houses.” Frederick. B. Tolles, “‘Of the Best Sort but Plain:’ The Quaker Esthetic,” American Quarterly Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1959): 74.
18 Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 16.
and Pop Art. His “not-straightforward architecture”\textsuperscript{19} embraced the entire variety of directions, trends and aspects of life, an attitude that has also been central to the Friends’ relationship with the world. Venturi never acknowledged his early upbringing as an inspiration for his architectural theories – however, it would be unlikely for a Friend to be outspoken on faith issues. The Quakers, in spite of their active involvement with social causes, have generally preferred to keep a low profile and avoid public visibility. \textit{More is not less}, which in Complexity and Contradiction precedes the argument that \textit{Less is a bore}, implies, I suggest, the paradoxical idea that it is complex and contradictory forms that carry simple and clear messages.

\textbf{The Quaker paradox: ‘In the World, but not of It’.}\textsuperscript{20} Tying together professional and personal narratives, Venturi has portrayed himself as an outsider. His early childhood years spent in private schools put a distance between him and the neighborhood children; as an architect, he felt relegated to the frontier of the profession due to his unconventional views opposed to mainstream architectural movements. He has assumed (and relished) this fringe condition along with his wife, herself an émigré, uprooted from her native South Africa, to London, and later Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{21} On the other hand, the history of the Quakers as a religious group is rooted in persecutions, marginality, and silent resistance. For the young architect, this genealogy might have created an environment where standing up against conventions is a necessary moral act. We will see how the tension inherent in Quaker spirituality has spawned a particular relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, manifested in works of art and architecture.

The Quaker doctrine derives, and at the same time, distances itself from the tenets of the Puritan Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century England. Discontent with the teachings and practices of the Church of England, George Fox, the son of a puritan churchwarden, began to seek salvation outside the official church. He founded the Religious Society of Friends, or the

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 16.
Quakers, and spent his life traveling and preaching throughout Britain, Europe and America. The expression “live in the world, but not of it” is attributed to Fox as a way of describing the inherent tension present in the Quaker way of life.

American Quakerism began with the English-born Quaker William Penn who came to North America in 1682 and later founded the province of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia. Embedded in the history and perception of the city, an implicit notion of paradox has loomed large in various historic studies about Philadelphia. In 1963, historian Nathaniel Burt described the city as a negotiation between plain Quakers and fancy Episcopalians, an enigma for outsiders, a place “devoted to moderation but fond of good living,” where the myth of a joyless population coexists with that of a snobbish, but pleasure oriented “fox-hunting aristocracy.”

The Quakers aesthetics originates in the larger Protestant views on plain style born in the seventeenth century in reaction to the Catholic Baroque. Historian Susan Garfinkel has argued that “Quaker theology has within it a fundamental crisis of representation. All expressive behaviors, whether spoken, enacted, or built, function as embodiments of this conflict.” Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge the complex nature of this tension and the constant travails of the Society of Friends to reconcile their theology with the pressures and demands of modern life. This paradox has been at the core of the Quaker material culture: while the physical world was stripped off metaphysical content, craftsmanship is highly valued; while meeting houses (the Quaker places of communal worship) have never been sacred spaces, they have always acted as depositories of historical and cultural genealogies.

22 The origin of the name Quaker is uncertain. According to Robert Barclay, a prominent 17th century writer belonging to the Religious Society of Friends, the name reflects the devotion of some members of the group who would start quaking while making their pronouncements. (http://www.tempequakers.org/FAQ.htm#six Accessed on Jan. 30, 2014) A different interpretation suggests that the name is a derogatory term that originated in a discussion between King George and William Penn: when the latter refused to take his hat off in front of his majesty telling him he should be “Quaking before the Lord,” the king responded “Get this quaker out of here.” (http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~quakers/quakhist.htm Accessed January 30, 2014) Another account states that George Fox, who had been imprisoned several times due to his beliefs, was doing time in Derby in 1650 when he asked Justice Bennett to tremble at the word of Lord, hence the latter called him “Quaker.” (A. Neave Brayshaw, The Quakers: Their Story and Message (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1938), 43)


24 Susan Garfinkel, “Letting in “the World: (Re)interpretive Tensions in the Quaker Meeting House,” 85.
The main source for understanding Quaker foundational beliefs is Robert Barclay’s *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, originally written in Latin and first issued in English in 1678.\textsuperscript{25} The key concept in Quaker theology is the *Inward Light of Christ* that, as historian J. William Frost points out, contains the essence of Quakerism, but also the seeds of its paradoxes. The *Inner Light* or the *Light Within* is the only form of divine agency accessible to people. The emphasis on *inward* reveals distrust for formalized liturgy and worship; the emphasis on *of Christ* suggests “the sameness of revelation for all,” pleading indirectly for orthodoxy and church government; the association of the *inward*, the *of Christ* and the *light* places the Quakers in a position where they could claim a “completely subjective, yet paradoxically objective, interpretation of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{26}

The paradoxical elements in Quaker thought and activities have often led to a misunderstanding of the Friends. … Quakers could be intellectuals and yet anti-intellectual, social activists and mystics, evangelical and quietistic, complacent and insecure, intent on making money and anxious to avoid being wealthy, dogmatic and nontheological, tolerant and strict.\textsuperscript{27}

Architectural metaphors occupy a particular place in understanding Quaker spirituality. Paraphrasing historian Arnold J. Toynbee, Quaker thinker Howard H. Brinton has explained Friends’ attitude toward life as a negotiation between “withdrawal and return,” or action and contemplation.\textsuperscript{28} Simple action is meaningless just as “action in building a brick house requires attention to one brick at a time, and yet one brick by itself is meaningless.”\textsuperscript{29} The part or the unit acquires significance only in relation to the whole. Pure contemplation, on the other hand, is likewise meaningless, just as “the builder who spends his time gazing at a blueprint,” or “the musician who ponders his score and never strikes a note” become so absorbed in the object of their own contemplation that they end up being dominated by it, and thus losing their free choice.\textsuperscript{30} Both action and contemplation are required for a rich and truthful life. While this

\textsuperscript{27} Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America*, 217.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 75-76.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 76.
paradox constitutes the core of the Quaker doctrine about spiritual and material life, a similar paradox – that of both/and – lies at the core of Venturi’s architectural thinking.

Four main principles or testimonies guide Quaker life: community, equality, simplicity and harmony. Unlike other religious practices that exercise silence as a form of worship (such as Zen meditation), what distinguishes the Quakers is the idea of the community. The worshipers sit together in silence waiting for the divine message to descend upon and utter through one of them. The act of recognizing the “still, small voice” is of crucial importance in Quaker worship, but “there is no sure test of divine guidance in this or any other undertaking” and “no rules can be laid down for Quaker ministry.” A tension thus emerges between silent reflection and the need for communication. Quaker harmony infers the unity of action without force. Equality does not imply egalitarianism in terms of economic or social status, but respect and consideration across class, race, social or religious distinctions. Of the four tenets, simplicity is probably one of the most controversial topics in Quaker doctrine. The general understanding of this testimony is that simplicity must be understood as the absence of the unnecessary, of the superfluous, of those things that clutter life. Rather than an exterior expression, simplicity is a form of sincerity and genuineness.

The paradox of being “in the world but not of it,” a simultaneous condition of inclusion and exclusion, has shaped Friends’ attitudes toward all the manifestations of material culture from exterior garb to architecture. Quaker clothing from the seventeenth century, for instance, removed the dress ornamentation characteristic to the age of Stuart kings, but that same simplification made the members of the Society of Friends appear more conspicuous than they

31 Ibid., 153-174.
32 Ibid., 103-104.
33 Ibid., 106.
34 Garfinkel, “Letting in “the World:” (Re)interpretive Tensions in the Quaker Meeting House,” 78.
35 Brinton, Friends for 350 Years, 160. Part of this attitude is the adoption of the “plain language,” namely the use of thou instead of you, and that of “plain dress.” (161)
37 Brinton, Friends for 350 Years, 165.

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would have wanted. (As the dress code has relaxed over centuries, today there is no visible difference between Quakers and non-Quakers.)

**Quaker Meetinghouses.** Quaker meetinghouses are not sacred, transcendent spaces, but their role is central to keeping alive genealogies, as well as personal and collective histories (Figure 2.4.) The common perception is that their design does not distinguish itself from domestic architecture. Although “there are no inherently sacred objects or spaces,” once a proper spiritual understanding is achieved through the Inner Light, the distinction between the sacred and the secular disappears and “all aspects of life are encompassed by the sacred.”38 So rather than a secularization of sacred spaces, all spaces, profane and sacred, are, in fact, elevated to a spiritual level.

A story of transgression that has occurred in the early 1690s and has been transmitted into the twentieth century, testifies for the pressures and sometimes inconsistencies at work in Quaker practices. The Quaker Robert Turner claimed that he had a testimony against ministers’ galleries, so he entered a meetinghouse and demolished that elevated gallery, later showing his satisfaction in front of his fellows Friends.39 This account shows a certain tension between physical and spiritual matters, a tension derived from the privileged position that the elevated gallery would have offered to certain members of the community, a situation at odds with the Quaker ideals of equality. Despite general assumptions, there is historic evidence showing that during service in the meetinghouse, certain agendas were pursued and different members of the community were assigned specific roles based not only on their religious experience, but also on their race, gender, age and class.40

Friends’ attitude toward their worship spaces reflects the paradox inherent in the Quaker doctrine: on the one hand, meetinghouses are not regarded as spiritual artifacts, but on the other hand, they are maintained, reused and rebuilt as a way of preserving the integrity and the

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38 Garfinkel, “Letting in “the World:” (Re)interpretive Tensions in the Quaker Meeting House,” 78.
39 Garfinkel, “Letting in “the World:” (Re)interpretive Tensions in the Quaker Meeting House,” 78.
40 Garfinkel, “Letting in “the World:” (Re)interpretive Tensions in the Quaker Meeting House,” 83-84.
continuity of the community. Clever ways of recycling and re-purposing building parts and materials from meeting houses that are no longer in use reflect concerns for resources and economy of means as aspects of simplicity, but also reinforce ideas about continuity, genealogy and legacy.

When possible, the old meetinghouse was and is saved in its entirety and adapted for another use such as a school, stable, shed, or even a residence. When new construction becomes unavoidable, materials from the old structure are generally incorporated into the design or sold and the funds applied to the cost of the building campaign.

Historian Susan Garfinkel has identified a series of polarized concepts and attitudes at work within the Quaker meeting houses such as nurture/nature, private/public, inside/outside, plain/worldly, equality/hierarchy, etc. Friends’ worship spaces act as contested spaces where tensions are performed and re-enacted in every meeting: between silence and speaking, action and meditation, between the individual revelation through Inner Light and its communal understanding through the larger group, between saving material artifacts as depositories of memories and discarding the same objects as spiritually irrelevant.

**Quaker Art.** Quaker artistic tradition is built upon the tension between words and images. The silent worship requires a patient waiting, which is sometimes followed by a message heard, recognized, understood, verbalized, and then communicated to the community. Words as signs carry the message of revelation. The act of recognizing them as signs is the act of receiving and understanding the divine message. As abstract entities, disembodied from the material world, words are discreet, but powerful presences in the Quaker universe.

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41 Lavoie, “Reunified, Rebuilt, Enlarged, or Rehabilitated: Deciphering Friends’ Complex Attitudes toward Their Meeting Houses,” 21.
42 Lavoie, “Reunified, Rebuilt, Enlarged, or Rehabilitated: Deciphering Friends’ Complex Attitudes toward Their Meeting Houses,” 20-52.
43 Lavoie, “Reunified, Rebuilt, Enlarged, or Rehabilitated: Deciphering Friends’ Complex Attitudes toward Their Meeting Houses,” 25.
One of the core ideas in Venturi’s theory and practice emphasizes the display of words on buildings (signs, names or numbers) as an unmediated and explicit way to communicate a message. The decorated shed is essentially a generic structure with a sign attached to it, stating unequivocally its purpose and intent. (Projects such as the Guild House (Figure 2.5.), Grand’s Restaurant (Figure 2.6.), National Football Hall of Fame (Figure 2.7.) are only a few examples of his early use of explicit signs where the signs were, in fact, not only placed on buildings, but carefully designed in the office through numerous iterations. “I am a monument” will later summarize this position.) This attitude might appear inconsistent with Venturi’s plea for ambiguity and richness of messages. While he has attributed the use of signs and icons to his own reading of New Criticism and Pop Art, the Quaker material culture offers cues for situating his position within a broader genealogy. Historic evidence and works of art in particular, show that a Quaker perspective accommodates and embraces seemingly contradictory approaches and that signs and icons are at the core of Quaker’s approach to art and spirituality.

In a commentary on Venturi’s work, architectural critic Inga Saffron noted an intriguing affinity between Venturi and Scott Brown’s Benjamin Franklin House in Philadelphia (Figure 2.8.) and the work of the early Quaker artist Edward Hicks. She remarked that “the steel Ghost House, the colonial fence posts, the arbor and the spreading mulberry tree” evoked Edward Hicks’ Peaceable Kingdom paintings.45

Visual arts have been a contentious topic in Quaker culture. Raising suspicion, mainstream visual arts were disregarded as representations of life threatening life itself.46 Their acceptance has been gradually introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century with Edward Hicks’ allegorical paintings. A Quaker preacher, minister and occasional poet, he was trained as a professional sign and carriage painter. Despite Friends’ skepticism toward images, around 1825 he began a series of easel paintings known as the Peaceable Kingdoms where he elaborated on Isaiah’s prophecy of universal peace and where words play a central role (Figure 2.9.).47 The recurrent motif of the series is the allegory of concord and harmony among all creatures on earth,

46 Brinton, Friends for 350 Years, 166.
an allegory represented by the serene co-habitation of the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the young lion.\textsuperscript{48}

Drawing on the practice of sign painting, Hicks used words to reinforce the message of the images. In \textit{The Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch} (painted between 1825 and 1830), for instance, Hicks inscribed on the margins of the painting the sixth verse of Isaiah’s prophecy: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (\textbf{Figure 2.10}.). Words and images rely upon each other to construct and communicate meaning. Paradoxically, the words explain the allegory, thus reinforcing the message of the images and ensuring that their meaning is clear and unambiguous. Situated outside the pictorial space, the words construct the framework of the image both as a physical edge, and, metaphorically, as a clarification.

Six of Hicks’ \textit{Peaceable Kingdoms} show a group of (mostly) men and women in Quaker plain dress holding a long streamer.\textsuperscript{49} These allegories attempted to depict Quakers’ role in the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century, but also a larger idea about Christianity and human freedom.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, they had both a local and a universal meaning. In one of them, known as \textit{Peaceable Kingdoms with Quakers Bearing Banners} (\textbf{Figure 2.11}.), the banner reads: “Mind the light within. It is glad tidings of great joy. Peace on earth and good will to all men everywhere.” The thirteen white figures projected in the background against the sky are Christ and the apostles and the banner represents Christian freedom.\textsuperscript{51} As it descends from time through space, the streamer reaches down into present world. The words occupy the space and, wrapped around the crowd, they carry the divine message as they are floating above the people from whom they remain detached.

The paradox of Hicks’ paintings is that they are simultaneously allegorical images and literal texts. Drawing on his formation as a sign painter, Hicks was literally advertising his work, but at the same time was addressing a community with which he shared a common

\textsuperscript{48} The sixth verse of Isaiah’s prophecy” “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf, and the young lion, and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (McCoubrey, “Three Paintings by Edward Hicks,” 17)


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 27.
understanding of his text. The act of explaining the images to ensure the clarity of content is essential within a group whose code of practices and beliefs is based on truthfulness and honesty. In his work, Venturi has relied on the shared understanding of a message through words displayed on billboard-like surfaces that wrap around the architectural body (such as Grand’s restaurant (Figure 2.6.) or Guild House (Figure 2.5)).

The practice of visualizing words and numbers is present not only in Quaker paintings, but also in their built structures. Letters were inscribed on the walls of the nineteenth century domestic architecture of upper-class Quakers in the Delaware Valley. The owners set into the brickwork their family names, initials and construction years as a sign of “wealth …, authority and monumentality.” They emphasized the status quo and also constructed a historical and spatial genealogy. Architecture displayed and memorialized family and community, past and present, world and faith.

The obvious paradox that emerges from this reading is the reconciliation of worldliness with Quaker life. The answer lies in part in our understanding that the issue for early eighteenth-c Quakers was not so much one of living in the world but one of how people properly lived in the world.

Although using a plain language, the Quakers pay special attention to words, their meanings and their etymologies. For instance, because most of the names for months and for the days of the week had pagan origins, early Quakers decided to use numbers instead. Thus, they would say that January 15th was First Month 15th Day without mentioning the day of the week unless it was important. Some Quakers still use this system and Quaker Sunday School is called First Day School.

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54 Ibid., 204.
While Quaker tradition appears to resist representation, it addresses a different dimension of the artwork. It engages, in fact, with art forms that operate in a two-dimensional space and tend to flatten the three-dimensional world. During the first couple of centuries after the foundation of the Society of Friends, the Quakers have disregarded mainstream visual arts perceived as images of life threatening to take over life itself. They appropriated, instead, modes of representation consistent with their doctrine. In nineteenth century Philadelphia, the Quakers privileged silhouettes over traditional oil paintings (Figure 2.12). A particular form of portraiture, silhouettes were either drawn freehand or traced directly from the outline of a head or a shadow with a physiognotrace (an instrument designed to trace a person’s physiognomy) (Figure 2.13.).

Made popular in the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century through the work of the Swiss theologian and philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater, physiognomy started from the premise that people’s facial traits reflect their character. It was precisely the emphasis on character as the most important feature of an individual that appealed to the Quaker soul, which was searching for the essence of being and was willing to leave aside unnecessary details. From a Quaker perspective, silhouettes could be construed as projections of the soul made visible through the Inner Light that acts as the source of light casting shadows. The invisible (the soul) thus turns visible through an ephemeral projection (the silhouette), itself a fleeting shadow.

The technique of making silhouettes did not require extensive resources. Made of paper, the hollow-cut silhouettes were placed on a black or blue piece of fabric. By folding the piece of paper, one could create multiple silhouettes and that made their production fairly easy and inexpensive. Philadelphia-area based Quakers came to prefer this form of portraiture because it conveyed the essence of the sitter’s character without superfluous adornments. At the same time, it was a modest and affordable form of graphic representation. Silhouettes fitted the Quaker

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50 Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years*, 166.
52 Ibid., 52.
53 Ibid, 52.
conceptions about material life: plain, simple, and economical. Collected in albums, they were bringing together not only members of the same family, but also friends, ancestors, and figures from the past (Figure 2.14). The cut-outs could be exchanged, mailed, and offered as gifts. The activity of assembling them in albums required the participation of the immediate or extended family and this act of sharing reinforced kinship and identity. At a larger scale, the albums also traced the lineage and genealogy of the Quakers, thus legitimating their position in history.

The silhouettes were simultaneously figurative and abstract, specific and universal: as they outlined the character of the sitters, the profiles gave them an identity, but also stripped off the particular details that usually make the difference between an individual and a generic figure. Contemporary Philadelphia still engages the passer by with the old tradition of silhouettes offering clues through public art pieces surreptitiously displayed on street corners. An art piece located on the street corner makes reference to a particular form of public space claimed by erstwhile Friends as a sign of their marginal condition.

Just as Venturi only obliquely referenced the presence of the Society of Friends in his life, the influence of silhouettes on his work is speculative. Venturi and Scott Brown’s design for the Knoll chairs, for instance, recalls the flatness of Quaker cut-out silhouettes and their play between universality and specificity (Figure 2.15.). As the story goes, a tablecloth belonging to one of the firm’s employee’s grandmother inspired the pattern of the Queen Anne chair (Figure 2.16.). The chair thus carries both specific and universal traits: while it references the past of a particular person, it also has characteristics that allow a larger group of people to recognize it and identify themselves with its message. In a photograph of Venturi and Scott Brown posing with two of the Knoll chairs, Denise is wearing a dress of the same pattern as the Queen Anne chair next to her. An ironic statement about the nature of the surface (also, perhaps an ironic statement about two queens, Anne and Denise), the fabric of the dress and the fabric of the chair become autonomous and interchangeable. What matter is not the quality of the fabric, its texture, thickness or materiality, but its mere appearance. Another example is the exterior rendering of

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60 Ibid, 53-54.
61 Verplanck, “The Silhouette and Quaker Identity in Early National Philadelphia.”
62 An active Quaker website called Street Corner Society “refers to a common space where the historical experience of Friends and other groups connects with issues of our day, and where we as modern-day Friends and fellow-travelers may discover ourselves more clearly in a broader, historical context.” http://www.strecorsoc.org/about.html Accessed on march 16, 2014.
the buildingboard (the entry for the National Football Hall of Fame competition), where Venturi used an image of football players silhouettes (Figure 2.17). They recalled a 1947 Princeton – Pennsylvania game. Bringing together Princeton (his alma mater) and the University of Pennsylvania (the school where he was teaching at the time), the rendering evoked both a very personal story and a more universal one.63

In response to a competition entry of the Venturi – Scott Brown partnership, Philip Johnson qualified their work as “ugly and ordinary.” The two have appropriated these attributes and turned them into a personal design manifesto. This is, perhaps, more than a satire against the elitism of modern architecture or a form of protest against mainstream movements. The Quaker value system recognizes an architecture in the world, but not of it that at the same fits within, and distinguishes itself from its surroundings, that belongs to a vernacular tradition while manifesting its own identity. From this perspective, flatness appears both as a material quality of the objects, but also as an attribute of the context in which the differences between various elements are gradually disappearing.

“Plain and Fancy.” In 1973, the firm of Venturi, Scott Brown and Rauch built the extension of the Allen Art Museum at Oberlin College, Ohio (Figure 2.18). A few of years later, Venturi published two articles about this project, both of them bearing the same title: “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert at Oberlin.” (The content was later republished in A View from the Campidoglio.64) The title provides a clue to understanding the relation between Quaker simplicity, on the one hand, and Mannerist and Baroque influences in Venturi’s work, on the other. In the context of Quaker Philadelphia, the oxymoron plain and fancy has a history that goes beyond a humorous pun.

The production ‘Plain and Fancy’ premiered on Broadway in 1955. Deemed the “best musical comedy of the year” in a New Yorker ad from 1956, the play was written by Joseph Stein

63 In a 1947 football game between the Penn Quakers and the Princeton Tigers, the formers won by 26-7.
(who had also authored the successful *Fiddler on the Roof*) and provided one of the first
depictions of an Amish community in American pop culture. The stage set included a barn and
thus displayed one of the traditional communal activities in Amish communities. Stein’s
inspiration in writing the script came from an Amish community in Lancaster County,
Pennsylvania. Although the Quakers and the Amish are unrelated as religious denominations and
have different sets of beliefs, they share certain similarities: they are both pacifists, oppose war
and violence, and promote simplicity of lifestyle, material culture, and manners. Descending
from the sixteenth century Swiss Anabaptists, the Amish still reject the comforts of modern life
(such as electricity, deemed to encourage competition for material goods) and to this day
distinguish themselves through particular garbs. To a layperson, however, the Quakers and the
Amish might appear similar, and therefore in the popular culture the differences between the two
groups are sometimes blurred. The phrase *plain and fancy* came to be associated with both
Amish and Quaker values, referring especially to aspects of their material culture.

The attributes *plain and fancy* cover a wide range of artifacts, from food to furniture and
decorative arts, as shown in a few examples drawn from popular culture. Dating from 1959 and
supplied by an Amish farm, a contemporary restaurant from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania
capitalizes on these attributes as the ‘Plain and fancy farm.’65 In a 1963 article titled
“Philadelphia Plain and Fancy,” the author explained that the city was the result of the
“conscience of Quakers (the Plain) and tastes of their rich Episcopalian descendants (the
Fancy).”66 A family business opened in 1968 in Richland, Pennsylvania that still manufactures
furniture calls itself “Plain and fancy cabinetry.”67 David Sox’s 2000 book *Quakers and the Arts,
‘Plain and Fancy:’ An Anglo-American Perspective* brought together writers, artists, musicians
and other intellectuals all members of the Society of Friends.68 “Plain or Fancy: Restraint and
Exuberance in the Decorative Arts,” a show organized in 2013 at the Metropolitan Museum in
New York City went beyond the assumption that Modernism singlehandedly banned ornament,

68 Kristin U Fedder, “Quakers and the Arts, ‘Plain and Fancy:’ An Anglo-American Perspective by David Sox,”
*Quaker History* Vol. 91 No. 1 (Spring, 2002): 70.
and showcased works of sculpture and decorative arts that followed the eponymous theme from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.\(^\text{69}\)

But what exactly is the view on \emph{plainness} and \emph{simplicity} in Quaker doctrine?

Conventional wisdom describes the Quaker way of life as \emph{plain} or \emph{simple}. The approach to \emph{plainness} and \emph{simplicity}, however, has not been consistent through the ages but rather has changed over time depending upon historic and social conditions, as well as subsequent readings of these circumstances.\(^\text{70}\) Over the past one hundred and fifty years in particular, different aspects of the Quaker lifestyle have been trying to reconcile the aspiration toward \emph{plainness} or \emph{simplicity} with the changing forms of the exterior world. Defined as “the absence of superfluity,” \emph{simplicity} was originally an outward expression manifested in dress, speech, and absence of distractions such as art and music, but eventually became a spiritual quality rather than a material attribute.\(^\text{71}\)

In time, Friends began to accept certain forms of art as adequate expressions of their love of God.\(^\text{72}\)

From its very beginning, the Quaker way of life denounced indulgence in any form of excess or luxury, and promoted a sober style. The testimony of simplicity began as a form of resistance to other religious traditions that preferred the pleasures of the senses to spiritual joys.\(^\text{73}\)

A shift from \emph{sober} to \emph{plain} occurred in the last decades of the seventeenth century when meetings began to reference \emph{plainness}.\(^\text{74}\) The \emph{plain style} did not belong exclusively to the Quakers – it was a mark of general Protestant aesthetics, and a form of protest against Baroque (associated with Counter-reformation) and, later, Rococo.\(^\text{75}\)

For the next two hundred years, the goal of the \emph{plain style} in speech, dress, architecture, and furniture was to distinguish the Quakers from the non-Quakers, and keep the Friends separated from the world. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century that the attitude toward

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\(^{73}\) Tolles, \textit{Quakers and the Atlantic Culture}, 73.

\(^{74}\) Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity: Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture,” 23.

\(^{75}\) Tolles, \textit{Quakers and the Atlantic Culture}, 77-78.
plainness has started to change. Quaker historian and theologian Rufus Jones has proposed that plainness was, in fact, devaluing nature, and that Friends had to move beyond the paradigm of the plain style in order to be able to value the presence of God in fine arts and music. He replaced plainness with simplicity and suggested that the latter was a “quality of the soul,” “a joyous companionship to God.”

First adopted in 1955, Faith and Practice is one of the many publications issued by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Quakers and includes “advices on procedures within the faith, membership, current practice for conducting meeting business and numerous quotations from Friends on belief, worship, concerns, leadings, and testimonies.” By 1961, the book defined simplicity as an attitude that did not require standardization or uniformity and emphasized, instead, simplicity as a moral and ethical stance. It preserved some earlier accounts related to the removal of “encumbering details” and unnecessary luxuries, but the issues at stake were truth, modesty, and sincerity. The book described simplicity as the outward manifestation of an inner commitment to Truth and to the system of values shared by the Society of Friends.

Simplicity is closely akin to sincerity – a genuineness of life and speech in which there is no place for sham or artificiality. The care given by early Friends to avoid flattering titles and phrases and to aim for rectitude of speech undoubtedly has done much to turn attention to honesty in the spoken and the written word. Care is needed to avoid and discourage the insincerity and extravagance that are prevalent in the social world. We need also to speak the simple truth, in love, when occasion requires it.

Since 1997, in Faith & Practice simplicity has been associated with stewardship; the latter is the “coming together” of Friends’ major testimonies and expresses one of the main virtues of the Quaker way of being in the world and within the family. Simplicity is defined as “one of the traditional Quaker testimonies that is closely associated with integrity, equality, and stewardship. Essentially, to limit the material circumstances of one’s life in a way that enables

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one to follow divine leadings.” Concepts such as “right sharing” or “walking gently on the Earth,” further reinforce the emphasis on the ethical dimension of simplicity.

Most of Quaker writings have focused on the study of the good and the truthful somewhat to the detriment of the beautiful. However, the ascetic Quaker aesthetics has appealed to modern tastes and the modern mantra Less is more. Quaker aesthetics, it has been argued, “reflected an ideal of functional simplicity peculiarly congenial to modern sensibilities.”

Plainness and simplicity, however, operate within the paradox specific to Quaker thought, which is rooted in contradictory values: equality and difference, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, emphasis on excellence and focus on humbleness, appreciation for high-quality craftsmanship and rejection of luxury and ostentatation. In this context, seventeenth century meeting houses, for instance, without stained glass windows, statues, religious garments or ordained ministers, appeared not plain and simple, but rather eccentric in comparison with current standards. Designed to be not so much plain, but different from the Anglican ecclesiastical architecture, the Quaker meeting house reinforced an important paradox: Quaker aesthetics “can only work through a process of outward show that places an emphasis on distinctiveness.”

Friends meeting houses from the eighteenth century in the Delaware Valley, for example, were based on the same tenet of simplicity and followed similar principles: on the one hand, they rejected ecclesiastic models and ornamentation, but on the other hand, they borrowed from vernacular domestic architecture in terms of construction techniques, use of indigenous materials, and human scale. Historic evidence shows that simplicity, however, does

82 Tolles, Quakers and the Atlantic Culture, 76.
84 Lapsansky, “Past Plainness to Present Simplicity: A Search for Quaker Identity,” 2.
85 Herman, “Introduction” to “Quakers as Producers,” 150.
not appear as a pre-established design goal for the architecture of meeting houses until the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{87}

Simplicity acts not only as a form of distinctiveness, but also as one of recognition that enables members of the same community to identify each other through their exterior appearance, their built structures, and their artifacts. A more nuanced attitude toward simplicity and material artifacts operates the distinction between foreground and background: situating objects in the foreground of someone’s life indicates a vain desire to possess the objects for themselves, whereas placing them in the background shows how they can construct the context for a rich spiritual life.\textsuperscript{88}

Recent scholarship proposes that Quaker beliefs about plainness and material world are rather fluid and encompass a variety of expressions.\textsuperscript{89} For instance, the assumption that Quaker domestic architecture is by default a plain one, is a rather modern idea, which is often contradicted by historic evidence.\textsuperscript{90} Quaker ideas about decoration might have been different from mainstream ones, but this does not mean they were entirely missing. The exterior of eighteenth century Quaker houses was treated in decorative brickwork onto which the owners would inscribe the initials of their names, as well as construction dates. These strategies communicate both a desire to display the sense of belonging to a community, and an aspiration to convey social status and certain living standards.\textsuperscript{91} The tension between private and public, between the Inner Light and its outward manifestations influences Quakers’ approach to material artifacts. Within this particular mindset, buildings are ephemeral, but they also communicate a certain sense of historical lineage.

From this perspective, it is relevant to examine Venturi’s practice of writing names and dates on the walls of his buildings. From his early projects such as the Frug House, Grand’s

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\textsuperscript{91} Bernard L. Herman, “Eighteenth-Century Quaker Houses in the Delaware Valley and the Aesthetics of Practice,” 199-208.
\end{flushright}
Restaurant, the Guild House or the National Football Hall of Fame, to the later works of the Venturi and Scott Brown team labeled as the *decorated shed*, the display of inscriptions has been largely situated within the artistic trends of visualizing words specific to the 1960s and 1970s. However, Venturi’s early upbringing and exposure to Quaker doctrine and aesthetics suggest that this iconology signals a genealogy different from mid-century visual arts. The theory of architecture as shelter with applied signs that Venturi and Scott Brown will elaborate in the 1970s may be understood not only as the outcome of their interest in the commercial vernacular, but also as a perhaps indirect (and never acknowledged) nod to Quaker culture. Inscriptions communicate explicit and unambiguous messages, but they also appeal to basic human needs: belonging to a community and being able to recognize the signs of its material culture gives individuals a sense of continuity and stability that modernity has radically altered. Venturi’s critique of modern architecture is indirectly a critique of modern alienation and displacement. His own biography shows a deep concern with finding personal and professional origins: while traveling the world, he never left his native Philadelphia and has always attempted to intertwine various cultural threads, from personal and architectural genealogies rooted in Italian culture, to American vernacular and Pop Culture.

Venturi’s approach to an architecture that is flat, and at the same time complex, a part of its context, yet apart from it, simple in nature, but convoluted in form, builds upon the notion of paradox central to the Quaker system of thought. Manifested in the spirituality of the Friends, as well as in their material culture, the paradox of being ‘in the world, but not of it’ finds its expression in Venturi’s architecture, which also aims to accomplish two of the important tenets of Quakerism: recognizing the signs, and telling the Truth. If according to Quaker doctrine, the former is a mystical event experienced not as a sudden exposure, but rather as a “gradual and progressive awareness,”92 in Venturi’s architecture the act of recognizing the signs is often a literal process of identifying the function and genealogy of a certain building. A form of simplicity, genuineness and sincerity, telling the Truth is a moral and spiritual belief that Venturi aims to translate into an architectural principle: once the truth – spiritual or architectural – is

92 Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture*, 112.
exposed, it does not require any further explanations or justifications and accomplishes its mission through its inner power.

2.2. Boredom and midcentury billboards

After having looked at plainness and simplicity in Quaker aesthetics, this section examines the flatness of billboards and boredom in midcentury architecture. Flatness refers both to the flatness of surfaces and to the flatness of meaning.

Having both spatial and temporal dimensions, billboards are inherently paradoxical objects. Generally assumed to have two dimensions, technically speaking billboards are not flat: a three-dimensional structure supports the advertising surfaces and, as we will see later in this chapter, different advertising strategies have often explored this third dimension. However, when billboards are perceived in a split second in urban contexts or on the highway, from the speeding car, the advertising surface itself appears, indeed, flat, transient and ephemeral. While their goal is to arrest viewers’ attention, billboards also act as entertainment devices that create disruption, distraction, and amusement. Billboards exist in an a-temporal world: neither here, nor there, they collapse past, present, and future in an instantaneous perception.

The first consequence of appropriating the aesthetics of billboards in architecture is what Venturi and Scott Brown coined as the decorated shed. In opposition to the duck (which designates an architectural object that directly expresses its function), the decorated shed is a plain box acting as a support for signs or billboards that spell out its function and purpose.

Another consequence, however, is that the use of billboard as a conceptual tool indicates a shift toward designing an architecture of entertainment and endless change, which is perceived mostly frontally, as a flat surface, rather than a spatial experience. The broad range of connotative and denotative meanings of the word flat points to shallow planes and surfaces that lack depth, but also to “prosaic, dull, uninteresting, lifeless, monotonous, insipid” situations,

objects, and persons. The implications of appropriating the flatness of billboards in architecture are twofold: on the one hand, it offers the promise of easy changes and distraction, and, on the other hand, puts forward a mode of perception that privileges elevations and frontal perception. Both consequences are eventually conducive to formal and experiential boredom. Exposed to superficial surfaces, both in a literal and figurative sense, people turn from inhabitants of architecture into passive spectators.

**Brief excursus in the history and typology of billboards.** According to an old story, the first known billboard was a message on a papyrus from 146 BC, which advertised a reward for a runaway slave in the ancient city of Thebes. One of the earliest textbooks on outdoor advertising even argued that the Rosetta stone, which was originally placed on the wall of a temple, presented an early form of outdoor advertising: the notice in several languages was supposedly intended to communicate the same message to several types of readers.

Different forms of sharing public notices with a larger audience have existed long before advertisement and product placing have been formalized through the billboard industry. Before the late 1700s in Europe, individuals designated as *billposters* had the role of making public various announcements and pieces of information. The early beginnings of billboards are associated with the entertainment field: theaters and circuses used posters to promote their shows and many billposting companies grew out of theater and opera houses. The term *billboard pass*, for instance, referred to “a free theatre ticket issued to tradespeople who allowed advertismsents to be displayed on their premises.” At the beginning of the 19th century, the walls of public buildings in North American cities, as well as telegraph poles, rocks, trees, railway tracks pillars, fences, and sometimes even carcasses of dead animals, provided unregulated spaces for advertising. Plastered with bills, posters, banners and streamers, these spaces constituted the first

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94 Oxford English Dictionary.
98 Oxford English Dictionary.
informal modes of publicity way before the advent and proliferation of the automobile culture offered the vast spaces of highways for spreading promotional messages.99

As billposting became an industry, a major step forward was the idea of leasing designated spaces and constructing special structures for advertising.100 The first recorded structure leased with this purpose was the board fence surrounding the construction site of the New York City Post Office in 1869, hence the alleged origin of the term billboard.101 In their early stages, billboards were primarily text-based; in time, the prevalence of text in nineteenth century billboards gave way to the image-based billboards of the twentieth century.102 The invention of lithography in 1796 made it easier and more affordable to print and multiply text and image and thus contributed to turning poster making into an art form.103

Billboard is a generic term that commonly refers to outdoor advertising elements. One of the earliest advertising manuals, Hugh E. Agnew’s Outdoor Advertising from 1938, classified billboards into posters, painted bulletins and electric spectaculars.104 Posters were applied on a standard steel structure (called poster panel) and had standardized dimensions: 24-sheet and 3-sheet. Bulletins – or what we generally call billboards – had a standard structural design and were placed in urban locations on roofs and walls, as well as on highways and railways, outside cities and in suburban setting. Electric spectaculars took full advantage of the availability of electricity, and occupied places in urban settings, on rooftops or walls, on specially constructed steel towers, at points of intense traffic; their size was determined by view-points, visibility and space availability.105 Agnew made the distinction between outdoor billboards and commercial signs, where the latter generally identify a business, its products or its services at the point of

99 Gudis, Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape, 9-34.
100 Gudis, Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape, 18.
101 Ibid., 18-19; Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 29.
102 Gudis, Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape, 66.
103 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 26-27. A German invention, lithography was invented in 1796 or 1798 by Aloys Senefelder and consisted of a process of printing from a smooth, flat-topped stone which permitted the reproduction of images at an affordable cost for advertisers. (Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 26-27)
104 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 4.
105 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 8. Etymologically, bulletin derives from the French boulette, diminutive of boule (ball) and contains the notion of short, concise notes; a bullet has the same condensed and concentrated effect. The electric spectacular derives from spectacle – a display to be looked at (Latin spectare, to look), “a person or thing exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity or contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration.” (Oxford English Dictionary)
manufacture, distribution or sale. He explained that the main difference between the two is that “signs are manufactured and sold outright for installation and maintenance by a sign contractor on premises not owned, leased or controlled by the contractor or his agent.”

Although perceived as flat, billboards are, in fact, three-dimensional and typically consist of steel structures that carry the weight of the advertising panels (Figure 2.19.). A basic metal structure, billboards borrow from architectural construction techniques, particularly those utilized in high-rise buildings. Simple, logical and efficient, the structure of the billboard serves its purpose. As a physical object, it can sometimes change location, be moved and repositioned. It bears different temporary advertising panels that are changed based on needs and contractual obligations. Discarded once no longer needed, advertising panels are replaced with new ones and the billboard offers a clean slate for another company to promote its products.

Outdoor billboards consist of a three-dimensional support structure and the actual advertisement that comes in various forms and media. Currently, the billboard structure typically comprises a steel monopole, a board and a PVC canvas applied onto it. Offering only one side to the motorists on the highway, billboards have a front and a back, but sometimes explore a depth and a thickness that is not immediately apparent in the way we perceive them. The desire to transgress these two-dimensional limitations has found different expressions throughout the years: three-dimensional elements, figures popping out from the flat screen creating the illusion of motion and movement, or even the viewer’s (limited) control over the image (Figure 2.20.).

This “third dimension” often offers opportunities for larger, if inadvertent, critiques of consumerist culture. An episode from the popular midcentury TV sitcom Leave it to Beaver aired on May 6, 1961 follows the main character, the seven-year old Beaver, as he is trying to look inside a three-dimensional billboard mug (Figure 2.21.). Intrigued by the savory (though fragrant-less) steam rising from the oversized cup, he is determined to find the magical, never-ending soup inside. Therefore, he eventually climbs inside only to find himself trapped in a

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106 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 11.
107 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 9.
108 Passers-by can control the level of tanning of a woman wearing bikini in a bus-shelter billboard. The advertising company DDBrasil came up with an adjustable tanning display for Johnson and Johnson’s Sundown line of tanning products. Accessed February 6, 2018, http://creativity-online.com/work/sundown-interactive-tanning-display/6576
network of electric circuits. There is no magic soup and the cup, like the advertising message itself, is hollow (Figure 2.22.). Beaver’s disappointment is the so-familiar disenchantment shared by all the gullible victims of deceiving publicity. In an outdoor commercial for Instant Sanka Coffee featured a gigantic cup and the tiny silhouette of a woman bent over the rim while reaching inside with a ladle that almost touched the enticing surface of (the unseen) brown “liquid.”

One of Venturi’s early projects, the 1962 restoration of the Grand’s restaurant in Philadelphia, featured a gigantic cup hanging off the façade of the building (Figure 2.6.). Splitting in half the commercial sign announcing the name of the place, the cup drew attention to the wall dividing the two townhouses that, in the remodeling process, were turned into a single building. Featuring flashy blue and yellow neon lights, the cup was a clever nod to current attempts of exploring the third dimension of billboards and also one of Venturi’s first uses of the advertising language in architecture.

If in the 1960s a naïve Beaver had been enticed by the sight of the steaming soup without any other sensorial experiences, more recent advertising strategies have attempted to question the boundary between reality and fantasy through engaging other senses in the perception of the advertising message. Part of a state campaign to promote milk, chocolate-chip-cookies scented strips were placed in bus shelters in San Francisco in 2006. In 2010, a scented billboard was installed in Mooriseville, NC as an advertisement for the Bloom grocery chain. From the end of May until June 18, every day from 7am to 10am, and 4pm to 7pm, a billboard featuring a fork piercing a piece of beef meat emitted the smell of pepper and charcoal that was sensed as far as 15 feet away (Figure 2.23.). The mechanics of this performance worked through a high-powered fan located at the base of the billboard pole that was blowing air over cartridges filled with fragrance oil. Alluding to the impossibility of representing smell, and also playing with the convention of pictorial space, the billboard read: “Flavor is actual size.” It could have been also a nod to Ed Ruscha’s 1962 “Actual Size,” an oil-on-canvas painting depicting a can of Spam flying through space – an allusion to a period joke calling astronauts “Spam in a can” (Figure

As technological advancements will allow further developments, the nature of advertising and billboards will change. Since Harvard scientists have accomplished the first long-distance transmission of smell, from Paris to New York, via i-phone on June 18, 2014, it is only a matter of time before the senses of smell, touch, and perhaps even taste, will be engaged as more convincing tools in spreading the advertising message.

Imagining the third dimension of billboards, their thickness and depth has played an important role in their design as stage sets where life scenes are re-enacted, sometimes quite literally. Different cut-outs breaking through the billboard frames create the illusion of occupying the space. (Figure 2.25.). Protected by glass screens, interiors of kitchens, bedrooms, or living rooms display furniture sets, various sorts of domestic equipment and consumer goods. Billboards thus break the conventions of scale, as well as the dichotomy interior – exterior with the ultimate goal of blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and imagination.

As the beginnings of billboard industry originated in the leisure industry, they have shared and continue to share similar strategies of display and entertainment: constructing a plot, building up viewer’s expectations, and dramatically revealing the final coup. As early as 1925 the heir of the Burma Vita company advertised their new brushless shaving cream by placing 6 10”X36” red-painted wooden signs spaced every 100 feet on Minnesota’s Highways 61 and 65, with rhymes like “Does your husband – misbehave – grunt and grumble – rant and rave – shoot the brute some – Burma-Shave.” Three-dimensional billboards provided stages for live performances, dramatic lightning constructed flamboyant decors, and streamlined design created an image of modernity and progress. Design and construction constraints have suggested new modes of communicating the advertising message. In the 1950s, the popular practice of breaking outside the surface of the billboard entered in conflict with the streamlined moldings running around the rim. Therefore, an entire cut-out of the product advertised was pegged off the surface

111 Gudis, Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape, 134-146. For the 1932 season, “live models turn the pages of the giant book advertising Paramount Studio’s new releases,” at a “world premiere for the billboard.” (Gudis, Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape, 140-141)
113 Ibid., 137-146.
114 Ibid., 77.
115 Ibid., 140-150.
of the billboard in order not to interfere with the molding.\footnote{Henderson and Landau, \textit{Billboard Art}, 56.} The overhanging pieces cast shadows onto the billboard playing with the ambiguity between flat surfaces and three-dimensional elements.

The advertising industry has offered new venues to visual artists who, in turn, have transformed the language and modes of expression of billboards. The middle decades of the twentieth century have provided fertile grounds for experimentation in art and as well as advertising and the intersection between the two fields were common. The Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s has generated a more abstract imagery in billboards.\footnote{Ibid., 61.} The show “The Responsive Eye,” on view at MoMA from February through April of 1965, was examining perceptual responses of the viewer exposed to illusions and optical devices.\footnote{MoMA press release, 13.} Ninety-nine artists from fifteen countries (including Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Irwin, Frank Stella and Victor Vasarely among others) put on display tricks for the eye and the mind that quickly found their way into the advertising industry.\footnote{Henderson and Landau, \textit{Billboard Art}, 60-61.} Known as “Optical,” “Retinal,” “Cool,” or “Programmatic,” this art form unsettled the viewer and their conventional perception of the environment through a deliberate play with optical illusions. Furthermore, the unreliability of sensorial experience that questioned the boundaries of reality became an adequate strategy for billboard design and reinforced their transient, impermanent and elusive nature.

Ed Ruscha, among other artists, has started working in advertising before launching his career as a photographer and a painter. A significant part of his work has constantly examined, criticized, and found inspiration in various forms of advertising. Moreover, Ruscha’s photography book \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip} was one of the explicit precedents that Venturi and Scott Brown referenced in \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}. Ruscha drove back and forth the two miles of the Sunset Strip Boulevard in Los Angeles in a slow-moving pickup truck and used a motorized camera to take pictures of all the buildings on the two sides of the road (\textbf{Figure 2.26.}). The camera would capture one or two buildings to a frame\footnote{Alexandra Schwartz, \textit{Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles} (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2010), 147.} and the result was a sequence of images that documented every building on both sides of the boulevard. The
photographs were assembled into a twenty-five-feet-long strip and the resulting image was folded like an accordion. Through the format of the book, the subject experiences empathetically the length of the actual boulevard. Distance and extension are perceived through elevations. Scholars have noted that while the top and bottom collages represent, respectively, the two sides of the street, the white space between them, in the middle of the page, stands for the road itself. “Physical movement and a shifting series of images are an essential part of the book, just as they are to the experience of the city of Los Angeles itself.” Ruscha’s deadpan recordings of the Sunset Strip have provided the precedents for Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s elevations of the Las Vegas Strip in the studio they taught at Yale in 1968. Moreover, Scott Brown’s article from 1969, _On Pop Art, Permissiveness and Planning_, was illustrated entirely with Ruscha’s images from several of his photography books.

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, buildings have provided the physical support for billboards. With the proliferation and availability of electricity, support structures for electric spectacles, commercial signs, and other forms of advertising have populated not only the suburban landscape, but have also been incorporated on the rooftops and walls of urban buildings. A symbol of consumerism, billboards began to affect directly people’s everyday lives, a phenomenon described in the films and literature of the time. One of the short stories in Italo Calvino’s _Marcovaldo_, a collection published in 1963 and translated into English in 1983 as _Marcovaldo or the Seasons in the City_, describes the simultaneous lure of and disenchantment with the advertising industry. Living in the attic of an apartment building, Marcovaldo and his family are awaken every night by the flashy lights of a billboard placed on a building opposite theirs. The representative of a competing company encourages them to break the bulbs of the billboard that is ruining their nights. Predictably, once the first company goes bankrupt, the other

121 Schwartz, _Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles_, 147.
122 Ibid., 147.
123 Ruscha’s work influenced Denise Scott Brown’s ideas about representing contemporary city and her attitude toward city planning.
125 Gudis, _Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape_, 130.
one takes over the advertising space, continuing to employ the same brutal strategies that haunt the nights of Marcovaldo’s family. Calvino joins the voices of those who since mid-century have criticized the deceptive nature of the advertising industry and its manipulation of people’s naïveté and credulity.

Billboards are contested presences in the city. On the one hand, architects and pop artists, such as Robert Venturi and David Hockney, have championed the liveliness and excitement that billboards bring to the urban environment. On the other hand, cultural critics such as Sigfried Kracauer, Lewis Mumford, Jospeh Rykwert, Kenneth Frampton or Karsten Harries, have strongly opposed the rise of billboards as an unmistaken sign of capitalist consumerism. From this latter perspective, design approaches that reinforce advertising strategies raise ethical questions about the nature of architecture and architectural practices.

Artist David Hockney saw billboards as a natural growth of urban life, and their absence as a sign of arrested development. Billboards helps alleviate the collective boredom of generic public spaces:

In Peter Blake’s Form Follows Fiasco, there are before-and-after photos of wonderful streets full of signs and life and everything. That’s “before” – “after” has been sanitized. The streets look totally dull and lifeless. … Without them [billboards] the subway [in London] would be a bit dull. They provide a lot of color.127

The 1950s were a time of experimentation in the billboard industry. It was the “Golden Age of Paint,” when hand-painted billboards brought “bigger, sleeker, glossier” imagery than printed posters.128 For a while, billboards recovered the lost art of painting, thus claiming the validity and legitimacy of an art form: “To make something not photographic means to draw it. People get bored with photography. Everybody is more interested in a drawing … . If you cannot draw, all pictures of the visible world are going to finish up being photographic or primitive.”129

128 Henderson and Landau, Billboard Art, 48.
Around the same time, billboards became literally mobile and subject to both physical change and change of message. With the use of “boom trucks” – trucks equipped with a 14-foot or a 20-foot crane – sections of billboards could be piled up and then “boomed up” to the upper levels of buildings. The result was “sign rotation:” billboards could travel throughout the city to different locations, and the advertising message would change as billboards were repainted. To this day, depending on the medium of advertising, the sheets can be reused and repainted. A white coat applied between two jobs provides the white canvas necessary for the new ad. Unlike a palimpsest that carries the depth of layers upon layers of words and images made present simultaneously on the same support, the billboard acts as a flat surface without a past. This double mobility – of the physical object and of the renewable message – makes billboards vehicles for change and transformation.

**Moral and ethical concerns.** Fostering the tension between *distraction* and *attention*, billboards carry within themselves an inherent paradox: on the one hand, their goal is to *distract* people from their routines, but on the other hand, they aim to arrest people’s *attention* through brief and compelling messages. Billboards have to provide a clean and neutral background that supports a quick and efficient rotation of messages expressed in different media, from hand painted images to digital displays.

“Distraction,” “kaleidoscopic creativity,” “visual excitement” – critics of urban advertising have proposed various names to describe the new condition, which was nothing less than an illness, engendered by the proliferation of billboards in urban environments. While the inflation of visual stimuli promises to offer a quick and immediate solution to collective and individual boredom, the flatness and obsolescence of these images fails, in fact, to provide a meaningful alternative to the tedium of everyday life.

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131 “… an advertiser could now move his message all over town in a matter of months by using the same billboards and simply switching them around. The boom truck could easily rack and unrack boards, moving them every thirty or sixty days to new locations that represented different markets, or different cross sections of people, with four months usually the maximum duration in each place. Each client would then get a repaint of the original billboard as part of the standard contract, since wind, rain and sun took their toll, with up to three repaints a year. While the billboard was undergoing its repaint, the message could be updated or changed.” (Henderson and Landau, *Billboard Art*, 54).
Writing for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the 1920s and 1930s, Sigfried Kracauer saw the increasing exposure of the modern individual to the new forms of entertainment – advertisement, movie theaters, and radio – as a major threat against one’s own privacy and against what he called “personal boredom.”\(^{132}\) Confronted with the repetition of tedious working hours that alternate with purposeless leisure hours, the modern man tries to fly away from everyday boredom by turning his attention toward more and more stimuli. In this process, he finds himself caught up in an endless loop where the inflation of information does not provide the desired escape, but instead turns out to be meaningless and irrelevant:

> [i]nstead of fostering cultivated conversations (which certainly can be a bore), one becomes a playground for worldwide noises that, regardless of their own potentially objective boredom, do not even grant one’s modest right to personal boredom.\(^{133}\)

Kracauer saw in movie theaters the physical manifestations of masses’ “addiction to distraction.” The meaning of “distraction” is twofold: it encompasses various forms of entertainment and, at the same time, their effect, that of driving people away from what is essential and important. Movie theaters satisfy people’s need for entertainment, on the rise with the rapid industrialization, mass production, and the radical separation between work and leisure.\(^{134}\) A lack of personal and professional fulfillment draws one toward entertainment, but the resulting experiences are even less satisfying because work and leisure act as two sides of the same problem: “The form of free-time busy-ness necessarily corresponds to the form of business.”\(^{135}\) Superficial entertainment is flat and highjacks any attempt to delve into the depth of real problems:

> The interior design of the movie theaters serves only one purpose: to rivet the viewers’ attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into abyss. The stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation.\(^{136}\)

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\(^{133}\) Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 333.

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 325.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 325.

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 326.
This form of distraction keeps the audience busy looking forward, toward an imagined future, thus avoiding and escaping the present with its fears, worries and anxieties.

In an article published in 1962, Lewis Mumford identified two trends that responded to the “excessive regimentation” of modern architecture: the creativity of the kaleidoscope and the geodesic dome looming large in the 1950s and 1960s threatened to erode ideas about architectural integrity. Mumford recognized the shortcomings of modernism and the failure of its faith in technological progress, and suggested that the fall of the machine has brought the advent of the package or, in other words, that consumerism has replaced the reliance on industrialization. He directed his critique against the architectural equivalents of contemporary advertising, the package-like buildings, devoid of content, insensitive to their physical environment and to the desires and aspirations of people: “The result is the characterless package, which has become the main hallmark of fashionable architecture for the last decade” or the “dazzling Christmas packages that have no relation to contents.” Like an ad-man, the architect invites people to “a new taste sensation” while offering the promise to be “years ahead with the latest model.” Mumford argued that the “excessive virtuosity” of contemporary architecture resulted from the “creativity of the kaleidoscope,” a false form of creativity derived from the “juggling of mechanical forms.” He pointed to Jorn Utzøm’s Sydney Opera House and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum as such examples of an architecture interested in the extravagant, in whimsical forms, spawned from the availability of performant technologies and building methods.

Boredom was for Mumford the specific disposition that produced the fascination with this type of aesthetics: “When a child is bored or an adult is ill, the esthetics of the kaleidoscope is enchanting ….” Architecture emerged implicitly as a discipline in crisis: boredom was a disease and the architect, like his fellow doctor overwhelmed by the enormous quantity of drugs available, felt compelled to resort uncritically to all the new materials, methods, and techniques

139 Ibid., 156.
140 Ibid., 160.
141 Ibid., 160.
available at hand to prove his creativity. This approach resulted in shallow forms and the longing for continuous change:

The desire for architectural originality through a succession of kaleidoscopic changes, made possible by modern technological agents, when the inner purpose and contents are ruled out of the equation, inevitably degrades the creative process.¹⁴²

Similarly, Joseph Rykwert saw the obsession with manipulating forms that emerged in the 1960s as a consequence of the “sheer tedium” induced by the flat surfaces and the mere size of the International Style buildings.¹⁴³ The variations in shapes and outlines, however, in conjunction with the “flashing, constantly changing billboards” only provide “visual excitement” without addressing the core problem of boredom.¹⁴⁴ The architecture of capitalist cities determined by profitability and economic interests was no different, Rykwert argued, from that of communist centers dictated by the strict rules of party propaganda. Billboards and neon signs were the only elements that differentiated the two types of cities:

One of the complaints about the ‘boredom’ of East European centers under Communist regimes arose from the absence of just such variegated and conflicting appeals from city walls – the buildings were, of course, no more exhilarating than those of the capitalists. Dirigist authorities had learnt how to emulate advertising, but substituted politically exhortative billboards in its place. Their message was uniformly bland and conformist, even if their formal effect on the urban scene was not all that different from that in the ‘free world’ . . . ¹⁴⁵

Although Kracauer, Mumford, and Rykwert all problematized the use of billboards as precedents for architectural design, they approached the issue from different angles. Kracauer examined the notion of distraction that he identified as a feature of the film itself and of the surface of the movie theater. The architectural surface, the movie screen, and the moving images all contribute to distracting the modern individuals from their true problems. Mumford

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¹⁴² Ibid., 160.
¹⁴⁴ Rykwert, The Judicious Eye: Architecture against the Other Arts, 8.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

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condemned design approaches inspired by advertising strategies that resulted in meaningless displays of extravagant shapes and outlines, of packages devoid of content. Rykwert criticized the values of the consumerist city covered in billboards and flashy electric signs that obliterate architecture and public spaces.

Implicit in all these accounts is the warning that attempting to heal boredom through distraction and entertainment, a tendency best illustrated in the proliferation of billboards, will result in a relapse into tedium and anxiety. Each critic proposed a different alternative to these problems posed by the intersection of billboards and architecture. Kracauer suggested a non-architectural solution: one should isolate herself, if temporary, from the hustle-and-bustle of the city, in order to exercise their patience in slow motion and have access to contemplation through boredom.146 Boredom, for Kracauer, proves that one is “still in control of one’s own existence.”147 Mumford identified the creativity of the kaleidoscope and the geodesic domes as the main pressures threatening the integrity of midcentury architecture and singled out two alternative directions already present in the discipline. One positive change, in Mumford’s view, was that, no longer willing to accept the modernist tabula rasa, architecture students started demanding architectural history classes in the university curriculum. The other hopeful change, which speaks of Mumford’s own biases, was the growing interest in environmental design at the University of California, Berkeley where the School of Architecture became the School of Environmental Design. 148 Writing in 2008, Rykwert advocated a more rigorous control of outdoor advertising in urban areas pointing out to two historical examples: the Defense d’afficher French law from July 29, 1881 that banned wall advertising on particular buildings and areas of Paris, and, more recently, the restrictive use of electronic advertising in Sao Paolo, Brazil, in effect from January 1, 2007.

As the neo-liberal economy became more prevalent in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the advertising industry turned into one of the main players on the urban scene. Not only were buildings wrapped in billboards, but they became billboards. Borrowing from the language of the

147 Ibid., 334.
advertising industry, Venturi’s reliance on the flatness of commercial signs revealed, though never explicitly, a desire to flatten not only surfaces, but also meanings. Displaying colorful and lively images, billboards offer a quick fix to the problem of collective ennui in dull urban spaces. At the same time, critics have noted, they expose the mechanisms of power and control of merciless consumerism and disregard the fabric and the context of the city.

Venturi appropriates the inherent paradox of billboards that are both shallow and deep, immediate and distant, fast and slow. The next section looks at three of his projects where these tensions offer a rich material of investigation.

2.3 More is not less.

This last section will focus on three projects that show different instances in Venturi’s approach to flatness, which I explore in two way, as architectural flatness and as flatness of meaning. Specifically, I am interested in ideas about frontal perception and the paradox of attempting to flatten meaning in a world described as increasingly complex. This paradox rests at the core of Venturi’s theoretical and practical positions, but is never fully recognized or embraced. His position borrows from the strategies employed in contemporary forms of advertising (primarily billboards), but also finds its roots in Venturi’s ties with the Quakers.

Venturi’s linear descriptions of his own projects go to great lengths to clarify and expose the reasoning embedded in the design process. The descriptions are exhaustive, but it is precisely this exhaustion that makes them thin. The claim of absolute clarity and transparency fails to account for the hidden system of meanings inherent to architectural practice and inhabitation. If boredom is the demon of noontide, then this tedium engenders a world of smooth surfaces without shadows, where meanings are also flatten through over-precise explanations. If less is, indeed, a bore, then how do flat surfaces and flat meanings restore the complexity of the world?

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149 I am paraphrasing Clifford Geertz’s use of the term “thick description,” which he defined as a mode of situating people and their actions within a specific cultural context (Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in The Interpretation of Cultures by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30).

On the other hand, overstimulation and the reliance on the interesting, which are implicit in Venturi’s propositions, bring one back into the endless loop of boredom.

In my speculative readings of three projects (Venturi’s thesis project for the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, 1953 (Figure 2.27.); the National Football Hall of Fame, 1967 (Figure 2.28.); and the Guild House, 1963-1966 (Figure 2.29.)), issues of frontal perception are intertwined with ideas about boredom in a world of flat surfaces and plain meanings. Although the main concern in the project for the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy is its relationship with the context, I am particularly interested in the organization of the interior spaces where the Quaker influence is present in subtle, yet meaningful ways. The competition entry for the National Football Hall of Fame reinforces the tension between flat surfaces and architectural depth and illustrates directly design strategies borrowed from the billboard industry. Lastly, a project extensively scrutinized in architectural scholarship, the Guild House invites to an alternative interpretation that brings together boredom, mythology, and contemporary art.

**Quaker influences: The Chapel for the Episcopal Academy (1953) (Figure 2.27.).**

Venturi’s interest in religious architecture dates back to his undergraduate studies at Princeton. In a school project for a Roman Catholic church he had brought together the conventional features of traditional Catholic worship spaces: open narthex, basilical plan, longitudinal axis, a tower (Figure 2.30.). At the same time, he experimented with asymmetries and the positioning of the tower above the altar rather than at the entrance or adjacent to it (Figure 2.30.). In what appears to be a quick 6- or 9-hour long sketch problem\(^{151}\) he enclosed the altar with a timber structure that filtered down the light – the only light source of the church, as shown in the interior rendering.\(^{152}\)

Venturi’s thesis begins with a prologue that states the main intent of the project: “to demonstrate the importance of and the effect of setting on a building.” His main inquiries and explorations seem to revolve around the issue of context. Venturi writes:

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\(^{151}\) Following the Beaux Arts model, in architectural education the 6- or 9-hour long sketch problem was a common design exercise in the curriculum. Students received the assignment usually in the morning and had to submit the project by the end of the day.

\(^{152}\) The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Venturi’s design projects during his studies at Princeton.
“A building is not a self-contained object but a part in a whole composition relative to other parts and to the whole.”

“Change in context causes change in expression. Change of a part (addition or alteration) causes a change in the other parts and in the whole.”

“These relationships are constantly relative to the observer’s visual reactions, limit of attention and situation.”

“The architect accepts and creates context.”

The case studies presented at the beginning of the thesis, as well as the design proposal that follows, illustrate the relationships between a building and its context, where the latter is understood mainly as physical and built presence, rather than as a larger and more complex cultural, social, and historical reality. Although Venturi explicitly draws on the principles of Gestalt psychology, and his formalist approach is highly indebted to the Gestalt figure-ground studies, Quaker values, although never overtly stated, have been critical in shaping his approach.

Conceptually, the thesis has three parts, which, almost in a scientific manner, construct the demonstration through (1) hypothesis, (2) testing, and (3) conclusions: (1) the theoretical premise stating the focus on context, (2) a series of case studies that bring supporting evidence, and (3) the concrete application of these ideas shown in the design of the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy. Visually, Venturi organizes a storyboard through horizontal and vertical connections between various parts of the project. Two parallel horizontal threads follow the ideas that “context gives a building expression” and “change in context causes change in expression” (Figure 2.31.). These horizontal lines begin with general composition principles (such as priority, juxtaposition, direction, etc.) and conclude with the chapel design. In the precedents section, vertical strips show changes over time in the context of the same building (Figure 2.32.).

It is relevant to observe the case studies, organized based on the comparative method that Venturi will continue to employ throughout his entire career. Although the precedents are

153 The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Venturi’s thesis project: A Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion, PA.
divided into two sections, titled “Rome” and “contemporary domestic architecture,” the former includes two examples from other locations, Paris and Philadelphia. The section on domestic architecture shows mostly precedents from the 1930-1940, with the exception of the 1830 Hoffman-Simpson House from Salem, Massachusetts. None of the precedents in these categories is identified by its author, although some of them do have notable names: the apartments in Aluminum City, Pennsylvania were designed by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and the apartments in Leipzig (or the Siedlung Rundlung Leipzig) were designed by the German modern architect Hubert Ritter. Since Venturi has always claimed the standards of academic rigor in his work, this lack of authorship, whether a negligence or a deliberate omission, could be attributed to certain Quaker ethical principles that tend to de-emphasize the individual, and implicitly the author, in favor of the community.

The very notion of context (although not necessarily formulated as such) has been at the core of Quaker thought. To be “in the world, but not of it” suggests both a sense of belonging to and one of alienation from the environment. The same Quaker attitude that embraces the everyday while aspiring to receive the higher Inner Light, guides the apparently unlikely association of precedents drawn from the most ordinary architecture and the sophisticated one set in a city like Rome. The very idea of looking at domestic precedents for an ecclesiastical building might appear unusual, but, from a Quaker standpoint, the worship house (or the meeting house, as it is typically called) belongs, in fact, to everyday life and architecture; therefore such precedents are not only accepted, but legitimate. Quaker meeting houses do not stand out in their environment, but, as we have seen, they preserve the notion of history as genealogy.

Venturi’s proposed chapel is intended to act as a mediator between the existing buildings on campus:

“This country day school consists essentially of two converted eclectic mansions. These buildings in their present function are unrelated in their position and form.”

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154 The precedents grouped under the “Rome” section include the following pairings: Trevi fountain and St. Michel Fountain in Paris; St. Ignazio in the 17th and the 18th centuries; Santissima Trinita in 1650 and 1725; Campidoglio in 1538, 1644, 1938; the Pantheon, a building in Philadelphia and the University of Virginia. The precedents drawn from domestic architecture include: Johnson Site, Racine in 1936 and 1937; the Hoffman-Simpson House, Salem, MA, 1830 and the Keck House, Belmont, MA, 1940; apartments, Leipzig, 1935 [here the date is wrong, the correct year is 1930] and apartments in Aluminum City, PA, 1942.
“The new chapel in its position and form is conceived as a changed context which causes a changed expression – meaning.”

“Two mansions become one institution.”

“The whole is articulated and unified by the addition of a part.”

Whether the chapel does accomplish its original goal is a matter open to debate. Venturi attempts to situate the new building as a joint between two existing mansions, thus creating a linear sequence of three buildings (Figure 2.33). Most of the precedents presented at the beginning of the thesis show urban configurations that create public spaces. Therefore, from this point of view, one could argue that the chapel fails to create an urban plaza in relation to the other two buildings. On the other hand, however, smaller, semi-enclosed public spaces do come into existence through the siting of the proposed chapel between the two existing buildings. This placement does not seem to be the most obvious choice in the given context: the main body of the chapel is not parallel to the other two buildings, instead it is slightly misaligned and appears to reference a different direction. It is only the enclosure of the entry courtyard that acknowledges the geometry of the existing buildings (Figure 2.33).

The different articulations that Venturi proposes, though purely formal, do not derive exclusively from the objective principles of Gestalt psychology, as claimed in the explanatory text. Gestalt does emphasize complexity of meaning, as well as an ambiguous figure-ground relationship in a way similar to the technique of two-dimensional silhouettes employed as forms of portraiture in early Quaker culture. Venturi’s proposal introduces a certain tension between new and old elements of the architectural composition that finds its roots, if implicitly, in Quaker beliefs. The paradox of being “in the world, but not of it,” of being at once part of and remote from the environment, of blending in while inadvertently standing out, reflects the overall attitude of Quakers toward the world. A sense of discomfort with the outside world, of unease and tension has characterized Friends’ behavior throughout centuries. To translate an internal state, most of the times unspoken and concealed, into a physical reality is not an easy task. Venturi projects, if unconsciously, the elements he is familiar with from his own upbringing onto

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155 The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Venturi’s thesis project: *A Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion, PA.*
a chapel project that requires a different level of introspection and sensitivity than more conventional, lay architectures.

In addition to the chapel, the scheme includes a “war memorial space” that utilizes in its composition “an existing large dead tree trunk to create an atmosphere expressive of war as tragic”\textsuperscript{156} (\textbf{Figure 2.34.}). While the use of \textit{spolia} had had a long tradition in architectural history, modern architecture, however, was largely indifferent to the idea of constructing meaning through recycling elements carrying a certain history. In 1950, at the time of Venturi’s thesis, incorporating \textit{spolia} was highly uncommon. On the other hand, we have seen that Quaker building traditions embraced the re-use of old architectural elements in new projects with a twofold purpose: for economic reasons and as a way of carrying through the history and genealogy of the place. While Venturi’s intention of incorporating a large dead tree trunk in his composition would go unnoticed today and perhaps even considered naïve, in the context of his thesis it was probably an unusual approach, subtly revealing influences of Quaker practices on his work.

However, where the Quaker mark bears its most noticeable influence is in the organization of the interior space of the chapel for the Episcopal Academy. After the American Revolution, the Episcopal Church has separated from the Church of England. More recently, it has described itself as “Protestant, yet Catholic,”\textsuperscript{157} stating: “Anglicanism stands squarely in the Reformed tradition, yet considers itself just as directly descended from the Early Church as the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches.”\textsuperscript{158} Venturi designs a floorplan that is a hybrid between the typology of Roman Catholic churches and Quaker meetings houses. Geometrically, the plan is a longitudinal volume that consists of five squares (\textbf{Figure 2.27.}). Spatially, it constructs the sequence of spaces that in a Roman Catholic church (which Venturi has studied in the past, as his earlier student projects show) create the transition from the most profane to the

\textsuperscript{156} The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Venturi’s thesis project: \textit{A Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion, PA.}

\textsuperscript{157} The Book of Common Prayer, the central publication of the Church that outlines its doctrine and worship services, has gone through several revisions, the most recent dating from 1979, when the Church adopted many of the principles outlined by Second Vatican Council from 1962, including the restoration of the Eucharist.

most sacred: outdoors courtyard, narthex, nave with two aisles separated by a central circulation, and sanctuary.

The directionality specific to Roman Catholic churches is contradicted, however, by the setting of the pews: instead of facing the sanctuary, as it is common in both Catholic and Episcopal worship spaces, the two aisles of pews are, instead, facing each other – a layout specific to Quaker meetinghouses (Figure 2.35.). Therein, Friends have oriented the benches toward each other as a way of constructing a stronger sense of interaction between the members of the congregation, a configuration still preserved in contemporary architecture (Figure 2.36.). This layout is a direct consequence of the Quaker canon that puts the community at its core and where the lack of ministry or priesthood is translated architecturally into the absence of a sanctuary or an altar. Venturi’s chapel for the Episcopal Academy embraces both Roman Catholic and Quaker characteristics. The drawings indicate a stepping up in section in two directions: the first occurs as one moves from the narthex through the nave toward the sanctuary (Figure 2.37.), and the second unfolds within the nave itself (Figure 2.38.). Spatially, the nave is separated from the narthex and the sanctuary, but the two aisles of pews are also stepping up above the central horizontal circulation. This arrangement is not simply a matter of furniture layout, but a deliberate decision to focus the design on the congregation. Moreover, given the nature of the space as a chapel for an educational institution, Venturi chooses to emphasize the educational aspect and to focus on the space of the community, rather than that of the sanctuary.

The section and the rendered interior perspective give us more indications on how to interpret the space (Figure 2.39-2.40). The structure consists of a series of trusses spanning between the lateral walls, which create a strong roof form, continuous along the length of the entire chapel. The roof / ceiling is identical over the nave and over the altar, thus reinforcing the reading of the space as non-hierarchical. Venturi’s note reads: “All compressive members are wood. All tensile members are steel. Truss color scheme is blue, green and violet which are floating colors and make a vibrating contrast.”159 This color scheme might appear rather unusual in a worship space, but it puts an emphasis on the continuity of the truss that visually and spatially connects the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary (Figure 2.40.). The truss also acts as a

159 The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; Venturi’s thesis project: A Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion, PA.
lighting mechanism through which the nave receives an indirect lateral light that washes the walls, whereas the sanctuary, raised above the level of the nave, is flooded in light.

In Quaker doctrine, light has a particular nature and relevance: individuals have access to spirituality not through their own will, but through what is called the Inner Light. Manifested only through revelation, the Inner Light does not engage with the sensible world. Quakers passively wait for and receive revelation in a physical world devoid of spiritual qualities. There are no corporeal mediators between the divine and the human. (This act of passive waiting might contain the seeds of what Venturi and Scott Brown will later refer to as “deferred judgment.”) Just as the Inner Light constitutes the unseen core of Quaker theology, the truss with its “vibrating contrast” constitutes the spine of the chapel: suspended, floating, illuminating. Moreover, the roof gently guides the light toward the sidewalls, rather than directly dropping it through the dramatic central spine. If the sidewalls are relatively bright from the roof lighting, then people sitting in the pews will be backlit and appear like silhouettes to those sitting across the aisle. Built on the tension between the seen and the unseen, light and matter, spiritual world and physical world, the chapel embodies the motto of the Episcopal Academy: Esse Quam Videri (“To Be, Rather than to Seem to Be”).

It is relevant to compare Venturi’s thesis project with his firm’s much later design for the Episcopal Academy Chapel, Newtown Square, PA, completed in 2008. Founded in Philadelphia in 1795, the Episcopal Academy had established two campuses, in Devon and Merion, PA. The two campuses were consolidated into one and relocated in Newtown Square, PA. It was for this new campus that the firm VSBA designed the new chapel, conceived as “an iconic campus landmark – immediately identifiable and symbolic of the new campus, yet also a well-used and highly-functional school facility.” Unlike Venturi’s 1950 thesis project whose emphasis on community was translated in a non-hierarchical architectural composition, the 2008 chapel proposes a different architectural and spiritual order (Figure 2.41.). The fan-shaped plan has a clear orientation toward the altar, which is marked volumetrically by a prominent tower

The relationship between different pieces and the altar / tower offers a different reading from Venturi’s thesis project. Despite the claim that the plan “allows the worshipers to face each other as well as the altar, nurturing a sense of togetherness and community,” the 2008 chapel shows, in fact, a hierarchical relationship, where the community and its space are subordinated to the ministry and its altar.

Ideas that Venturi will develop in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* are emerging in his thesis project. He applies the relationship figure-ground and whole-to-parts (appropriated from Gestalt psychology) to the siting of the chapel in relation with the campus and the neighboring buildings. While the exterior of the chapel appears rather plane, ideas about flat surfaces are not yet made explicit. However, the intention to flatten meanings through overspecific explanations is already at work in the almost scientific manner of presenting the project. The very fact that Quaker principles and beliefs quietly inform the design, without ever being “explained,” shows how the claim for absolute clarity fails to account for a network of significances still inexplicable.

**Frontality: The Bill- ding-board (1967)** (Figure 2.28.). In 1967, the firm of Venturi and Rauch working with Gerod Clark as collaborator, entered the competition for the National Football Hall of Fame in New Brunswick, NJ. Although they did not win (and one of Venturi’s articles on this topic is illustrated, in his characteristic self-deprecating manner, with a competition board stamped with the word “Loser” ), the project is relevant for two reasons. First, it is an early explicit use of billboards in Venturi’s designs. Second, it calls into question the dichotomy *duck* – *decorated shed* that Venturi and Scott Brown will later develop in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

Venturi described the entry as a hybrid between a building and a billboard – a *bill- ding-board* – just as some of the previous projects he presented as hybrids between architecture and landscape (FDR Memorial (Figure 2.43.)), architecture and sculpture (Philadelphia Fairmount

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Park (Figure 2.44.) or architecture and urban design (Copley Square (Figure 2.45.)).\textsuperscript{165} The program had to accommodate exhibition spaces along with administrative, research, and dining facilities. Venturi’s firm’s response to the competition brief consisted of a gigantic screen oriented toward the parking lot and attached to a solid structure that incorporated the exhibition halls and the other required spaces.

Venturi talked about this project in two slightly different articles published the same year, one in April 1968, in \textit{Architectural Forum}, the other one in October 1968, in \textit{Architecture Canada}\.\textsuperscript{166} Both articles acknowledged the original intention to design the building in the shape of a football.\textsuperscript{167} This proposal (which did not materialize) illustrated what Venturi and Scott Brown will later criticize in \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, as the duck. Deemed irrelevant in the context of contemporary culture, the duck stood for those architectural forms that directly expressed their purpose or function. They argued that this position, common in modernism, had its roots deeply embedded into centuries of architectural history. Presented as the opposite attitude, the decorated shed defined a plain structure with a billboard attached onto it that would directly communicate the purpose of the building.\textsuperscript{168}

Although described as a dichotomy, the duck and the decorated shed present, in fact, two sides of the same coin as they both define architecture as symbol. The bill-ding-board is a case in point. Conceptually (although Venturi argues otherwise), there is no fundamental difference between a building shaped as a football and one shaped as a gigantic billboard. They both aspire to communicate an architectural message in a direct, unmediated form, they both simplify architecture to a finite object, and they both stimulate visual perception.

The design combined projection, graphics and traditional architectural space to create a media iconography – to teach as well as to entertain a large audience. The scheme emphasized a high degree of interaction. Films of great moments in college football


\textsuperscript{168} Venturi and Scott Brown, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}. 181
history were projected over the interior surfaces. A rich mix of motion and changing scales was used to recreate the excitement of the sport.169

The desire to teach and entertain acted as a remedy to boredom. Ideas drawn from billboard industry, reiterated inside the exhibition hall through panels that flipped, turned, moved, and rotated, provided the excitement for the “jaded senses which respond only to bold stimuli.”170 Claiming the billboard as a design strategy, Venturi employed it mainly as a vehicle for communication, like an oversized commercial sign. Implicit in this approach was understanding the billboard as a white canvas used as a background for entertainment and distraction – the most facile (and ultimately ineffective) cures for boredom.

Venturi recognized the ambiguity between the message of the billboard and its physical structure. The most publicized image of the building is an interior perspective rendered as a collage that emphasizes movement and transparency (Figure 2.28). However, in the process drawings and the competition boards, the rendering of the back façade of the billboard shows deep shadows and strong contrasts that indicate not a light metal structure, but rather a heavy, dramatic concrete building (Figure 2.46). A strong sense of front and back perceptions guided the design:

The exterior of the building was designed to create an arrival sequence, which heightened the tourist’s sense of anticipation. The rear of the building was integrated with a grandstand facing the Hall of Fame Football Field.171

Working sketches for the billboard show several iterations of the façade facing the parking lot where the name of the building sometimes occupies as much as half of the elevation height. The name itself – National Football Hall of Fame – is spelled as a visual pun: the word football is replaced by the image of a football whose position would also mark the main entrance (Figure 2.47). For the competition boards, the rear elevation (which corresponds to the back of the billboard) was rendered with heavy shadows indicating the sturdy structure of a building rather than the lighter one of a billboard. The name played the role of a commercial sign that

170 Venturi; Scott Borwn, A View from the Campidoglio, 15.
identified the building, while the giant screen on which hundreds of thousands of electronically programed lights “would produce moving sequences of naturalistic images, words and phrases, and diagrammatic choreographies of famous football plays,” acted as an oversized electric spectacular.¹⁷²

With the enormous screen facing the parking lot, and words, images, and famous football plays projected onto it, the billboard recalls not only the conspicuous billboards, but also the drive-in movie theaters of midcentury. The history of drive-in movie theaters begins with Richard Hollingstead, an auto-parts salesman who, after having experimented for a few years with different ideas about car arrangements, heights and optimal visibility, in May 1933 patented a ramp system to allow cars to park at different heights. A month later, on June 6 1933, he opened the first drive-in theater, in Camden, NJ.¹⁷³ Venturi’s subsequent description of the project includes specific references to theaters: “The idea that a space can be transformed by light and pictures is an old one in the theater but a relatively recent concept in architecture and the commercial world.”¹⁷⁴

In his Either / Or, Søren Kierkegaard has recognized the desire for constant change as one of the main symptoms of boredom. He made the argument that a state of perpetual variation provides only a temporary and deceptive sense of gratification and leads, in fact, to greater dissatisfaction. He called this phenomenon “the rotation of crops” and described it as a “vulgar, inartistic rotation,” “based on an illusion:”

One is weary of living in the country and moves to the city; one is weary of one’s native land and goes abroad; one is europamude [weary of Europe] and goes to America etc.; one indulges in the fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star. Or there is another direction, but still extensive. One is weary of eating on porcelain and eats on silver; wearying of that, one eats on gold … .¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² I am borrowing the terminology from Agnew, Outdoor Advertising.
Kierkegaard opposed two principles: the surface *extension* and the *intensity* of the cultivation. Instead of frequently searching for other lands, one should change the “method of cultivation and the kinds of crops.” In other words, one should work within the parameters available at hand, understanding the latent potential of that which is accessible: “The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes.”

Flipping a horizontal surface into a vertical one emphasizes the principle of surface extension, which, in the development of the *billdingboard*, became a core design strategy. The billboard, described as “enormous” and “giant,” is 100ft high by 210ft long, its proportion (approximately 2:1) resembling that of a football field (160ft wide by 360ft long). The iconic image of the project shows the display of a football player in motion projected onto the gigantic screen (Figure 2.17). The *billdingboard* collapses the horizontal and vertical dimensions. Flipping the horizontal football field to a vertical billboard makes visible the speed and fast movements that usually unfold on the flat surface. One usually moves on, or along, a horizontal surface, but looks at a vertical element. By switching from horizontality to verticality, Venturi also changes the type of perception of the inhabitant of architecture who turns from an active participant to a passive spectator.

The shift between the horizontal and the vertical can occur in both directions. Catherine Gudis has associated the shift in the orientation of billboards from vertical to horizontal with the changing dynamics of cities evolving from vertical development to urban sprawl:

> “Vertically reaching tiers of billboard structures holding numerous ads were consolidated into individual, larger, horizontally stretching boards. … The boards now imitated the lateral expansion of the city itself, from vertically oriented metropolis to horizontally sprawling strip and suburban developments.”

Advertising manuals have provided from early on guidelines of psychological laws for buying and selling. Two of them – involving *size* and *attention* – are particularly relevant for this

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176 Ibid., 292.
177 Venturi; Scott Brown, *A View from the Campidoglio*, 15.
One of these laws claimed that “size is another element that affects suggestion. Large fortunes, books, buildings, displays, rivers and animals are impressive.” Another law differentiated between “attention to the message itself and attention to the object the message is supposed to sell” and warned about the risk of inadvertently shifting attention from the product to the actual picture. Big size and the play between attention and distraction are also key elements in Venturi’s billdingboard whose design relies, on the one hand, on the oversized billboard as a physical architectural element, and, on the other hand, on a specific type of perception. Billboards (or decorated sheds) construct a mode of perception based on a short attention span that does not allow the eye to rest onto the image; instead, the viewer will grasp the message instantly and quickly float over the surface without dwelling on it. The original intention to design the project in the shape of a football (the duck) would have prompted a similar reaction from the spectator: invited to look at an object, the viewer would rapidly glance over and move on.

Reducing the experience of architecture to the dichotomy duck – decorated shed does not, in fact, answer questions of relevance, significance or meaning. Both the duck and the decorated shed are closed objects that do not open up the possibility of further engagement or action. Both the duck and the decorated shed are prescriptive and normative, self-referential and autonomous. Detached and disconnected from their contexts, they perpetuate the boredom and alienation of their inhabitants.

Flatness: The Guild House (1963-1966) (Figure 2.29.). After Orson Wells had broadcasted an alien invasion live on his radio show on Halloween of 1938, friendlier Martians invaded American televisions. Between 1963 and 1966, the TV series My Favorite Martian brought to American households an anthropologist from Mars whose airship had crashed and landed him close to Los Angeles. Among many different skills, Uncle Martin, as his terrestrial friend Tim called him, had the power to extend two retractable antennae from his head which immediately connected him to the network of waves present everywhere in his environment, but

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179 Agnew, Outdoor Advertising, 193.
180 Ibid., 205-6.
181 Ibid., 208.
invisible to ordinary people (Figure 2.48.). The decades of the 1950s and 1960s saw a boom in radio, X-Ray, ultraviolet and infrared technologies that attempted not only to make visible otherwise imperceptible signals, but also to connect humans with the outer space. The twitching nose of the modern witch in Bewitched was perhaps also another sort of antenna sensitive to atmospheric changes (Figure 2.49.). Political undertones of the American – Russian space race aside, the universe was brought within reach into one’s own living room as shown in Richard Hamilton’s 1954 collage Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Home so Different, so Appealing? where a (menacing?) planet hovers indoors right in the middle of the house, above the couch and the coffee table (Figure 2.50.). The enthrallment with the invisible networks surrounding us has been ubiquitous in the popular culture. In the 1999 comedy Entrapment, Catherine Zeta Jones plays the role of an insurance agent sent by her employer to help capture an art thief. As part of her training, she learns how to navigate blindfolded a network of unseen rays that surround and protect the most valuable art works in a museum.

It was in the context of post-war exalted consumerism, in a world awakening its fascination with technological gadgets and invisible networks that Robert Venturi designed the Guild House (1963-1966), the residence for the elderly opened in Philadelphia in 1966. In a curious architectural move that has been amply discussed by scholars and architectural critics, on the roof-top of the house, centered on its axis, he placed an antenna (Figure 2.51.). It was a non-functional, purely decorative aerial made famous in Venturi’s first book, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture:

The television antenna atop this axis and beyond the otherwise constant height line of the building strengthens this axis of scale-change in the zone of the central façade, and expresses a kind of monumentality similar to that at the entrance of Anet. The antenna, with its anodized gold surface, can be interpreted two ways: abstractly, as a sculpture in the manner of Lippold, and as a symbol of the aged, who spend so much time looking at T.V. ¹⁸²

How are we to interpret Venturi’s brief references? How do they relate to each other, if at all? Is Venturi giving us clues about a larger, unseen topic at stake in his design? Or, perhaps, what we see is simply what we get?

At the official opening of the Guild House, Venturi “presented a small bouquet of fresh cut flowers to each occupant.” The only child of a well-to-do family of Italian descent, Venturi, as we have seen, was brought up as a Quaker following the conversion of his mother who felt that the Friends were the only religious group that suited her pacifist position and liberal views. Completed with federal funding, the Guild House was the initiative of Francis Bosworth, the executive director of the Friends Neighborhood Guild, a non-profit social welfare agency founded in 1879 and affiliated with the Quakers. Close to his aging mother (his father had passed away in 1959), Venturi was sympathetic to the needs of the elderly. His project aimed to provide them the maximum degree of comfort and variety possible under the budgetary restrictions imposed by the Federal Housing and Home Agency whose guidelines required that the “building design must not be elaborate or ornate.”

The press release issued at the opening of the Guild House (which has been originally drafted by Venturi himself) singled out the interior flexibility achieved through the structural system, along with the entertainment system as two of the main features of the building:

Construction of the fireproof structure is flat plate reinforced concrete which permitted wide latitude in interior design to relieve monotony without undue increases in construction costs. A master TV antenna is included and air-conditioning is at the resident’s option.

From this curious association of construction flexibility with entertainment it appears that two of the important characteristics of the building were also the two major sources to “relieve

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185 VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.4. folder 6104.41. Typed press release from August 11, 1966. This was the official press release that was based on information delivered by Venturi. The VSB Collection includes the hand-written text he has drafted which is a description of the building according to different criteria: owner, site, project, financial requirements, design, and special features. (VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.4. folder 6104.41.)
monotony,” or, in other words, to fight boredom: the structural system that allowed for design variety, and television.

But what does television have to do with architecture? A lot, would have answered Mr. Venturi. A sign of progress and good care toward the elderly, the antenna mentioned in the press release was different, however, from the one described in *Complexity and Contradiction*. In fact, period photographs show several antennas placed on the roof of the Guild House behind the ornamental piece that occupies the foreground (Figure 2.52.). So here we have several “real” antennas, a “fake” one, a French chateau, and an American artist. How do they all converse with each other and how do they converse in the story and history of the Guild House?

**Golden horns.** At the beginning of the paragraph describing the antenna, Venturi references the monumentality of Anet. A French chateau built by the architect Philibert de l’Orme from 1547 to 1552, Anet was a gift from King Henri II of France to his mistress, Diane de Poitiers (Figure 2.53.). Although the castle did not suffer major damages during the French revolution, its contents were auctioned, and some architectural elements were retrieved and displayed by the French archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir in his *Musée des monuments français* (Museum of French Monuments). Lenoir had started the museum in order to rescue works of art and architecture from the ravages of the revolution and present them to a larger audience. Although partly demolished, the Anet castle will survive due to subsequent owners who will invest in its restoration. Some of the objects removed will be reinstalled into their original context after World War II.

The reference to the Anet castle has a twofold significance: built at a time when architecture was taking a Mannerist shift, the castle illustrates Venturi’s fondness of the styles of the sixteenth century. In the preface to *Complexity and Contradiction* he states that “The examples chosen [in the book] reflect my partiality for certain eras: Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo especially.”

At the same time, the troubled history of the castle suggests an unfavorable destiny that is often the fate of works of art which are either misinterpreted, or become fatalities of hostile historical circumstances. Venturi has constructed a public persona of a marginal, often

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misunderstood figure operating at the periphery of the profession, so the reference to a “victimized” architecture suited his autobiographical profile. With parts of the castle located in the Musée des monuments français, itself situated inside the École des Beaux Arts – the temple of classical art – Anet stands not only for the monumentality of form that Venturi alludes to, but also for classical art in general thus legitimizing its architectural and historical value. Whether Venturi was aware of the details of this history is less relevant. Examining the Anet castle as a precedent opens up a speculative reading of the Guild House that situates the building in a larger cultural context of ideas, showing the often invisible networks of significances within which we operate.

What exactly did Venturi see in the entrance of Anet that spawned his analogy? It was the imposing statue of a stag with prominent antlers crowning the entrance gate to the castle that most likely prompted Venturi’s parallel between the antenna on the Guild House and the French chateau (Figure 2.54.). The statue is a reference to Diane de Poitiers, the Lady of the estate and portrays her as Diana, the Roman goddess of hunt. The correlation was based on more than the namesake: herself an unusually athletic woman for the time, Diane de Poitiers used to swim, hunt, and ride horses every day, bearing a close resemblance to the fearless goddess of hunt and wilderness. Cold and ambitious, Diane placed herself as a majestic statue at the entrance of the palace, guarding it from above. Her chateau portrays not an architecture of pleasure, but rather, in the image of its mistress, one of calculated schemes and cold strategies.

A curious and unforeseen twist of fate shows the invisible and often unaccounted for, network of connections surrounding us. Much like the unseen infrared rays protecting the artwork in Entrapment, intricate invisible systems occupy the space around us, waiting to be discovered and made present. Beside the formal analogy between the antenna on the American residence and the statue at the entrance of the French castle, there is another latent meaning in this comparison. In Roman mythology, the goddess of hunt had a fast and strong white stag that Hercules had to capture as one of his twelve labors and, eventually, ended up freeing upon the

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completion of his tasks. Legend has it that Diana’s stag had golden horns. As Diana herself came to be identified with the moon, the association of the sun (represented by the golden antlers of the stag) and the moon suggested the wholeness of the universe.

Twenty years older than her royal lover, Diane de Poitiers embodies the complicated theme of age and aging, so appropriate in the context of a residence for the elderly. She passed away in 1566 at age 66 under unknown circumstances, but her remains were found only in 2008, in a common grave where her body was supposedly thrown after the revolutionists had opened her tomb in 1795. Forensic investigations have identified the presence of gold in her physical remains. Scientific evidence thus corroborates what was previously known from unverified period testimonies, namely that Diane de Poitiers was ingesting gold as an elixir for permanent youth. “We have identified Diane de Poitiers to a high degree of confidence,” maintain the specialists. “We believe that she drank gold . . . . The high concentrations of gold in her hair indicate the she could have died of chronic intoxication with gold.”

Passing from myth to reality and then into art, the gold went through a process of transmutation from the antlers of Diana’s white stag into the body of Diane de Poitiers, settling into the horns of the Anet statue and finally landing in the form of a gold anodized antenna on the rooftop of a building in Philadelphia. Invisible network of significations.

Etymologically, the word antenna derives from Greek (to stretch out or forth) and Latin (horns of insects or ends of sail-yards). Biological antennae are sensory organs that reach out to feel the environment, determine orientation, and make sense of the surroundings. The extensions of the legendary stag and those of the modern Guild House antenna perform similar functions: they situate and anchor the body that carries them in its particular setting, making it aware of its context. The gold transgresses time and space and perhaps reveals the unspoken

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190 Charlier et alli, “Fatal Alchemy,” 1402.
192 Charlier et alli, “Fatal Alchemy,” 1403.
desire of the architect to re-locate his “ugly and ordinary” building from Philadelphia into a mythical time.\textsuperscript{194}

\textit{Golden wires}. After referencing the Anet castle, Venturi remarks that the antenna on the Guild House can be interpreted abstractly “as a statue in the manner of Lippold.”\textsuperscript{195} Richard Lippold (1915-2002) was an American artist who studied industrial design, but was also engaged in music and dance. (Musician John Cage was, in fact, one of his close friends.) As Lippold contributed to a re-birth of the Constructivist tradition in the United States, his “constructivist-inspired wire sculptures were characteristic of a form of soft modernism.\textsuperscript{196} He collaborated with several modernist architects and artists and was an artist-in-residence at the famous Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1948.\textsuperscript{197}

In the 1960s, Lippold was commissioned to create a sculpture for the Vanderbilt Avenue lobby of the headquarters of Pan American World Airways in New York (\textbf{Figure 2.55.}). With Walter Gropius and Peter Belluschi among the architects, the Pan Am building, was an International Style skyscraper designed for a company that aimed to project to the world an image of modernity and progress.\textsuperscript{198} In a letter to Lippold from 1960, Gropius described his idea of the final sculpture as “a large metal screen” with “a large globe designed as an abstract” in front of it.\textsuperscript{199} Lippold’s intention, however, was that the sculpture would “provide a means for tranquil contemplation in a center of unordered movement, thus being party to the concurrence of law and chance.”\textsuperscript{200} In the final piece entitled \textit{Flight}, he used two materials: “a high-carat gold over bronze for the globe and star, and stainless steel for all the silver-colored elements.”\textsuperscript{201} Reaching out into the space was more than a metaphor for Pan Am, a building that had been built making use of “air rights” – the right to build in the air space above an existing structure where

\textsuperscript{194} “Ugly and ordinary” was Philip Johnson’s description of Venturi and Scott Brown’s entry for the 1967 Brighton Beach Housing Competition. (Deborah Fausch, \textit{The Context of Meaning is Everyday Life: Venturi and Scott Brown’s Theories of Architecture and Urbanism}, Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1999, 214.)
\textsuperscript{199} Vanel, “John Cage’s Muzak-Plus: The Fu(rni)ture of Music;” 110.
\textsuperscript{200} Richard Lippold, “Projects for Pan Am and Philharmonic,” \textit{Art in America} 50, No. 2 (Summer 1962): 55.
\textsuperscript{201} Lippold, “Projects for Pan Am and Philharmonic,” 54.
the new construction rests upon the old one. The new Pan Am building was standing atop Grand Central Station (Figure 2.56).

Gold features extensively in Lippold’s work. His Variation with a Sphere, No.10: The Sun (1953-1956) was a composition of gold-filled wires The Trinity Crucifix at the Church of St. Gregory the Great in Rhode Island (1960), was made of gold plate wire, stainless steel wire, aluminum and silver gilt. Gold wire was also the medium of the Bird of Paradise #3 (1964) Lippold continued to explore gold as a medium even in his later works: the Ad Astra sculpture in front of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC (1976) is made of gold-colored polished stainless steel Ex Stasis on the campus of Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1988) is crafted from stainless steel, anodized aluminum, and gold-plated cables (Figure 2.57.).

When Venturi brings forth the reference to Lippold’s abstract sculptures, he tacitly engages not just their form, but also their media. The antenna on the Guild House brings into the same horizon the golden horns of Diana’s stag and the golden wires of Lippold’s artwork – technology, mythology, and abstract art. These various devices sense and make sense of the environment, and also perform a balancing exercise through anchoring or suspending their own golden bodies. Which brings us to the next question:

What does a TV antenna do? It acts as a medium that captures the waves and translates them into images, and it is, in fact, what makes television (i.e. remote vision) work. It is an instrument made of multiple conductors of different lengths that correspond to the wavelength range that the antenna is supposed to receive. Antennas are placed either indoors, on a TV set, or outdoors, on a building, and receive broadcast television signals which are then transferred to the TV set. Conventionally, antennas are classified in indoor (dipole or loop antennas) and outdoor (yagi and log period antennas).

Golden boredom. The office of Venturi and Rauch paid considerable attention to the “antenna” on the Guild House, which was not, in fact, a functional one. It was neither a ‘ready-made’ taken from a catalogue, nor a conventional antenna. It had been carefully designed in the office, based on precise specifications. Following Venturi’s rule of both-and, it was both an

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202 Eugene J. Morris, “Air Rights Are ‘Fertile Soil’,” The Urban Lawyer 1, No. 3 (Fall 1969): 247.
interior, and an exterior antenna that merged the two typologies together, and therefore as one looked at it, one was both inside, and outside the house. In a frontal view from afar, the circular piece at the bottom appeared flat, just like the circular element of an indoor antenna. The design specifications indicated that this part was a “6’ parabolic antenna 3090” and its section was convex (Figure 2.58.). As the eye moved from the bottom of the building upward, the “antenna” centered on the vertical axis of symmetry of the façade signaled the dissolution of the bulky non-structural column on the ground floor into the thin, white non-bearing wall, and further into a light non-functional metal structure. Sitting atop the white base like a TV set on a stand, the Guild House turned into a giant television screen for the city. The façade became an X-ray, the building a giant TV screen and the passer-by, a spectator. As 5:4 was the proportion of the first rectangular television screens, this was roughly the proportion of the brick wall of the main elevation of the Guild House.

In his critique of the three forms of modern entertainment in the first decades of the 20th century – advertisement, films and radio – Siegfried Kracauer described the constant exposure of the modern man to news and events from all around the world as a “species of antennal fate.” This constant background noise, Kracauer argued, which in itself can be utterly boring and irrelevant, denies one the right to privacy and personal boredom. The aerial on the Guild House foresees the “antennal destiny” of architecture, which in the coming decades will increasingly rely on the latest trends and the most recent fashions.

The side elevation showed the antenna carefully aligned with the façade of the building, and construction documents specified how the steel rod was to be anchored into the slab (Figure 2.59.). This alignment of the antenna with the façade would have never been perceived from a distance and whether the aerial was recessed from the front façade or not was a detail that passers-by would most likely have missed. The construction documents, however, indicated the importance of the aerial being flush with the building as a means to achieve a flatness carried on at different scales of the design (Figure 2.59).

203 VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.2. folder 6104.08.
204 Kracauer, The Mass Ornament, 333.
A TV antenna signals the collapse of time and distances. On TV, far-away events are brought near, and follow in quick succession one after another. As viewers watch TV, they expect images to change, vary and constantly move. Television is where the impatience of the age resides. The Guild House carries the seeds of an impatient architecture that doesn’t allow time and the eye to settle in. As soon as the latter begins to slide on the flat surface of the façade it quickly moves away in search for something else, another piece of information, perhaps a different building. Surfaces are flat to allow the unobstructed and quick movement of the eye. Flatness as a condition of speed is translated into construction details of surfaces that are flush and aligned with each other to ensure a smooth and rapid transition. The effect of “the dark brown brick walls with double-hung windows” is not only a play of scale between their unusual big size, and the traditional row houses in Philadelphia, as Venturi explained.\(^{206}\) It is also a glorified flat surface. Possible stains of weathering would pass unnoticed on the dark surface, without visually interrupting the smoothness of the façade. In a hand-written account of the project, Venturi described the north façade as “flat.”\(^{207}\) The balcony railings are perforated steel plate painted black, flush with the plane of the façade thus ensuring flatness despite the change in materials. The “polished black granite” of the entrance column highlights not only the symbolic role of the heavy post,\(^{208}\) but also its restless sleekness. As one could spin around the column in endless motions, the pillar destabilizes rather than anchors the building into the ground. In a construction document that details the sign indicating the construction year (1965), it is specified that a corner stone has to have “this end polished.”\(^{209}\) The sign (which eventually did not find a place on the façade) was designed with particular attention to the construction of the letters: hand-written notes on the drawings specified that the interior curves of the numbers were to be elliptical, not circular.\(^{210}\) Along with the antenna, this unsettling Baroque ballet of curves and counter-curves contributed to the sense of movement and speed contained in the new media so happily embraced by architects and lay people alike.

The anodized gold TV antenna on the Guild House foresees more radical approaches in Venturi’s future work. As we have already seen, his fascination with screens big and small,

\(^{207}\) VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.4. folder 6104.41.
\(^{209}\) VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.2. folder 6104.23.
\(^{210}\) VSB Collection 225.II.A. box.2. folder 6104.23.
projections and moving images becomes a design strategy in the (unbuilt) entry for the National Football Hall of Fame competition from 1967 where panels, screens and billboards move, flip, rotate, and alter the face of architecture. For Venturi, the medium of architecture resides in skin-deep, flat surfaces that contain provisions for constant change and entertainment.

This approach echoes Marshall McLuhan’s famous ‘the medium is the message.’ McLuhan understood media as extensions of the human body and its sensory perceptions. He argued that the medium does not represent anything, does not stand for anything else, but that it simply *is*. There is no other content or meaning beyond the medium itself. Alluding to the jargon of teenagers who began to use the word *cool* instead of their parents’ *hot* to show that something had value, McLuhan classified media in *hot* and *cool*. *Hot* media heightened one particular sense in “high definition,” allowed for less participation of the audience and referred to those media that used to be exhilarating for the generation of the parents: radio, movie and photography. *Cool* media, on the other hand, engaged all senses, required the participation of the audience who was invited to complete the message, and included, among other forms of communication, the most exciting invention of the time: television. As surprising as it might seem today, McLuhan saw in television a deep potential for interaction and engagement with the human body: “TV will not work as a background. It engages you. You have to be with it.” Moreover, he made the argument that television is a haptic medium:

> The TV image requires each instant that we “close” the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object.

He derived his idea that ‘the medium is the message’ from Cubism, which, he argued, had posited it for the first time with the intention of collapsing time and space. For McLuhan, the possibility to identify the medium with the message became reality only with the advent of electric speed, an event reflected also in architecture:

> “…cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that *the medium is the message.* … Before the electric speed and total field, it
Wright’s Guggenheim Museum, designed on a spiral, concentric basis, “is a redundant form inevitable to the electric age, in which the concentric pattern is imposed by the instant quality, and overlay in depth of electric speed.”

The aerial on the Guild House carried the promise of speed and change. At a time when technological progress transformed into reality the *aesthetics of speed* imagined by Italian Futurists at the beginning of the century, television made possible another secret dream: as one stood still in their own living room, the world was changing right in front of their eyes and the spectator entertained the illusion that they had control over it. To the seniors, to the bed ridden, to the bored homemakers, television offered the potential for erstwhile inaccessible amusement and distraction. When Venturi described the antenna as a symbol of the elderly “who spend so much time looking at T.V.” he was inadvertently revealing the latent discomfort of the age, not only of the aged, with slow pace and unhurried rhythms. Anxious to keep moving, the world was flying away from boredom without realizing that the faster it ran away from it, the quicker it spun within the same tighter and tighter circle. As the press release proudly stated, television and a flexible construction system offered the residents of the Guild House the tools “to relieve monotony.” But wasn’t television providing the trap into deeper and more profound boredom? Wasn’t Venturi’s antenna indicating the shift toward an architecture of changing surfaces that, much like a TV screen, would rely not on materiality, but on virtual signals? Wasn’t the aerial pointing, in fact, to the exact opposite of what the architect had intended? Didn’t the fake antenna stand for a fake escape from boredom? If the “real” antennas were receiving television signals, wasn’t the “fake” antenna capturing the unseen waves of boredom?

Standing between the golden horns of Diana’s stag and the golden wires of Lippold’s sculptures, the golden antenna on the Guild House embodies the modern myth of escaping boredom through distraction. All these ‘sensing devices’ seize the invisible waves and networks of meaning present in our environment. If the movies and television series of the 1950s and 1960s were enthralled with the idea of the universe sending us signals, terrestrial architecture was gradually losing its depth becoming, instead, a shallow, flat, and skin-deep screen.

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was not obvious that the medium is the message. The message, it seemed, was the “content,” as people used to ask what a painting was about.” (McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 13)

Conclusions.

This chapter has shown that Venturi’s (unaccounted for) upbringing as a Quaker has discreetly shaped his architectural theories. Some of his seemingly contradictory positions (such as the emphasis on flatness, on the one hand, and the preference for excess, on the other) could be deciphered through the lens of Quaker ethics and aesthetics. My speculative readings of three of his early projects show that, despite Venturi’s attempt to flatten meaning through over-explicating his design and thinking process, meaning is never exhausted. Every description is always a thick description.
Chapter 2. Figures.

Figure 2.1. Venturi and Rauch, *Plan of Vanna Venturi House*, 1966. Public domain.

Figure 2.2. Venturi and Rauch, Cope and Lippincott, *Plan of Guild House*, 1960-1963. Public domain.

Figure 2.3. Venturi and Short, *Plan of North Penn Visiting Nurse Association*, 1960. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.
Figure 2.4. Interior of the Arch Street Friends Meeting House, Philadelphia. Public domain.


Figure 2.8. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, *Franklin Court*, 1976. Public domain.

Figure 2.9. Edward Hicks, *Painting in the Peaceable Kingdoms Series*, 1825-1830. Public domain.

Figure 2.10. Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch*, 1825. Public domain.
Figure 2.11. Edward Hicks, Detail of *The Peaceable Kingdoms with Quakers Bearing Banner*, 1826. Public domain.

Figure 2.12. Quaker Silhouettes, 18th-19th centuries. Public domain.

Figure 2.13. Gilles-Louis Chretien, *Drawing for a physiognotrace*, 1786. Public domain.

Figure 2.14. Albums of Quaker Silhouettes. Public domain.
Figure 2.15. Venturi and Scott Brown, *Knoll Chairs*, c. 1984. Public domain.

Figure 2.16. Venturi and Scott Brown, *The Queen Ann Chair*, c. 1984. Public domain.


Figure 2.19. Metal structure of a contemporary billboard. Public domain.

Figure 2.20. Interactive display for Johnson and Johnson’s Sundown line of tanning products. Public domain.

Figure 2.21. Still frame from *Leave It to Beaver!* Public domain.

Figure 2.22. Still frame from *Leave It to Beaver!* Public domain.
Figure 2.23. Scented billboard in Mooresville, NC. Public domain.

Figure 2.24. Ed Ruscha, *Actual Size*, 1962. Public domain.

Figure 2.25. Contemporary billboard. Public domain.


Figure 2.30. Robert Venturi, *School project for a Roman Catholic Church*, undated. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.


Figure 2.36. Interior of a contemporary Quaker Meeting House. Public domain.


Figure 2.41. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, *Episcopal Academy Chapel*, 2008. Public domain.
Figure 2.42. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, *Episcopal Academy Chapel*, 2008. Public domain.

Figure 2.43. Venturi and Rauch, Scott Brown, *FDR Memorial Park Competition*, 1960. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Figure 2.44. Venturi and Rauch, Scott Brown, *Philadelphia Fairmount Park*, 1964. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.
Figure 2.45. Venturi and Rauch, Gerod Clark and Arthur Jones, *Copley Square Competition Entry*, 1966. Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.


Figure 2.48. Still frame from the sitcom *My Favorite Martian*, 1963-66. Public domain.

Figure 2.49. Opening frame of the sitcom *Bewitched*, 1964-1972. Public domain.

Figure 2.50. Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It that Makes Today’s Home so Different, so Appealing?*, 1954. Public domain.


Figure 2.53. Philibert de l’Orme, *Anet Castle*, 1547 to 1552. Public domain.

Figure 2.54. Philibert de l’Orme, *Anet Castle*, 1547 to 1552. Public domain.

Figure 2.56. MetLife Building, formerly Pan American World Airways, New York, 1963. Public domain.

Figure 2.57. Richard Lippold: *Variation with a Sphere, No.10: The Sun* (1953-56); *Bird of Paradise #3* (1964); *Ad Astra* (1976); *Ex Stasis* (1988). Public domain.


Modernity, and with it architectural representation, largely assumes the space of clarity and straightforward answers where *riddles* are resolved, *inversions* are turned into mere mirrors, and *ghosts* in the daylight vanish. The modernist machine devours and turns into straight lines any deviation from the norm (Figure II.1., II.2). As architects, how can we claim the imprecise territory of visual riddles through the even more imprecise tools of moods and atmospheres?

Riddles exist everywhere. In tales and folklore, riddles constitute rites of passage for young men, riddles are presented to a suitor before the girl is entrusted to him in marriage, and riddles often accompany the deceased on their last journey. From times immemorial, all cultures have employed riddles as cognitive operations\(^1\) that describe the indescribable through metaphors. “The very nature indeed of a riddle is this, to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words (which cannot be done with the real names for things, but can be with their metaphorical substitutes)...,” wrote Aristotle in *The Poetics*.\(^2\) Around mid-twentieth century, a structuralist definition emerged in linguistics and folklore studies: “A riddle is a traditional verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed.”\(^3\) A more nuanced approach states that “riddles play with boundaries, but ultimately to affirm them (like a child playing with mud to find and define the boundaries of his body.) Shared characteristics between categories are a threat to the distinctiveness of the categories; riddles examine those things that are shared and pinpoint those that divide.”\(^4\)

As a central tactic in the process of riddling, *inversion* is the folding of two apparently conflicting realities into each other. In one of the oldest riddles in the history of Western civilization, the Sphinx collapses and inverts opposite principles: male and female, sun and moon, day and night, light and shadow, life and death. Inversions call into question too easy

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3 Ibid., 113.
dichotomies. It is during this process and within this thick space that fruitful and unexpected associations come to life.

**Inversions**

I will examine visual tactics of retrieving *riddles* and *inversions* in architectural representation through *boredom* and *daydreaming* as two ostensibly opposed moods. A pathological condition (Otto Fenichel), a mood conducive to philosophy (Martin Heidegger),

“the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (Walter Benjamin),

“a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly” (Sigfried Kracauer),

the concept of *boredom* has emerged and been intertwined with modernity.

Defined as a “series of thoughts or yearnings that pleasantly distract one’s attention, an idle fantasy or a vain hope,”

*daydreaming*, like contemplation or reverie, has been associated with creativity and imagination. A sense of impracticality and distance from “real” problems or “real” solutions underlies the act of daydreaming. Earlier meanings associate it with unrealistic hopes and dreams of “castle-building in the air.” Through daydreaming, the subject can activate her imagination and transport herself to another time or place.

Daydreaming and boredom share a sense of disengagement from the present, a certain absent-mindedness, an idleness, and aspirations for impractical pursuits. Having my starting point in this common territory between two seemingly opposed moods, I will show the

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9 Oxford English Dictionary, entry *daydream*: “A series of thoughts or yearnings that distract one's attention (esp. pleasantly) from the present; a reverie. Hence: an idle fantasy or vain hope, typically concerning ambitions of happiness or success.”
10 A use tracked to 1816, suggests that “Many, particularly young persons, .. stray in the regions of fancy, called castle-building, or daydreaming.” (Oxford English Dictionary, entry *daydreaming*)
11 Oxford English Dictionary, entry to *daydream*: “trans. (refl.). With into, to. To imagine oneself in another place, time period, etc., as part of a daydream.”
construction of spatial riddles through the folding of boredom into daydreaming in two drawings by Saul Steinberg.

The first drawing I will ponder over is an unpublished sketch, dated 1943-1944 (Figure II.3.). In this drawing, Steinberg portrays himself in a sparsely furnished room, populated with ghost-like silhouettes: “Decorations I made in a room (U.S. Army Hotel) where I’ve been living for a few days. Glad when I moved,”12 he wrote.

After having spent the first eighteen years of his life in Bucharest, Steinberg lived in Italy between 1933 and 1941, where he earned an architecture degree at the Regio Politecnico in Milan. By 1941, he was sought by Mussolini’s police as a stateless Jew with no rights to remain in Italy. A series of immigration ordeals followed and through the help of friends and family, he eventually landed on American soil. Shortly after his arrival, he was drafted in the US Army and in 1943 was deployed first to China, and later to Algiers (via India), Naples, and Rome.13 From 1944 to 1945, The New Yorker magazine published ten portfolios of drawings that recorded Steinberg’s time in the Army. A roommate during the time spent in China recalled that after leaving their shared room for an hour, he came back to a lifesize bar that Steinberg had drawn on the walls: “a table, two chairs, a bottle of whiskey and two glasses, near a window which looked down on Times Square.”14

The second drawing I will examine shows a man watching TV in bed, in an highly decorated bedroom (Figure II.4.). In the summer of 1950, Steinberg traveled to Hollywood to provide the drawing hand of Gene Kelly’s character in An American in Paris. He quit the first day after an argument with the director Vincente Minelli, but stayed in California for the next three months.15 The outcome of his stay on the West Coast was the portfolio titled “The Coast,” which occupies five pages in the January 27, 1951 issue of The New Yorker. The drawing I am

13 Joel Smith, Illuminations (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 31. Upon arriving in the United States, in August 1942 Steinberg was classified as “available for immediate military service” and became a consultant for the Graphics Division of the Office of War Information. With the help of friends, he received a commission as an ensign in the US Naval and became part of the Office for Strategic Services. His skills were used in the preparation of pictorial propaganda and he continued to make drawings of the places and environments he was living in and sent them to The New Yorker. (Saul Steinberg: Chronology. http://saulsteinbergfoundation.org/chronology/ Accessed March 15, 2018)
14 Smith, Illuminations, 31.
looking at is part of this series. In January 1951, Steinberg wrote in his journal: “America looks to California the way Europe looks to America.”

Through the inversion of boredom and daydreaming, the two drawings propose spatial riddles, which, unlike verbal riddles that have an answer, construct, instead, a thick space of ambiguity. The drawings are architectural not because they foreground architectural interiors, but because they invite us to occupy the space by constructing a network of shared complicities between the viewing subject and the architect-artist. Marco Frascari has argued that Steinberg, like Filarete, ties “the place-time of drawing in bundles of practices within the horizon of a region. … These drawings create specific time-place sections through habitual social practices. Their details systematically bind specific locations through the overlapping of time-horizons.”

In Steinberg and Filarete’s drawings, Marco writes, “transpires an embodied cultural calling-into-being of experience.”

**Noontime**

Medieval Christian monks feared *acedia*, boredom’s ancestor, as the “demon of noontide” that threatened to surreptitiously take over their vigilance and alertness in the lazy hours of midday, the time of stillness without shadows. Indifference and apathy induce a non-caring state, a mode of being oblivious to the present and the immediate world, and drive one into emptiness. Analyzing *ennui* in Western literature, literary critic Reinhard Kuhn noted that when the demon of noontide does not stifle creativity, it paradoxically “can and often does induce efforts to fill the void that it hollows out.”

*Boredom, ennui or Langeweille* sometimes inverts itself into the pleasant mood of *daydreaming*. Steinberg’s drawings make present the imprecise territory between boredom and daydreaming, questioning the dichotomy between the two conditions and operating, instead, at their intersection. In various instances, Steinberg has detailed his relationship with boredom, which he viewed as the catalyst of imagination: “The life

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16 Ibid., 76.
18 Ibid., 187.
of the creative man is led, directed, and controlled by boredom. Avoiding boredom is one of our most important purposes.” In his personal notes he elaborated on the role of boredom in his work: if “I get slightly bored with my work, I don’t find the excitement, the real excitement, now this boredom tells me something, it’s a message … I have to invent new things.”

The inversion of boredom and daydreaming activates imagination. In 1790, Xavier de Maistre, an army officer better known as a writer, was confined to a forty-two-day arrest in his room in the aftermath of a duel. The outcome of his involuntary sojourn was the book *Journey around My Room*, a small volume that describes the imaginary travels spawned by the mundane objects in his chamber. A parody of the eighteenth century *Grand Tour*, the book inverts the grandiose narratives of extraordinary adventures with the more modest, but not less engaging, stories of the everyday. Constrained by physical boundaries, he turns his boredom into contemplation: “A nice fire, books, pens; how many resources there are against boredom! And what a pleasure it is, too, to forget your books and your pens, and instead poke your fire, succumbing to a gentle contemplation or arranging a few rhymes to amuse your friends.” Like de Maistre, Steinberg folds boredom into contemplation by examining the mundane and ordinary things around him.

Writing about one’s memory of their childhood home, philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes children’s inversion of boredom and daydreaming as a catalyst of imagination: “What special depth there is in a child’s daydream! And how happy the child who really possesses his moments of solitude! It is a good thing, it is even salutary, for a child to have periods of boredom, for him to learn to know the dialectics of exaggerated play and causeless, pure boredom.” Our memory collapses boredom and daydreaming in re-constructing the dream homes of our childhood: “Centers of boredom, centers of solitude, centers of daydream group together to constitute the oneiric house which is more lasting than the scattered memories of our birthplace.”

In the early decades of the twentieth century, cultural critic Sigfried Kracauer has recognized the modern separation between work and leisure as one of the main sources of

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20 UNCAT MSS 126 Box 100.
23 Ibid., 17.
boredom. This dichotomy has fractured people’s time into active and passive hours and so, fearing the void of having nothing to do, individuals resort to facile forms of entertainment. Quiet Sunday afternoons engender a stifling boredom reflected in the eerie stillness of decorative miniature glass figures, frozen in their porcelain silhouettes. Instead of falling captive to this deadening silence, Kracauer proposes to turn boredom into contemplation:

If, however, one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused w soul come into view. And look – your own soul is likewise swelling, and in ecstasy you name what have always lacked: the great passion.

Steinberg’s drawings occupy the temporal and spatial interval described by de Maitre, Bachelard, and Kracauer, where boredom and daydreaming fold into each other and activate one’s imagination. Steinberg’s techniques of fabricating this riddle involve the construction of boundaries, specific bodily postures, and, deriving from the first two, a particular relationship of the self with the world.

**Spatial Boundaries**

*Looking up, with his eyes closed, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Watching TV with his eyes behind shades, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Are they bored or are they dreaming?*

In the first drawing, Steinberg sketches two versions of himself in a minimally furnished room, an army hotel room, as he remembers. (Figure II.3.) One of the two Steinbergs is lying in bed with the hands folded under his head and looking up, while the other one appears as an oversized specter looking down at his alter ego. The scene appears both alienating and nostalgic as it brings together solid realities and fluid fantasies, an undesirable present and characters from a long-lost past. The edges of the room seem ordinary and precisely defined: walls, ceiling, hardwood floor, a door, and a window. However, another type of boundary doubles the physical

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25 Ibid., 334.
limitations. Two ghosts “spill” into the room, re-imagining its limits and entering into a conversation with man lying on his back. A horizontal specter sweeps the floor and gently holds one of the shoes belonging to the character in bed. A vertical specter occupies the wall, leaking upward onto the ceiling. She is scratching her head with the pensive gesture that indicates someone trying to figure out a riddle. Occupying the perimeter of the space – walls, floor, and part of the ceiling – the ghosts construct fluid boundaries and indicate that the room is both real and imagined. The generic and non-descript army hotel room folds into a warm and welcoming oneiric room, perhaps one of the rooms in the childhood house on Strada Palas.

Often described as the mood experienced by Bovary-ian wives confined to their domesticity, boredom inverts itself into daydreaming when the hard-edged interior becomes fluid and offers a gateway to imagination. It is within this depth turned inside-out that ghosts appear. Known for her casts that solidify and make visible the invisible space, British artist Rachel Whiteread gained international recognition through her celebrated piece Ghost. It casts the interior of a nineteenth-century Victorian living room and bring into presence its specific features: floor boards, ceiling molding, the soot on the fireplace, a door, and a window. The artist confessed that it was only when she looked at the inverted position of the light switch that she realized she was having the perspective from inside the wall. She was occupying the body of a ghost (Figure II.5.).

In the drawing from The Coast series, Steinberg puts his protagonist in a heavily ornate interior (Figure II.4.). A baldachin hanging from the ceiling and an intricate piece of heraldry, as well as an oversized shell-shaped headboard and decorated lamps suggest a fake sense of sophistication. Steinberg is mocking the pretense of elegance – not only does the character look content in this eclectic interior, but he is wearing sunglasses indoors. With a history going back to brocade and other precious fabrics brought from foreign lands, the (fake) baldachin (or baldacco, the Italian word for Baghdad) also evokes something else: the world of fantasies hovering above one’s head when they are daydreaming. Fantasies come to life as phantasms that dwell in the room. But isn’t the TV cancelling out the reverie and bringing back the boredom?

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26 Created in 1990, Ghost is currently part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.
27 Oxford English Dictionary, entry baldachin: Etymology – Baldacco, Italian form of Bagdad, the city in Asia where the material was made.
At a closer inspection, these apparently hyper-realistic drawings make one wonder: what is real and what is imagined? A specter is gently holding a shoe, but ultimately both the ghost and the shoe are drawn figures. A man wearing sunglasses is lying in bed—while indoors, maybe he dreams of wandering outside, so where is he really? “Drawing is more truthful than reality,” Steinberg wrote, “because reality is undoubtedly invented, whereas drawing is faithful. It is made according to the rules of drawing.”

As long as specters make their appearance and occupy the perimeter of these spaces, boundaries are no longer dense, but porous and elastic. Spaces with permeable boundaries blur the distinction between boredom and daydreaming, upside and down, inside and out.

**Bodily Posture**

*Looking up, with his eyes closed, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Watching TV with his eyes behind shades, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Are they bored or are they dreaming?*

In ennui as in daydreaming, the head is heavy with the weight of thoughts or, on the contrary, as light as the void inside. The bored, as well as the contemplative, abandon their body to loose postures. They rest their jaw on one hand in an unbalanced pose and gaze toward nowhere (Figure II.6.). Sometimes, they lie horizontally with the head comfortably balanced on both arms and gaze up (Figure II.7.). Longing either for a glorified past or for an imagined future, they never live in the present. The couple in Walter Sickert’s *L’Ennui* is bored (Figure II.8.). Or perhaps contemplative…? The woman is looking to the left, as if toward the past, while the man is looking to the right, as if toward the future. The bored and the contemplative never look you in the eye, and that makes it hard to distinguish between them and decipher the riddle of their thoughts. Disengaged from the each other and from the viewer, both characters in the painting look elsewhere and dream of being elsewhere. The stuffed bird in the glass cage in the foreground recalls the stillness of Kracauer glass miniatures. They capture the essence of boredom: a body held captive within the invisible confines of a glass box.
Both boredom and daydreaming claim domestic, familiar spaces, where bodies relax and lose the tightness of the upright posture. “Ennui, it has been said, is a ‘domestic demon.’”28 The tedium of everyday life induces the uniform, the shapeless, but also the multiform, the excess – of ornament, of color, of objects, of furniture.29 Boredom and contemplation are inward-looking, private moods. They belong to an inner world, often depicted as the space between an interior and an exterior seen through a window or reflected – as inversion – through a mirror. The refuge of the interior offers an alternative to tedium.

In Steinberg’s drawings, both bodies are reclining. Thus, the body becomes a horizon line full of possibilities. While standing and sitting are in a continuous interaction, lying down offers different readings. Joseph Rykwert has remarked the affinity between standing up and the primordial stretching of the body at birth.30 The act of sitting is both a form of surrendering to fatigue and a coming-closer to the earth. At the same time, it often indicates a form of privilege clearly expressed in relation to others who are standing. Neither standing (as if ready for action), nor sitting (as if resting, but still alert), the passive posture of lying down allows a range of different futures to unfold: boredom, dreaming, daydreaming, awakening, sickness or even death are all possible. Unpredictably, the protagonist might sit up, stand up, roll on the side, move or simply fall asleep. Playing within this ambiguous territory, Steinberg does not give one straight answer, but rather thickens the spatial riddle of the inversion between boredom and daydreaming.

The Self and the World

Looking up, with his eyes closed, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Watching TV with his eyes behind shades, a man is lying in bed, arms folded under his head. Are they bored or are they dreaming?

“Happiness enjoys itself completely only if it doubles its own image in the mirror of reflection. Happiness wants to be both subject and object: the subject of its object and the object

29 Ibid., 49.
30 Joseph Rykwert, “The Upright Posture – A Question of Method.”
of its subject. There is no happiness if one is alone; happiness must be shared, it needs a public.”

Marco Frascari has written about the power of architecture to create a vita beata (a happy existence) by merging visible (architectural and human) bodies and invisible body images. Steinberg’s protagonists imagine a happy existence beyond the boundaries of their existing conditions. Through boredom and daydreaming as solitary acts, the characters are simultaneously connected with and disengaged from, the larger world.

A recurrent theme in Steinberg’s work, the television appears to bring the spectator into the world or rather bring the world closer. In fact, the subject is detached and cut off from a world perceived through the mediation of the television screen, where people turn into specters with expressionless grins (Figure II.9). Paradoxically, the drawn ghosts appear more “real” than the smiling people on the screen who lack personality and display a fake, uniform and meaningless smile. While the latter construct an artificial and illusory relationship with the world, the former engage the memory and imagination of the subject.

In the middle of an overflow of “stuff,” a faint smile is the sign of a man’s satisfaction with the self and the situation (Figure II.4). The Spartan interior does not make the other man happy, but his imagination spills onto and inhabits the bare walls (Figure II.3). Who is bored and who is daydreaming?

The man lying in bed and his spectral alter ego watching him are reflections of each other. This inversion can only exist in the space of inwardness and introspection, where one becomes a flâneur in his own room and discovers, just as Xavier de Maistre, the bliss of tedium. It is within the intimate space of domesticity that ennui and daydreaming are intrinsically connected and conspire toward building a vita beata.

By intertwining boredom and daydreaming in his spatial riddles, Steinberg reveals the thick space of domesticity as an instrument, rather than a machine, for living, attuned to moods and atmospheres, open to different horizons, full of dreams, as well as nightmares.

In Steinberg’s universe, every-one and every-thing is a dreamer.

A stray dog dreams of guarding a castle, even if the castle is the Smithsonian Institution logo (Figure II.10.).

A heavy-handed-drawn cube has modernist aspirations (Figure II.11.).

… and even a banal E wishes to become a slim and distinguished French vowel (Figure II.12.).

From the enigma of the ancient Sphinx to present-day puzzles, riddles are everywhere. Just as boredom and daydreaming fold into each other through unexpected inversions, things turned upside down or inside out never stay the same. Walter Benjamin saw the inside of boredom as a lustrous and colorful silk within which we wrap ourselves when we dream.33 In his own way, through inversions, reflections, and shadows, Saul Steinberg stubbornly kept looking for a sometimes twisted, never straightforward:

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Second Interlude. Figures.

Figure II.1. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure II.2. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure II.3. Saul Steinberg, Untitled sketch, 1943-1944. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure II.4. Saul Steinberg, Drawing from the portfolio “The Coast,” The New Yorker, January 27, 1951. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure II.5. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*, 1990. Photos by the author.

Figure II.6. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure II.7. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Figure II.8. Walter Sicker, *L’Ennu*, 1914. Public domain.

Figure II.9. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure II.10. Saul Steinberg. *Drawing from a series made as an artist-in-residence at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*, 1967.
Figure II.11. Saul Steinberg. Courtesy of The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Chapter 3: Between the *Boring* and the *Interesting*

**Introduction**

The starting point of this inquiry is the question that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown asked in *Learning from Las Vegas*: “Is boring architecture interesting?”¹ They pose this question at the end of the first chapter (“Ugly and Ordinary Architecture or the Decorated Shed”) of the second part of the book as a way to frame their argument for the validity of architecture as decorated shed. I find the roots of the dichotomy *boring – interesting* in Venturi’s theory and practice before his collaboration with Scott Brown, in his theoretical stance from *Complexity and Contradiction* as well as in his early projects, such as the three buildings for the town of North Canton, Ohio or the entry for the Copley Square competition. However, it is important to note that Venturi’s early use of these terms introduces nuances and ideas that will later disappear from the theoretical and practical work of the Venturi – Scott Brown team.

As we will see later in this chapter, Venturi’s play between *boring* and *interesting* in his early work suggests multiple interpretations. With an emphasis on appearance, reflected in the numerous elevation studies, architectural objects become autonomous. Scale is important in the dichotomy *boring – interesting* and requires different readings from far-away and close-up. Time is implicit in this mode of reading the work and suggests a lengthy rather than immediate engagement with it. This direction is quite different from the immediacy of signs and symbols that will later become one of the central ideas in the work of the team. With a focus on design strategies based on formal arrangements of elements, the *boring* and the *interesting* are no longer a matter of relationship between object and subject, but a matter of the autonomy of the work. They also turn normative, announcing what will become explicit in later writings, such as *Learning from Las Vegas*, namely assessing architecture and design from an aesthetic and formalist perspective.

The *boring* and the *interesting* have a long intellectual history, which this chapter will attempt to uncover. This chapter will critically look at the concept of the *interesting* and its

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relationship with the *boring* as a way of understanding, through the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, its specificity within and consequences for architectural discourse. Venturi and Scott Brown have employed these concepts as distinct, opposite categories. Using irony through rhetorical arguments, they have suggested that, while their architecture appeared *boring*, it was in fact *interesting*. In doing so, they validated the latter, perhaps inadvertently, as a relevant category in the architectural discourse. Although *boring* and *interesting* are generally employed loosely, based on their intellectual history I suggest that the two are not in dialectical opposition, but become, in fact, interchangeable. Unlike the *boring*, which is detested, undesirable, and generally avoided, the *interesting* is appealing, attractive, and sought after (although at times it can have the very opposite meaning). The *interesting* operates through deception, its lure resides precisely in the illusion constructed through ambiguity and imprecision, through the seductive promise of a wholeness opposite to the abysmal emptiness of the *boring*. The *boring* and the *interesting* sit in a Janusian relationship where they represent, in fact, two sides of the same condition. Seeking the *interesting* engenders a relapse into the *boring* and thus newer and more exciting images quickly become obsolete, drawing one back into tedium and boredom.

Firstly, I will trace the intellectual history of the *interesting* as an aesthetic category rooted in nineteenth century philosophy and aesthetics. Although our current use of *boring* and *interesting* is rather shallow, the terms have a rich genealogy. By uncovering their deeper conceptual meanings, I aim to unveil how their use in architectural discourse shows biases and specific directions with critical consequences for theory and practice. While most of the times the term *interesting* stands for something loose, indeterminate, and generic, in philosophy and aesthetics, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term has well-defined characteristics. Although Venturi and Scott Brown have distanced themselves from the postmodern label, having claimed, instead, a Modernist lineage, I propose that Venturi’s approach to architecture resonated with nineteenth century aesthetic theories on form.

Secondly, I will examine the emergence of the *interesting* as a distinct category primarily in the artistic and critical discourse of the 1960s, thus building the context for its use in architectural discourse. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the architectural conversation about the *boring* and the *interesting* has paralleled and was influenced by, similar directions in visual arts. Examining Minimalism, Pop Art and Conceptual Art in the 1960s,
cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has argued that the use of the *interesting* was not a mere rhetorical trope, but opened up the possibility of a conversation and ultimately turned into an operative tool to facilitate criticism. The *interesting* was raised to a form of critical judgment. Also writing about visual arts in the 1960s, philosopher Karsten Harries, on the other hand, has proposed that the *interesting* never surpassed its aesthetic nature. Building around the interdependence of the *boring* and the *interesting*, he employed the latter as a means to formulate questions about ethics and aesthetics in architecture.

Lastly, I argue that the *interesting* took a different path in architecture than the critical one suggested by Ngai in the visual arts. In architectural discourse it has specific attributes that distinguishes it from other fields: (A) the emphasis on *appearance* as the main property of architecture results in a sense of deceit and the autonomy of the architectural object; (B) the use of combinatory techniques as design strategies generates self-referential and normative practices; (C) the bias for formal excess and overload is justified as complexity.

It was the concern with *form* that prevailed throughout *Complexity and Contradiction* – in fact, in the note to the second edition, Venturi regretted not having titled his treatise *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Form*, as it had been suggested by one of his mentors, the art and architectural historian Donald Drew Egbert.² The focus on *appearance* as the defining attribute of architecture is still a current theme – it has gradually shifted from the three-dimensional *forms* of the second half of the twentieth century to the two-dimensional *images* we are confronted with today. *Flatness*, discussed in the previous chapter, was announcing the collapse of the multiple dimensions of architecture into a thin image. Moreover, contemporary technologies such as digital fabrication or 3D printing, which allow for endless formal iterations require a critical examination of both our criteria and our intentions. Midcentury conversations about the *boring* and the *interesting* have not turned obsolete, on the contrary, in a world submerged in fleeting images they are more relevant today than ever before.

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3.1. Learning from the interesting

As literary and cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has remarked, one of the difficulties of tackling the concept of interesting is its vague, loose, and imprecise use. Its ambiguity makes it a “plastic word,” a term that the German writer and linguist Uwe Poerksen coined in his book Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language. Much like Lego construction blocks, words such as “accomplishment,” “factor,” “identity,” “problem,” “process,” “quality,” “relationship,” “strategy,” “structure,” “system,” “value” Poerksen argues, can mean anything and nothing at the same time. They resemble metaphors as they associate two fields (the domain of science with the realm of the everyday), but are fundamentally different from them because they no longer conjure up any images. They fit in any context, but rule out synonyms; they have a large field of connotations, but no specific denotation; they “lack a historical dimension. … they are shallow; they are new and they don’t taste of anything.”

Despite its current elusiveness, the concept of interesting has a history that illuminates the overlooked meanings embedded within it. It is related to, though somewhat different from, that of interest. Their etymological roots go back to the Latin interest used mainly as a verb in third person referring to something that “makes a difference, concerns, matters, is of importance.” Latin also gives us interest as an in between condition, a state of being in the interval: inter esse. The history of the word interest is rather obscure – while it is known that until the sixteenth century, it persisted in old French with the sense of “damage or loss,” it is unclear how it migrated to English in the fifteenth century. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first use of interest in English as early as 1450 in relation to a “legal concern in a
thing” and for centuries, its predominant use was associated with financial and legal issues.9

*Interesting* seems to have entered the English vocabulary later, with Lord Shaftesbury’s 1711 *Characteristicks* as something that concerns, touches, or affects; by mid-eighteenth century, the adjective was used to designate a woman’s state of being pregnant, a meaning that remained in use until mid-twentieth century.10

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**Interest in psychology, economy, and science.** A brief excursus into the history of *interest* will show that the latter covers multiple fields, and has various, sometimes unrelated, connotations, from a subjective affect, to an objective term related to monetary transactions. These underlying meanings, in turn, are echoed, as we will see later, in the concept of *interesting*. The intellectual genealogy of *interest* and the *interesting* has multiple intertwining strands that bring together philosophy, social sciences, aesthetics, literary criticism, and visual arts. Like most of the essential terms that we employ more or less aware of their actual meaning, *interest* and *interesting* are less a matter of language and more one of culture, society, and history. As cultural critic Raymond Williams has argued, the language does not simply reflect the processes of society and history, but rather these processes take place within the language itself.11

Scholars have acknowledged the difficulty of tracing the development of *interest* as a “common name for a general or natural concern, and beyond this to something which first ‘naturally’ and then just ‘actually’ attracts our attention.”12 Two different meanings of the word take either (1) an objective, or (2) a subjective turn: (1) general concern or the power to attract concern (mid-eighteenth century) and (2) contemporary predominant sense of curiosity or attention, or the power to attract curiosity or attention (since mid-nineteenth century).13 These distinctions are expressed through subtle differences in terminology: *disinterested* has positive

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9 Oxford English Dictionary, entry interest – “The fact or relation of being legally concerned; legal concern in a thing; esp. right or title to property, or to some of the uses or benefits pertaining to property; = INTERESS n. 1.”

10 Oxford English Dictionary, entry interesting – “(to be) in an interesting condition, interesting situation, interesting state: (to be) pregnant; also, to be interesting; interesting event: a birth.”


12 Ibid., 172.

13 Ibid., 172.
connotations – impartial, unbiased; uninterested and uninteresting, on the other hand, have negative connotations – something that does not have the power to attract.  

In psychology, interest has been defined as a type of affect. In 1962, psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins brought forward the study of affect and consciousness that have long been ignored within a paradigm dominated by behaviorism and psychoanalysis.  He argued that the mid-century shift toward examining consciousness was prompted not by psychologists, but rather by neuropsychologists and designers who were able to quantify and measure data that had previously been considered too fluid. Tomkins defined eight types of affects, of which interest-excitement, he claimed, “has been the most seriously neglected.” He listed these affects in pairs of two, where the first term designates the milder, and the second one the more intense, manifestation of the affect. Unlike behaviorists and psychoanalysts (who regarded interest as a “secondary phenomenon, a derivative of drives”), Tomkins situated interest at the very core of human existence and progress. He proposed, in what was a rather circular definition, that “the function of this very general positive affect is to ‘interest’ the human being in what is necessary and in what it is possible for him to be interested in.” The possible unfolds multiple futures that could be both positive and negative.

Tomkins relegated the pair interest-excitement primarily to the stimulation of sight and hearing. Paradoxically, he described the bodily responses to visual stimuli in the behaviorist manner that he was, in fact, critiquing. At the same time, while emphasizing sight and hearing,

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14 Ibid., 172.
15 “The empirical analysis of consciousness has been delayed by two historical developments, Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis.” Silvan S. Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness (New York: Springer Publishing Company Inc., 1962), 3. Tomkins has developed an affect theory that subsequently, scholars argue, will become relevant in poststructuralist theory and queer theory.
16 “The paradox of this second half of the twentieth century is that the return to the classical problems of attention and consciousness was not a return by psychologists who had a change of heart. It is derivative rather of the initiative of the neuropsychologists and the automata designers.” (Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness, 5.)
17 Ibid., 337.
18 Ibid., 337.
19 Tomkins’s categories are: (positive affects) interest-excitement; enjoyment-joy; (resetting affects) surprise-startle; (negative affects) distress-anguish; fear-terror; shame-humiliation; contempt-disgust; anger-rage. (Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness, 337)
20 Ibid., 342.
21 The possible belongs equally to “the realm of the wonderful, the trivial, the distressing and the terrifying.” (Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness, 345).
22 “When the object of excitement is visual there appear to be two distinct aspects to the ocular component – a fixation of the eyes on the object and a rapid visual exploration of the object. These two ocular aspects appear
he also acknowledged “reverie” and “reflective problem solving” as possible triggers of this affect.\textsuperscript{23} In other words, he proposed that stimulating one’s mind and imagination, and not only their senses, engenders interest and excitement. For Tomkins interest-excitement is critical in the development of both conceptual thinking and creativity:

To think, as to engage in any other human activity, one must care, one must be excited, must be continually rewarded. There is no human competence which can be achieved in the absence of a sustaining interest, and the development of cognitive competence is peculiarly vulnerable to anomie.\textsuperscript{24}

Novelty also played an important role in Tomkins’s description of creativity, which he defined not “by the nature of the response, but rather by the relative novelty of the response compared to prior responses.”\textsuperscript{25} He claimed that “Without interest in novelty, there is no development of intelligence, but without an active intelligence there can be no interest in novelty.”\textsuperscript{26}

Most of the times, when we qualify something as interesting, the association of novelty and interest is still the norm. Tomkins acknowledged that in order to build cognitive competence, there is a necessity for both the immediacy of novelty and the time needed to build up knowledge.\textsuperscript{27} He saw thinking and creativity as two intertwining strands. His “hypothesis of creativity as an addiction to thinking” proposed that “learning ability must be exercised to be acquired in the first place and continually practiced if it is to be retained.”\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[	extsuperscript{23}] Although the affect of interest or excitement is activated by, and frequently accompanies, looking or listening to something “interesting,” it may also be activated by or accompany sexuality, or revery or reflective problem solving.” (Tomkins, \textit{Affect Imagery Consciousness}, 339).
\item[	extsuperscript{24}] Ibid., 343.
\item[	extsuperscript{25}] Ibid., 353.
\item[	extsuperscript{26}] Ibid., 354
\item[	extsuperscript{27}] “In connection with the development of acquaintance and competence it is necessary not only to vary perceptual, conceptual, motor and memory perspectives but also to extend radically the period of acquaintance. One must live with an idea, a person, or a painting or oneself for some time before one may attain that kind of knowledge of any domain and that kind of competence which is distinctively human.” (Tomkins, \textit{Affect Imagery Consciousness}, 349).
\item[	extsuperscript{28}] Ibid., 357.
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In midcentury psychology, the concept of interest-emotion emerged as a type of affect, essential to cognition, perception, thinking, creativity, in short to life itself. Associated primarily with novelty, and visual and acoustic stimuli, the affect of interest was deemed to ensure the ongoing development of a successful inner life. A parallel conversation was taking place in architecture understood primarily as a visual matter.  

Political economist Albert O. Hirschman situates the origin of interest not in the realm of subjective affects, but in the more objective one of monetary transactions. He looked at interest as a vehicle for examining capitalism and studied the dialectics between passions and interests in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to understand the intersections of statecraft, political science, and economy, and their consequences for twentieth century capitalism. Observing the mercantile connotation of the term interest, he made the argument that “‘Interests’ of persons and groups eventually came to be centered on economic advantage as its core meaning, not only in ordinary language but also in social-science terms as ‘class interests’ and ‘interest groups.’” Hirschman maintained that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the notion of interest offered a middle-ground between the “traditional categories of human motivation:” (destructive) passion and (ineffectual) reason. In this opposition, interest embodied the rational side of passion and the passionate side of reason. Even when interest was not associated with material aspects, Hirschman remarked, the term denoted “an element of reflection and calculation.”

It was the legal and economic sense of the term that was prevalent until the seventeenth century and referred “to an objective or legal share of something.” The extended use, denoting “a natural share or common concern,” was originally employed in a metaphorical sense. In one of its earliest uses, interest meant a “compensation for default on a debt” and was different from

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31 Hirschman, The Passions and the Interests, 43.
32 “Interest was seen to partake in effect of the better nature of each, as the passion of self-love upgraded and contained by reason, and the reason given direction and force by passion.” Ibid., 43.
33 Ibid., 32.
34 Williams, Keywords of a Vocabulary of Culture and Society, 172.
35 Ibid., 172.
usury, which designated what we call today “interest for a deliberate loan.” What is important to note is that contemporary uses of interest or interesting in their sense of “attention, attraction, and concern” spring from the experience of a society based on monetary relationships.

In a study on science and knowledge, journalist John Horgan showed that in certain scientific circles, interesting and complex are interchangeable terms: researchers have employed “‘interesting’ as a synonym for ‘complex.’” This observation sheds new light on the title of Venturi’s treatise, where “Complexity and Contradiction” might be understood as “The Interesting and The Contradictory.” Discussing “the end of science,” and more specifically, the end of what he called “chaoplexity,” Horgan paraphrased an old adage about beauty, suggesting that “complexity exists, in some murky sense, in the eye of the beholder.” Consequently, the interesting cannot claim any territory of objective certainties, but remains in the realm of subjectivity. Novelist Henry James has also drawn connections between the interesting and the complex. wrote that “The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting.” Years later, artist Donald Judd made the claim that artwork “needs only to be interesting.”

Venturi’s notion of complexity in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture was itself ambiguous and based on sometimes dated scientific research. In this context, interesting and complex were related and belonged to rather undefined and vague categories. However, there is more to this association than an inadvertent accident: Vincent Scully described the Vanna Venturi house through the same lens. He appropriated the Freudian principle of condensation (i.e. bringing together the opposites in order to create a new unity) as an angle to examine Venturi’s work:

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36 Ibid., 172.
37 Ibid., 173.
39 Ibid., 197.
42 For a comprehensive discussion on Venturi’s theory of complexity, see Peter Laurence, “Contradictions and Complexities: Jane Jacobs’s and Robert Venturi’s Complexity Theories,” Journal of Architectural Education 59, No. 3 (February 2006): 49-60.
Here the principle of condensation becomes an extremely complex and interesting one. With the chimney rising through the gable, the general parti derives from that of the Beach House. Now, however, the living room is half vaulted, and that semicircle is picked up in the tacked-on arch of the facade; now, the whole house is rising and being split through the middle.\textsuperscript{43}

The specific meanings of interest that we have examined (affect, reflection and calculation, complexity) offer a first glimpse into the nature of the interesting. They begin to illuminate the multiple layers of Venturi’s repeated use of the boring and the interesting and indicate that his take on architecture was at the same time highly subjective and claiming a scientific objectivity.

The following sections will examine interest, the interesting and the latter’s relationship with the boring in several major works in philosophy and aesthetics from the eighteenth century onward.

**Immanuel Kant: free play; the interesting as deceitful.** The study of interest and the interesting developed within the field of aesthetics (first defined by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in 1735) and in relation to judgments of taste and judgments of beauty.\textsuperscript{44}

Immanuel Kant discussed interest, the interesting and boredom in The Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790) and Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798). In the former, he developed a two-part theory of aesthetics revolving around the aesthetic power of judgment and, respectively, the teleological power of judgment. Central to his work were the concepts of interest, taste, the agreeable, the beautiful, the good, the sublime. Kant defined the judgment of taste at the intersection of understanding (i.e. objective reason) and imagination (i.e.

\textsuperscript{43} Vincent Scully, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 265. In the same essay, Scully wrote: “Venturi … has worked most through the principle of condensation – Freud described how what he called the ‘dream work’ brought ‘dream thoughts’ into ‘dream content.’ The first stage in that process was the condensation of opposites to form a ‘new unity.’ That aesthetic idea is originally Scholastic, since Scholastic philosophy employed the word *concordantia*, the reconciliation of opposites, to define what Freud meant by condensation.” (Scully, *Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, 263.)

\textsuperscript{44} The term *aesthetics* in its modern use was first coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in 1735 and defined later in his 1750 *Aesthetica*. Etymologically, the word *aesthetics* derives from the Greek *aisthetikos* that was related to sense perception, sensitive, perceptive, perceptible. (Oxford English Dictionary, entry *aesthetic*: “Ultimately < ancient Greek *aisthetikos* of or relating to sense perception, sensitive, perceptive.”)
subjective feeling), thus situating the judgment of beauty or the aesthetic judgment in the realm of both objectivity and subjectivity. Kant presented an alternative to the two main traditions in eighteenth century aesthetics. On the one hand, the empiricist tradition was claiming that the judgment of beauty expresses a feeling without a cognitive content. On the other hand, the rationalist tradition was arguing that the judgment of beauty consists in the cognition of an object as having a universal, objective property. At the same time, Kant indirectly began to conceptualize the difference between arbitrary and subjective.

Kant defined interest as “the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object” and posited that “The satisfaction that determines the judgment of taste is without any interest.” Kant differentiated between grounding a judgment of taste on interest and producing an interest, where the latter generates the interesting:

A judgment on an object of satisfaction can be entirely disinterested yet still very interesting, i.e., it is not grounded on any interest but it produces an interest; all pure moral judgments are like this. But the pure judgment of taste does not in itself even ground any interest.

Kant further distinguished between objective sensation and subjective representation of sensation (or feeling), and between the agreeable, the beautiful, and the good. Each of these last three concepts designate a different relationship to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure: the agreeable gratifies, the beautiful pleases, and the good is esteemed or approved for its objective value. The agreeable addresses the senses. The good addresses reason. The beautiful finds satisfaction in both senses and reason and is the only one among the three that is free and

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45 “In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective.” (Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 89, 5:204)
46 Hume, Hutcheson, and Burke are representative of the first tradition, whereas Baumgarten and Meier are representative of the second. (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/ Accessed October 25, 2016)
47 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 90.
48 Ibid., 91. 5:20.
49 Kant gives the example of the difference between the green color of a meadow and the agreeableness of that color: “The green color of the meadows belongs to objective sensation, as perception of an object of sense; but its agreeableness belongs to subjective sensation, through which no object is represented, i.e. to feeling … .” (Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 92, 5:207)
50 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 95. 5:210.
disinterested: “One can say that among all these three kinds of satisfaction only that of the taste for the beautiful is a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, neither that of the senses nor that of reason extorts approval.”

The notion of interest is what relates the concept of taste and the concept of beautiful is: “Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful.”

Furthermore, Kant will define the beautiful as that “which pleases universally without a concept.” The agreeable is grounded in personal feelings and the perception of the senses and has a subjective value. The beautiful, on the other hand, has universal value. The taste of the senses generates private judgments and is not ascribe to others, whereas the taste of reflection engenders generally valid judgments, being ascribed to others and to the object itself. Aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste have several attributes: (1) are based on feelings of disinterested pleasure; (2) claim a universal validity; (3) do not presuppose an end or a purpose; (4) stand in a relation of necessity to the object which elicits them.

Based on disinterested pleasure, the judgment of the beautiful is different from the judgment of the agreeable (which expresses an interest in something such as food or drink) and also from the judgment of the good (which expresses an interest in the concept of moral goodness.)

Key to Kant’s critique of taste is the idea that the judgment of the object precedes the feeling of pleasure in the object. In this dynamics, imagination and understanding (or cognition) are situated in a relationship of free play that generates the representation of an object and the judgment of taste. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant had described imagination as organizing the data of sense-perception under the governance of rules that are prescribed by the

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51 Ibid., 95. 5:210.
52 Ibid., 96. 5:211.
53 Ibid., 104. 5:219.
54 Ibid., 97-98.
56 Ibid., 102. 5:217
57 “Now there belongs to a representation by which an object is given, in order for there to be cognition of it in general, imagination for the composition of the manifold of intuition and understanding for the unity of the concept that unifies the representation. This state of a free play of the faculties of cognition with a representation through which an object is given must be able to be universally communicated, because cognition … is the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone.” (Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 103. 5:218)
understanding. In other words, imagination was subordinated to understanding (or reason). In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, on the other hand, imagination and understanding stand in a different relationship, one of *free play* where the former is no longer subordinated to the latter. Imagination has gained a higher status. The *beautiful* resides not in the object itself, but rather in the disinterested pleasure one experiences from the free play of imagination and understanding. The judgment of taste, then, is not arbitrary— it involves, instead, a negotiation of imagination and reason.

Published in 1798, eight years after the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* addressed the issue of boredom in the first part of the book ("Anthropological Didactic") that dealt with knowing “the interior as well as the exterior of the human being.” Situated in “Book II. The feeling of pleasure and displeasure,” the conversation on boredom strategically occupies the middle ground between the cognitive faculty (Book I) and the faculty of desire (Book II). *Boredom* and the *boring* are intertwined with the *interesting*.

Kant suggested that boredom might have critical consequences upon the very nature of the individual. This state is perceived as “a void of sensation by the human being who is used to an alternation of sensations in himself, and who is striving to fill up his instinct for life with something or other.” The absence of sensations impairs the cognitive faculty, which, in turn, disturbs the interior of the human being and might even lead to radical gestures: “even if no positive pain stimulates us to activity, if necessary a negative one, *boredom*, will often affect us in such a manner that we feel driven to do something harmful to ourselves rather than nothing at all.”

The relationship between sensations and boredom has been set up earlier, in Book I, in the discussion on what increases or decreases sense impressions. Defined from the least intense to the most intense, these four techniques are: (1) contrast, (2) novelty, (3) change, and (4) intensification. It is relevant to examine the distinction between *contrast* and *contradiction*.

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59 Ibid., 128.
60 Ibid., 127.
61 Ibid., 54-58.
While the former is the juxtaposition “of mutually contrary sense representations under one and the same concept,” the latter is the “linking of mutually antagonistic concepts.”\textsuperscript{62} Building a case through examples taken from architecture and landscape, Kant assigns a positive value to contrast and a negative one to contradiction. “A well-cultivated piece of land in a sandy desert,” “the bustle and glitter of an estate or even of a great city near the quiet, simple, and yet contented life of the farmer,” “a house with a thatched roof in which one finds tasteful and comfortable rooms inside” are all examples of contrast that enliven our representations and strengthen the senses.\textsuperscript{63} On the other hand, “poverty and ostentatiousness,” a lady wearing dirty clothes and glittering diamonds, or an extravagant dinner with the host wearing crude footwear are examples of contradiction where “one sense representation destroys or weakens the other because it wants to unite what is opposite under one and the same concept which is impossible.”\textsuperscript{64} From this perspective, we might argue that the idea of “contradiction in architecture” is not just undesirable, but also impossible.

The second technique to increase / decrease sense impressions is novelty, which counteracts the familiar of the everyday that wears out sense impressions. The new, the rare, that which has been kept hidden, belong to the same category and their role is to animate / boost attention. Through the notion of interest Kant operates a distinction between curiosity (as the desire to acquire knowledge for the sake of the new, the rare and the hidden) and a more genuine tendency to know the object of one’s attention:

Although this inclination [curiosity] only plays with ideas and is otherwise without interest in their objects, it is not to be criticized, except when it is a matter of spying on that which really is of interest to others alone.

In other words, the interest in the object itself is qualitatively different from the interest in the object as mere novelty.

Change is another way to activate the senses by alternating opposite types of stimulation (“work and rest, city and country life, social conversation and play”) that eventually result in the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{64} Kant, \textit{Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View}, 55.
strengthening of the mind. Through the notion of change, the interesting is defined as that quality resulting from the stimulation of senses through contrasting impressions:

Nature itself has arranged things so that pain creeps in, uninvited, between pleasant sensations that entertain the senses, and so makes life interesting. But it is absurd to mix in pain intentionally and to hurt oneself for the sake of variety, to allow oneself to be awakened in order to properly feel oneself falling asleep again .

Implied therein is the idea that variety generates interest in the object as novelty.

Last but not least, in Kant’s aesthetic theories intensification is the last technique of gradually increasing the intensity of sensations. Postponing enjoyment rather than consuming it all at once enriches one’s life, whether the approach is Stoic restraint or Epicurean gratification.

In his theory on design, Venturi employs these four techniques (contrast, novelty, change and intensification) to increase sense impression. His use of contradiction is directly related to Kant’s idea of contrast and several chapters in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture directly address this topic. Although he appears to reject novelty, the latter results from the emphasis on the interesting. Moreover, variety as a design strategy might be construed in a twofold way: on the one hand, variety is a reaction against “Less is more” and the reductive modernist aesthetics; on the other hand, the variety resulting from combinatory techniques constitutes the ultimate goal of architecture. The examples in the book are numerous. Discussing the necessity of a complex architecture that needs to be reflected through both medium and program, Venturi writes: “the variety inherent in the ambiguity of visual perception must once more be acknowledged and exploited.”

Opposed to modernist standardization, variety is found

65 Ibid., 56.
66 Ibid., 57.
67 “Young man! Deny yourself gratifications (of amusement, indulgence, love, and so forth), if not with the Stoic intention of wanting to do without them completely, then with the refined Epicurean intention of having in view an ever-increasing enjoyment. This stinginess with the assets of your enjoyment of life actually makes you richer through the postponement of enjoyment, even if, at the end of life, you have had to give up most of the profit from it. Like everything else, the consciousness of having enjoyment in your control is more fruitful and comprehensive than anything that gratifies through sense, because by this means it is simultaneously consumed and thus deducted from the total quality.” (Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, 57-58)
68 Ch. 4 “Contradictory Levels;” Ch. 5 “Contradictory Levels Continued;” Ch. 7 “Contradiction Adapted;” Ch. 8 “Contradiction Juxtaposed.”
in the commonplace and ordinary objects celebrated in Pop Art.\textsuperscript{70} At an urban level, it is manifested, for instance, in the unusually shaped buildings situated on the triangular blocks resulted from the intersections of diagonal avenues with the gridiron street fabric in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{71} Finally, \textit{intensification}, although never mentioned explicitly, is at work in projects that require different types of readings, from far away and from close up, such as the unbuilt design for the Copley Square in Boston.\textsuperscript{72}

These four techniques constitute the background of a theory on the \textit{boring} and the \textit{interesting} where \textit{boredom} is discussed with its pair, \textit{amusement}. Having shown different strategies to activate the senses through contrast, novelty, change, and intensification, Kant describes \textit{boredom} as the result of two vectors, one associated with sense perception and the other with time, a notion embedded in the German word for boredom (\textit{Langeweile} or, literally, “long while”). Enjoyments make time feel shorter because the faster time passes, the more renewed one feels.\textsuperscript{73} Moreover, “Conversations that contain little exchange of ideas are called \textit{boring}, and just because of this also arduous, and an \textit{entertaining} man is still regarded as an agreeable man, even if not exactly an important one.”\textsuperscript{74} Implicit here is the association of enjoyment or entertainment with the passing of time, which only creates the illusion of a meaningful (or important) experience. In contrast, the void of sensations spawns a \textit{horror vacui} and the fateful presentiment of a slow death.\textsuperscript{75} The question raised involves the nature of human existence: why does someone who has experienced boredom their entire life complains at the end that their life has been too short?\textsuperscript{76} The phenomenon is explained through a visual metaphor that offers a spatial visualization of a temporal feeling:

The cause of this is to be sought in the analogy with a similar observation: why do German miles (which are not measured or indicated with milestones, like the Russian...
versts) always become shorter the nearer we are to a capital (e.g., Berlin), and longer the farther we are from one (in Pomerania)? The reason is that the *abundance* of objects seen (villages and farmhouses) produces in our memory the deceptive conclusion that a vast amount of space has been covered and, consequently, that a longer period of time necessary for this purpose has also passed. However, the *emptiness* in the latter case produces little recollection of what has been seen and therefore leads to the conclusion that the route was shorter, and hence the time less, than would be shown by the clock.77

The excess of objects creates the illusion of covering a vast space over a longer period of time, just like the abundance of enjoyable or entertaining events creates the illusion of a meaningful passing of time. The experienced time is different from the measured time. The temporal aspect of the *boring* as *horror vacui* is intertwined with the physical aspect of the *interesting* as excess. Key to understanding the tension between the *boring* and the *interesting* is the idea of deception: time *appears* longer or shorter depending on the events taking place; activities *appear* meaningful based on their mere quantity rather than their significance; a man *appears* agreeable when his conversations are entertaining rather than important. All these situations indicate the presence of something interesting (i.e. distracting) that *appears* to offer a solution to tedium while in fact it only conceals the void of boredom.

Kant’s stance is critical to unpacking the relationship *boring – interesting*. Firstly, he distinguishes between arbitrary and subjective. While they are often interchangeable and vague in our common parlance today, he suggests that, far from being random, the latter belongs to the judgment of *taste* (or the judgment of *beauty*). The judgment of *taste* is different from the judgment of the *good* (which involves reason) and the judgment of the *agreeable* (which involves the senses and is mere gratification). Thus it bridges the gap between the two and is completely disinterested because it appeals neither exclusively to reason, nor exclusively to the senses. With an emphasis on feelings and subjectivity over rationality, this judgment of beauty will become the model for aesthetics in the second half of the 19th century.78

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77 Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 130.
Secondly, as the judgment of taste of an object precedes the feeling of pleasure in the object, the former is the result of the free play between imagination and reason. According to Kant, it is in this free play, not in the object itself, that beauty resides. This idea might foreshadow the well-known postmodern interpretation of a work as a double-reading that, through different levels, targets different audiences. Venturi and Scott Brown’s architecture has also been construed in these terms. Philip J. Finkelppearl, an English professor without a design background, who was Venturi’s life-long friend from their Princeton years and the one who introduced him to New Criticism, wrote a review of the architects work:

A full response to this work requires an audience aware of the conventions and patient and sensitive enough to appreciate the elaborate games that are being played with scale, placement, proportion, materials, and ornamentation in this Mannerism of the Ordinary. … This is architecture that is always working on at least two levels: it satisfies practical needs by the design of familiar, affordable, carefully planned structures; at the same time it comments on or criticizes the values and tastes of the civilization that requires these forms.79

It is the free play between imagination and reason that Finkelppearl invokes in reading Venturi and Scott Brown’s architecture. The disinterested feeling of pleasure is to be found not in the architectural object itself, but rather in the judgment of taste that the objects elicits. The free play between satisfying “practical needs” and imagining the work as a critical object creates the disinterested pleasure.

Thirdly, Kant’s concern with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure leads to the conversation on boredom and sets up the premises for a theory of the boring and the interesting based on deception. Kant describes boredom as an association between time and a “void of sensations.” Defined as a lack, an absence or a deficiency, boredom is ascribed a negative value. It is a serious matter and its extended presence might damage the cognitive faculty and, eventually, the interior of the human being. Individuals have several tools to fight boredom and activate their senses and among them novelty and change bring into presence the category of the interesting. The relationship between the boring and the interesting is founded on the deceptive

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nature of excess: more – more objects, more entertainment, more activities – creates the illusion of eliminating tedium but, in fact, it simply camouflages it.

More recently, philosopher Lars Svendsen has suggested multiple readings of the interesting. Associated with multiplicity and excess, the interesting results in lessening the value of objects, which in time end up being seen as disposable entities.\textsuperscript{80} Associated with novelty and excitement, the interesting is the time of childhood where everything is being newly discovered, whereas adolescence is the time of boredom, “suspended between childhood and maturity.”\textsuperscript{81}

More is not less\textsuperscript{82} – Venturi’s first version of Less is a bore, which was discussed in previous chapters – contains the seeds of legitimizing the excess and overload (or the interesting) as tools against the boring. He plays on the ambivalence between his bias for tabu historical references (such as Mannerism and Baroque) and his simultaneous admiration for modern masters. More – more historic references, more precedents, more devices – will be used as a strategy to conceal what Venturi denounced as the “blatant simplification”\textsuperscript{83} (or boredom) of modern architecture.

Venturi’s approach was questioned early on even by Denise Scott Brown, at the time his colleague at University of Pennsylvania. While writing Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi asked her to read and comment on his manuscript. In a letter dated July 13, 1963, she returned carefully crafted observations on his book draft. Her closing paragraph reads:

But I think you use too many devices (always remembering that I don’t approve of any of them) and will do till you get more work and can spread them fewer per building. None of this is insulting. I respect your work … but disagree with it – mainly because I think there are other constraints acting upon us today. I like the things you like, have learned from them what you have taught, but I would apply the lessons differently.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80}“Surrounded by an infinite selection of ‘interesting’ objects that can be chosen so as to be discarded, nothing will have any value. For that reason, immortality would have been immensely boring, for it would allow an infinite number of choices.” [Lars Svendsen, A Philosophy of Boredom, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 143].
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 150.
\textsuperscript{82} Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 16.
\textsuperscript{83} Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 17.
\textsuperscript{84} Venturi Scott Brown Collection. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania. Box 70. 225.II.F.1037
As Scott Brown noted, the overload of devices was hiding, in fact, other, more important concerns of the time. The deceitful nature of the interesting manifested through surplus constitutes perhaps one of its most characteristic features.

**Friedrich Schlegel: the interesting opposed to the beautiful.** One of the earliest and most explicit critiques of the interesting comes from Friedrich Schlegel in his 1797 “On the Study of Greek Poetry.” Published after Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), but before his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Schlegel’s study examined ideas about taste and aesthetic value. His main criticism was directed against modern poetry presented in antithesis with Greek poetry. The former engages with the interesting, defined as an aesthetic category in opposition with the beautiful: “Beauty is thus not the ideal of modern poetry; it is essentially distinct from the interesting.” One of the main features of modern poetry, Schlegel argued, is its lack of universality and the emphasis on individuality and originality. Stemming from this focus on subjective rather than universal experiences, the interesting lacks the set of values associated with strong categories. Modern poetry strives for individuality, rather than universality, for “something new, piquant and striking” without ever fully satisfying its desire.

Schlegel associated the interesting with excess and quantitative measures: “Every original individual that contains a greater quantity of intellectual content or aesthetic energy is interesting.” He distinguished between philosophical and aesthetic content: if the former persisted, it would engender a form of critical resistance and consequently taste – the critical notion at stake in Schlegel’s argument – would become objective; if, on the contrary, aesthetic content prevailed, then taste would be reduced to a mere desire for more and more intense pleasures:

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86 Ibid., 99.
87 Ibid., 32, 35.
88 “Furthermore, the total predominance of the characteristic, individual, and the interesting is evident throughout modern poetry, especially in more recent ages. Finally, there is the restless, insatiable striving after something new, piquant, and striking despite which, however, longing persists unappeased.” (Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, 24.)
89 Ibid., 35.
It will pass over quickly enough into piquancy and the astonishing. *Piquancy* is what stimulates a dull sensibility; the *astonishing* is a similar stimulus for the imagination. These are the harbingers of a near death. The *jejune* is the meager nourishment of the impotent; and the *shocking* – be it bizarre, disgusting, or horrible – is the last convulsion of a dying taste.\textsuperscript{90}

Unlike the truth, the good, and the beautiful, the *interesting*, Schlegel argued, has a "provisional validity."\textsuperscript{91} Distinguishing not only between *philosophical* and *aesthetic* content, but also between *content* and *value*, he did not deny the *content* of the *interesting*, but questioned its *value*.\textsuperscript{92}

The loop of the *interesting* and the *boring*, where "the new becomes old; the unusual becomes common; the frisson of what is charming becomes dull,"\textsuperscript{93} is the dead end of intellectual and artistic pursuits. Moreover, it annihilates one’s ability to identify and value the beautiful:

Thus those who are not satisfied that Greek poetry is beautiful impose upon it an entirely foreign standard of evaluation; and in their confused pretensions they thoroughly mix together everything objective and subjective and demand that it should be more *interesting*. Certainly, even that which is most interesting could be more interesting [...].\textsuperscript{94}

Schlegel’s definition of the *interesting* builds upon the opposition between subjective and universal values, between (aesthetic) value and (philosophical or moral) content, between the stimulation of the senses and the stimulation of the intellect. The *interesting* obscures the *beautiful* and "desecrates" it.\textsuperscript{95} Schlegel’s critique of the *interesting* spawns from a particular cultural and historical context. With the advent of modernity, communities and erstwhile traditional societies become fragmented. The emphasis shifted from the values and the authority of the community to the values of the individual. The *interesting* validates arbitrariness and

\textsuperscript{90} Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, 36.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{95} Schlegel, 83.
multiplicity of tastes and accompanies the focus on fragments and particulars. With the rise of individualism, every opinion is valid, if fleeting and transitory. It is around the same time, in the eighteenth century, that the mood of boredom gains visibility and the word enters the English vocabulary. The rise of individualism has been identified also as one of the main causes of the advent of boredom.\(^9\) The boring (and the interesting) are brought into presence at a time when the inner experience of the individual becomes worthy of investigation.\(^9\)

Strong categories (such as the beautiful, the true, the good) are replaced by weaker ones (such as the interesting, the astonishing or the unusual). The conceptualization of the interesting and the boring happens simultaneously with the emergence of aesthetic categories that had not been examined before, such as the ugly or the sublime.\(^9\) In this context, critics have made a further distinction, that between ennui and boredom: the former has larger, more universal claims and accompanies the sense of sublime, whereas the latter is a response to immediate, mundane, and more ordinary concerns.\(^9\)

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture begins with Venturi’s “gentle manifesto” written exclusively in the first person singular: I like, I do not like, I speak, I welcome, I aim, I prefer.\(^1\) If at first, this mode of writing suggests a certain modesty by avoiding any claims to universality, it gradually becomes clear that this restraint is deceitful. The use of words such as “special obligation,” “truth,” “totality,” “must,” indicate that subjectivity does, in fact, have universal claims.\(^1\) The rise of individualism and subjectivity culminates in the late years of modernity when canons are called into questions and value is ascribed based on new aesthetic categories. Liking elements that are “hybrid rather than pure, compromising rather than clean [… ] boring, as well as interesting, […] conventional rather than designed,” Venturi assigns them value based on a reshuffling of these new aesthetic categories. Schlegel’s distinction between strong and weak values, the ethic and the aesthetic, which is key in his definition of the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 23.
\(^9\) The sublime as an aesthetic category radically different from the beautiful came to prominence around the same time through the work of Edmund Burke (1756) and later that of Immanuel Kant (1764) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1818).
\(^9\) Meyer-Spacks, Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind, 12.
\(^1\) Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 16.
\(^1\) Ibid., 16-19.
interesting, constitutes the underpinning of Venturi’s subjective theory of architecture that merges lowbrow and highbrow values.

Arthur Schopenhauer: the boring and the sublime; the interesting as distraction. In The World as Will and Representation (first published in 181-1919), Arthur Schopenhauer had brought together the boring and the sublime. In his view, what bridges the gap between the two is the act of contemplation, which enables the transfiguration of what might be perceived as tedious into an otherworldly experience: “Let us transport ourselves to a very lonely region of boundless horizons, under a perfectly cloudless sky, trees and plants in the perfectly motionless air, no animals, no human beings, no moving masses of water, the profoundest silence.”102 These surroundings might inspire either an “instance of the sublime in a low degree,” or the emptiness, “torture and misery of boredom.”103 As the boring and the sublime inhabit the same territory, the line between them is thin and it is one’s deliberate will for contemplation rather than despair that reveals “the touch of the sublime.”104 The ability to choose one over the other also gives the measure of one’s intellectual worth.105

For Schopenhauer boredom has an ontological dimension as the force that sets in motion the will of human beings. Human nature is subjected to a cycle of desire and satisfaction, followed by a new desire, where the lack of gratification leads to suffering and the “longing for a new desire is languor, boredom.”106 In this scenario, attention and an active mind are ultimately a form of “continuously postponed boredom.”107 Schopenhauer proposes – cynically – that life moves like a pendulum between pain and boredom where the latter is all that is left for heaven after all the suffering has been placed in hell.108 What most people need is not intellectual

103 Ibid., 204.
104 Ibid., 203.
105 Ibid., 203.
106 Ibid., 260. See also p.314: “The wish, the need, appears again on the scene under a new form; if it does not, then dreariness, emptiness, and boredom follow, the struggle against which is just as painful as is that against want. For desire and satisfaction to follow each other at not too short and not too long intervals, reduces the suffering occasioned by both to the smallest amount, and constitutes the happiest life.”
107 Ibid., 311.
108 Ibid., 312.
pleasures, but *panem* and *circenses* to cure their boredom.\textsuperscript{109} For Schopenhauer too, the nature of the *interesting* resides in the search for distraction and excitement:

But purely intellectual pleasures are not accessible to the vast majority of men, they are almost wholly incapable of the pleasure to be found in pure knowledge; they are entirely given over to willing. Therefore, if anything is to win their sympathy, to be *interesting* to them, it must (and this is to be found already in the meaning of the word) in some way excite their will, even if to be only through a remote relation to it which is merely within the bounds of possibility.\textsuperscript{110}

At the core of Schopenhauer’s theory is the distinction between *representation* and *will*, where the former is the human perception of events and the latter a form of vital energy, “what today we might call the biological, electromagnetic, chemical, and gravitational forces of the world.”\textsuperscript{111} Despite its deceptive nature, the *interesting* through its appeal to senses is one of the forces that activates the *will*.

**Søren Kierkegaard: the interesting as skin-deep, autonomous, self-referential.**

Deception and deceit constitute one of the core arguments in Søren Kierkegaard’s reflection on the ethical and aesthetic aspects of life.\textsuperscript{112} Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, he positioned the *interesting* within the aesthetic domain, one defined by immediacy, where appearances and outer existence are more important than the true self, where one avoids commitments and leads a life of intense pleasures, stimulated by novelty and whose quick consumption turns into boredom.\textsuperscript{113} In contrast, the ethical realm is defined by critical reflection, moral responsibility, accountability, and commitment.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 313-314.  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 314.  
\textsuperscript{111} Mallgrave, *The Architect’s Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*, 58.  
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
In the *Diary of a Seducer*, Kierkegaard summarizes the aesthetic nature of the *interesting*:

“How beautiful it is to be in love, how interesting to know that one is in love.”  

From an aesthetic perspective, the essence of the real thing is secondary because the aesthete is concerned with sheer appearances and thus unable to discern between what is important and what is peripheral. There is no difference between seeing and missing the beloved one, between joy and pain as both states ultimately produce the same superficial reaction.

The *interesting* and the *boring* are, in fact, intertwined: the former creates the illusion of making the latter disappear, where in fact it simply offers a temporary distraction. While the ethical requires duration and intensity, the aesthetic is immediate and extensive. Kierkegaard criticizes the common approach of counteracting the boredom associated with the aesthetic realm through superficial changes (i.e. changes that happen on the surface or changes of the surface): tired of country life, one moves to the city, tired of Europe, one goes to America or tired of porcelain, one eats on silver. In his interpretation of *Either / Or*, Karsten Harries has remarked that “the interesting depends here on the contrast between the antecedent and the subsequent states.” He wrote:

> interest is something with which the individual endows the situation. The situation furnishes only the occasion. … Implicit in the search for the interesting is thus a rejection of the place we have been assigned by the situation in which we find ourselves. The search for the interesting is essentially a flight from reality.

As an alternative, Kierkegaard proposes the concept of crop rotation: rather than constantly moving to a new soil (or, in other words, constantly changing the surface), one should remain on the same soil and vary the types of crops (in other words, understand and work with limitations). “Here at once is the principle of limitation, the sole saving principle in the world. The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes.” Kierkegaard suggests an *intensive* rather than *extensive* approach to the issue of boredom whose remedy resides not in

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117 Ibid., 96-97.
119 Ibid., I, 292.
perpetual change, but, rather, in thorough introspection. He brings lively examples from the world of children who, subjected to tedium, find resourceful ways of re-discovering the world: catching and playing with a fly or listening to the rain dripping through the roof\textsuperscript{120} constitute moments when the everyday is transfigured and reinvented.

The second volume of Either/Or never addressed the concept of the interesting, however its repeated use indicates a certain bias toward a sense of arbitrariness and a seductive deceitfulness. The institution of marriage seems to have the devious role of disguising various liaisons and thus making life interesting.\textsuperscript{121} The interesting is the out-of-ordinary that adds charm, but no real meaning to life.\textsuperscript{122} It is associated with diversity and change of moods and conditions that the aesthete finds through his “wit, cunning, and all the seductive gifts of the mind.”\textsuperscript{123} It is variety that determines the interesting: “for the more varied life is, the more interesting for the observer.”\textsuperscript{124} In the first volume, for the aesthete “admiration and indifference have become undifferentiated in the unity of boredom.”\textsuperscript{125} Here the aesthete does not differentiate between sorrow and joy: they both stimulate his feelings and are, therefore, interesting. The aesthete lacks the ability to recognize and appreciate ethical values:

Since you have hardened your mind to interpret all existence in esthetic categories, it is taken for granted that sorrow has not escaped your attention, for sorrow in and by itself is at least as interesting as joy. The imperturbability with which you everywhere cling to the interesting wherever it appears is a constant occasion for those around you to misunderstand you and sometimes to regard you as absolutely heartless and sometimes as a really good-natured person, although you actually are neither.\textsuperscript{126}

The boring and the interesting build off one another and are intertwined in a game of entertainment and continuous distraction, or in other words, in leisure. The paradigm of our times is the dialectics work – leisure, where the latter fills up the empty (i.e. unoccupied) time
with equally empty (i.e. meaningless) activities. One way to break the circle of aesthetic pursuits and infinite amusements is to discover the redeeming qualities of work or to conceive of it as meaningful leisure: “One’s work nevertheless ought not to be work in the strict sense but should be able to be continually defined as pleasure.”\textsuperscript{127} This type of work is neither drudging, nor tedious, but gives one wings to fly over the world.\textsuperscript{128} This ability to find full pleasure in work, however, is an “aristocratic talent” characteristic to an ethical life that the aesthete has little access to it.\textsuperscript{129}

Kierkegaard situates boredom at the origin of human civilization, which, he proposes, has been built on deceit and superficial amusement. In his own sarcastic version of the biblical genesis, the gods were bored and they created Adam; to alleviate his boredom, they made Eva; with the birth of Cain and Abel, the family of four were getting bored together and as the population grew bigger, nations and people “were bored \textit{en masse}.”\textsuperscript{130} This collective boredom resulted in the attempt to build a tower high enough to reach the gods:

To amuse themselves, they hit upon the notion of building a tower so high that it would reach the sky. This notion is just as boring as the tower was high and is a terrible demonstration of how boredom had gained the upper hand. Then they were dispersed around the world, just as people now travel abroad, but they continue to be bored. And what consequences this boredom had: humankind stood tall and fell far, first through Eve, then from the Babylonian tower.\textsuperscript{131}

Although akin to meaningless distraction, boredom has gained an ontological status. Unable to gauge the outcomes of their desire for aesthetic pleasures, human beings ended up as slaves of their own weakness. Aesthetic pursuits, however, have physical, architectural

\textsuperscript{127} Kierkegaard, \textit{Either / Or}, 1959, II 260, 290. (“A person discovers some aristocratic talent in himself that distinguishes him from the crowd. He does not develop this recklessly, because then he would soon be bored with it, but with all the esthetic earnestness possible. Life then has a new meaning for him, since he has his work, a work that nevertheless is really his pleasure. In his independence, he shelters it so that it can develop in all its luxuriance, undismayed by life. He does not, however, make this talent into a plank on which one manages to squeeze through life but into wings on which one soars over the world; he does not make it into a drudging hack but into a parade horse.”)
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 290.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 290. (“But our hero has no such aristocratic talent; he is like most people. The esthete knows no other way out for him than that ‘he has to resign himself to falling into the crowd’s hackneyed category of a person who works.’”)
\textsuperscript{130} Kierkegaard, \textit{Either / Or}, 1959, I 258, 286.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 286.
consequences. In this rather apocalyptic scenario, the tower of Babel and everything it stands for constitutes a concrete manifestation of the more abstract mood of boredom. Kierkegaard’s cautionary tale, sarcastic and extreme as it appears, warns about the danger of overlooking the direct, tangible effects of moods and emotions whose physical expressions have long-lasting effects. The deep abyss of boredom, its infinite dizziness and nothingness have unforeseen material results. As he wrote further, “A mistaken generally eccentric diversion has boredom within itself, and thus it works its way up and manifests itself as immediacy.”

Writing a few decades after Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard was familiar with his works and reinterpreted his ideas about the sublime. His view of the abysmal boredom as the core of human civilization echoed the Romantic category of the sublime. Kierkegaard turned boredom, one of the most despised moods, into a central, if negative, condition of human progress. While Venuri’s work never explores the relationship of boredom and contemplation or the sublime, in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he does situate boredom at the core of his theory on architecture. Reflecting, as we have seen in previous chapters, the midcentury ethos, the underlining presence of boredom indicates the discontent with the modernity and its architectural manifestations.

**Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Susan Sontag, Giorgio Agamben: the interesting as periphery, marginality, curiosity.** One major distinction between *interest* and the *interesting* resides in their relationship to the object examined. Discussing ideas about perception, Edmund Husserl posited that *interest* is critical to the apprehension of a thing or theme as the main object of contemplation. In relation to this main object, other things or themes appear secondary.

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134 “Rather, a specific interest – taking the term “interest” in its broader sense – is required, an interest in contemplation of one of these objects, which causes it to be apprehended as a principal theme. We carefully observe the penholder, for example. Our attention wanders from it, which (as our theme) is still retained in grasp, to the table top. We also draw the latter within our sphere of observation, not as a principal theme but only as a *theme in relation to the penholder*.” [Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 153].
Martin Heidegger proposed a similar idea. Building upon the Latin etymology (*inter esse*), he defined *interest* as being “among and in the midst of things” or being “at the center of a thing” and staying with it.  

In contrast, contemporary meanings of the *interesting* have shifted toward something that, turned indifferent, can be immediately replaced with something else.  

While the *interest* is intimately connected to the essence of a thing, the *interesting* resides at its periphery, the location of disposable attributes. In this light, the *interesting thing* belongs to “the ranks of what is indifferent and soon boring.” Situated in a continuous loop, the *boring* and the *interesting* represent, in fact, two sides of one and the same condition.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger has distinguished between two forms of curiosity: one that expresses a form of encountering the world through perception, not confined to seeing but using sight as a general form of knowing; and another one that designates a form of seeing not in order to know but “just in order to see.” Heidegger’s approach echoed Kant’s earlier distinction between interest in the object itself and interest in the object as novelty, the latter being relegated to the realm of curiosity. Similarly, for Heidegger curiosity “seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty.”

Restlessness and the possibility of distraction are the defining attributes of curiosity, which “is everywhere and nowhere.” In “What is Thinking?” (1951-1952) Heidegger will situate *interest* at the center of a thing; in *Being and Time*, curiosity lacked precisely that intimate connection with the very nature of a thing, the ability to observe and marvel at things, which is how the *interesting* will be defined later. Without specifically addressing the *interesting* or its relationship with *curiosity*, in *Being and Time* Heidegger inferred a kinship between the two where both are concerned with the periphery, the new, and the inessential. Unlike *wonder*, which constitutes the foundation of philosophy and reveals the most intimate nature of things, *curiosity* operates in the realm of dispensable and superfluous attributes.

136 Ibid., 5.
137 Ibid., 5.
139 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 172.
140 Ibid., 217.
Susan Sontag defined the *interesting* as “the commonplace, the inessential, the accidental, the minute, the transient.”\(^{141}\) She found it in the nineteenth-century novel (the archetypal art form of the time), which fully articulated the ethos of the period: the dullness of reality, the lack of spirituality, and the discovery of the interesting.\(^{142}\)

Influenced by Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben also defined curiosity as the restless activity that “seeks what is new only to jump once again toward what is even newer, and that, incapable of taking care of what is truly offered to it, obtains, through the impossibility of sustaining attention … the constant availability of distraction.”\(^{143}\) Distraction is what eventually enables the *interesting* to manifest itself.

If “philosophy begins in wonder,”\(^{144}\) *curiosity* offers the realm of the *interesting* as an alternative to an introspective view of the world.

**Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: the *interesting* at the center.** Unlike Husserl, Heidegger, and Agamben, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari situate the *interesting*, rather than the *interest*, at the very core of their philosophy, which, they argue, “does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure.”\(^{145}\) For Deleuze and Guattari, writings in philosophy lack importance or interest when they fail to create a concept or an image, and to bring a new twist to an old problem.\(^{146}\) They define the “naturally uninteresting” as either flimsy, or petrified concepts that do not present an opportunity for further development. The *interesting* is critical for understanding criticism as a creative endeavor.\(^{147}\) Ideas about the *interesting* converge with ideas about the *new*, where the former implies the latter:

> Criticism implies new concepts (of the things criticized) just as much as the most positive creation. Concepts must have irregular contours molded on their living material. … Even

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142 Ibid., 101.
146 Ibid., 82.
147 Ibid., 82.
the history of philosophy is completely without interest if it does not undertake to awaken a dormant concept and to play it again on a new stage … .

**Ralph Barton Perry: interest and the interesting as predisposition.** A student of William James (the first educator to offer a psychology course in the United States), American philosopher Ralph Barton Perry introduced a significant nuance in the definition of *interest*. Unlike most interpretations, which describe *interest* as a positive inclination toward something, he proposed that interest discloses either a favorable or an adverse attitude toward an object: a “state, act, attitude or disposition of favor or disfavor.” *Interest* is essentially a biased perspective, highly subjective, that cannot be explained in cognitive terms. It shows a natural, inherent predisposition of human beings to be *for* or *against* certain things. Defined as *disposition*, the *interest* finds affinities with the mood of boredom and more subjective concepts like emotions and feelings. (Perry had a significant influence on Donald Judd and his theories about the *interesting* in art.)

A similar distinction between a positive and a negative interest suggested Bertrand Russell. He distinguished between *external interest*, which inspires one to pursue different activities and prevent *ennui*, and *interest in oneself*, which is passive and not conducive to any growth.

**Michael L. Raposa: the interesting and the role of imagination.** Building upon earlier definitions of boredom, philosopher Michael L. Raposa describes it as a semiotic and relational matter: boredom arises from one’s inability to interpret “the information in any given situation as

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148 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 83.
149 “It is characteristic of living mind to be *for* some things and *against* others. This polarity is not reducible to that between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the logical or in the purely cognitive sense, because one can say ‘yes’ with reluctance or be glad to say ‘no.’ To be ‘for’ or ‘against’ is to view with favor or disfavor; it is a bias of the subject toward or away from. It implies … a tendency to create or conserve, or an opposite tendency to prevent or destroy. This duality appears in many forms, such as liking and disliking, desire and aversion, will and refusal, or seeking and avoiding. It is to this all-pervasive characteristic of the motor –affective life, this state, act, attitude or disposition of favor or disfavor, to which we propose to give the name of *interest.*” [Ralph Barton Perry, *General Theory of Value: Its Meanings and Basic Principles Construed in Terms of Interest* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1926), 115].
meaningful or interesting”¹⁵¹ and resides in the relationship between the object and the subject. Further, he maintains that “it might be possible to argue that all situations are intrinsically interesting.”¹⁵² The implicit assumption is that the interesting is the opposite of boring, an idea also found in his description of art as being more real and significant than everyday life “because it is more interesting.”¹⁵³

It is through imagination, Raposa proposes, that one discovers the infinitely interesting within the apparently boring, an insight which he continues to identify as a semiotic process.¹⁵⁴ Although never specifically articulated, an important idea is that the boring and the interesting are not inherent properties of the object, but rather it is the role of imagination to distinguish between them.

Conclusions. We have seen that the ostensibly indeterminate category of the interesting has an intellectual history rooted in aesthetic theories developed mainly from the late eighteenth century onward. The boring and the interesting exist in a Janusian relationship rather than in a dialectical opposition. The interesting designates the attitude of the autonomous and self-referential aesthete who lacks a solid world view and the capacity to recognize ethical values (Kierkegaard). It is often deceitful and distracting (Kant, Schopenhauer), associated with novelty and excess (Kant, Schlegel), and curiosity, rather than wonder (Heidegger, Sontag, Agamben). These various attributes have distilled down into the architectural discourse as emphasis on appearance (resulting in the autonomy of the architectural object), combinatory techniques as design strategies (resulting in self-referential and normative practices), and a bias for excess and overload (often described in terms of complexity). While midcentury architecture embraced these approaches as an immediate reaction against the sterility of Modernism (deemed dull), the interesting sought through formal exercises itself quickly turned boring. Facilitated by newer, more performant, and more efficient software and technologies, such as 3D printing, digital

¹⁵² Ibid., 77.
¹⁵³ Ibid., 81.
¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 82.
fabrication or parametric design, the search for the *interesting* continues to inform the architectural practice at an ever increasing speed.

The faculty of imagination is critical to breaking the endless loop of the *boring* and the *interesting*. For Kant, the judgment of taste is not arbitrary, but involves a negotiation of imagination and reason, which are situated in a relationship of free play. For Raposa, the *boring* and the *interesting* do not belong to the object, but rather are a matter of the relationship between subject and object. It is through imagination that one overcomes their dichotomy.

Where Venturi’s theory on the *boring* and the *interesting* fails to become operational is in disregarding the role of imagination. Venturi focuses on architectural forms and their semiotic interpretation as symbols, which results in disembodied shapes and “decorated sheds,” no different from the modernist boxes he is criticizing. The faculty of imagination could bridge the gap between perception and reason. Through narrative and storytelling, architecture has the potential to activate people’s imagination and engage them in meaningful acts and events, without the use of explicit signs.

3.2. Boredom and midcentury visual arts

The intellectual history of the *boring* and the *interesting* has a particular resonance with the midcentury artistic discourse. With its simplicity, uniformity, seriality and lack of affect, midcentury Minimal and Conceptual Art generated intense polemics around *boredom*, the *boring* and the *interesting* that have extended beyond the years when they emerged.

**The *boring* and the *interesting* in midcentury visual arts.** The apparent paradox of “interesting boring things” was formulated in 1949 by John Cage: “The responsibility of the artist consists in perfecting his work so that it may become attractively disinteresting.”\(^{155}\) Cage identified the creative potential of boredom: “… the way to get ideas is to do something boring.

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For instance, composing in such a way that the process of composing is boring induces ideas.”

Quoting a Zen aphorism, he recommended: “If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting.”

An adept of Zen practices in his late years, Saul Steinberg said: “The life of the creative man is led, directed and controlled by boredom. Avoiding boredom is one of our most important purposes.”

Frequently quoted, Andy Warhol famously said: “I like boring things.” In Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi and Scott Brown used this quip as the motto of the chapter “Some Definitions Using the Comparative Method.” The chapter revolves around the comparison between Venturi’s Guild House (seemingly boring, but really interesting) and Paul Rudolph’s Crawford Manor (apparently interesting, but actually boring) and concludes with the table comparing the boring and the interesting in architecture.

In 1965, art historian and critic Barbara Rose wrote: “If, on seeing some of the new paintings, sculpture, dances or films, you are bored, probably you were intended to be. Boring the public is one way of testing its commitment.” The following year, relegating the issue of boredom to the audience, rather than to the work itself, Susan Sontag made the argument that “there is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of educated people.” A few years later, she described this approach as an aesthetics of silence: “Cultivating the metaphor of silence suggested by conventionally lifeless subjects (as in much Pop Art) and constructing ‘minimal’ forms that seem to lack emotional resonance are in themselves vigorous, often tonic choices.”

Art critic Hilton Kramer was skeptical that boredom actually moves the audience and suggested it was employed as a rhetorical tool to draw interest: “Now it is true that much of this art is boring, and one is at

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156 Ibid., 12.
157 Ibid., 93.
161 Barbara Rose, “ABC Art,” Art in America (October 1965).
first relieved to hear that one’s own boredom in confronting it is, after all, the correct response. [...] in reading her [Barbara Rose’s] essay one’s own boredom is quickly dissipated, one’s interests aroused.”  

The debate continued over the years. Writing in 1971, art critic and curator Lucy Lippard was critical of the claim that the mood of boredom has a positive impact on the audience:

The fact is that the process of conquering boredom that makes the pleasure of art fully accessible is a time-consuming one. Most people prefer to stay with boredom, though it does seem in view of the deluge of recently published comment about boredom in the arts, to be a pretty fascinating boredom.\(^{165}\)

By 1972, when Sam Hunter published *American Art in the 20\(^{th}\) Century*, this new aesthetics was conceptualized as “the aesthetics of boredom.”\(^{166}\) Hunter described it as a new type of artistic sensibility that replaced the post-war abstract expressionism, a sensibility “based on a conscious program of emotional disengagement, formal rigor, and anonymity of authorship.”\(^{167}\) It was not only visual arts that confronted this new affect, boredom was present in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the performances of Merce Cunningham, the music of John Cage, and the uneventful movies of Andy Warhol.\(^{168}\)

A distinction needs to be made between works that take on *boredom* as their subject and works that aim to engender the affect of *boredom* into the viewer. In both cases, however, the implicit assumption is that the *boring* is, in fact, *interesting*. The boring-turned-interesting was a deliberate strategy of the 1960s and produced an art that was meant to be “surprising – but not

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168 Ibid., 372.
that surprising.” The boring / interesting was a subject of great interest in all midcentury art forms.

In Europe, the cinematography of the 1950s and 1960s brought forth the topic of boredom at the height of modernity in a series of films that exposed the anxieties and discontents of the moderns. Michelangelo Antonioni’s films Le Amiche (The Girlfriends, 1955), L’Avventura (The Adventure, 1960) and La Notte (The Night, 1961) were cross-cuts through the life of middle-upper class Italian socialites, who spend their lives in pursuit of an easy-to-achieve happiness meant to fill their interior voids. Antonioni’s characters suffered from boredom without knowing it. In films like Mon Oncle (1958) and Playtime (1967) Jacques Tati told the story of modern boredom as a dialogue between people and their environment. Alberto Moravia, known to his friends as a perpetual victim of boredom, published in 1960 the novel La Noia, followed in 1963 by an eponymous movie. Originally translated as The Empty Canvas (most likely out of fear that a direct translation – Boredom – would not appeal to an English-speaking audience), the novel, written in first person, told the story of the neurotic love of a disenchanted painter for an easy girl. Dino’s failure to understand that the impossibility of truly knowing Cecilia beyond their sexual encounters, reflected his own failure to represent the world and engage with it, in other words his own failure as a painter. It was this disengagement and indifference that constituted Dino’s inherent boredom.

Art criticism: the interesting as judgment of value. The discourse on the boring and the interesting in visual arts continued into the last decades of the twentieth-century as a form of meta-criticism. In 1985, art critic Frances Colpitt published an attention-getting article “The Issue of Boredom: Is It Interesting?” that mapped the main claims in the argument over the boring or interesting character of a work of art. Looking both at artists (Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol) and critics (Susan Sontag, Lucy Lippard, Barbara Rose, Michael Fried,

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Clement Greenberg, Bruce Boice, Richard Lind), she made the argument that to value formally reductive and undifferentiated objects requires the deliberate “commitment and concentration of attention” of the viewer. She concludes: “The tendency has been to dismiss as boring any object or experience that does not meet the contemporary audience’s appetite for immediate sensory stimulation and satisfaction.”

Colpitt’s article prompted two responses: supporting her point of view, Richard Lind clarified some of the claims of the essay; on the other hand, ten years later, Derek Matravers, argued that “Colpitt has failed to produce any justification for paying attention to boring objects.” He claimed there is a distinction between boring and interesting objects or experiences and it makes sense to seek the latter rather than the former.

More recently, art historian and critic Jonathan Flatley examined the similarities between Donald Judd and Andy Warhol in terms of their “affectless art.” He proposed that Judd’s use of the term “interesting” and Warhol’s use of the term “liking” reflected similar ideas about the aesthetic experience, namely “the attempt to produce emotion without representing it.” Thus they challenged the strategies of Abstract Expressionism, which sought to elicit an emotion by representing it. It is this space of disinterestedness that provides the viewer with the necessary distance to have insights about emotions otherwise too direct in the realm of everyday life.

One of the most recent and significant contributions to the field comes from literary and cultural theorist Sianne Ngai who has produced a body of work revolving around what she calls “states of weakness,” “minor’ or non-cathartic feelings,” and “trivial aesthetic categories” such as zany, cute and interesting. While the aesthetic theories developed by Immanuel Kant in the

175 Ibid., 425.
177 Flatley, “Allegories of Boredom,” 52.
178 Ibid., 52.
179 Ibid., 52.
eighteenth century or Clement Greenberg in the twentieth make the argument that the aesthetic experience cannot exist without judgment, Ngai proposes that aesthetic categories are both discursive evaluations and objective styles.\textsuperscript{181} Her focus on trivial, overlooked, but never marginal, aesthetic categories reveals the centrality of these concepts not only to postmodern culture, but, more importantly, to the concept of the \textit{aesthetic} itself. The field of aesthetics, she argues, has been radically transformed by the commodification and network information specific to late capitalism.\textsuperscript{182}

Key to Ngai’s argument is the idea that “judgments like ‘interesting’ seem to \textit{demand} justification,”\textsuperscript{183} that they initiate a dialogue and engage the interlocutors in a critical exchange:

Judging something interesting is often a first step in \textit{actually making it so}. Which is why there is an explicitly pedagogical dimension to the interesting. … Explicitly asking us to link our aesthetic judgments to extra-aesthetic ones (in the act of justification), the evaluation of interesting tends, if nothing else, to prolong critical conversations.\textsuperscript{184}

Not unlike Kierkegaard’s definition of an aesthetic, rather than ethic perspective on life in which the individual is autonomous, uncommitted, and constantly searching for distraction and entertainment, Ngai describes the maker of interesting art as lacking attachment to any particular worldview and, consequently, unable to thoroughly pursue any subject-matter.\textsuperscript{185} She builds a connection between certain nineteenth century realist practices and twentieth century Conceptual Art with its focus on “documentation, classification, and the presentation of evidence”\textsuperscript{186} or what she calls “a late twentieth-century aesthetic of difference as information.”\textsuperscript{187} Ngai situates the \textit{interesting} at the intersection of “affect-based judgment and concept-based-explanation”\textsuperscript{188} and notices how it is intertwined with the \textit{boring} through a similar indetermination of affect.\textsuperscript{189} She

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{181} Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai,” 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 51.
  \item \textsuperscript{187} Ngai, \textit{Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting}, 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{188} Ngai, \textit{Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting}, 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{189} “‘Interesting’ looks like the antithesis of disinterestedness. There is, however, a sense in which its indeterminate affect makes the two seem less different than alike, which may also explain why the interesting is so prone to turn boring. … Much like the way in which the interesting toggles – is itself a toggling – between aesthetic and
argues that the *interesting* offers a particular modern response to “novelty as it necessarily arises against a background of boredom” and “to change against a background of sameness.”

The *interesting* re-emerges in the various forms of mid- and late-twentieth century art, from Conceptual Art and Minimal Art to Pop Art and Serial Art, through an aesthetic of difference as information, documentation, and evidence. Looking at late-twentieth century visual arts, Ngai argues that the *interesting* is an aesthetic about this very tension between difference and typicality – or standardization and individuation – in capitalist modernity writ large. … its resurgence in the 1960s was spurred by the growth of new media and new communication technologies that led the way in transitioning the United States from an automated into an informed and networked society.

An important artist operating within this framework is Ed Ruscha who, between 1962 and 1973, published sixteen photography books that were looking at a variety of typologies from gas stations to Los Angeles apartments, parking lots, and swimming pools. Ruscha had a significant influence on the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, especially due to Scott Brown’s familiarity with his work after the time she had spent on the West Coast. She illustrated her 1969 article “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning” with images from Ruscha’s 1967 book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*. In *Learning from Las Vegas* the elevation of the Las Vegas Strip is based on Ed Ruscha’s 1966 *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* where the artist photographed from a car every single building on both sides of Sunset Boulevard and assembled the images in an accordion-type book. In addition to constructing evidence in an almost forensic manner, Ruscha’s book was also operating, perhaps inadvertently, at another level: the actual length of the boulevard was embodied into the scaled-down length of the book, a dimension that was entirely missing from the Las Vegas elevation. Ruscha claimed that his work had no hidden meaning, that it was entirely subjective and simply based on what seemed right to him at a nonaesthetic judgments, the wavering between the boring and the interesting seems internal to the interesting.”

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191 Ibid., 143-145.
192 Ibid., 146.
certain time. Embracing the arbitrariness and indeterminacy of the interesting, he stated: “I’m interested in what is interesting.” Similarly, in a statement that had spawned countless threads of criticism, minimalist artist Donald Judd famously asserted: “A work needs only to be interesting.”

Judd’s statement was part of “Specific Objects,” the-article-turned-manifesto that he published in 1965. His discussion revolved around the new three-dimensional work emerging in the art world, situated at the intersection of painting and sculpture (Figure 3.1–3.3). Written as and intended to be an overview of the state of contemporary art commissioned by Arts Yearbook, the essay became a manifesto for new art forms as well as for Judd’s own views. Among the topics Judd touched on were wholeness, new materials, large scale, and seriality. Addressing the issue of the wholeness of an artwork, he wrote: “The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.”

In Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, Venturi’s emphasis on “the difficult whole” shows the important role contemporary art movements play in his thinking. At a time when “weaker” aesthetic categories were becoming more relevant in the critical discourse, it is important to acknowledge the intersections between fields and disciplines.

Judd’s take on the interesting has been the subject of intense polemics. Critics Michael Fried and Hal Foster have suggested that this concept replaced the demand for quality with that for interest and that it was more or less equivalent to “merely interesting.” Judd, however, rejected this position and, as art critics Francis Colpitt and James Meyer show, did relate the interesting with the idea of quality. The philosopher Ralph Barton Perry who had discussed interest and the interesting in terms of predisposition, has a critical influence on Judd’s artistic theories:

In discussing the definition of value, we shall be dealing constantly with the motor-affective life; that is to say, with instinct desire, feeling, will … it is necessary therefore

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194 Ruscha cited in Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting, 144.
197 Meyer, Minimalism, 138.
199 Meyer, Minimalism, 139-140.
200 Ibid., 140.
to have a term which may be used to refer to what is characteristic of this strain in life and mind … The term interest is the most acceptable.  

A central argument in Judd’s essay is that interest, after all, can connote value. An interesting work is such if it holds one’s gaze and prompts the viewer to look at it again and again. A common thread that ties together all these different takes on the interesting is that it is primarily a visual experience.

Karsten Harries: the critique of the interesting. In 1968, Karsten Harries published The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation, a volume that looked at the emergence of modern art as a consequence of the dissolution of the ideals built upon the Platonic-Christian tradition. Harries was writing at a time when various forms of Modern and avant-garde art co-existed with the more recent Conceptual Art, Pop Art, and Minimalism. In the preface of the book he remarked, in what today, decades later, reads as a truism and a common place, that “The artist no longer has an obvious, generally accepted route to follow. One sign of this is that there is no one style today comparable to Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque.” In the absence of a prevalent direction, Harries asked, what are the criteria that modern artists employ in making choices? His concerns were aligned with those of other current cultural critics and theorists, such as, for instance, Sigfried Giedion who, during the same decades, decried the lack of direction and the state of “confusion and boredom” manifested in contemporary arts and architecture.

The chapter titled “The Search for the Interesting,” built upon Kierkegard’s Either / Or and contained the seeds of Harries’s commentary to Kierkegaard, which he published decades later. The chapter was a critique of the reliance of visual arts on the concept of interesting that “depends on a movement of reflection which enables the individual to detach himself from his

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204 Harries, The Meaning of Modern Art, xiv-xv.
engaged being in the world in order to enjoy it.”205 The world-view of Kierkegaard’s aesthete consists in an agglomeration of random objects lacking meaning and relevance.206 In this context, there is no difference between the boring and the interesting as states of mind. They both have in common the distance and disengagement from the world in which the aesthete operates. Seeking an escape from reality, the aesthete, or the bored modern man, finds such a refuge in art, which, in turn, becomes arbitrary. 207 Harries proposes a spatial understanding of the interesting that relates the individual and her place in the world. The interesting lures people into breaking free from their own place in the world and finding pleasure in the unusual and the surprising.

It dislocates man by presenting him with something unexpected or novel. Its appeal depends on certain expectations which are then disappointed. Thus the normal is boring, the abnormal interesting. Something taken out of its normal context, e.g. a can of Campbell’s soup presented as a work of art is interesting. To stress the unimportant, giving it great importance, can be interesting.208

“The concern for the interesting,” Harries writes, leads to the adoption of arbitrariness as an aesthetic principle.” Underlying Harries’s critique was a question about the criteria employed to determine the creation and evaluation of a work of art and its relationship with the audience. Embracing the arbitrary, the modern work of art severs any possible dialogue with the spectator who ends up investing the work with meanings that were never intended to be there in the first place. This phenomenon of over-reading into a work and attributing it arbitrary meanings ultimately creates the expectation for novelty and change. “The interesting demands novelty. If one has an interest in the interesting, to say that something has already been done is devastating criticism.”209 For Harries, “the interest in the interesting” is one of the main characteristics of art since 1790, becoming something analogous to an artistic movement. While “the masters of the interesting” base their artistic growth on discontinuity and novelty, a possible response to the

206 Ibid., 54.
207 Ibid., 56-57.
208 Ibid., 57.
209 Ibid., 59.
increase of arbitrary freedom is to be found in Kierkegaard’s advice for limitation and restraint.\textsuperscript{210}

If in 1968 Harries developed his criticism around visual arts, thirty years later with the publication of \textit{The Ethical Function of Architecture} (1997) he explicitly addressed architectural issues. Building upon Giedion’s chapter “Confusion and Boredom,” which was part of the 1967 edition of \textit{Space, Time and Architecture}, and his own earlier argument against a purely aesthetic approach, Harries discussed postmodern architecture in terms of a search for the \textit{interesting}. Specifically, he looked at Venturi’s work as a founding moment for postmodern architecture.

Like other postmodern architects, Venturi has enjoyed appearing in humanist dress, but did he not give us a more helpful pointer when he opposed to Mies van der Rohe’s “less is more” his own equally quotable “less is a bore?” This suggests that postmodern has its origin not so much in a humanistic (that is to say, in an ethical) as in a merely aesthetic response to modernism – more precisely, in the already mentioned response that, born of boredom, seeks relief in a cultivation of the interesting.\textsuperscript{211}

While Harries joined a long list of critics who have long questioned Venturi and Scott Brown’s approach to architecture, he is the only one who framed his critique around the concepts of \textit{boring} and \textit{interesting}. Harries’s main question (“should architecture strive to be interesting?”\textsuperscript{212}) opens up other questions: is the relationship between modern and postmodern architecture similar to that between early Gothic and late Gothic, or between the classical Renaissance of Brunelleschi’s Ospedale degli Innocenti and the more elaborate Renaissance of Palladio’s Palazzo Chiericati? Is architecture to be perceived and experienced only as a visual form? Harries looked at Wölfflin’s \textit{Principles of Art History} to offer a more nuanced answer to these enquiries. Wölfflin had made the argument that between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a specific shift happened in the nature of artistic vision and formulated five pairs of opposing concepts that demonstrated this shift.\textsuperscript{213} One of them was the shift from \textit{absolute} to \textit{relative clarity}, which was related to the one from \textit{linear} to \textit{painterly} representations. In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Ibid., 60.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Harries, \textit{The Ethical Function of Architecture}, 9.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{213} The five pairs of formal principles are: linear / painterly, planar / recessional, closed form / open form, multiplicity / unity, absolute clarity / relative clarity.
\end{itemize}
Renaissance and Baroque, Wölfflin applies these ideas to distinguish between the two architectural styles. Harries proposed to interpret postmodern architecture in Wölfflin’s terms as a progress from one type of clarity to another and from linear to painterly.

This was, in fact, in less explicit terms, Venturi’s own approach. Never comfortable with the postmodern label, in Complexity and Contradiction he was searching for ways to break away from the modern idiom, perhaps inadvertently following Wölfflin’s theory. As we will see in the next section, Wölfflin emphasis on form, as well as his questions about the causes of changes in style, were based on visual perception and the concept of empathy. His comparative strategies, his conversations about pairs of opposites were common to nineteenth century art history studies and eventually found their echo in Venturi’s theory. The comparative method remained for years to come a didactic tool for the team Venturi-Scott Brown. As an architectural critic remarked more recently, in the revised edition of Learning from Las Vegas, “the new layout facilitates the comparison [between Venturi’s Guild House and Rudolph’s Crawford Manor] in true Wölfflinian fashion, as the two buildings face each other on opposite pages, separated by the cleft of the spine and drawn to the same scale.”

We have seen that in the midcentury art, the boring and the interesting raised to prominence not only as aesthetic categories but also as critical terms. The next section will show their specific use in Venturi’s architectural discourse.

3.3. Is boring architecture interesting?

Perhaps an homage to Vitruvius’s Ten Books on Architecture, Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture is structured in ten chapters that lay out his architectural theory, plus an eleventh one presenting his own work. In the tenth chapter, Venturi makes an argument for what he calls “the obligation toward the difficult whole” in architecture. Combining Gestalt theories (which state that a whole is more than the sum of its parts) and complexity theories (that define a complex system as a “large number of parts that interact in a non-simple...
way”\textsuperscript{216}, Venturi once again builds his argument around formalist composition. His emphasis is on number-based rules (such as duality and binuclear plan) and inflection of different parts.\textsuperscript{217} To legitimate his position, he repeatedly references Baroque and Mannerist precedents. (More than twenty six percent of the images come belong to these movements.) In this context, he brings up Heinrich Wölfflin’s concept of the “unified unity” of Baroque: “This subordination of parts corresponds to Wölfflin’s ‘unified unity’ of the Baroque – which he contrasts with the ‘multiple unity’ of the Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{218}

Venturi never clarifies the reference to Wölfflin, nor does he mention any work by the Swiss art critic. I propose that Venturi’s emphasis on symbolic forms and ideas about vitality were closer to nineteenth century aesthetic theories than to Baroque or Mannerist precedents or even contemporary examples drawn from Pop Art and New Criticism. The concept of empathy and the term vitality developed through the work of Robert Vischer, Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer, Heinrich Wölfflin’s theory on stylistic evolution and Adolf Göller’s ideas about changes in style have indirectly distilled down into Venturi’s work.

**Robert Vischer and Wilhelm Worringer: empathy and vitality.** The concept of empathy (\textit{Einfühlung} in German – literally in-feeling or feeling-into) was introduced in 1873 by Robert Vischer in his doctoral dissertation entitled “On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics” and was defined as an unconscious projection of the bodily form of an individual into the form of an object.\textsuperscript{219} Vischer founded his theory on a physiological and neurological basis and on the notion of similarity explained as the harmony between the subject and the object.\textsuperscript{220} Thus, a horizontal line might be more pleasing than a diagonal one because the former resonates with the structure of visual perception.\textsuperscript{221} In looking at a small object we experience a “contractive feeling”, whereas in looking at a large building we experience an

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 88-90.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{219} Mallgrave. \textit{The Architect’s Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture}, 77.
\textsuperscript{220} “He means by this not only that we tend to relate objects to our bodily form but also that they, in turn, relate in varying degrees to the workings of our nerves, muscles, and those mysterious ‘neural modifications’ [...].” (Mallgrave, \textit{The Architect’s Brain}, 78.)
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 78.
“expansive feeling.” One’s empathic relationship with an object is essentially “physiognomic or emotional” and it is through our imagination that we invest objects with vital energy.”

Critical to Vischer’s theory was the notion of vitality. He claimed that an empathetic experience “leads to a strengthening or a weakening of the general vital sensation.” Empathy and vitality were central to the theories of Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer and became key notions for Art Nouveau artists and architects such as August Endell and Henry van de Velde.

In his Abstraction and Empathy (first published in German in 1908 and in the first English translation in 1953), Wilhelm Worringer proposed an interpretation of art based on what he saw as two opposite concepts. Building upon Theodor Lipps’s aesthetic theories, he was the first to legitimize abstraction as equal to realism. In an evolutionary manner, he argued, in fact, that “the urge to abstraction stands at the beginning of every art and in the case of certain peoples at a high level of culture remains the dominant tendency, whereas with the Greeks and other Occidental peoples, for example, it slowly recedes, making way for the urge to empathy.” He associated empathy with the gratification found in the beauty of the organic and the abstract with the inorganic and the crystalline, and claimed that the value of a work of art resides in its power to impart happiness. That the reproduction of the “organically beautiful vitality” releases a sensation of happiness constitutes the presupposition of empathy. “The value of a line, of a form consists for us is the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling.”

Apparently, there is no direct connection between the concepts of empathy and vitality in Venturi’s work. In fact, both Venturi and Scott Brown have been highly critical of the various forms of expressionism manifested in modern architecture and whose origins could be traced all the way back to the nineteenth century notion of empathy. In Learning from Las Vegas, they

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222 Mallgrave, The Architect’s Brain, 78.
223 Ibid., 78.
224 Ibid., 79.
225 Theodor Lipps’ Aesthetics (1903-1906) and Wilhelm Worringer’s Abstraction and Empathy (1908).
227 Ibid., 4.
228 Ibid., 13.
229 Ibid., 14.
230 Ibid. 14.
specifically directed their criticism against such ideas as connotation, physiognomy and expression in architecture:

Modern architecture (and Crawford Manor as its exemplar) has tended to shun the heraldic and denotative in architecture and to exaggerate the physiognomic and connotative. Modern architecture uses expressive ornament and shuns explicit symbolic ornament.\(^{231}\)

However, critics have observed that “Donald Weismann, Vincent Scully, Robert Venturi, and Colin Rowe are only a few of the better known practitioners of empathetic seeing.”\(^{232}\) It is worth noting that in his first book, Venturi repeatedly referenced ideas about vitality and even expressionism. In the “gentle manifesto” at the beginning of Complexity and Contradiction he stated: “By embracing contradiction as well as complexity, I aim for vitality as well as validity. ... I am for messy vitality over obvious unity.”\(^{233}\) Nonetheless, his take on empathy is primarily visual and generally brackets other forms of embodiment or relationship between the subject and the object. Later in the second chapter, Venturi wrote:

Gothic tracery and Rococo rocaille were not only expressively valid in relation to the whole, but came from a valid showing-off of hand skills and expressed a vitality derived from the immediacy and individuality of the method. … [Alvar Aalto’s Imatra Church] represents a justifiable expressionism different from the willful picturesqueness of the haphazard structure and spaces of Giovanni Michelucci’s recent church for the Autostrada. Aalto’s complexity is part of the program and structure of the whole rather than a device justified only by the desire for expression.\(^{234}\)

Vitality is that aspect of variety intrinsic to architectural objects or cities that, implicitly, makes them interesting. “An artful discord gives vitality to architecture,” wrote Venturi in the sixth chapter, that on “the conventional element.”\(^{235}\) Mundane and ordinary elements of

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\(^{231}\) Venture, Scott Brown and Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, 101.


\(^{233}\) Venture, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 16.

\(^{234}\) Ibid., 18. In the second edition, he revisits his position and adds the following footnote: “I have visited Giovanni Michelucci’s Church of the Autostrada since writing these words, and I now realize it is an extremely beautiful and effective building. I am therefore sorry I made this unsympathetic comparison.”

\(^{235}\) Ibid., 41.
architecture and landscape also possess a vitality that architects need to account for rather than ignore.\textsuperscript{236} Unlike architecture, Pop Art has recognized that “common place elements are often the main source of the occasional variety and vitality of our cities … .”\textsuperscript{237} The vitality of Times Square is not unlike that of Piazza San Marco in Venice.\textsuperscript{238} The intersections between a diagonal avenue like Broadway and the gridiron of Manhattan became events that “added validity and tension” to the overall regular plan of the city.\textsuperscript{239} The book’s closing statement is a manifesto for revisiting the everyday and the ordinary in architecture and the city: “And it is perhaps from the everyday landscape, vulgar and disdained, that we can draw the complex and contradictory order that is valid and vital for our architecture as an urbanistic whole.”\textsuperscript{240}

For Venturi, vitality indicates the quality of a formal composition, but it also relates to that similarity between subject and object that was central to Vischer and Worringer’s concept of empathy. Gothic and Rococo express vitality because of the extraordinary craftsmanship embodied in the work. The vitality of Times Square results from the variety of architectural events embodied within the hustle-and-bustle of daily life, which people experience directly. Similarly, the everyday and the ordinary in architecture and landscape resonate with the everyday and ordinary emotions experienced by ordinary people. While Venturi will explicitly stay away from evoking emotions and feelings, his insistence on the vitality of architectural and urban forms echoes the concept of empathy. The main difference, however, is that he approaches it through disembodied symbols expected to create visual connections between the viewing subject and the object.

**Heinrich Wölfflin: the unified whole; the interesting as illusion.** In *Complexity and Contradiction*, Venturi never clarified his brief reference to Wölfflin.\textsuperscript{241} However, he was probably familiar with Wölfflin’s influential books, by then available to the English audience: *Renaissance and Baroque* (first published in German in 1888, but translated in English only in

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 42-43.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{241} “This subordination of parts corresponds to Wölfflin’s ‘unified unity’ of the Baroque – which he contrasts with the ‘multiple unity’ of the Renaissance.” (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 90).
While discussing the main differences between two architectural styles along with their characteristics, Wölfflin’s *Renaissance and Baroque* offered a specific hypothesis for understanding stylistic changes. Although Venturi largely departed from Wölfflin’s propositions, I believe that several of his underlying tenets have, if indirectly, found their echo in *Complexity and Contradiction*, namely ideas about the *boring*, the *interesting*, and the necessity of change.

In Wölfflin’s *Renaissance and Baroque*, he defined the latter as a painterly style, “that which lends itself to being painted, that which without addition would serve as a motif for the painter.”245 This idea was further developed in *Principles of Art History*, where he proposed five pairs of concepts to explain the transition from the style of the sixteenth century to that of the seventeenth.246 The first pair described the difference between what Wölfflin called the *linear* to the *painterly*: in the former case (which corresponds to the Renaissance) objects are perceived through their outlines, contours, and limits, whereas in the latter (which corresponds to the Baroque), objects tend to look limitless, their distinct boundaries are blurred, and things merge with each other.247

A classical temple, or by extension, a Renaissance building, “would look monotonous in a picture” (or in other words, boring) and “an artist painting it on a canvas today would have great difficulty in making it look interesting.”248 In contrast, a “Baroque building is more animated” and lends itself easier to more dramatic effects of light and shadow.249 The painterly

246 These five pairs were: linear and painterly, plane and recession, closed and open form, multiplicity and unity, clearness and unclearness. (Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*).
248 Ibid., 29.
249 Ibid., 29.
quality of a building derives from a sense of moving and restless masses, of jumping and swaying forms.

In short, the severe style of architecture makes its effect by what it is, that is by its corporeal substance, while painterly architecture acts through what it appears to be, that is, an illusion of movement. Neither of these extremes, of course, exists in a pure state. Painterliness is based on an illusion of movement. 250

What makes a building interesting, worthy of representation, is its ability to create an illusion, to appear as something else, something different. Ultimately, it wasn’t the depth of the wall in Baroque architecture, neither “the dissolution of the regular,” 251 the elusiveness, the lack of definition, 252 nor the drama of light and shadow, that Venturi “learned from” this style, but rather a sense of the interesting derived from the play between what things are and what they appear to be. This association of interesting and deceitful was already present, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, in the aesthetic theories of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard.

Wölfflin maintained that apparent accidents as design techniques infuse architecture with greater vitality – a term that, as we have already seen, Venturi used frequently, and which translated into a deliberate strategy applied in his projects. 253 Comparing Renaissance and Baroque surfaces, Wölfflin wrote: “…the clearly-defined surfaces of the old style were purposely broken up with ‘accidental’ effects to give them greater vitality.” 254 Later in the book, Wölfflin will call this an “intentional dissonance.” 255

The formal relationship of parts to whole was central to Wölfflin’s understanding of the differences between Renaissance and Baroque. In addition to the characteristics already mentioned, he found that it was ‘maniera grande’ that best expressed the nature of Baroque architecture; borrowed from Giorgio Vasari, the term was used by Wölfflin to describe two main elements that distinguished Baroque from Renaissance: an increase in size and a simpler, more

250 Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, 30.
251 Ibid., 32.
252 Ibid., 33.
253 “… an ‘accidental’ drapery fold or something of the sort must be introduced to enliven it [the flat surfaces]. Unpainterly are the uniform series and the regular interval; a rhythmic succession is better, and better still is an apparently quite accidental grouping, depending entirely on the precise distribution of masses of light.” (Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, 32)
254 Ibid., 35.
255 Ibid., 68.
unified composition. Through architectural examples, Wölfflin showed how these two composition principles worked hand in hand: as the size increases and the parts get bigger, large unarticulated masses rather than separate parts become the main elements of the composition. By way of consequence, larger buildings called for simpler details. Unlike the tripartite horizontal division of the Renaissance façade, the Baroque façade became a “unified body.” Wölfflin wrote:

After the activity of Michelangelo and Raphael in the Vatican, painting, sculpture and architecture increased steadily in scale; until beauty was conceived of entirely in terms of the colossal. Gracefulness and diversity gave way to a new simplicity, aiming only at large masses; the whole is permeated by a powerful and unifying force and nothing suggests a composition made up of separate parts.

In Complexity and Contradiction, Wölfflin’s principle of the “vertically unified façade” (or what Venturi calls “unified unity”) works hand in hand with the Gestalt principles: Wölfflin claimed that Renaissance design principles worked with parts that prefigured the form of the whole; in contrast, the Baroque worked with increasingly larger parts, where the whole was vaster than the sum of its parts, which in turn, will become one of the most important principles of Gestalt psychology. Wölfflin found the aesthetic appeal of this approach in “the resolution of the discords” and reversed the direction of the relationship of parts to whole: no longer are the parts indicative of the whole as in Renaissance architecture, but, instead, “only through the whole could the individual part gain value and meaning.”

Again, this tension between conflicting parts constitutes a core principle of Venturi’s architectural theory and practice. The “messy vitality” and the “obligation toward the difficult whole” that he proposes in his “gentle manifesto” recall Wölfflin’s interpretation of Baroque architecture. In this context, even the quote from August Hecksher (“The equilibrium must be created out of opposites”) is in tune with the same ideas. Tension, rather than serenity, should

256 Ibid., 40.
257 Ibid., 40.
258 Ibid., 39.
259 Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, 70.
261 Ibid., 16.
be characteristic of the architecture of the time. Complexity and contradiction should result from the association between what an image is and it appears to be.

The examples continue throughout the book and are also made explicit in the eleventh chapter, the one which presents the work of the firm. The project for the Pearson House (1957) (Figure 3.4.) played with “contrasting spatial layers,” whereas the renovation of the James B. Duke House (1959) (Figure 3.5.) attempted to create harmony through “contrasting juxtapositions.” Distortion and a game of make-believe are at work in the headquarters of the North Penn Visiting Nurse Association (1960) (Figure 3.6.), where the straight retaining wall and the rectangular box are distorted, and the scale of the windows makes the building appear bigger than it actually is. The side façades of the Guild House (1960-1963) are “contrasting intricately,” the antenna appears real, but is, in fact, fake, the double-hung windows are “unusually big” and consequently express tension on the elevations (Figure 3.7.). The Vanna Venturi house (1962) (Figure 3.8.) illustrates most of the lessons learned from Baroque and Mannerist precedents: complex and distorted interior spaces, broken symmetries, tension between two vertical elements (the fireplace-chimney and the stair). The house is open and close, simple and complex, big and small.

Heinrich Wölfflin and Adolf Göller: empathy and the “law of jading.” The middle chapter of Wölfflin’s Renaissance and Baroque inquired into a topic of utmost relevance for nineteenth century art history: what causes the change in style? His answer was influenced by his belief in the theory of empathy between architectural forms and human emotions.

Wölfflin asked: “Where are the sources of baroque? … Why did Renaissance come to an end? … Why was it followed, particularly, by Baroque? … Why did it happen this way?” He

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262 Ibid., 17
263 Ibid., 20.
264 Ibid., 106.
265 Ibid., 107
266 Ibid., 109.
267 Ibid., 116.
268 Ibid., 118.
269 Ibid., 118-119.
270 Wölfflin, Renaissance and Baroque, 73.
proposed two answers. The first one was a critique of a theory on the *boring* and the *interesting*. In contrast, the second one introduced ideas about experience, the human body, and practice.

Wölfflin’s first answer was a critique of Adolf Göller’s theory on changes in style. In late nineteenth century, Göller was a professor of architecture at the Technische Hochshule in Stuttgart and in 1887 delivered a lecture titled “What is the Cause of Perpetual Style Change in Architecture?” He put forth an architectural theory grounded in aesthetics and empathy, making the argument that architecture was the art of “visible pure form, considered free of any ideal content” and “an inherently pleasurable, meaningless, play of lines or of light and shade.” Göller was mainly concerned with the formation of styles and the invention of architectural forms, which he saw as a cyclical process: it had started far back in antiquity and could be defined through the succession of “advent, flowering, and passing of families of form.” His approach was an evolutionary one, based on progress, development, and decline. He acknowledged the difference between works of painting and sculpture, and works of architecture, where the former generate aesthetic pleasure derived from reflection, but the latter “are beautiful without thought content.” Göller was a proponent of architecture as language and drew comparisons between the two. The sound of language, rather than its meaning, is what pleases us. Likewise, he it is not the content of architecture’s formal language that is interesting, but “the pleasing play of lines or of light and shade.”

Göller introduced the concept of “memory image,” defined as the first moment in the formation of a style, when people get gradually accustomed to certain forms that they will eventually find pleasurable. This process, however, does not go on indefinitely and comes to end with what Göller called the law of “jading:” as people become more and more familiar with

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272 Ib. Id., 193.
273 Ib., 198.
274 Ib. Id., 198. “Why should the content of architecture’s formal language – the structural achievement – be particularly interesting in itself? If our emotions were moved by mere statics and mechanics, then a machine would be the greatest architectural work of art! We see structural achievement even without decorative forms. If the interest resided in that architectural work itself, what purpose would the decorative language of form serve?”
275 “The sharper the memory image becomes etched into the memory patterns of individuals, the more clarity it gains, the more these particular forms become pleasurable.” Harry Francis Mallgrave. *The Architect’s Brain: Neuroscience, Creativity, and Architecture*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 82.
these forms, the memory image is complete, the erstwhile pleasure experienced by spectators and architects is gone and the style becomes exhausted. He explained that once this jading settles in, the architects have only a few options to move forward. Firstly, they look for new arrangements of the same volumes, *partis* and decorations or intensify the already “jaded forms” – both of these strategies eventually lead to a baroque stage of the style. Once these options are worn out, architects end up simplifying the formal vocabulary in order to offer new forms that will generate new memory images, which will eventually follow the same cycle. Implicit in Göller’s proposition was a tendency to regard human beings as a rather amorphous group without agency and no individualities.

What Göller described as the law of jading was a form of boredom that connected architectural forms and human beings. The underlying argument was that the formation of a style was the result of a constant search for the *interesting* understood as newness and novelty, in response to the jaded (or *boring*) forms of the past. Critical to his view was the unquestioned acceptance of the pleasing nature of all things novel and the universal legitimacy of the law of jading:

The charm of novelty is well known, as is the way habit may blunt the impression of many forms; but it has been necessary to seek out the hidden law and its causes in order to make it possible to draw a conclusion. It has to be shown *that not even the most ideal form, considered as a purely optical event, can be an exception*. For most persons, the charm of a beautiful form is not lost with its novelty; conversely, it has to be shown that jading is not simply an accidental phenomenon, nor is it based on personal predispositions or individual aberration, but rather on a universally valid law.

Moreover, the jading was conceptualized as the essential driving force behind architectural progress: “Without jading, nothing new would ever have been sought nor anything more beautiful ever found. Had we always found beautiful what was once accepted as the most beautiful, no new architecture could ever have arisen.”

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277 Ibid., 82.
278 Ibid., 82-83.
279 Göller, 206 (italics in original.)
280 Göller, 217.
forms, the entire history of architecture would have remained monotonous and boring.\textsuperscript{281} Once engaged in the ideology of the interesting, boredom is necessary the result.

Coincidentally, in the description of the entry for the National Football Hall of Fame competition Venturi employed a language that echoed Göller’s theory on the law of jading. The project was published in 1968, first in *Architectural Forum* (April) and then in *Architecture Canada* (October).\textsuperscript{282} Dubbed a “billdingboard involving movies, relics, and space,” Venturi’s project attempted to address the almost-cult status of campus football along with the new mid-century sensibilities developed around movies, billboards, and cars (Figure 3.9):

> Our mixed media include symbolic and representational elements, that is, billboards and words, along with the abstract elements of space, form, and structure. Symbols with architecture enrich meaning. They can evoke the instant associations crucial for today’s vast space, fast speeds, complex programs and, perhaps, jaded senses which respond only to bold stimuli.\textsuperscript{283}

The “jaded senses” of the moderns signal the moment of crisis that Göller had identified earlier as the end of a stylistic era. The use of language aside, Venturi’s project embodies the tension between architectural forms of the past, historic precedents, and the technology of the future. References to Gothic cathedrals, Baroque villas, and Piazza del Campidoglio populate the design along with projection screens and computer graphics, which foreshadow the huge impact of digital technologies in the upcoming decades. Contrasts of scale and surface decoration, openings that violently puncture the whole recall Wölfflin’s theory about the “resolution of the discords.” Never made explicit in these terms, the viewers’ anticipated perception of the building was grounded in the recognition of common symbols and what Göller has defined as the “memory image.”

Returning to Wölfflin, he refuted Göller’s theory of “blunted sensibility” and did not believe that it offered a legitimate answer to his own question about causes of stylistic changes,

\textsuperscript{281} Göller, 217.
and, more specifically, the origins of Baroque. Wölfflin’s main criticism was that Göller reduced human beings full of vitality to “form-experiencing” creatures, “enjoying, tiring, demanding fresh stimuli.” He maintained that “an action or experience not conditioned by our general responses to life, our personality and our whole being, is inconceivable.” Where Göller denied the agency of human beings, Wölfflin reinforced the power of the individual. He argued that Göller’s “jaded formal perceptiveness” could not account for the extraordinary changes brought about in Baroque – they were rather the result of a “general numbing of the nerves,” “a universal loss of refined perceptiveness caused by a high degree of emotional indulgence, which rendered all less obtrusive stimuli ineffective.”

Moreover, for Wölfflin, Göller’s theory had the underlying hypothesis of a state of constant change in which the role of the architect was to produce something novel by varying the grouping of masses, the shape and combination of individual forms.

Wölfflin’s critique of Göller was implicitly directed against a theory of the boring and the interesting focused on the search for novelty in architectural forms. He criticized the reductionist claim that human beings simply respond to external stimuli (which later will lie at the core of behaviorism) and have no role in shaping their experience. What he proposed, instead, was to center architectural experience on what is the most familiar and comprehensible fact, specific to each individual, yet also common to all: the human body itself. He wrote:

…it is clear that architecture, an art of corporeal masses, can relate only to man as a corporeal being. It is an expression of its time in so far as it reflects the corporeal essence of man and his particular habits of deportment and movement, it does not matter whether they are light and playful, or solemn and grave, or whether his attitude to life is agitated or calm; in a word, architecture expresses the ‘Lebensgefühl’ of an epoch. As an art, however, it will give an ideal enhancement of his ‘Lebensgefühl;’ in other words, it will express man’s aspirations.
For Wölfflin, *Lebensgefühl* (“vital feeling”) mediates between the forms perceived by an individual and their physiological body, and designates a type of energy experienced by the body in movement.\(^{291}\) (*Lebensgefühl* was also an important concept in Kant’s philosophy. He proposed that a subject’s aesthetic perception of a building depends on how the building affects the individual’s “vital feeling,” creating pleasure or displeasure.\(^{292}\) Rejecting positivist theories that traced the origin of forms to technical causes, Wölfflin argued that understanding architecture from the perspective of the human body provides an expression of the spiritual. He recognized, however, that Baroque architecture “cannot be seen in terms of the human body” and it has “no sense of the significance of individual forms.”\(^{293}\) The essence of the style consists in the effects of lights and shadows and the painterly quality of the whole rather than the intimate and empathetic response to individual forms that was specific to Renaissance.

While Wölfflin’s main concern was related to architectural forms, he was seeking to understand them in relation to moods and human emotions. His approach rejected positivist theories and proposed a body-centered perspective on architecture. “The body is the medium that affords the grounding of knowledge. It provides the locus of a universal experience – thus its ‘exactness’ – that unites object and viewer around the symmetrically placed axis of experience.”\(^{294}\) Critics have made the argument that postwar egalitarianism has favored empathy theories in opposition to metaphysical history or neoclassical aesthetics because of the their focus on physical artifacts rather than abstract ideas.\(^{295}\)

Architectural critic and historian Mark Jarzombek has shown that it is when vitalism and vitality take a self-fulfilling and self-referential turn, as it is the case in Venturi’s work, that they actually change into “vividness” and become irrelevant.\(^{296}\)

It was as if the vitalist argument within the formalist position became autonomous and demanded to be fed more and more ‘complexity’ as an increasingly rigorous test of its potency – all in the search for “vividness” … . [The argument] assumes that we will

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292 Ibid., 5
293 Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, 85.
295 Ibid., 35.
296 Ibid., 53.
always be precisely human, that we will be aroused by physical forms, especially if they are “alive,” complex, and worthy of the male gaze that continually has to prove its power of observation.\textsuperscript{297}

Adding to that, I propose that it is not only the autonomy of the object that weakens the claim for vitality and empathy in Venturi’s theory, but also the reduction of architecture to an aesthetic object described in terms of the dichotomy boring – interesting. Venturi’s reading of Wölfflin was certainly biased and reductive as he chose those specific aspects of his work that supported his own views, namely the creative tension between discordant elements and the relationship of parts to whole. At the same time, it was through Wölfflin that Venturi might have become acquainted with empathy theories, ideas about moods and architecture, and Göller’s hypothesis about changes in style being determined by a cyclical loop between the boring and the interesting. In Complexity and Contradiction Venturi did not make any explicit claims about empathy, nor did he address ideas about embodiment or expressive moods. “Less is a bore,” however, echoes Göller’s proposition that exhausted, jaded “memory images” fail to resonate with people’s feelings and call for radical changes. Likewise, Venturi’s emphasis on the irrelevance of certain analogies dear to modern architects (such as, for instance, those between Japanese pavilions and contemporary houses\textsuperscript{298}) indicates a similar sense of exhaustion with certain forms that have turned obsolete and require critical changes.

\textbf{Sigfried Giedion: confusion and boredom.} A particular thread that carried Wölfflin’s legacy into twentieth century architectural thinking was his doctoral student, Sigfried Giedion. Giedion was critical of positions such as Göller’s, who associated stylistic changes with the jading of forms, and was interested, instead, in examining the shared grounds of different epochs. In the introduction to the 1967 edition of Space, Time and Architecture (first published in 1941), Giedion described mid-century architecture as being governed by “confusion and boredom.”\textsuperscript{299}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{297}] Ibid., 53.
\item[\textsuperscript{298}] Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 17.
\item[\textsuperscript{299}] “In the sixties a certain confusion exists in contemporary architecture, as in painting; a kind of pause, even a kind of exhaustion. Everyone is aware of it. Fatigue is normally accompanied by uncertainty, what to do and where to go. Fatigue is the mother of indecision, opening the door to escapism, to superficialities of all kinds. … A kind of playboy-architecture became \textit{en vogue}: an architecture treated as playboys treat life, jumping from one sensation to another and quickly bored with everything.” (Giedion, Space, Time, and Architecture (1967), xxxii.)
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His concern with the state of architecture was not new – he had published an earlier version of this introduction in 1961 as a preface to his Constancy, Change and Architecture, a small volume based on the talk he had delivered the same year at Harvard for the first of an annual series of Gropius Lectures. Giedion’s talk presented some of the arguments he had already made in Space, Time and Architecture and had two parts, “The Beginnings of Art” and “The Beginnings of Architecture.” It was prefaced by his thoughts on “the present disturbing fashions in architecture” that closely resemble the chapter on “Confusion and Boredom” from 1967. Having its starting point in the critique of “the fashions of 1960 with their lacework of heterogeneous historical relics,” Giedion’s ultimate goal was to understand the relationship of constancy and change in architecture and to search for those invariables of human nature. Implicit in the notion of fashion was his critique of novelty and change, of elements that, quickly becoming outdated, demand to be replaced by other, newer and more interesting, forms.

Giedion acknowledged his interest in one main problem: “the formation of the man of today” and more specifically, the “architecture which provides the corporal and the psychic shelter for this formation.” His inquiry is related to Wölfflin’s question about the causes of stylistic changes and, as we have already seen, his positioning of human corporeality and human aspirations at the core of changes in arts and architecture. Giedion reiterated his argument from Space, Time and Architecture that showed the dichotomy – widened in the nineteenth century – between methods of thinking and methods of feeling; he proposed to bridge that gap by looking at the unchanging elements of human nature and finding the equilibrium “between inner and outer reality.” An advocate of abstraction as the thread that tied together the primitive and the modern man, Giedion built upon Wilhelm Worringuer’s thesis on the art of abstraction and the art of empathy. Each of the two parts of the lecture discussing the beginnings of arts and, respectively, of architecture, start with a section on “continuity and change.” In both arts and

300 Sigfried Giedion, Constancy, Change and Architecture.
301 Ibid., 3.
302 “There is at present a certain confusion in contemporary architecture. Just as in painting, there seems to be a kind of pause, even a kind of exhaustion. Everyone is aware of it. Fatigue is normally accompanied by uncertainty, what to do, where to go. Fatigue is the mother of indecision, of quivering.” (Giedion, Constancy, Change and Architecture, 3). Compare with note 195.
303 Ibid., 4-6.
304 Giedion, Constancy, Change and Architecture, 4.
305 Ibid., 6.
architecture, the continuity across time and space is manifested through the longing shared by all human beings for signs and symbols.

The analysis of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s St. George Church in Bloomsbury, London from *Complexity and Contradiction* is a nod to and a hidden critique of, Giedion’s influential book: “In St. George, Bloomsbury … the contradictory axes inside become alternatingly dominant or recessive as the observer moves within them, so that the same space changes meaning. Here is another dimension of ‘space, time and architecture’ which involves the multiple focus.”

(Figure 3.10) Venturi referenced again *Space, Time and Architecture* first in relation to Giedion’s studies of balloon frames and then as an opportunity to criticize Giedion’s reading of Aalto’s work. Unlike Giedion, who saw Aalto’s architecture as a “combination of standardization with irrationality,” Venturi looked at it as contradictory and “an artful recognition of the circumstantial and the contextual …” An explicit critique of Giedion’s own modern bias came from Venturi and Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas* when they wrote: “For us the most boring pavilions at Expo ’67 were those that corresponded to the progressive structures of nineteenth-century world’s fairs celebrated by Sigfried Giedion.”

**Techniques of the interesting: appearance, combinatory techniques, excess and overload.** Venturi and Scott Brown have remained relatively consistent over the years in terms of their theoretical stance, beliefs, and practical approach to architecture and urban design. While it was in *Learning from Las Vegas* that they clearly formulated the question “Is boring architecture interesting?” the concern with the relevance of this apparent contradiction for our discipline had started much earlier.

Through the work of Venturi and Scott Brown we begin to understand the specificity of the category of the interesting in architecture. The emphasis on appearance results in the autonomy of the architectural object. Through combinatory techniques, design strategies turn

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307 Ibid., 38.
308 “Giedion has written of Aalto’s unique ‘combination of standardization with irrationality so that standardization is no longer master but servant.’” (Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd edition, 44.)
into self-referential and normative practices. Lastly, the bias for formal *excess and overload* is often legitimized in terms of complexity.

As shown in the first chapter, in his “gentle manifesto” at the beginning of *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi deliberately introduced the pair *boring – interesting* as a way to make an argument about his personal, subjective (yet highly relevant) approach to architecture. (Despite the seemingly “gentle” tone, through words such as “obligation,” “truth,” “must,” he urges the readers to endorse his position.)

Various forms of the dichotomy *boring – interesting* underline Venturi’s argument: exclusion – inclusion, explicit – implicit, oversimplification – complexity, reduction – simplicity, clarity – ambiguity, banality – variety, serenity – tension, etc. Justifying his argument for a complex architecture, Venturi wrote:

> The desire for a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions, is not only a reaction to the banality or prettiness of current architecture. It is an attitude common in the Mannerist periods: the sixteenth century in Italy or the Hellenistic period of Classical art, and is also a continuous strain seen in such diverse architects as Michelangelo, Palladio …, some architects of the Shingle Style, Furness, Sullivan, Lutyens, and recently, Le Corbusier, Aalto, Kahn, and others.

If unknowingly, Venturi embraced Wölfflin’s theory about the evolution of a style and the shift from one style to another. Although having had a certain evolutionary bias, Wölfflin had questioned the development of a style in terms of “rise, height and decline” and argued that what comes after a particular style should not be regarded as a lesser art, but rather a completely different one. Venturi proposed to validate his new approach to architecture not simply as a reaction against a state-of-affairs in architecture that he found problematic, but also as a natural evolution, which, as historical evidence showed, was moving toward something entirely different. The *new* is ultimately *interesting* not because it is simply different, but mostly because it belongs to a tradition of similar breakthrough moments that have happened throughout

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311 Ibid., 16-19.
312 Ibid., 19.
313 Wölfflin: *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art; The Sense of Form in Art: A Comparative Psychological Study; Renaissance and Baroque*.
314 Ibid., 14.
315 Ibid., 14.
time. By having identified *complexity* in earlier moments in architectural history, he situated his own approach within a legitimizing genealogy.

*Boring, interesting, complex* are intertwined both in the precedent studies and the descriptions of Venturi’s own projects, both at architectural and urban scales. This is how Venturi presents the comparison between road-town and Levittown:

Is there [*in Piazza San Marco – my note*] not a similar validity to the vitality Times Square in which the jarring inconsistencies of buildings and billboards are contained within the consistent order of the space itself? It is when honky-tonk spills out beyond spatial boundaries to the no-man’s land of roadtown, that it becomes chaos and blight. (If in *God’s Own Junkyard* Peter Blake had chosen examples of roadside landscape for his book which were less extremely “bad,” his point, at least involving the banality of roadside architecture, would ironically have been stronger.) It seems our fate now to be faced with either the endless inconsistencies of roadtown, which is chaos, or the infinite consistency of Levittown […] which is boredom. In roadtown we have a false complexity; in Levittown, a false simplicity. One thing is clear – from such false consistency real cities will never grow. Cities, like architecture, are complex and contradictory.\(^{316}\)

The “false complexity” of roadtown suggests that the agglomeration of buildings and signs without spatial limitations is *deceptively* interesting or, in other words, that without a framework, variety and diversity turn into disorder. (This idea is first presented in the second chapter, “Complexity and Contradiction vs. Simplification and Picturesqueness:” “A false complexity has recently countered the false simplicity of an earlier Modern architecture.”\(^{317}\)) The argument on “false complexity” and “false simplicity” is developed at the end of the seventh chapter, “Contradiction Adapted,” that proposes design techniques to accommodate differences and irregularities.\(^{318}\) The main strategy suggested is combinatory techniques. Precedents are analyzed in minute detail from strictly formal perspectives: the circumstantial distortion (such as

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317 Ibid., 18.
318 Ibid., 45-54.
the distortions of the plans of Palladio’s palaces to adapt to the streets of Vicenza\textsuperscript{319}; the expedient device (an accident within a rigorous order such as the post in the inner portal at Vézelay which blocks the axis to the altar\textsuperscript{320}) (\textbf{Figure 3.11}.); the eventful exception (such as the displaced column in Le Corbusier’s plan for Vila Savoye) (\textbf{Figure 3.12}.); the dialogue between the rectilinear order and the diagonal (such as Kahn’s Goldenberg House project)\textsuperscript{321} (\textbf{Figure 3.13}.).

The entire conversation is built around individual buildings, but the last paragraph proposes that similar principles can also be applied to urban design. It is in this context that the comparisons between Piazza San Marco and Times Square and between roadtown and Levittown emerge. Just as the various techniques to accommodate irregularities spawn the \textit{interesting} only within a rigorous architectural order, so the \textit{interesting} (or the exception, the distortion, the accident) at urban scale is manifested only within well-defined boundaries. Complexity is not chaos (or endless inconsistencies) and simplicity is not boredom (or infinite consistency). Earlier in the treatise, he had written that intricate forms are not necessarily complex.\textsuperscript{322} The \textit{interesting} (or the \textit{complex}), both in cities and individual buildings, results from a formal play between order and exceptions to order. Nowhere in his careful analysis does Venturi bring up the materiality of architecture or the dynamism of city life. While he does mention the “violent contradictions in scale, rhythms, and textures” in Piazza San Marco, the focus remains on autonomous objects and the visual perception of their formal composition.

To demonstrate the application of the theory to his work, Venturi employed the same principles and parameters in the description of his own projects in the eleventh chapter of the book.

The first instance in the account of his designs when he emphasized ideas about complexity was the design for the Headquarters Building for the North Penn Visiting Nurse Association (1960) (\textbf{Figure 3.6}.). The building is designed as a distorted box that is both simple and \textit{complex}, the positioning of the windows on the façade is \textit{complex} to counteract the simplicity of the box, the main entrance – through its design and location from the side court – is

\textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 18.
complex, as is the program itself.\footnote{323 Venturi, \textit{Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 109.} The project has gone through numerous iterations. While several elements have remained consistent (e.g. the general layout, the diagonal wall, and to a certain extent the thick street façade / storage-wall), it was the street elevation that has been carefully studied (Figure 3.14.). So what does the claim for complexity really indicate? In a sequence of two-dimensional studies, these iterations show a purely formal arrangement of shapes and their disposition on the surface of the wall. The latter is treated almost as a canvas without depth where cutouts of various sizes and forms are arranged in different combinations. Complexity seems to result from the formal variety of window patterns along with the treatment of the entrance – the intersection of a half-circle and a triangle.

This first account on complexity in Venturi’s own work shows how he resorts primarily to formal organizations of geometric elements as a means to build an “interesting” whole. Visual perception is the only way to relate with the work. The inhabitant becomes first and foremost a viewer. Architectural experience is thus reduced to visual signs. Complexity is hardly complex at all.

The last two projects shown at the end of the book bring up the key arguments of the dichotomy boring – interesting deriving from nineteenth century aesthetic theories. The design for the YMCA building (1965) (Figure 3.15), which was part of a larger complex in the small town of North Canton, Ohio that included the town hall and the extension of the existing public library, is described in a Wölflin-ian manner almost as a Baroque building accomplishing the goal of a unified body:

The openings in the wall were few and big to increase the scale. The relationships of the openings which are the dominant elements of the façade make up a relatively constant rhythm without focus in the center or emphasis at the terminations. This characteristic also gives greater unity and scale to the building.\footnote{324 Ibid., 126.}

Not unlike a painterly Baroque building where the clear distinctions between masses or between elements are blurred, the YMCA building does not have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but, is, instead, “just one continuous thing resulting from the constant, even boring,
rhythm.” This “boring rhythm” is constructed on the free-standing wall acting as a front façade and a buffer zone between the building and the plaza (Figure 3.15). Evidently, the “boring rhythm” and its larger scale are meant to be appealing because they signal something else: a nod to the existing factory and to the city hall. The former is situated opposite the YMCA and is overall bigger, but “smaller in its individual parts,” whereas the latter, is situated on the other side of the plaza and is smaller. The boring becomes interesting or complex in a very specific context: “A contrapuntal juxtaposition contrasts the ‘boredom’ of the false façade with the ‘chaos’ of the back façade which reflects the interior circumstantial complexities.” The boredom of the false façade is different from the boredom of Levittown described earlier, just as the chaos of the back façade is unlike the chaos of roadtown. Neither boredom nor chaos are mere rhetorical devices, but rather stand here for specific design tools expressed as combinatory techniques applied to formal compositions in elevation.

The last project in the sequence of twelve showed in the closing chapter of Complexity and Contradiction is Venturi and Rauch’s 1966 proposal for the Copley Square competition (Figure 3.16). The dichotomy boring – interesting appears again at the level of the formal composition through the relationship between their proposal for an ordered grid and the existing buildings on the site: “In the context of the ‘boring’ consistent grid inside the square the chaotic buildings to the north become ‘interesting’ and vital elements of the composition.” The “boring grid” provides that specific element which makes the difference between Times Square and Piazza San Marco, and roadtown: the ordered background. Venturi describes the project as a reflection, at a different scale, of Boston’s gridiron street pattern. Thus the proposed grid acts at an empathetic level: intimately knowing the large scale of their city, the occupants of the plaza would understand the logic embodied within this smaller scale design. In this context, interesting and vital become synonymous and a certain resonance between different scales is at work throughout the proposal. Operating at different levels, this mode of thinking is manifested in

325 Ibid., 126.
326 Ibid., 126.
328 Ibid., 129.
329 “This grid reflects in miniature the gridiron pattern of the part of Boston surrounding Copley Square. It imitates the hierarchy of streets, big, little and medium found in the real city. Like the real gridiron city, it contains diagonal ‘avenues’ which facilitate circulation and whose juxtaposition creates exceptional, residual blocks.” (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 129).
various instances: the circulation through the square replicates the circulation at urban level. The miniature replica in cast concrete of the existing Trinity Church is placed in front of the actual Trinity Church. What at an urban scale would be signs for adults, here are nursery rhymes for children, inscribed on walls at their own height (Figure 3.17).

The interesting, the vital, the complex grow from ambiguity and the blurring of boundaries in a way similar again to Wölfflin’s definition of the painterly. The issue of bringing things into focus or, on the contrary, of zooming out indicates a play between close-up and distance that resembles Wölfflin’s reading of Baroque architecture with its dissolution of lines and sharp contours:

…[t]here are more ways to see it [the grid]. It is like the intricate pattern of a plaid fabric. From a distance it is an overall repetitive pattern – from a great distance, indeed, it is a plain blur – but close-up it is intricate, varied and rich in pattern, texture, scale and color. […] It is a question of focus: as one moves around and through the composition, he can focus on different things and relationships in different ways. […] There is the opportunity for a variety of focuses, or rather for changing focus. […] Violent juxtapositions of blurred and sharp focuses come from levels of relationships which relate more or less to the whole, or in complex compositions, to wholes within wholes.330

One of Venturi’s most important claims in this project is “The main paradox of this design is that the boring pattern is interesting.”331 With what level of irony are we to interpret this statement? Is it simply a clever witticism meant to post-rationalize an otherwise common design approach? (As he briefly shows in the same text, grids have been employed in one form or another in countless architectural and urban interventions.) Is it a bitter-sweet way of justifying a position that he foresees as running against the architectural establishment? He had already used interesting in an ironic voice, suggesting that non-grid ways of using the piazza that claim to be “interesting, sensitive and human” are, in fact, just the opposite.332 The interesting, he implicitly warns us, is deceptive, just as it is deceptive to see the grid as boring.

330 Ibid., 130.
331 Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition., 130.
332 “There are probably more ways to use this square which is ‘just a grid’ than there are to use those which are interesting, sensitive and human.” (Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd edition, 130).
Venturi’s play between the boring and the interesting in his last two projects suggests multiple interpretations. With the emphasis on appearance (e.g. elevations) architectural objects become not only autonomous, but also somewhat deceitful, as things are not always what they appear to be. There is a question of scale involved in the dichotomy boring – interesting that requires alternative readings from far-away and close-up; in a manner similar to what Sianne Ngai has shown was occurring in the visual arts, these readings invite further conversation, discussion, and criticism. This mode of reading the work has a temporal dimension, where the inhabitant has a lengthy rather than immediate engagement with the project. This direction is different from the imminence of signs and symbols, one of the central ideas in the work of the Venturi – Scott Brown team. With a focus on design strategies based on formal arrangements of elements (windows, doors, frames, etc.) boring – interesting become self-referential, they are no longer a matter of relationship (although Venturi claims otherwise), but a matter of the autonomy of the work. The boring and the interesting become normative and foreshadow what will become explicit in later writings, such as Learning from Las Vegas, namely a mode of assessing architecture and design from a purely aesthetic and formalist perspective.

**Boring and interesting or the duck and the decorated shed.** That the boring and the interesting became criteria to evaluate Venturi and Scott Brown’s work was acknowledged both by Vincent Scully and Philip J. Finkelpearl, Venturi’s friend from Princeton and the one who introduced him to New Criticism and irony in literary studies. In a comprehensive review of several of Venturi and Scott Brown’s works, published in 1979, Finkelpearl made the argument that the “apparent oldness” of their works is, in fact, their “true newness.”333 Quoting Vincent Scully, he suggested that the rhetorical game between boring and interesting involves a deliberate strategy of deception where the new is disguised within the (apparently) old:

The authors of Learning from Las Vegas themselves ask the crucial question: “Is boring architecture interesting?” Vincent Scully’s answer in an essay in Werk-Architese (there

translated into German) is that their buildings are never boring “though they probably
look that way – because they are truly new – to people who have been brought up on late
International Style.”

It was, indeed, in *Learning from Las Vegas* that Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour
specifically addressed the question of the dichotomy *boring – interesting* in architecture. The
first chapter (“Some Definitions Using the Comparative Method”) of Part II (titled “Ugly and
Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed”) ends with the section called “Is Boring
Architecture Interesting?” At the beginning of the chapter the authors cite Andy Warhol’s
much-quoted aphorism “I like boring things.”

One of Venturi and Scott Brown’s most notable contributions to architectural theory is
the dialectical opposition between the duck and the decorated shed used to describe (and
simplify) architectural history through this dualism. Although both are deemed valid and are
usually intertwined, the duck (or the building *as symbol* – Chartres cathedral) stands opposite the
decorated shed (or the building *with applied symbols* – Palazzo Farnese). I propose, instead,
that the *duck* and the *decorated shed* stand in the same relationship as the categories of *boring*
and *interesting*. Illustrated through Venturi’s comparison between Paul Rudolph’s Crawford
Manor and his own Guild House, the duck and the decorated shed constitute the most
comprehensive architectural theory on the *boring* and the *interesting*. They tie together the
emphasis on appearance, the use of combinatory techniques as generative strategies, and the
preference for a surplus of architectural devices.

In the Wölfflin-ian manner of comparisons between Renaissance and Baroque, the
chapter in *Learning from Las Vegas* titled “Some Definitions Using the Comparative Method” is
entirely structured on dichotomies and polarities. Venturi’s training under the Beaux-Arts
influence of Donald Drew Egbert and Jean Labatut at Princeton has marked his methodological
bias for the didacticism of the comparative method. Comparison is justified through its dullness

334 Philip J. Finkelpearl. “Contemporary Confrontations,” 204.
336 Ibid., 87.
337 Ibid., 87.
(“it is simple to the point of banality”\textsuperscript{338}) and is applied throughout the entire chapter to two buildings: Rudolph’s Crawford Manor and Venturi’s Guild House (Figure 3.18).

In 1972 when \textit{Learning from Las Vegas} was published, why did Venturi go back to a work that had been completed nine years earlier and thoroughly explained six years before (in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}), while many other projects have been finalized in the meantime? Why would he construct the entire argument around a building that belonged to a period which, in this very book, he was already calling into the question for not having been radical enough and for not having clearly illustrated the theoretical principles laid out in \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}?\textsuperscript{339} Is it because, as the authors claim, Crawford Manor and Guild House were comparable in terms of program, size, and construction date, yet so fundamentally different?

While the claims for certain correspondences are, as we will see further, largely inaccurate, the two buildings are similar for reasons different from those exposed in the comparison. The whole point of this exhaustive comparison is to make an argument for the difference between the \textit{duck} and the \textit{decorated shed}, where Crawford Manor stands for the former and the Guild House for the latter. The published analysis conceals the true similarities between the two projects, which, in turn, reflect the similarities between the \textit{duck} and the \textit{decorated shed}. I believe that the two concepts, which have become so central to Venturi and Scott Brown’s architectural theories and through which they have re-conceptualized the entire history of architecture, as well as their own work, are not radically different. I will attempt to show how the \textit{duck} and the \textit{decorated shed} are closer in nature than they suggest, thus revealing a deeper connection with the dichotomy \textit{boring – interesting}.

Returning to the comparison between Crawford Manor and Guild House will help shed light on the relationship between the \textit{duck} and the \textit{decorated shed}. First, as the authors of

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{339} “Let us describe our own experience as architects to explain how we came to ugly and ordinary architecture. After the appearance of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, we began to realize that few of our firm’s buildings were complex and contradictory, at least not in their purely architectural qualities of space and structure as opposed to their symbolic content. We had failed to fit into our buildings double-functioning or vestigial elements, circumstantial distortions, expedient devices, eventful exceptions, exceptional diagonals, things in things, crowded or contained intricacies, linings or layerings, residual spaces, redundant spaces, ambiguities, inflections, dualities, difficult wholes, or the phenomena of both-end. There was little in our work of inclusion, inconsistency, compromise, accommodation, adaptation, superadjacency, equivalence, multiple focus, juxtaposition, or good and bad space.” (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, 2nd edition, 128)
Learning from Las Vegas noted, the urban conditions of the two buildings are distinct: while Crawford Manor occupies a corner site in New Haven, CT, Guild House stands in a midback site on Spring Street Philadelphia, PA. Although the urban fabric is somewhat similar (both locations are in low density, mixed use areas, with various buildings heights), these two distinct conditions call for different approaches. Both projects, in fact, pay attention to these two urban situations, one (Crawford Manor) addressing the two streets, the other (Guild House) by proposing a building that has a primary street elevation.

Second, unlike what is claimed in their comparison, the two buildings are also different in size: Crawford Manor is a fourteen-story mid-rise building with a total of over a hundred and ten apartments, but the Guild House has six stories and about ninety apartments.

Third, if we were to follow the authors’ argument that their emphasis is on the “contrast in the images of these buildings in relation to their systems of construction,” then there are still several inconsistencies. Apparently, what we see are two facades, one “heroic and original,” the other “ugly and ordinary.” But how do the images communicate these ideas? To support the argument, the two buildings are shown in very different circumstances. Crawford Manor is photographed during a sunny day when the balconies and the protruding volumes cast strong shadows, thus emphasizing its “heroic” architecture. In contrast, the Guild House is deliberately showed under an overcast sky with almost no shadows on the façade.

The lack of shadows is specific to noontime. Considered one of the seven capital sins, accidie, boredom’s ancestor from the Middle Ages, was also known as the *demon meridianus* who visited the monk at noon and slowly induced him a state of languor and torpor. The middle of the day is a time when the shadow-less, two-dimensional world stands still. When the world becomes boring or is perceived as such, it requires action and engagement. Boredom is a universal matter of concern. In Eastern philosophy, boredom reflects a particular relation between knowledge and creation:

The men of knowledge are forever joyful, but others remain in the shadows of bewilderment, wandering astray in this world and the next. Were it not for the renewal of

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340 At North Frontage Road and Park Street, New Haven, CT.
341 Between N 7th St. and N Perth St., Philadelphia, PA.
creation at each instant, boredom would overcome the entities, since Nature requires boredom. … So the boredom of the cosmos is identical with the boredom of the Real.342

Boredom surfaces as an individual and / or collective state of mind in moments of transition: at the turn of the twentieth century with the advent of the avant-gardes or in the 1950s – 1960s when modernism is called into question. As it simultaneously prefigures, and facilitates change, in architecture, art or politics, the state of boredom seems to operate as a hinge between two conditions. Venturi himself anchors his design beliefs in the architecture of Italian Mannerism and Rococo, historically known as transition moments from the high Renaissance to Baroque, and, respectively, from Baroque to Neoclassicism.343 The Guild House is photographed at a moment of the day with no shadows, and no depths, when its tediousness is deliberately emphasized, and boredom thus appears as a condition of the surface.

The two photographs of Crawford Manor and Guild House are substantially different on yet other levels (Figure 3.18). Although they are presented simply as two façades, the former is cropped so that we don’t see the building touching the ground. There is also little, if any sky at all present in the image, which makes the building appear suspended above ground. It is floating heroically and overcoming gravity. There is no sign of human inhabitation of the Crawford Manor, and, consequently, no scale. The Guild House, on the other hand, is more mundane. We see the street, a banal fence, and a cloudy sky. An indistinguishable figure stands in front of the entry wall thus giving us a sense of scale. One of the following pages shows a window detail where flowers grow in vases on the window sill, a sign that there are people living inside.

As we are asked to examine the two buildings even closer, in the following pages the images remain parallel, yet quite different in nature. While they both show details of the façades, their respective vantage points are not similar. Rudolph’s building is shown from a worm’s eye view, a technique made famous in architectural representation with Erich Mendelsohn’s Amerika – the visual travelogue that he published after his 1924 trip to the United States, in which the worm’s eye view reinforced the sense of overwhelming power of American skyscrapers.344 This view of Crawford Manor is dramatic, we are crushed under the presence of an overpowering

building which thus appears, indeed, “heroic.” A strong contrast between lit and shaded surfaces contributes to this carefully orchestrated drama. Venturi’s building, on the other hand, is shown as a flattened representation; what is a photograph of the façade looks like a two-dimensional drawing without depth or thickness. In short, through all these different strategies, Crawford Manor (and by extension the duck) is made to appear interesting, and the Guild House (or the decorated shed), boring.

But are the two buildings as different as their images show them to be? Mocking the modern architectural jargon (articulation, flowing interior space, structural purity, floating cantilevered balconies\textsuperscript{345}), the authors make the argument that despite its ordinary construction system and materials, Crawford Manor projects a heroic image. However, upon examining the plan, the interiors are not flowing spaces but rather conventional apartments that are also shown on the outside as fairly conventional. Taken at a different time and from different angles, the photographs of Crawford Manor would appear less heroic and much more ordinary. The “heroic and original” derive less from the expression of the structure and materiality, and more from the size of the building, which, as we have shown, is fairly large. Crawford Manor does not appear more technologically advanced, it simply makes use – just as the Guild House does – of the available technologies and materials of the time. Here’s how Rudolph has described the building: “The utilization of a special precast block for all exterior surfaces breaks down the scale of the building, enables it to weather well and helps to keep the building within the stringent economic limits imposed on public housing in the United States.”\textsuperscript{346}

The authors’ claim that “Guild House has ornament on it; Crawford Manor does not. The ornament on Guild House is explicit.”\textsuperscript{347} They bring as evidence “the continuous stripe of white-glazed brick high on the façade, in combination with the plane of the white-glazed brick below.”\textsuperscript{348} However, following the same logic, once could argue that the concrete bands marking the balconies and windows of Crawford Manor also act as a form of explicit ornament, just as precast blocks used for finishing the exterior surfaces.

\textsuperscript{345} Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, 2nd edition, 91.
\textsuperscript{347} Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, 2nd edition, 91.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 92.
The idea that Crawford Manor operates through connotative associations, whereas Guild House operates through denotative ones is also questionable. Guild House’s symmetrical television antenna “which is both an imitation of an abstract Lippold sculpture and symbol for the elderly” requires one’s ability to read connotative meanings. The vertical division of the building into levels of various heights that suggest “the proportions of a Renaissance palace” also requires implicit, rather than explicit associations.

Summarizing the main features of the two buildings, the chapter concludes with the rhetorical question “Is Boring Architecture Interesting?” This question is deployed through the first of the two comparative tables in the book and synthesizes the essential differences between the duck and the decorated shed. (Figure 3.19.)

For all its commonness, is Guild House boring? For all its dramatic balconies, is Crawford Manor interesting? Is it not, perhaps, the other way around? Our criticism of Crawford Manor and the buildings it stands for is not moralistic, nor is it concerned with the so-called honesty in architecture or lack of correspondence between substance and image *per se*; Crawford Manor is ugly and ordinary while looking heroic and original.

The duck and the decorated shed are defined earlier in the chapter when the main focus of the inquiry is stated to be “image over process or form.” The premise of this position is that “[a]rchitecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building.” The two resulting definitions are:

1. Where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the duck in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, “The Long Island Duckling,” illustrated in *God’s Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake.

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349 Ibid., 92-93, 100-101.
350 Ibid., 92.
351 While the first table compares two buildings, the second one compares two urban conditions: the urban sprawl and the megastructure. (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd edition, 118).
353 Ibid., 87.
354 Ibid., 87.
2. Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and
ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the decorated shed.355

Acknowledging that architecture relies on experience and emotions draws from the
nineteenth century aesthetic sources that have already been discussed. From this perspective,
there is no difference between the duck (a symbolic form) and the decorated shed (a form with
applied symbols) as both of them ultimately operate at the level of form and symbol, which are
recognizable and recognized by the viewer. However, the main claim is that while both
architectures are valid, the duck – largely illustrated by Modern precedents and specifically by
Crawford Manor – is no longer relevant for the contemporary world.356

As developed as the comparison between the duck and the decorated shed is, the question
of why something is relevant or not in the contemporary context is hardly answered. The two
columns of the table include elements used both explicitly (meaning – expression, denotative –
connotative, representational art – abstract expressionism, symbolic – expressive) and ironically
(ordinary – extraordinary, inconsistent – consistent, conventional – advance, looks cheap – looks
expensive).357 The last row sums up the analysis: Guild House is “boring” and Crawford Manor
is “interesting.”358

The quotation marks, along with the rhetorical question at the beginning of the section,
indicate that the judgment is ironic and self-deprecating. What the authors obviously mean is that
things are the other way around, that the decorated shed / Guild House is interesting and the duck
/ Crawford Manor is boring.

Although boring and interesting are employed as a pair of opposites, we have seen that
the two operate in a Janusian manner, where they represent two sides of the same condition and
one quickly turns into the other. The attempt to emphasize the conceptual rift between the duck
and the decorated shed through the “dichotomy” boring – interesting ultimately highlights the
affinities, rather than the differences between the two concepts. The duck and the decorated shed
are both self-referential and the claim that the latter is more engaged with (or relevant to) the

355 Ibid., 87.
356 Ibid., 87.
357 Ibid., 102.
358 Ibid., 102.
world than the former does not hold. Constantly seeking the interesting, Kierkegaard’s aesthete was an autonomous individual, operating outside networks of relationships and never bound by feelings or emotions. The interesting decorated shed is, likewise, an autonomous object without a context. Within the framework set up in this chapter, the boring and the interesting become normative and any possible associations with moods, feelings, or emotions are lost. If the implicit assumption in Adolf Göller’s theory on stylistic changes was that individuals are form-experiencing creatures with no agency, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour similarly suggest – though claiming the opposite – that people have little or no agency in the experience or interpretation of architecture. Either a duck or a decorated shed, architecture is reduced to a formal symbolism that its users (not inhabitants) merely occupy. The most they can do is to recognize a sign. The interesting as norm encourages the autonomous search for change and the next new thing.

Qualified as boring, any form of modern architecture is quickly dismissed for being “too architectural,” too controlling, and irrelevant for today’s problems.359

The occasionally witty exercises in Pop imagery of the megastructure visionaries are fine as an end in themselves, more literary than architectural in intent. They are a bore as architectural theory and ultimately, as well as immediately, unresponsive to the real and interesting problems now.360

Foreseeing the digital shift as probably the most relevant change of the twentieth century, the authors identify the electronic revolution as one of the “real and interesting problems now.” They illustrate their position through another boring – interesting comparison:

For us the most boring pavilions at Expo ’67 were those that corresponded to the progressive structures of nineteenth-century world’s fairs celebrated by Sigfried Giedion; while the Czech Pavilion – an architectural and structural nonentity, but tattooed with symbols and moving pictures – was by far the most interesting. It also had the longest

359 Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, 2nd edition., 149.
360 Ibid., 149.
lines of spectators; the show, not the building, drew the crowd. The Czech Pavilion was almost a decorated shed. \footnote{Ibid., 151.}

Directing their criticism against the technological experiments with megastructures from the 1960s, and Buckminster Fuller, the designer of the USA Pavilion at Expo ‘67. (Ironically, they forget that an earlier instance of joining film / image and architecture had happened, in fact, within a structure designed by Fuller for the Moscow World’s Fair in 1959. Within Fuller’s geodesic dome, seven parallel floating screens were showing *Glimpses of the USA*, the propaganda film designed by Charles and Ray Eames in collaboration with other designers, architects, and artists.)

A big success at Expo ’67, the Czech Pavilion housed the display of the world’s first interactive film: a black comedy, *Kinoautomat: One Man and His House*, it requested the intervention of the audience at several points during the movie when the public was asked to choose between two scenes. However, regardless of the choices made, the end result was always the same: the burning building. The film was interpreted as a socialist critique of the capitalist world where the much celebrated freedom of choice is only apparent, because regardless of the choice, the final result will always be the same. Presented as *interesting*, the film and the pavilion are yet another example of self-referential, autonomous structures that exist independently of networks or relationships.

**Epilogue on the boring and the interesting.** These two terms continued to be present, though less articulated and with less force, in the subsequent work of Venturi and Scott Brown.

In 1996, Venturi published *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room*, a collection of short essays and quips some of which were published for the first time. \footnote{Robert Venturi, *Iconography and Electronics Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996).} Written in an alert, witty, and often ironic tone, the essays bring together Venturi’s principles mostly in forms of aphorisms and maxims. While the content is not particularly original or different from earlier writings, the writing style has shifted from the
didactic tone in *Complexity and Contradiction* and even *Learning from Las Vegas*, to a sharper, often angry voice. The first essay (titled “Sweet and Sour,” but explained through a lengthy subtitle) appears to revisit Venturi’s “gentle manifesto” from *Complexity and Contradiction*. There is, however, nothing gentle about this other manifesto, nor does it recall the intensely personal and subjective voice of *Complexity and Contradiction*. The boring finds its place again, this time as an attribute of abstraction, understood in opposition with signs, symbols, and iconology:

A gentle manifesto that acknowledges the demise of a universal architecture defined as expressive space and industrial structure:

Let us acknowledge architecture for now that is not ideologically correct, rhetorically heroic, theoretically pretentious, boringly abstract, technologically obsolete.\(^{363}\)

The closing paragraph returns to the mood of boredom as a critique of the contemporary state of architecture: “Oh, to be bored in our Neo-Modern age of Minimalist hype!”\(^{364}\)

Having lost its critical edge, the voice has turned contemptuous.

The first essay is followed by “A Not So Gentle Manifesto” (written in 1994) that reiterates the beliefs and principles that have been developed over the years. Each aphorism is structured as a dichotomy and ultimately illustrates a “good” and a “bad” architecture:

A not so gentle manifesto

…

Oh, for an architecture:

…

Whose aesthetic pixels define a medium for architecture – rather than whose wire frame rotations promote ennui,

…


\(^{364}\) Ibid., 8.
Whose agonized complexity comes naturally – rather than willful picturesqueness bores in the end,

…

Aren’t’ we tired of our subjection to boring esoterica promoting arcanoeprure [sic]
involving cuckoo sculptural form defined by old-fashioned shadow and archaic
engineering which is really decoration?365

The book concludes with a series of aphorisms (“Mals Mots”) written from 1990 through
1995, where the theme of the boring reflects a profound and bitter discontent: “Journalist-critics
– shrill and boring.” “From late Modernist dull dry to Neo-Modernist dull hype.” “Consistent
dissonance creates not a difficult whole but a boring mess.” “Dissonance deriving from authentic
contradiction – rather than boring rhetoric.”366

The last book published by Venturi and Scott Brown was Architecture as Signs and
Systems: For a Mannerist Time, where the two clearly separated the authorship of the essays.367
In the fourth chapter (“A New Mannerism, for Architecture as Sign”), Venturi puts forward two
ideas. On the one hand, he attempts to show the consistency of his positions over time by tracing
the genealogy of his main ideas back to Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. On the
other hand, he is trying to show the enduring validity of his concepts that are as powerful and
relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century as they were in the middle of the
twentieth.368 In his alphabetical listing of the elements of a mannerist architecture we find what is
probably one of the last explicit references to tedium and ennui:

Accommodation

Ambiguity

Boredom

365 Venturi, Iconography and Electronics, 11-15.
366 Ibid., 299-312.
367 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time (Cambridge,
368 “And can it now be said that an aesthetic evolution makes sense at the beginning of the twenty-first century,
engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the preceding style, that of classic Modernism – just as an aesthetic
evolution made sense in the mid-sixteenth century engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the preceding
style, that of High Renaissance?” (Venturi and Scott Brown, Architecture as Signs and Systems, 73).
Monotony

Wrestling\textsuperscript{369}

\textbf{Conclusions.}

To describe architecture in terms of \textit{boring} and \textit{interesting} is more than a mere rhetorical trope. Although employed loosely in everyday parlance, the concept of the \textit{interesting} has a genealogy rooted in eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic theories, which indicates an emphasis on novelty, excess, curiosity, distraction, along with a lack of a firm and committed world view. Etymologically related with, though different from the concept of \textit{interest}, the \textit{interesting} had a distinct path in the visual arts of the 1960s where it bridged the gap between aesthetic and critical judgments. The \textit{interesting}, some critics maintain, requires further discussions about the objects described as such and invites the various interlocutors to further elaborate their arguments. Other critics propose that far from being a critical term, the \textit{interesting} offers nothing more than a shallow aesthetic and disengaged description. In this context, I propose that Venturi’s theoretical stance, though influenced by midcentury artistic movements and specifically Pop Art, is built upon the nineteenth century aesthetic discourse on vitality and form.

Looking at Venturi’s early work from \textit{Complexity and Contradiction} and at his collaboration with Scott Brown in \textit{Learning from Las Vegas}, I suggest that the category of the \textit{interesting} in architecture has specific features that distinguish it from parallel discourses in visual arts. Its use is neither innocent, nor neutral. Through a particular focus on appearance and formal compositions, it shows a shift toward architecture as an autonomous object. Formal arrangements of separate elements such as windows, columns, decorative elements, signs, and

\textsuperscript{369} Ibid., 75-77. The other elements are: Both-and, Breaks, Chaos, Complexity, Contradiction, Contrast, Convention Broken, Deviations, Difficult whole, Discontinuity, Disorder, Dissonance, Distortion, Diversity, Dualities, Dumbness, Eclectic, Everyday, Exceptions, Generic broken, Imbalance, Inconsistency, Incorrect, Inflection, Irony, Jumps in scale, Juxtapositions, Layering, Meaning, Naïveté, Obscurity, Ordinary, Paradox, Pluralism, Pop, Pragmatism, Reality, Scales (plural), Sophistication, Syncopation, Tension, Terribilità, Wit.
symbols result in self-referential and normative practices. Lastly, complexity is expressed as a preference for excess of combinatorial devices, historical references and different types of signs.

The boring and the interesting have implications that go beyond the vague and the elusive meanings we generally attribute them. Understanding their intellectual genealogy and consequences for architectural discourse is particularly relevant today at a time where virtually anything has the potential to be built and made present. In a world full of possibilities, the question of relevance raised by Venturi and Scott Brown decades ago remains critical, but the answers are certainly different. Examining contemporary categories such as the boring and the interesting, helps defining our criteria for constructing a meaningful worldview, as well as our choices and the way we legitimize them.
Chapter 3. Figures.

Figure 3.1. Jasper John, *Three Flags*, 1958. Public domain.

Figure 3.2. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Brown Felt)*, 1973. Public domain.

Figure 3.3. Claes Oldenburg, Work from *The Store*, 1961. Public domain.
Figure 3.4. Robert Venturi, Pearson House, 1957, from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1972, p.106.

Figure 3.5. Venturi, Cope and Lippincott, Renovation of the J. B. Duke House (1957), from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1972, p.107.


Figure 3.8. Venturi and Rauch, *Vanna Venturi House*, 1962, Venturi and Scott Brown Collection. Courtesy of The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Figure 3.10. Nicholas Hawksmoor, *St. George Church*, Bloomsbury, London. Public domain.

Figure 3.11. Ste. Madeleine, Vezelay, from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1972, p. 46.

Figure 3.12. Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1972, p. 20.

Figure 3.13. Louis Kahn, Goldenberg House, from *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd ed., 1972, p. 51.


Figure 3.18. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Comparison between Paul Rudolph’s Crawford Manor and Robert Venturi’s Guild House, from *Learning from Las Vegas*, 2nd ed., 1977.

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Robert Venturi’s contribution to architectural theory and practice is unquestionable. The polemics surrounding his work continue to be relevant today, over sixty years after the publication of his first treatise, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, as questions about meaning and relevance in architecture are more valid today than ever before. Often dismissed as a rhetorical pun on Mies van der Rohe’s modernist adage *Less is more*, Venturi’s *Less is a bore* never received scholarly attention. Upon closer examination, however, questions about boredom, boring, and interesting surface repeatedly in his treatise and show a consistent concern with the tedium of modern world. Venturi was not the only architect who acknowledged boredom as a relevant concern. Adolf Göller, Le Corbusier, Josef Frank, Bernard Rudofsky, Cedric Price, Serge Chermayeff, Christopher Alexander, and Sigfried Giedion among others all share the same unease in front of this pervasive illness of the modern world. Minimal and conceptual artists such as Ed Ruscha, Donald Judd, and Agnes Martin deliberately sought boredom as a mode of eliciting emotion by distancing the viewer from the work. Unlike most of his peers, Venturi shows a consistent interest in this topic and attempts to go beyond its appeal as a rhetorical trope. *Less is a bore* synthesizes, if unknowingly, the ethos and mood of the age.

The general argument of this dissertation is that, while Venturi recognizes the pervasive presence of boredom in the life of modern individuals, he fails to acknowledge the potential of this mood as a generative, not only critical tool. While some of his early work engages promising ideas about embodied practices, his attempt to instrumentalize boredom as a formalist construct manifested through shapes and forms, eventually leads to an architecture of disembodied signs and symbols.

Facing Venturi in a dialogue rather than confronting him in a polemics, Steinberg offers an alternative position. Experiencing boredom first hand, instead of fighting tedium, he delves into it. For him, *boredom, contemplation, dor, daydreaming* fold into each other and act as catalysts of imagination.
The dissertation looked at Venturi’s relationship with boredom and the boring through three lenses: habitus, flatness, and the interesting. Together, they provide a multifold approach not only to the presence of boredom in Venturi’s work, but also to the presence of boredom in the larger architectural discourse. Firstly, habitus, the embodied practice defined by Bourdieu, mediates between the tedium of daily routines and the comforting values of the everyday. It is when habitus loses its bodily dimension that it becomes boring. Secondly, Venturi’s positivist attempt to make explicit and flatten every meaning of his work parallels his interest in the use of flat surfaces. Paradoxically, instead of providing answers, this position results in opening more questions, showing that ultimately the reading of every work is never a thin, but always a thick description. Lastly, by examining the dichotomy boring – interesting the study uncovers the specificity and consequences of this polemics for architectural discourse. Rather than opposite terms, the boring and the interesting (like the duck and the decorated shed) sit in a Janusian relationship with each other and indicate an unsettling disenchantment with the world. The dissertation suggests that it is through imagination rather than novelty that one has access to the wonders of the world, often hidden in plain sight under the plain garb of the everyday.

Reading Steinberg’s drawings through the lens of boredom offers precisely the exercise in imagination necessary to turn tedium into contemplation. Anchored in the embodied practices of habitus, his work provides endless modes of folding boredom into a reflective mood. In doing so, it recovers the values of the infra-ordinary and constructs worlds situated at the intersection of the real and the imaginary.

Is there a place for boredom in today’s world?

The polemics between Less is more and Less is a bore does not end with Venturi. In 2010, Danish architect Bjarke Ingels publishes Yes Is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution, an architectural manifesto – monograph of the Bjarke Ingles Group office.1 Situating himself in the genealogy of Mies van der Rohe, Robert Venturi, Philip Johnson, Rem Koolhaas, and Barack Obama, Ingels uses the language of comic books to convey ideas that are neither particularly creative, not particularly engaging. Largely dismissing ideas that are not his as

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1 Bjarke Ingels, Yes Is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution (Köln: Taschen, 2010).
boring, Ingels implicitly embarks on a search for the interesting. Using the visual equivalents of brief tweets and text messages, he develops modes of representation that reduce architectural concepts and developments to one-dimensional formal diagrams.

Describing “The Mountain,” one of the most celebrated projects of the firm, Ingels positions his idea as the antithesis of “a standard apartment slab next to a boring parking block.”2 (Figure 4.1) In the “Infinity Loop” project, he changes the location of the rowhouses and apartments “from the boring Northeast to the sunny Southwest.”3 (Figure 4.2.) In “Urban Typography,” the outcome of challenging the “depressingly boring” tower typography is the manipulation of exterior shapes into an oversized alphabet.4 (Figure 4.3.) The result (“a giant town sign”) is not fundamentally different from Venturi’s proposition for a bill-ving-board. Reinforcing similar ideas about two-dimensional urban signs, a hotel at the periphery stands out through its shape (triangular, rather than rectangular plan) and façade treatment (that suggests the profiles of three Danish royal figures.)5 (Figure 4.4.) From certain angles, the building appears two-dimensional – indeed, a decorated shed. Seeing this project as the meeting point between Peter Zumthor and Andy Warhol, Ingels, however, claims to have added a third category to Venturi’s duck vs. decorated shed, which he calls the princess: “functional elements that independently seem benign constitute a collective iconic expression of another magnitude.”7 Missing the point of the close kinship between the boring and the interesting, the duck and the decorated shed, Ingels perpetuates the endless loop of the formal boredom he is trying so hard to overcome.

Despite the contemporary bias for formal explorations facilitated by technologies such as CNC machines and 3D-printing, memorable architectural experiences emerge from the slow-paced mood of ennui turned into contemplation. Although never conceptualized through the lens of boredom, the work of the Spanish architect Alberto Campo Baeza seems a stubborn exploration of white boxes. In its extreme asceticism and formal modesty lies the exuberance of material and spatial experiences. Every project is a carefully constructed narrative that joins

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2 Ibid., 79.
3 Ibid., 96.
5 Ibid., 195.
6 Ibid., 340.
7 Ibid., 341-343.
inhabitants, landscape, and materials through the body of the house. The photographic essays that accompany each project systematically include a silhouette of a woman that comes into or walks outside the frame (Figure 4.5.). Techniques of visual storytelling articulate the embodied experience of the house.

For a couple of years starting in 2006, Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa and British designer Jasper Morrison have curated several shows under the title *Super Normal.* Displayed on neutral white boxes, the objects exhibited came from different generations and times but shared the same quality: unsensational objects of the everyday, from paper clips and wastebaskets to grills and bicycles (Figure 4.6.). Commenting on our contemporary assumption that “normal” has become the equivalent of “unstimulating” or “boring,” the designers make an argument for ordinary objects that perform just as they should: naturally. Two intertwined ideas are at work in their approach: on the one hand, the absence of style and originality lends these objects the capacity to become invisible. On the other hand, by making them so normal, they become extraordinary. The implicit statement is a critique of the *interesting,* of seductive things that attract attention, that are superficial, spectacular, loud, and, ultimately, arbitrary. There is a clear de-emphasis of form and shape in favor of materiality and details. The authorship of the objects selected varies: some of them are completely anonymous, others come with the label of a designer name, but they all share the quality of being “a quietly seen unseen.” Beauty, as Fukasawa and Morrison see it, does not belong to forms or shapes, but rather qualifies the relationship between people, objects, and circumstances.

British architect John Pawson operates within the thick space where boredom folds into meditation. Usually described as “minimalist,” his architecture recovers the simple and unassuming qualities of mundane forms and objects. His designs are built around the activities and events of their inhabitants. From monastic life to food making, his work embraces the simple and elegant joys of the everyday (Figure 4.7.). Not unlike Steinberg, who saw boredom at the core of his creative pursuits, Pawson confesses: “I do sometimes think: ‘What’s next after architecture?’” One’s always trying to make the work better, but I don’t know, maybe something

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different. I have a very low boredom threshold.”\textsuperscript{9} Having practiced as a professional photographer before he trained as an architect, Pawson continues to work with photography as a means of conveying moods and atmospheres (\textbf{Figure 4.8}).

I like the everyday. I rarely photograph the spectacular view. Capturing small moments makes me feel less anxious about missing things. I see so many things.\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
Conclusions. Figures.

Figure 4.1. BIG, *The Mountain*, 2008. Public domain.

Figure 4.2. BIG, *The Infinity Loop*, 2010. Public domain.

Figure 4.3. BIG, *Vejle Housing (Urban Typography)*, 2003. Public domain.

Figure 4.4. BIG, *VMCP Hotel*, 2011. Public domain.
Figure 4.5. Alberto Campo Baeza, *Domus Aurea*, 2015. Public domain.


Figure 4.7. John Pawson, *Okinawa House*, 2013-2016. Public domain.

Figure 4.8. John Pawson, *Spectrum*, 2016. Public domain.
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Steinberg at the Smithsonian


