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# Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates: An Analysis of the Architects' Approach to Additions for Historic Buildings

Amanda Theresa Hall  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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# Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates: An Analysis of the Architects' Approach to Additions for Historic Buildings

## **Disciplines**

Historic Preservation and Conservation

## **Comments**

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**VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN AND ASSOCIATES:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHITECTS' APPROACH  
TO ADDITIONS FOR HISTORIC BUILDINGS**

Amanda Theresa Hall

A THESIS

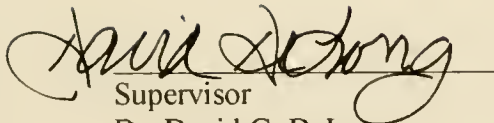
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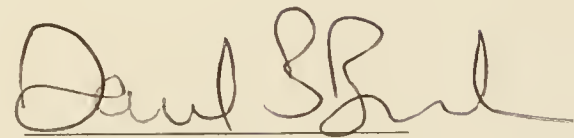
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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

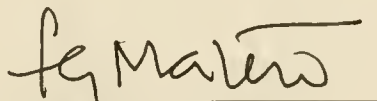
2000



Supervisor  
Dr. David G. DeLong  
Professor of Architecture



Reader  
Dr. David Brownlee  
Professor of Art History



Graduate Group Chair  
Frank G. Matero  
Associate Professor of Architecture

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. David DeLong for inciting my interest in the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown through his fascinating and insightful lectures. I am grateful to Dr. DeLong for selecting me for the VSBA research internship in the summer of 1999. This rare opportunity provided access to primary documents, which allowed me to further investigate the firm's work. As my thesis advisor, Dr. DeLong guided me toward the final topic and provided invaluable assistance.

I am also grateful to Dr. David Brownlee for reading my completed thesis and providing additional insight on the topic.

The majority of my research took place at the Louis I. Kahn Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania and I would like to thank Julia Converse, director, and William Whitaker, collections manager, for the opportunity to work in such a wonderful environment and for providing assistance with the VSBA archive materials.

As well, I am grateful to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown for granting me access to their drawing, correspondence, and photography archives. Without the invaluable primary documents found in these collections, this thesis would not have even begun to take shape.



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## INTRODUCTION

The protection and maintenance of historic buildings is a concern to preservationists and architects alike. Many times working in collaboration on restoration projects, architects and preservation specialists may deal with sensitive situations involving the design of an addition to a historic structure. A set of standards exists that is applicable to most addition projects, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.<sup>1</sup> When conceived, the *Standards* were intended primarily for projects that involve a structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For all other buildings not listed but historically significant, the standards apply but are not necessarily referred to. The vague language and restrictive nature of the *Standards* makes them difficult to implement. Thus, one of the largest design challenges that architects face, whether or not the *Standards* are followed, is the successful design of an addition for a historic building.

The way in which a non-preservationist architect (a designer whose practice is not primarily concerned with the conservation of historic structures) approaches the addition design for a historic building reveals much about the understanding of the original building's history and context. Whether the architect copies features of the older building within the addition or designs a completely different structure, the presence of the past will inevitably be acknowledged. Most architects are not trained to deal with preservation issues and, depending on the attitude toward historic buildings, will adopt

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<sup>1</sup> *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, (Washington D.C.: U. S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Preservation Assistance Division, 1976, revised 1990).



varying approaches to the addition design. In an effort to understand the issues surrounding historic building additions this study will first discuss the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* with regards to additions and will outline the various design approaches embraced by preservationists and non-preservationists. Secondly, as a means to resolve the controversial issues surrounding the lack of a model for addition design, this study will identify a non-preservationist architect who has completed a number of addition designs and has provided a consistent model. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, one of America's most significant twentieth-century firms, developed a foundational theory regarding the vital role of historical context in architecture early in their career and have since established an archetypical example for addition design.

Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates have dealt with many addition projects. The Philadelphia-based firm is mostly known for new construction; however many projects have involved restoration, rehabilitation, and addition design for historic buildings. The long list of preservation-related project commissions, from Franklin Court in Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park (1972-86) to the restoration of the Furness Library on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania (1985-91)<sup>2</sup>, validates the firm as an ideal candidate for this study. Even more significant is the fact that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, firm principals, have predicated a strong theoretical stance for history and context in architecture throughout the forty years they have been practicing.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanislaus Von Moos, *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates – Buildings and Projects, 1986-1998* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), p. 306.



Beginning with *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, largely written in 1962 and first published in 1966, Robert Venturi argued for an architecture conscious of historical context. Radical at the time, he called for a return to historical allusion and complex design after decades of modernist architecture that rejected tradition. Venturi advocated an ambiguous and contradictory architecture, full of many levels of meaning.<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi's early work, under the firm names Venturi and Short and later Venturi and Rauch, was foremost concerned with the historical and contextual issues surrounding new design. The early projects that established Robert Venturi and his associates in the architectural current include the North Penn Visiting Nurse Association (1960), the F.D.R. Memorial Competition (1960), Guild House (1960-63), and the Vanna Venturi House (1962).<sup>4</sup> Denise Scott Brown joined the practice in 1967.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1970's and 1980's Venturi and Rauch, along with Scott Brown, designed a multitude of private residences, campus buildings, and civic structures, all based upon Venturi's previously established theory. In the late 1980's John Rauch left the firm and Denise Scott Brown became partner. During the time of transition, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates broadened their focus even more to include a number of planning projects and international design commissions, which have continued throughout the 1990's.<sup>6</sup>

Although the firm has evolved in the use of stylistic representation, imagery, and technique, the foundational theory has remained largely the same. History and context, interpreted into layers of meaning within the project, remains a steadfast theme in

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, pp. 109, 111, 116, 118.

<sup>5</sup> Frederic Schwartz, *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Von Moos, *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates – Buildings and Projects, 1986-1998*.





VSBA's design. Throughout his career Venturi has consistently praised the complexities of stylistic juxtaposition, which in addition projects manifests itself as a contradiction between old and new buildings. The contradiction involves a number of coexisting juxtapositions between historical period, style, imagery, form, space, and layer. The resulting additions, although somewhat ambiguous and complex, harmoniously unite the old and new. This is apparent in the three additions that follow: The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College (1972-76); The La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (1986-1996); and the Sainsbury Wing, National Gallery, London (1986-1991). All additions and extensions to museums, these three projects reveal the variety in program and solution devised by VSBA. The architects' concern with architectural tradition and its influence upon new design identifies the addition projects of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates as model subjects for this study.

The subject of this thesis developed as a result of an intense study of primary documents relating to VSBA's work. My participation in a graduate seminar at the University of Pennsylvania on the later works of VSBA and my completion of a research internship sponsored by the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the anticipated VSBA retrospective of 2001 incited my interest in the subject. Both the seminar and the internship involved research into the VSBA archives and documentation of project information. As a candidate for a Master's of Science in Historic Preservation, I am primarily interested in the firm's theory regarding history and context in architecture, specifically with regards to additions for historic buildings. This paper will provide foundational information regarding additions to historic buildings in general, documentation of three VSBA addition projects, and an analysis of the architects' theory



and design methods, all based upon primary documents and secondary sources.

Ultimately, the intention of this study is to posit the validity of VSBA's non-preservationist approach to additions as an alternative design model.

The Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates drawing and photography archives, located at the firm's office in Philadelphia, and the correspondence files, on long-term loan to the Louis I. Kahn Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania, were the sources of primary documents for the investigation. The correspondence files are currently in the process of being rehoused and indexed, therefore the method of citation throughout this paper will be explained. Within each new box individual documents are organized by project and indexed by folder, based upon the original order. A new number has been assigned to each box to further clarify the new indexing. Each citing in this paper will list in order: document title, author/s, date, folder title, and box number. Further information regarding the location and access to the Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates correspondence files is available at the Louis I. Kahn Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania.



**CHAPTER 1**

**ADDITIONS TO HISTORIC BUILDINGS**



## ADDITIONS TO HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Individuals involved in the field of historic preservation are primarily concerned with the protection and maintenance of historic integrity within a building. Driven by a conviction to sustain history and conserve the built environment, preservationists uphold the view that historic buildings<sup>1</sup> must undergo as little change as possible in order to protect the character that remains intact. However it is impossible for most buildings to avoid change, especially those in use, because they are constantly being altered and expanded. When changes must occur preservationists in the United States point to an established set of guidelines, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards* for assistance and regulation. In essence, the *Standards* is a list of ten general statements regarding the rehabilitation of historic buildings. It is published by the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and was written in 1976 following the incorporation of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.<sup>2</sup>

The *Standards* were initially developed by the Secretary of the Interior in order to determine the appropriateness of proposed work on registered properties within the Historic Preservation Fund grant-in-aid program. Under this program, the owner of a registered historic property is not eligible for financial incentives for rehabilitation unless all ten of the guidelines are followed.<sup>3</sup> It is now used as a means to regulate changes made to buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The *Standards* is

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<sup>1</sup> The term "historic building" is used by the National Park Service to describe a building listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For the duration of this study, the term "historic building" will be used to refer to any older building constructed previous to 1950 (the standard used by the National Park Service in determining historic significance).

<sup>2</sup> *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards...*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.





intended to provide assistance in the long-term preservation of a nationally registered historic property through the preservation of historic materials and features.<sup>4</sup> It is the only such set of established guidelines widely recognized and is regarded as the definitive model, whether or not the building is considered historic by the National Park Service. Ideally all changes to a historic building will follow the guidelines. In reality, however, the general recommendations found in the *Standards* can only be interpreted loosely when applied to an actual rehabilitation project. Due to the fact that no set list of ‘preservation standards’ was previously established for non-registered historic buildings, preservationists seeking design guidelines have adopted the *Secretary of the Interior’s Standards* as the framework for rehabilitation regulation.

The National Park Service has identified four treatment options for which the *Standards* apply that include the full range of historic preservation activities: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. The option that is most applicable to this study of additions to historic buildings, rehabilitation, is the most common because it addresses the continuing use and adaptation of historic properties. Rehabilitation is defined as the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.<sup>5</sup> Additions to historic buildings are a very controversial aspect to rehabilitation. According to the *Standards*, new additions must be identifiable from yet compatible to the original structure. As well, the addition must not destroy historic fabric or character.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Kay Weeks and H. Ward Jandl, “The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties,” *Standards for Preservation and Rehabilitation* (West Conshohocken, PA: ASTM, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-17.



*Secretary of the Interior's Standards* specifically addresses additions in guidelines nine and ten and are as follows:

- A. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.
- B. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.<sup>7</sup>

The guidelines for additions focus on two design concerns: physical form and context. The statement that, “The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features...” implies that the architect must design the addition to appear new and clearly separate from the historic building. However, the addition must also somehow visually relate. What a difficult and intimidating feat it is designing an addition that is compatible with the older building yet does not replicate it. The second guideline states that the addition must be designed and built in such a way that if removed later, the historic property would not be altered or destroyed. Thus, the new addition cannot be physically integrated with the older building, rather it must attach in a way that does not destroy historic fabric. The *Standards* with regards to additions to historic buildings are vague and difficult to interpret, lacking design clarity and guidance for the rehabilitator.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards...*, p. 5.



Included as an addendum to *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation* is a discussion of guidelines and recommendations based upon the *Standards*. The guidelines are not codified as program requirements, rather they provide a model process for those attempting rehabilitation projects.<sup>8</sup> The guidelines for additions to historic buildings take into account the inevitability that owners and occupants may require additional space and will plan for a physical expansion. This is addressed by the statement, "Some exterior and interior alterations to the historic building are generally needed to assure its continued use, but it is more important that such alterations do not radically change, obscure, or destroy character-defining spaces, materials, features, or finishes." The guidelines are clear to state that the design of an addition ought to be the last option. "The construction of an exterior addition to a historic building may seem to be essential for the new use, but it is emphasized in the guidelines that such new additions should be avoided, if possible, and considered *only* after it is determined that those needs cannot be met by altering secondary, i.e., non-character-defining interior spaces. If, after a thorough evaluation of interior solutions, an exterior addition is still judged to be the only viable alternative, it should be designed and constructed to be clearly differentiated from the historic building and so that the character-defining features are not radically changed, obscured, damaged, or destroyed."<sup>9</sup> Additions are frowned upon; however design guidelines for additions are provided despite the discouragement to prevent further destruction of historic integrity.

The guidelines go further by suggesting approaches to the physical form and imagery of the addition design. Not recommended is designing the addition with

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.



duplicated form, material, style, and detailing so that the addition appears to be part of the historic building. Instead the guidelines recommend, “Design for the new work may be contemporary or may reference design motifs from the historic building. In either case, it should always be clearly differentiated from the historic building...”<sup>10</sup> The guidelines suggest that the architect should make it a priority to incorporate physical attributes of the historic building into the addition, however they also clearly discourage imitation or duplication of the older building’s historical style. Further, the suggestion that the addition may be of a “contemporary” style implies that an addition with no apparent relation to the historic building is a perfectly acceptable solution. Thus, the compatibility between the old and new buildings is not nearly as much of a concern as the differentiation between the two. Ultimately it is up to the rehabilitator, who may or may not be a trained designer, to decide the degree and method of historical reference.

Given the choice, most architects commissioned to design additions for historic buildings would opt not to follow the *Secretary of the Interior’s Guidelines* because they are too restricting. The requirement to design an addition that is compatible yet differentiated is too daunting. Some would argue that an addition purposefully contrasting with the historic building is the better approach because the differentiation between the two is clear. Although in a case such as this, no trace of the historic building is found within the addition. In contrast, an addition that mimics the style and imagery of the older building provides a false sense of history. As well, it tends to demonstrate a lack creative design intentions on the part of the architect. In light of the aesthetic debate, it must be reinforced that the goal of The National Park Service through establishing the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 30-31.





*Standards* is, over all, to protect the historic building's intrinsically valuable character and fabric.

So far this discussion has focused upon the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, which is the conservative approach to addition design. Buildings that are historic but not listed on the National Register of Historic Places may experience a very different situation as part of an addition design. When unconfined by the *Standards*, architects are much freer in their approach. Architects faced with the challenge of designing an addition to an historic building have at their disposal a number of design possibilities. This is true whether the architect is trained as a preservationist, possesses preservation-related interests, or is little concerned with the historic nature of the building. Truly the underlying intention – the designer's attitude – determines the success and values associated with the completed scheme. Three general design techniques are typically employed by architects designing additions to historic buildings: additions that contrast, copy, or combine the old and new.

The first approach is an addition that purposely contrasts the original building. Preservationists and non-preservationists alike may employ this technique, but for different reasons. Those foremost concerned with the protection of an historic building may use this approach as a means to expand spatially without disturbing the older building's physical fabric. It is based upon *Standard* number nine which says, "The new work shall be differentiated from the old..." and the following 'Guidelines' that recommend designing the addition in a manner that makes clear what is historic and what is new.<sup>11</sup> In theory this type of addition is meant to be neutral to its surroundings,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 5, 30-31.



differentiating itself from the original structure and receding into the background. The result can have an adverse visual effect because the addition relates to neither the original structure nor its contextual environment. The disconnected addition actually stands out as different and often creates an unsettling effect where the old and new appear to compete. The preservationist's goal is partially achieved – the new does not destroy the physical fabric of the historic building – however the potential endangerment of historic character is questionable.

Another situation where an architect may employ the contrast approach is in the case of an addition where the architect possesses little concern about the historic structure. Not required to express sympathy to the existing building by the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* nor by the client, the architect in this situation is concerned with one notion - the promotion of his own design. Contrast is used to highlight the new addition and force the existing into the background. Typically, the architect's style is contemporary with modern techniques in materials, form, and style and will overshadow the older building with its attempt at newness and innovation. The architect often has no reservation about removing or destroying historic fabric from the existing structure. The result is an exercise in newness, and for some, disrespect of the historic building.

The second possible approach to an addition is through the replication and reconstruction of the historic building. The *Standards* state that a new addition must be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features of the original structure.<sup>12</sup> Designers attempting to follow these vague guidelines may copy the form and style as an easy solution. In this case, the addition may appear too similar by

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.



pretending to be of the time period it merely represents. If done without skill, the attempt is too obvious and jeopardizes the historic character of the older building. The only situation where the replication of historical imagery within an addition appears successful is when it is done in a combination with modern design, as in the third possible approach.

The final and what can only be the most integrative approach, is the sensitive combination of old and new features within the addition design. The goal of this approach is to design an addition that respects the older building, retains its historic character, and addresses the historic context while forming a new identity. This is the most difficult approach and requires on the part of the designer a full understanding of history and context. In this approach, the addition contains references to the historic building yet it is clearly differentiated as new. The new addition may contain visual references to the old such as stylistic features and proportions, but it never attempts to fully replicate the historic building. Rather, the historic features of the original are reinterpreted in order to link the old and new together. Conservative preservationists may not support this approach because it is too liberal with the differentiation between the old and new while non-preservation minded designers may find fault in the effort required in linking old and new together. The subjects of this study, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, have adopted this approach with the three addition projects discussed further. As will be revealed, the Allen Memorial Art Museum addition, the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art expansion, and the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery all fall within this particular category of addition design. As architects who are not considered preservationists, and who do not make it a practice to follow *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards*, VSBA approached all three projects with sensitivity to the historic



buildings and contexts. The resulting addition schemes, although different in form and technique, are successful in expressing their respect for the original structure. The historic buildings and new additions are differentiated by their unique qualities yet joined together through shared values.





CHAPTER 2

**THE ALLEN MEMORIAL ART MUSEUM ADDITION  
OBERLIN COLLEGE  
(1972-76)**



WEST ELEVATION  
JANUARY 1975  
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

[VSBA photo archive]



**THE ALLEN MEMORIAL ART MUSEUM ADDITION,  
OBERLIN COLLEGE  
(1972-76)**

The addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio was an early Venturi and Rauch project that dealt directly with an addition to a historic building. The original museum building was designed in 1917 for the Oberlin College campus by the American architect Cass Gilbert (1859-1934).<sup>1</sup> In 1972 Venturi and Rauch were asked to remodel the interior of Gilbert's building and design an addition to house new gallery space, studios, and conservation laboratories.<sup>2</sup> The addition and expansion project for the Allen Memorial Art Museum provided Robert Venturi an opportunity to explore the practical applications of his architectural theory regarding history and context.

Robert Venturi's 'gentle manifesto,' *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, was first published in 1966. In his writings Venturi challenged the anti-historicism of modern architecture and advocated a new architecture based upon values learned from history.<sup>3</sup> Venturi's theory was an influencing factor in Oberlin College's decision to ask Venturi and Rauch to design an addition for the historically significant museum.<sup>4</sup> Allen Museum director Richard Spear notified the architects in a November 1972 letter of the commission. Spear wrote that the firm was selected "...after a long review of scores of architects, and a strong interest on all of our part in your work."<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Irish, *Cass Gilbert, Architect*, (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Cohen, "A Summing Up," *Progressive Architecture*, October 1997, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, Richard Spear to Robert Venturi, 29 November 1972, 73.04 General Correspondence, VSB.56.



addition, Spear justified his choice of architect by claiming that Venturi was selected because “...we knew that he would be more sympathetic to the Cass Gilbert building than any of the others we talked to and would be willing to do something that would not overpower the old building.”<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2.1 – The Allen Memorial Art Museum with Venturi and Rauch’s addition.

Venturi was clearly thrilled to have been chosen for such an important commission. In a 1972 letter responding to Spear’s request for design services Venturi wrote, “I have had an interest for a long time in the particular problem of adding sympathetically to an old building in a particular context and I am very fond of Cass Gilbert’s pavilion.”<sup>7</sup> This statement is key to the Venturi and Rauch addition design. An investigation into the design of the Allen Memorial Art Museum addition reveals that the main focus of Robert Venturi’s design was the complex problem of creating an addition that celebrates the original building yet possesses its own architectural merit. How he resolved this dilemma was through the design of a juxtaposed yet analogous addition. Rather than reproduce the original building or adopt a similar stylistic mode, Venturi

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Venturi as quoted in Linda Pratt, “Harmonizing the Old and New,” *The Oberlin Review*, 10 December 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, Robert Venturi to Richard Spear, 19 December 1972, 73.04 General Correspondence, VSB.56.



designed a clearly modern building that is joined to the older museum through visual references of color, pattern, and material. [Fig. 2.1] Venturi described his addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum as a “plain” building attached to a “fancy” one.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the concept of contradictory values and juxtaposed imagery as a means for design resolution was the underlying theme for the addition scheme.

The Allen Memorial Art Museum is an important part of the Oberlin College campus history. It was one of a number of academic buildings designed for Oberlin College by Cass Gilbert in the early-twentieth century. Gilbert is recognized in American architectural history for the design of large commissions such as the United States Custom House (1899-1907), the Woolworth Building (1910-13), and the United States Supreme Court Building (1928).<sup>9</sup> Gilbert received his Beaux-Arts architectural training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He left M.I.T. before completing his education to work for the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead and White. In 1882 Gilbert formed a partnership with James Knox Taylor.<sup>10</sup> Gilbert’s career advanced dramatically when he won a competition to design the State Capitol of Minnesota. In 1905 he established his own firm in New York City.<sup>11</sup> Gilbert received the first commission from Oberlin College in 1905 for the design of Finney Chapel. In 1911 the school appointed Gilbert as campus architect and subsequently he designed the Cox Administration Building (1913-15) and the Allen Memorial Art Museum (1917).<sup>12</sup> According to his biographer, Gilbert conceived the Allen Museum as an adaptation of Filippo

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Venturi, “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert at Oberlin,” *A View From the Campidoglio: Selected Essays 1953-1984* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Irish, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13

<sup>11</sup> Suzy Maroon, *The Supreme Court of the United States* (NY: Thomasson-Grant & Lickle, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Irish, pp. 86-89.





Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital (1419-45) in Florence.<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 2.2] The Oberlin museum contains visual references to Brunelleschi's Renaissance structure which are found in its arched loggia, columns, and decorative terra-cotta roundels. Cass Gilbert expanded upon Brunelleschi by providing the rectangular two-story building with a low hip roof and a decorative façade of buff sandstone subdivided by squares and niches. The Allen Memorial Art Museum is a typical example of early-twentieth century Renaissance revival architecture found throughout America.



Fig. 2.2 – Filippo Brunelleschi, The Foundling Hospital (1419-45).

As a dedicated historicist true to his Beaux-Arts training, Cass Gilbert was not concerned with stylistic consistency among his commissions. He drew from various vocabularies including Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Northern Italian with the belief that certain styles were more suited for particular building functions than others.<sup>14</sup> Added to his penchant for classical imagery was an underlying influence from the mid-

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 89.



western American architectural tradition. Venturi described Gilbert's Allen Museum as "Tuscan Renaissance" imbued with a "vernacular" vocabulary.<sup>15</sup> In his essay "Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert" written in 1976, Venturi compared the Allen Memorial Art Museum to Frank Lloyd Wright's Winslow House, insisting that the two architects employed a similar mode of "contemporary vernacular architecture."<sup>16</sup> [Fig. 2.3] Venturi justified his comparison by writing that, in essence, both Wright and Gilbert were masters of enhancing the ordinary. Both the Allen Museum and the Winslow House are rectangular boxes refined by overhanging hip roofs and linear decoration that create an overall horizontality. Visually, the comparison ends with these elements. Cass Gilbert added ornamental decoration of clear historic origin to his museum whereas Wright's innovative design is a simple and proportioned façade inspired by rural American architecture. Venturi points out in his essay that neither architect influenced the other; rather Wright and Gilbert paralleled each other in their application of a mid-western vernacular.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 2.3 – Frank Lloyd Wright, The Winslow House (1893).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Venturi, "Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert," p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.



Regarding the Allen Memorial Art Museum addition, Venturi was thoroughly engaged with the physical context. He identified the juxtaposition between the fancy museum placed within the ordinary locale of a small-town college campus, and exploited this tension as the foundation for his addition design. Describing the context he wrote of the museum as,

“...an architectural gem in an ordinary setting. It achieves its own harmony on the corner of Main and Lorain – a Quattrocento villa symbolizing the greatest decades of Western art – in a gridiron plan; off a village green; and among a Congregational church, a Citgo Station, and those somewhat threadbare bungalows, nondescript but universal in the American town...the art museum achieves harmony through contrast, heightening the quality of its context through jarring juxtapositions such as terracotta friezes with moulded plastic signs; della Robbia tondos with Citgo logos; decorative wrought-iron grilles with gingerbread wooden trellises; pilasters and urns with gas pumps and signs; and a front porch completing a Classical axis. Diverse elements provide context and enhancement for each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Venturi clearly identified the perceived environment that Gilbert’s building acknowledged and responded to.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, the context in which Venturi observed the museum was greatly changed from the context that Gilbert knew and understood. The change in context over time provided the initial concepts for Venturi and Rauch’s addition design.

The complexities of the existing building were identified by Venturi and Rauch, rather than rejected or ignored, and became integral to the addition design. As postulated in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* as well as other writings, Venturi

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, p. 50.



consistently discussed the importance of context and the need to relate his designs to the immediate environment as well as to the historical context.<sup>20</sup> However much Venturi's theory was established, the real task would be the application of his ideas to the design of a physical structure. Venturi admitted that designing the Allen Memorial Art Museum addition was extremely challenging. He wrote, "Adding to a building by Cass Gilbert is difficult because his architecture is very good and comparisons are inevitable...adding a wing to the art museum is like drawing a mustache on a Madonna. It is difficult, too, to add to a completed composition – a wing on a symmetrical Renaissance villa, like a bowler hat on a Venus, will never look correct."<sup>21</sup>

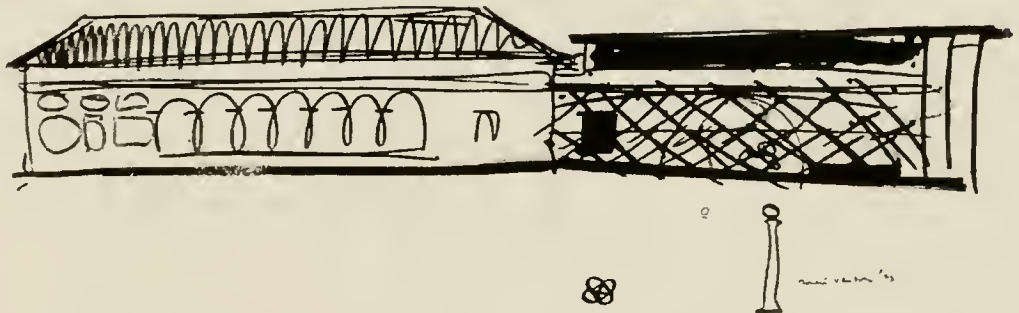


Fig. 2.4 – Robert Venturi, sketch of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, 1973.

Richard Spear, Allen Museum director, outlined the Oberlin College expansion program for the museum in a 1972 letter to Robert Venturi. Included in his description were the requirements for new classrooms, studios, offices, conservation laboratories, a 30,000-volume library, and additional gallery space. In the same letter, Spear projected

<sup>20</sup> Franz Schulze, "Plain and Fancy Out On the Prairie," *ARTNews*, April 1979, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Venturi, "Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert," p. 51.





that approximately 40,000 square feet of new space would be required.<sup>22</sup> Venturi and Rauch's addition, completed in 1976, provided 35,000 square feet of new space and rehabilitated the 3,750 square feet of the existing Gilbert building. The addition was designed as an industrial loft building with a flat roof, wide fascia, strip windows, a checkerboard pattern on the front façade, and buff-colored brick on the side facades.<sup>23</sup>

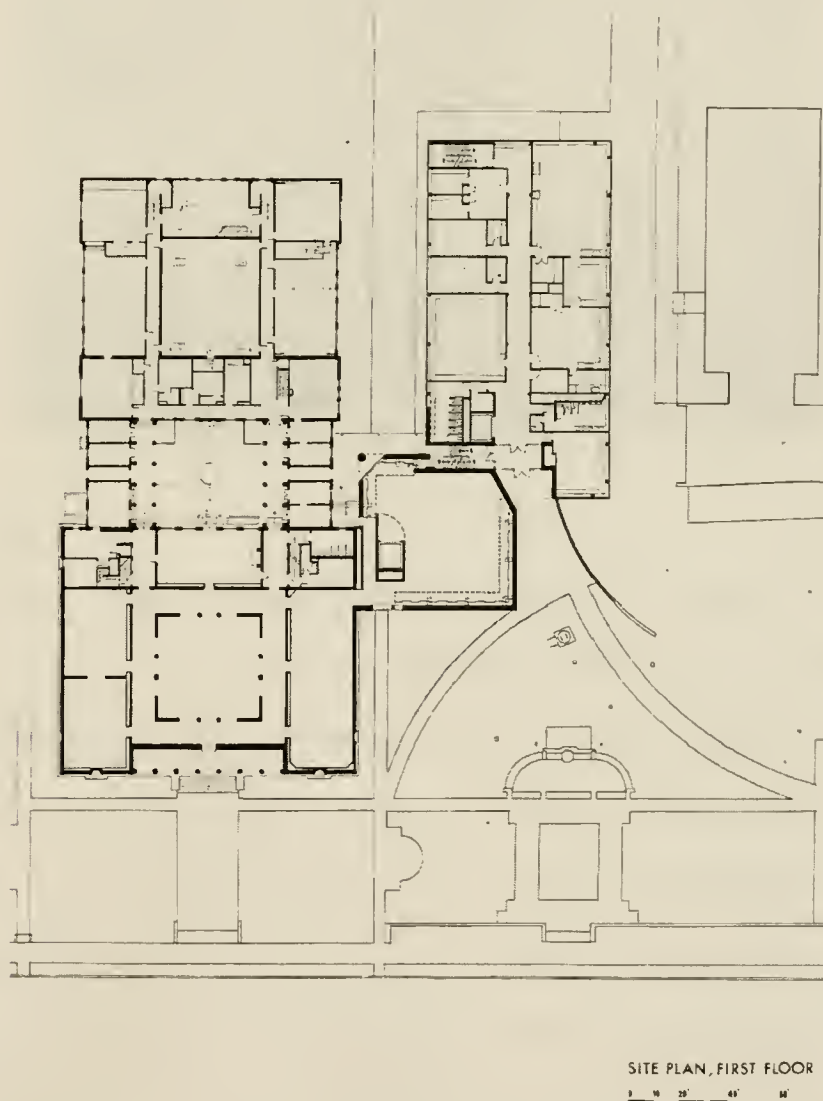


Fig. 2.5 – Plan of the Allen Memorial Art Museum addition.

<sup>22</sup> Letter, Richard Spear to Robert Venturi, 29 November 1972.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, pp. 50, 54.





Fig. 2.6 – Detail of connection between the old and new museums.

In order to show full respect to Gilbert's historically significant building while fulfilling the museum's needs for an addition, Venturi and Rauch designed a modern structure that clearly appears as an addition. Rather than construct a visually continuous extension using similar historical form and ornament, the architects designed a new building defined as different than Gilbert's museum. Early in the design process Venturi conceived the idea of contrasting facades, as seen in a sketch from 1973. [Fig. 2.4] The addition clearly states that it is new yet it succeeds in linking to the old through allusions and references, all of which will be further explored. Programmatically, Venturi and Rauch's addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum is a simple box-like shed attached to the side of Gilbert's building. In plan the addition steps back in an asymmetrical manner. [Fig. 2.5] The flat façade is clad with a checkerboard pattern of pink granite and



rose sandstone panels. The horizontal roof overhangs a line of strip windows. [Fig. 2.6] It is truly a “plain” modern building joined to the “fancy” museum. Overall, Venturi’s intention was to construct a hierarchy of forms and imagery that maintained the unity of the whole.<sup>24</sup> Explaining his design Venturi wrote, “Our addition, in some ways contrasting with, in other ways analogous to, the original block, is inevitably awkward perhaps, and shows a not too obvious respect for the past.”<sup>25</sup>

The addition façade provides merely an introduction to the complex theory behind Venturi and Rauch’s design. Upon first inspection the addition façade appears dull and plain, even mismatched in its checkerboard pattern, to the original museum. The cladding materials used by Venturi and Rauch, pink granite and rose sandstone, are identical in hue to the stone used by Gilbert. The coloration scheme is a deliberate gesture by the architects to provide a vague sense of correlation between the old and new. However, the patterning, in what could be described as a collision of facades, is initially unclear in its source and intention. Explaining his façade design Venturi wrote,

“Its flat surfaces are in harmony with the simple proportions and low relief of Gilbert’s Quattrocento ornament. On the other hand, the almost consistently flat surfaces of the new wing appear recessive in the context of the bold deep entrance arcade in the center of the museum façade. The pink granite and rose sandstone of the new façade are analogous in color but contrasting in overall pattern with the polychromatic but hierarchic panels and ordered bays of the old building...”<sup>26</sup>

Venturi has very little to remark about the checkerboard pattern specifically, rather he refers to it as a part of the larger façade arrangement that is symbolic of a plain

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<sup>24</sup> Brent C. Brolin, *Architecture in Context: Fitting New Buildings with Old*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1980), p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Venturi, “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert,” p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.



architecture adorned with a fancy applique. It appears that no real historical or contextual inspiration for the patterning source exists. The façade was conceived by Venturi as a means of applying ornament and decoration to the otherwise flat addition so that it might relate to the older structure. Tension is created by the presence of both conflict and harmony between the facades. Venturi intended for the two facades to link but not appear visually continuous. In fact, the addition façade is meant to recede to the background so that Gilbert’s façade will appear as the focal point.

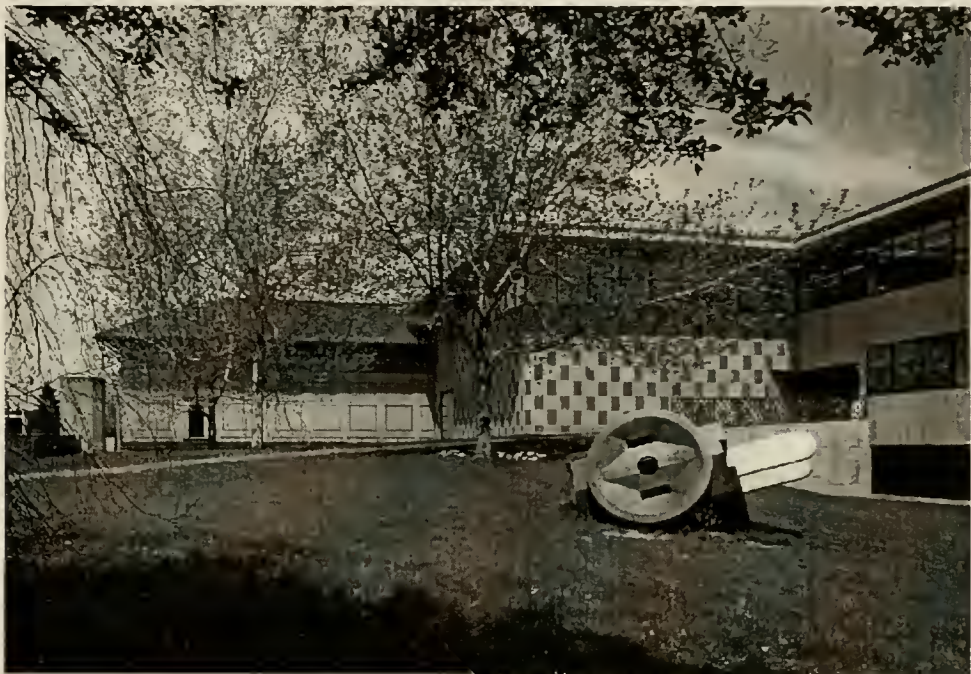


Fig. 2.7 – Side view of the Allen Museum.

Another contrast between the old and new exists in the exterior representation of volumetric form. Gilbert’s museum is clearly a rectangular volume while Venturi’s addition appears outlined rather than solid. The thinner, flatter industrial walls of the addition seem to contrast with the solid and thick appearance of Gilbert’s building, contributing to the overall theme of juxtaposition. Venturi and Rauch’s method of façade resolution through contrast is what was described as a “the most unexpected of *modern*





gestures.”<sup>27</sup> The Allen Memorial Art Museum addition was truly post-modern in the sense that Venturi and Rauch’s solution was radical for its time. Historically additions tended to either copy their parent buildings through visual continuity or contrast completely, however Venturi and Rauch deliberately embraced a different approach at the Allen Museum. The new addition is new and distinct, yet it subtly references the older building so that it appears connected.



Fig. 2.8 – Rear façade at the connection between old and new.

The plan of the completed scheme clarifies the intended addition set-back from Gilbert’s building. According to Venturi, the architects placed the addition to one side of the museum because of site constraints and functional requirements.<sup>28</sup> A previous addition had been made to the rear of Gilbert’s museum in 1937 which prevented Venturi

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<sup>27</sup> Cohen, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> Venturi, “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert,” p. 51.



and Rauch from placing the new addition to the back.<sup>29</sup> Although the addition is a single building, it steps back from the original museum twice, thus reinforcing the hierarchical framework intended by the architects. [Fig. 2.7] The placement of the addition to the side forces the Beaux-Arts museum into an asymmetrical composition. To some observers, this asymmetry is a way of engaging the symmetry of the old as little as possible, so as not to destroy it.<sup>30</sup> The architects created a harmonious juxtaposition in which their addition appears as a receding, secondary element to Gilbert's museum. However, the success of this scheme is challenged when the asymmetry actually draws attention to the addition as something that attaches but does not truly belong.

The link between buildings on the front façade presents an obvious juxtaposition. However, the old and new façades on the rear are treated quite differently because they correspond to each other rather than conflict. The Venturi and Rauch addition is connected to the rear of the existing museum by an exterior walkway covered with a corrugated aluminum roof. The new industrial roof replicates the original. It is painted to match the roof tiles, soffit, and projecting rafters of the Gilbert building so that the colors and forms correlate.<sup>31</sup> [Fig. 2.8] Under the roof the corner of the new gallery is sliced off diagonally and an Ionic column is placed at the corner void. [Fig. 2.9] The column is fat and cartoon-like, decoratively covered with wood slats in a very non-Classical manner.<sup>32</sup> The Ionic column and the replication of the older museum along the rear roof line, both historically-derived elements, provide a very different visual solution at this side of the museum. Venturi's treatment of the rear in a contradictory manner is

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<sup>29</sup> Cohen, p. 52.

<sup>30</sup> Byard, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.



explained in his writings about the museum addition. In his essay “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert” Venturi discussed an early observation that Gilbert contrasted the front and back in many of his buildings.<sup>33</sup> This observation encouraged Venturi to follow a similar approach in his addition. Further, the idea of contrasting facades correlates with his own theories about complexity and irony in architectural design.



Fig. 2.9 – Ionic column at the addition rear.

Functional requirements initially determined the spatial arrangement in plan and fenestration patterns on the addition’s front façade. The strip windows, which continue around the addition façade as it steps back, allow large amounts of light into the gallery

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<sup>33</sup> Venturi, “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert,” p. 48.



and studio spaces. The windows and their placement are also integral to the visual connection between old and new. The horizontal band of clerestory windows at the second level stops before the addition butts the Gilbert museum roof line. A single square window punctures the checkerboard façade at the first level. Between the windows and the building juncture there is a strip of blank wall that acts as a linking element, suggesting the space behind is transitional. Venturi wrote that he purposely created this illusion on the façade to hide the fact that the addition space is immediately juxtaposed to the old gallery without transition.<sup>34</sup> The previous chapter discusses the general approaches to addition design, one example being an addition that sharply contrasts with the original building. Commonly a visual link or connection is devised in order to ease the transition between old and new. A typical design solution is the incorporation of a glass reveal connecting the old with the new, so as to provide a neutral factor between the competing forces.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the Allen Memorial Art Museum there is hardly a visual transition, glass or otherwise. The addition is placed directly against the side of Gilbert’s building. Venturi explained that by abutting the addition to the older building he eliminated a scheme that “...looked too fussy and diminished the scale and unity of the complex.” He claims that “...a connecting link made the addition too independent and therefore architecturally competitive with the old museum.” Venturi also wrote, “In the end we liked jamming an independent new pavilion onto the old pavilion without a transition – or rather, with a transition at the scale of detail...,”<sup>36</sup> which is a ten-inch vertical strip of gray granite placed on the new wall at the point of

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> Brolin, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> Venturi, “Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gilbert,” p. 58.





intersection. This single linking element represents the designers' belief that the transition must be made through the small-scale details rather than at the scale of the building's mass. This gesture ultimately implies that Venturi was concerned with resolving the physical and intangible links between the old and new within the real of the façade.

Clearly there is an intellectual component to Venturi and Rauch's addition design. Summing up his work at Oberlin Venturi wrote, "The design of the addition as a whole fits our predilection for the decorated shed – that is, plain architecture with a fancy applique. The play between contrasting and analogous harmonies and between plain and fancy elements in the forms of this complex is echoed by a similar play in its symbolism."<sup>37</sup> The key idea is one of harmony through juxtaposition, an intellectual notion. Because the architect did not make any obvious references to Gilbert's museum, rather vague allusions, most observers will not understand the connection between the old and new buildings unless first enlightened by the contextual issues. Upon first inspection, the addition appears to have no relation to its parent building. The addition is literally a checkerboard-patterned industrial box forced against the side of a Classically-ornamented, symmetrical museum. Many would describe the addition as the most unsympathetic of solutions. Ironically, Venturi and Rauch believed that this scheme was truly the most sympathetic solution. It is only through an explanation by the architects that their intention is revealed. The architects believed that they were showing Cass Gilbert the highest degree of respect by refusing to copy the original museum. They used certain visual elements to show a correspondence between buildings, which are apparent

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.



only through a close investigation of the facades. The architects believed that the exaggerated contrast would ultimately provide unity.

Harmony was achieved at Oberlin through the inherent contrast resulting from intentionally juxtaposed buildings. Venturi believed that the contrast would cause his addition to recede to the background, working in the favor of Gilbert's building. The addition does not attempt to replicate Gilbert's museum, therefore it cannot be accused of trying to be something that it is not. In context, placed against the Allen Museum, the addition clearly contrasts. The architects purposefully designed a "plain" addition for an unmistakably "fancy" building. The addition is abstracted so that the original museum appears in full clarity, even more so through contrast. A theoretical hierarchy is established with the Gilbert museum reigning at the top, which is realized in the spatial layout and visual connection between buildings. Yet despite their modesty, Venturi and Rauch also made an extremely bold statement. They devised a theoretical framework that addressed the conflicting issues of history and style, and employed visual imagery as the means to resolve the two. Venturi and Rauch dared to produce a revolutionary architectural model for addition design.

An important issue to consider is whether Venturi and Rauch resolved the problem of adding to an historic building successfully without destroying its historic character. Aside from the removal or demolition of physical fabric, there is no established gauge of success in this regard. It is truly a subjective matter based upon personal viewpoint. As Venturi has written about the Allen Memorial Art Museum, it was foremost in the architects' minds to fully respect the Cass Gilbert building through their addition design. He admitted that rather than attempt to copy the older museum,



which would be disrespectful in the architects' opinion, they provided a completely new and different building.<sup>38</sup> The addition purposefully juxtaposes the original, yet connects through vague allusions. Venturi and Rauch believed that by providing a contrasting building, the historic Gilbert museum would be preserved in its full glory without any confusion between old and new. The architects designed a dumb shed-like building to contrast with Gilbert's fancy ornamented museum. The obvious contrast between ugly and beautiful is what makes many observers uneasy, as found in the discussions between a number of prominent architects such as Leon Krier, John Hejduk, and Robert Stern published in the *Harvard Architecture Review* in 1980.<sup>39</sup> Problems arise from the fact that an explanation of the architects' motives behind the seemingly unresolved contrast is required. The theory may be too difficult to justify such a bold visual statement. Summed up in the words of one critic, "Venturi's defense of his work simply demonstrates that, in architecture, ideas are no substitute for visual refinement. The eye demands satisfaction on its own terms."<sup>40</sup> The conflict between theoretical and visual resolution is truly a subjective problem and will never be fully resolved. In any case, Venturi and Rauch provided an addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum that is foundationally conscious of its historical context yet is modern in its form and representation.

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<sup>38</sup> Venturi, "Plain and Fancy Architecture by Cass Gill," pp. 50-51, 56, 58.

<sup>39</sup> "Forum Discussion – Beyond the Modern Movement," *The Harvard Architecture Review*, Spring 1980, pp. 200-201.

<sup>40</sup> Brolin, p. 119.



### CHAPTER 3

## THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SAN DIEGO LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA (1984-1996)



[VSBA photo archive]





**THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SAN DIEGO  
LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA  
(1984-1996)**

Another addition project for an historic museum completed by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates was for the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in La Jolla. The expansion project, which began in 1984, involved the selective restoration of a historic structure and the design of new space for the museum. The museum occupies the Scripps House, an important Irving Gill design from 1916, which was concealed by unsympathetic alterations during the 1950's.<sup>1</sup> The museum's significant history and unique setting were crucial factors of the VSBA addition design. The museum is located within an historic section of La Jolla, California and set upon a ridge overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The main façade faces Prospect Street and the rear looks to the ocean. VSBA approached the addition project by identifying an ongoing duality of existing contradictions. They created a unified composition by meshing the old and new together. The architects embraced the history of the original building and the surrounding urban context by employing direct historical imagery into their addition design. The historic façade is tied to the new design, resulting in a museum addition that clearly reflects the original structure.<sup>2</sup>

The building occupied by the La Jolla Museum, the Scripps House, is significant to the regional history of La Jolla, California. This fact was crucial to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's design. As Venturi explained in his 1996 essay, "Design for the

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Davies and Anne Farrell, *Learning From La Jolla* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 1996), pp. 9-10, 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.



Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego,” the architects developed the contextual issues into a thematic framework for the addition project.<sup>3</sup> Venturi immediately identified the museum’s significance as an Irving Gill building and focused on the contextual importance of reviving the Scripps House memory. The project involved the restoration of the historic Gill facade while providing new gallery space. Venturi explained the extent to which the architects went to uncover the original façade from the 1950’s additions. He wrote, “We had to demolish parts of, renovate parts of, restore parts of, add to parts of the original complex of the Museum of Contemporary Art to make the inside a whole which accommodates the extremely complex program of a modern museum, and to make the outside a new civic building for the community.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the architects believed that by focusing their design on the museum’s history they would address the surrounding context as well. Robert Venturi’s first project notes summed up the architects’ attitude in three simple words: “Bring back Gill.”<sup>5</sup>

Irving Gill, a local architect practicing during the early-twentieth century, was commissioned for the house design in 1915 by Ellen Browning Scripps.<sup>6</sup> Irving Gill was an important designer for his period, partly because he developed a new building technique using poured concrete. According to his biographer, Gill believed in the honesty of materials and allowed the poured-in-place concrete to determine form, sometimes adding arches to relieve the severity of the bare geometry. The resulting structures were stark cubic forms, which must have been shocking amid late-nineteenth

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi, “Design for the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego” in Davies, pp. 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Notes, Robert Venturi, 27 June 1985, folder 1.2, box 2.20.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Kamerling, *Irving J. Gill, Architect*, (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1993), p. 102.



century Victorian neighbors.<sup>7</sup> Gill's clean lines and pure geometry anticipated twentieth-century Modernist architecture. [Fig. 3.1]



Fig. 3.1 – Irving Gill, Scripps House (1916).

Irving Gill had a difficult time finding clients willing to commission buildings in his trademark style, and thus it is only in projects designed for sympathetic clients that his stripped-down forms are found.<sup>8</sup> Members of the Scripps family, which was extremely active in the La Jolla community, were early Gill enthusiasts and funded many of his buildings including the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (1904), the Bishop's School (1909), and the La Jolla Women's Club (1912).<sup>9</sup> The building occupied by the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, the Scripps House, was commissioned by Ellen Scripps after fire destroyed her nineteenth-century cottage in 1915. The two-story Scripps House was designed in typical Gill geometry. The symmetrical front façade was treated with rectangular strip windows and a cubic front porch punctured by a single large arch.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 63, 70, 96.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.





Fig. 3.2 – The Art Center, rear façade after first renovations.

The Scripps House’s transition from private residence to art museum occurred after Ellen Scripps died in 1932. The house remained vacant until 1940, when a group of local artists obtained permission from her estate to use the space as a gallery. In 1941 the artists purchased the house and formed an organization called “The Art Center in La Jolla.”<sup>11</sup> In 1950 the Art Center determined that its galleries, which occupied the original Gill building required modification. The local architectural firm Mosher & Drew was hired to rearrange the interior of the Scripps House so as to create more suitable gallery space.<sup>12</sup> The alterations transformed the first floor living rooms into galleries and second floor bedrooms into offices.<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 3.2] In 1959 the same design firm was hired again to perform a second round of alterations and additions. At this time the changes made to the

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<sup>11</sup> Davies, pp. 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Karen D. Stein, “Irving Gill Reconsidered,” *Architectural Record*, August 1996, p. 88.





Scripps House drastically altered the original Gill design. According to Hugh Davies, La Jolla Museum director, the Mosher & Drew project succeeded in concealing the Scripps House façade with a more “modern aesthetic” of concrete block and colonnades. The arched entry, a trademark Gill feature, was removed and the original windows were bricked in.<sup>14</sup> The alterations concealed all traces of Gill’s original design on both the Prospect Street and ocean facades. [Fig. 3.3]



Fig. 3.3 – The La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, front façade (c.1981).

Following the two expansions during the 1950’s the museum collections continued to increase. In 1964 the museum board voted to change the name from “The Art Center in La Jolla” to “The La Jolla Museum of Art” in recognition of the institution’s growth.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the museum’s growing collection increasingly included works of late twentieth-century art. In order to reflect this focus, the board voted in 1971 to change the name of the museum again, this time to “The La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.”<sup>16</sup> Beginning in 1983, the museum

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<sup>14</sup> Davies, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.



trustees began contemplating an expansion of its facilities following a recommendation by its new director, Hugh Davies.<sup>17</sup> In the fall of 1985 Davies and senior curator Ronald J. Onorato were appointed to an architectural selection committee for the proposed museum addition. The selection process began with a list of forty international design firms compiled by the committee, which was quickly narrowed down to four. The four finalists were Mitchell/Giurgola, Mark Mack, Charles Moore, and Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. Each of the four candidates traveled to La Jolla within the time frame of a month to make presentations for the selection committee. VSBA was clearly the first choice for the job, and Hugh Davies notified the firm of their selection in June 1986.<sup>18</sup> The firm contracted for the commission in October 1986.<sup>19</sup> At the same time that VSBA took on the La Jolla Museum project the firm also accepted a very significant commission overseas, the Sainsbury Wing addition for the National Gallery in London. The National Gallery proved to be one of the most important commission ever completed by VSBA. Work on the Sainsbury Wing, as well as fund-raising difficulties on the part of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego appear to have stalled the La Jolla project almost ten years.<sup>20</sup>

The expansion program for the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art was devised in 1986 by Hugh Davies and curator Lynda Forsha. It outlined an additional 10,000 square feet of gallery space and 2,000 square feet of offices and storage. The new

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>19</sup> Notes, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, 26 September 1986, folder 1.2, box 2.20.

<sup>20</sup> Davies, pp. 16, 22.



facilities included additional space for a new library, bookstore, café, and the rehabilitation of the existing auditorium.<sup>21</sup> Robert Venturi held a strong interest in the museum and its historic context. The significance of the original house as an Irving Gill masterpiece and its vital contribution to the La Jolla historic district clearly interested the architects. Within the immediate neighborhood, a number of other Gill structures still exist including the La Jolla Women’s Club, the Bishop’s School, and the La Jolla Recreation Center. These Irving Gill buildings now form the “Cultural Zone” of La Jolla and are the foundation of the city’s historic significance.<sup>22</sup> The Scripps House was also part of the “Cultural Zone,” however when VSBA began the museum addition hardly a trace of the original Irving Gill façade remained. VSBA approached the museum addition with the intention of restoring historic elements of the house, many of which had been lost or concealed over the years during its occupation by the museum. Venturi recognized the fact that Irving Gill was a very important stylistic influence upon the city of La Jolla.<sup>23</sup> The architects believed that the restoration of the Scripps House façade was integral to their addition scheme. Venturi wrote, “One can’t ‘compete’ with the greatness of Gill, but it is our intention to respect the harmony of what can be considered his ‘precinct’ in La Jolla, through architectural additions that are analogous and contrasting.”<sup>24</sup>

The idea of creating an “analogous and contrasting” composition is clearly founded in Robert Venturi’s theory of an inclusive architecture that embraces what he described as “Both-And” rather than the exclusive “Either-Or.” In *Complexity and*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Davies, Ronald J. Onorato, and Robert Venturi, “Interview with Robert Venturi,” in Davies, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Venturi in Davies, p. 17.



*Contradiction in Architecture* Venturi criticized Modernist architecture for its exclusivity. Advocating an architecture of duality he wrote, “If the source of the both-and phenomenon is contradiction, its basis is hierarchy, which yields several levels of meanings among elements with varying values....An architecture which includes varying levels of meaning breeds ambiguity and tension.”<sup>25</sup> Context, composed of multiple and overlapping references, is the source of the “Both-And phenomenon” and has the potential to be expressed in architecture through representational forms. The historic context of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art provided VSBA with a plethora of inherent contradictions, found within many dimensions and layers.



Fig. 3.4 – Pergola in La Jolla Woman’s Club courtyard.

The coexisting yet competing context of old versus new was the first issue considered by VSBA as they approached the addition design. The architects studied the original Irving Gill details found in La Jolla such as the arched entry of the Scripps

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<sup>25</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 23.





House, the arched loggia and columned pergola from the Woman's Club [Fig. 3.4], and the minimal stuccoed exteriors common to Gill's designs. These elements were incorporated into the addition façade as historical references, providing representational imagery as a means to unify the design.<sup>26</sup> Describing the firm's approach Venturi explained, "With Gill as context, we found we could achieve a harmony with the complex of four Gill buildings that face our site. They had a direct influence on our architecture. We decided that we would achieve harmony with these buildings mostly by means of analogy, but via contrast as well."<sup>27</sup> The architects did not copy Irving Gill or assume his architectural signature. Rather, they provided a reinterpretation of historic details with inventive proportions that act as a two-dimensional screen layered in front of the new addition. Visually the layering of history unifies the façade so that the museum appears as a harmonious composition.

The façade design for the La Jolla Museum was clearly resolved from the beginning of the schematic design stage. Writing in retrospect of his early design Venturi commented, "Remembering the façade of the great house that was here...starts with the beautiful rhythms and human scale of the buildings by the same architect. We decided early on to extend the building toward the front, analogous to the spirit of the place and yet original at the same time."<sup>28</sup> A study of Venturi's sketches provides insight into his conception of how to resolve the conflict between old and new. The earliest sketches of the addition imply a reference to the Scripps House façade including the trademark Gill arches and a columned pergola. A presentation drawing of the front elevation from June,

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<sup>26</sup> Venturi in Davies, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Venturi in Priscilla Lister, "Venturi Returns Gill Façade in LJMCA Expansion Design." *San Diego Daily Transcript*, 5 May 1988, p. 2B.



1987 shows the entire façade composition, which includes the Scripps House restoration in the center. [Fig. 3.5] This drawing remained essentially the same up through the project completion. As well, the VSBA addition contains arches abstracted from Gill's arches, represented with new proportions. A columned pergola, inspired by the original once found in the Scripps House garden and modeled after the existing pergola at the La Jolla Woman's Club, was placed in the entry courtyard fronting the Scripps House façade. [Fig. 3.6] Through a study of Venturi's sketches and drawings, it is clear that the conceptualization of historic references was established early in the design process and proved to have remained a theme throughout the project.



Fig. 3.5 – Robert Venturi, façade drawing, 1987.



Fig. 3.6 – Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, front façade.





Fig. 3.7 – Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, rear façade.

A second issue that was resolved early in the museum addition scheme was the juxtaposition of the east and west facades. VSBA observed a clear contrast between the two main facades, the front along Prospect Street and the rear overlooking the ocean, and allowed the facades to remain as two separate entities. Davies described the architects' approach to the two facades as "...a kind of vernacular American house with its formal front on Prospect Street and its casual, evolve-what-may backyard on Coast Boulevard."<sup>29</sup> The duality of the facades is echoed by the following interrelated contradictions: front versus back, formal versus informal, and urban versus picturesque. A site-related differentiation exists for the two main facades because of the nature of the landscape. The east side is the formal façade that corresponds directly to the urban context of La Jolla. In contrast, the west side is the informal façade that directly faces the Pacific Ocean. The architects observed the harmonious existence of the opposing facades

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<sup>29</sup> Davies, p. 26.



and enhanced their juxtaposition by emphasizing their unique qualities.<sup>30</sup> The informal west façade, which was altered in the 1950's, was changed little by VSBA. [Fig. 3.7] It remains an irregular composition of modern additions that responds to the jagged cliff side leading to the ocean. The urban context of the east façade is reinforced through VSBA's design that incorporates the historical references to Irving Gill. It is the formal front to the museum and stands as a civic monument to La Jolla's history. [Fig. 3.8]



Fig. 3.8 – Detail of restored Scripps House façade.

A similar contrast exists for the La Jolla Museum addition in plan. The original Gill structure and the 1950's additions that concealed it were designed within a rectilinear framework. VSBA's design incorporated the original geometry into the new galleries placed behind the Scripps House façade and in the entry courtyard. The new addition to the north angles off the main geometry to form a new axis and follows the natural curve of Prospect Street. [Fig. 3.9] The change in axis is subtle, yet it serves to reinforce to coexistence of old and new.<sup>31</sup> The museum visitor experiences the juxtaposed axes upon

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<sup>30</sup> Venturi in Davies, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.





entry to the museum. Approaching the museum, the visitor enters the pergola-framed courtyard facing the Scripps House façade on the original axis. [Fig. 3.10] Rather than enter through the single Gill arch, the original entry, the visitor is forced to enter to the left and is immediately thrown into the Axeline Court and onto the new axis. The juxtaposition of the axes pervades not only the floor plan, but also the visitor's experience.

The original Scripps House façade designed by Irving Gill became the centerpiece of the new museum. The façade had been concealed during renovations in the 1950's and, according to Venturi, the VSBA architects had to "...excavate, expose, and restore..." the façade.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it appears that the endeavor to reveal the Gill façade was a restoration project, not a reconstruction or recreation. Set back from the addition wings, the Gill façade serves as the background for the entry courtyard. Visually it provides the source for historical reference in the new addition and links the old and new together.

Discussing his approach Venturi wrote,

"The relation of the newly revealed façade of the Scripps House to the newly designed façade of the whole is significant: the new façade works as a civic statement analogous to its context but it works also as a frame – as a context itself – to the earlier façade. And, as a frame, the new works to enhance the old by acknowledging its significance and reinforcing its character by creating contrast and encouraging comparison in scale, where the big civic scale of the new makes explicit the small residential scale of the old... We hope the old façade becomes a precious jewel, protected via enclosure and enhanced via the space and scale of its new context."<sup>33</sup>

The contradiction between old and new is resolved through the varying scales of

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<sup>32</sup> Venturi in Davies, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.



historical imagery. Large and small scales are combined to accommodate perception by the individual at close view and by the community at a distance, thus fulfilling a civic duty to visitor and resident.<sup>34</sup> The restoration of the Scripps House façade reinforces the historical significance of the building and creates a centerpiece for the completed museum.

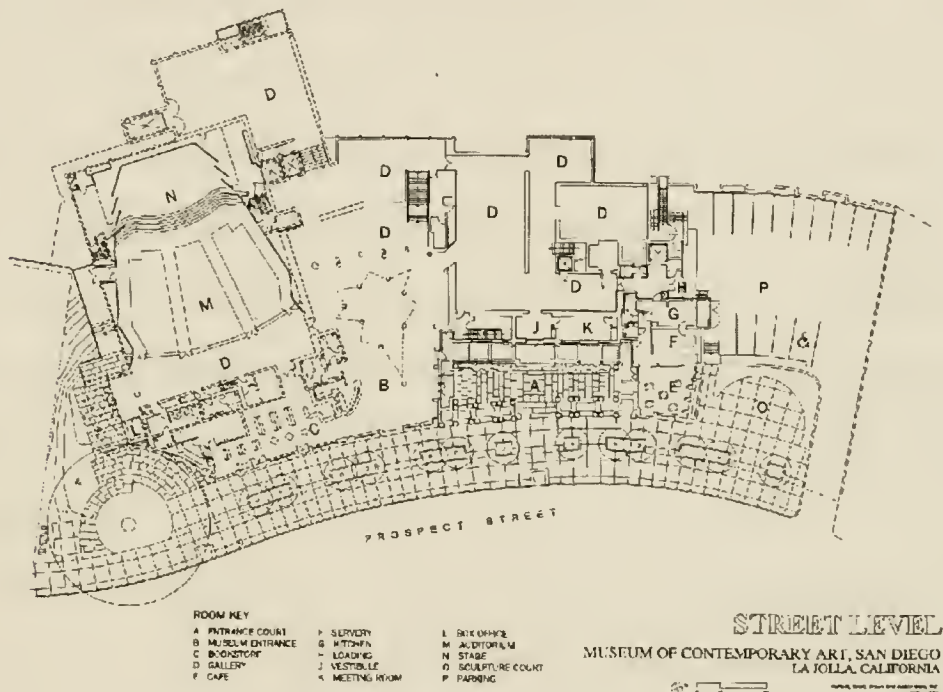


Fig. 3.9 – Plan of the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla.

In addition to referencing historical imagery from Gill’s buildings, VSBA used the façade coloration as a means to resolve the contrast between old and new. In restoring the Scripps House façade to its original state, the architects made efforts to match the new stucco and paint to the original Gill examples. Sample analysis revealed that the original stucco had been a pinkish-white hue. The architects determined that only the Irving Gill section of the new museum extending along the Prospect Street

<sup>34</sup> “Additions, Renovations and Restoration, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California,” *Space Design*, August 1997, p. 52.



façade would receive the original stucco color. According to VSBA/LJMCA meeting notes, it was decided for the rest of the museum that the stucco color was to change to a more neutral hue at a reveal detail.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the pink-hued Gill façade, the addition was treated with a grayish-white stucco. The stuccoes subtly contrast through the color variation. For the windows, paint analysis determined that the original trim was green, and thus the same color was used for the restored Scripps House fenestration. However, for the new arched windows on the addition, the trim was painted a neutral gray.<sup>36</sup> The façade coloration falls directly in line with the architects' theoretical framework of contradictory elements: the old and new are differentiated yet form a unified whole. According to Venturi, the gray-scaled new façade and the colored Scripps House façade subtly reinforce the difference between the old and new.<sup>37</sup> Despite the distinction, the threshold between old and new is subtle and the museum appears as a single, unified composition.

The Scripps House façade was restored as only that – a façade. Previous alterations to the house in the mid-twentieth century destroyed the interiors. VSBA restored the original façade merely as a representation of the historic Gill house. The Scripps House is just a two-dimensional layer, lacking depth and failing to reveal the interior functions behind it. Thus, the contrast between inside and outside is yet another contribution to the “both-and” theme employed by the architects. Robert Venturi's early theory about the representational role of the façade and its relation to interior space is found in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. He wrote,

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<sup>35</sup> Meeting Minutes, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, 5 December 1989, folder 2.5, box 2.20.

<sup>36</sup> Venturi in Davies, p. 28-29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.



“Designing from the outside in as well as the inside out, creates the necessary tensions, which help make architecture. Since the inside is different from the outside, the wall – the point of change – becomes an architectural event. Architecture occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of use and space. These interior and environmental forces are both general and particular, generic and circumstantial. Architecture as the wall between the inside and the outside becomes the partial record of this resolution and its drama.”<sup>38</sup>

At the La Jolla Museum, the contradiction between interior and exterior is clearly expressed. The restored Scripps House façade is the focal point of the exterior. It is natural to assume that the most important museum space occurs directly behind the main façade, however in this case the observer is tricked. Entry occurs to the north into the VSBA addition, not through the Scripps House front door. A second surprise is found in the entry space. What is represented as a modest flat façade on the exterior really fronts the Axeline Court, the most monumental interior space. From the exterior, the observer would never suspect the double-height interior space roofed by a skylit seven-point star. The crowning glory of the expansion was the creation of a large civic space for public events. This became the Axeline Court, the double-height entry space topped with a star-shaped drum. The exterior centerpiece is the Scripps House while the heart of the interior is found in the entry court. The tension between interior function and exterior representation gives depth and meaning to the composition, creating the architectural event.

VSBA approached the La Jolla Museum addition in a very different manner than the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Rather than devise a framework in which the historic

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<sup>38</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 86.





museum and the new addition are treated as juxtaposed objects, the architects identified an ongoing duality of existing contradictions and played upon the theme of “both-and”<sup>39</sup> to create harmony. Fundamentally, reviving the historic context provided a theme for the addition design and unified the old and new. Venturi wrote,

“One can’t compete with the greatness of Gill, but it is my intention to enhance the harmony of this place through architecture... We are striving to create a reminiscence of Irving Gill, while creating something that meets the museum’s needs by bringing back elements of the old Scripps House and incorporating them into the new façade. They will provide a nice surprise, a precious cultural relic to discover as part of the museum visitor’s experience.”<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 3.10 – Entry courtyard.

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<sup>39</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> LJMCA News Release, “La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art Announces Major Expansion Project,” 4 May 1988, folder 2.6, box 2.20.



CHAPTER 4

**THE SAINSBURY WING, NATIONAL GALLERY  
LONDON, ENGLAND  
(1986-1991)**



[VSBA photo archive]



**THE SAINSBURY WING, NATIONAL GALLERY  
LONDON, ENGLAND  
(1986-1991)**

The addition for The National Gallery, London, completed by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates in 1991, is widely considered to be the firm's masterpiece. The Sainsbury Wing is an ultimate embodiment of the architects' theory; the culmination of decades of consistent predication regarding the significance of history and context in architecture.

The original museum, designed by William Wilkins in 1833, has relevance in many contextual issues.<sup>1</sup> The National Gallery is a city landmark fronting Trafalgar Square, a site frequented by London natives and visitors. It is one of a number of civic buildings that were products of an English Neo-Classical style popular during the mid-nineteenth century. Controversy has always surrounded the museum which resulted in many competitions and proposals for an extension. The significance of the Sainsbury Wing also lies in within the subject of VSBA's design approach for additions to historic buildings. The architects joined the Sainsbury Wing to the original museum through typical Venturi reasoning and methods, executed masterly. In plan the addition is joined by a 'bridge' that links the new to the old at the intersection of two juxtaposed axes. Visually the new façade corresponds to the old by the use of historical imagery, not much unlike the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. However, the historical references at the Sainsbury Wing are more direct and much freer than the La Jolla Museum. For the National Gallery addition, the architects have employed the consistent theme of

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Amery, *A Celebration of Art and Architecture: The National Gallery Sainsbury Wing*, (London: National Gallery Publications, Ltd., 1991) p. 20.



contradiction as a theoretical framework for all aspects of the design and have successfully created a unified composition between the old museum and new addition.

A study of The National Gallery's history from the construction of Wilkins' building to the commissioning of VSBA reveals the contextual complexities that the architects were forced to reconcile when designing the addition. William Wilkins completed The National Gallery in 1838 after years of design revisions and controversy surrounding the British Government's limited museum budget.<sup>2</sup> Concerned with designing a building that was monumentally appropriate for its important setting at the north end of Trafalgar Square, Wilkins produced a long, low, palatial structure. The architect decorated the National Gallery façade with Corinthian columns and pilasters, true to Grecian-influenced English Neo-Classicism of the time. [Fig. 4.1] This approach was especially popular for civic commissions during the early-nineteenth century in London.<sup>3</sup> Upon completion, Wilkins' museum was harshly criticized on aesthetic and functional grounds. Objectors went as far to propose its immediate replacement with a new design despite the fact that the construction had recently been completed.<sup>4</sup> During the century following its opening, The National Gallery underwent a series of studies for revisions and extensions. In 1959 the British Government obtained a lot immediately to the west of the museum. The site was formerly occupied by the Hampton Furniture Company, whose building had been destroyed by bomb fire during the Second World War. The series of development schemes for the newly acquired site involved the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 21-24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23-28.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum*, (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998) p. 182.





proposal of commercial development sharing space with a museum extension, a scheme which further heightened controversy.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 4.1 – Idealized view of the National Gallery in the 1840's.

The first architectural competition for the design of a gallery extension was launched in 1959, sponsored by *The Sunday Times* to encourage public interest in The National Gallery's proposed expansion. A winner was announced and the design was publicly exhibited, but it was not considered by the museum.<sup>6</sup> In 1982 a second and more serious competition for an addition was organized. Based upon previous proposals the British Government, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, proposed underwriting the extension by including commercial space.<sup>7</sup> More than eighty architects entered the competition including Richard Rogers; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill; Sheppard Robson; and Ahrends, Burton and Koralek. The entries were narrowed to a list of seven schemes.

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<sup>5</sup> Amery, pp. 38-40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Pawley, "Viewpoint," *Architectural Record*, October 1991, p. 75.



each an extremely different solution. Unexpectedly, the competition entries aroused controversy and the design judges hesitated to choose a winning scheme. Sparking the indecision was a public outcry for the lack of contextual concern in all of the entries. Despite the public debate, Ahrends, Burton and Koralek (ABK) were finally selected under the condition that the initial design would be considerably revised.<sup>8</sup> A destructive blow was made to the competition by none other than HRH The Prince of Wales through a speech given in May 1984 to the Royal Institute of British Architects. Along with denouncing the “High Tech” approach of the ABK design as inappropriate to the Trafalgar Square site Prince Charles notoriously described the scheme as “...a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved elegant friend.”<sup>9</sup> The National Gallery’s board chose to abandon the competition and reexamine the programmatic needs and financial capabilities of the museum.

Essentially, The National Gallery expansion plan required the museum to devise a solution in which the addition would be built and operated exclusively by the museum, without reliance upon revenue from commercial space.<sup>10</sup> The solution was found in a fortuitous donation by the Sainsbury brothers, Simon, John, and Timothy, for an extension without the stipulation of rental office space.<sup>11</sup> Based upon previous controversy the Sainsburys agreed that the choice of architect would be a joint decision between the donors and the museum’s Trustees, aided by a selection committee. Up to six international architects would be invited to submit designs, from which one would be

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<sup>8</sup> Amery, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Architecture in Europe Since 1968*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) p. 272.



chosen. Most important to the new competition was the requirement that the extension must relate sympathetically to the old building, have an architectural distinction worthy of the site, and be complementary to Trafalgar Square.<sup>12</sup> It was in this context that Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates became involved in The Sainsbury Wing competition.

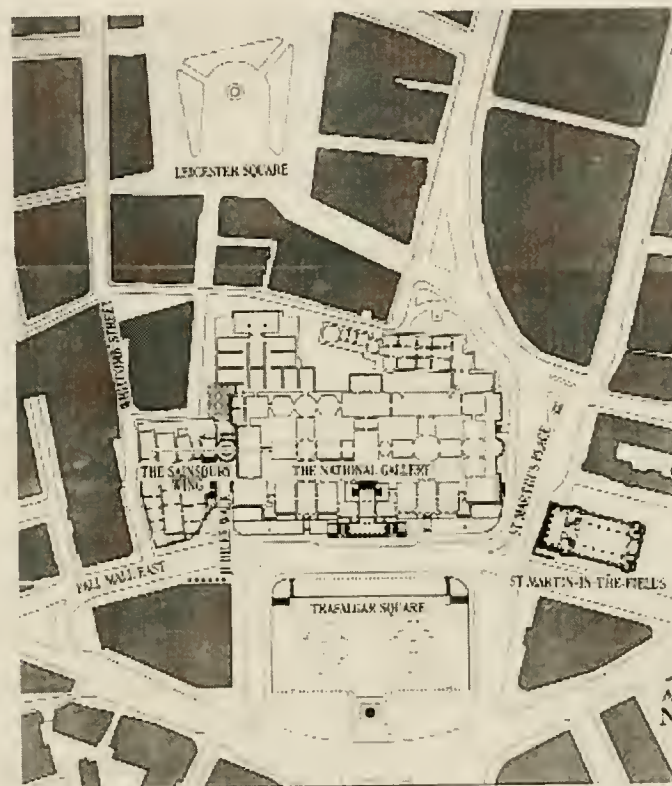


Fig. 4.2 – Site plan of Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery.

The selection committee was particularly interested in VSBA, over all the other firms initially considered, because of Venturi's consistent theory. According to Amery, the ideas of spatial complexity and layering that Robert Venturi learned from his mentor, Louis Kahn, were extremely appealing to the selection committee.<sup>13</sup> After consultation with the firm and observation of the progress in two ongoing museum projects, the

<sup>12</sup> Amery, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.



Seattle Art Museum and the Laguna Gloria Museum, VSBA was invited to participate in the competition. In October of 1985 the selection committee finalized its short list of firms chosen to submit proposals for The National Gallery addition. The six firms selected were: Henry Nichols Cobb of I. M. Pei Partnership; Colquhoun and Miller; Jeremy Dixon/BDP; Piers Gough of Campbell, Zogolovitch, Wilkinson and Gough; James Stirling, Michael Wilford and Associates; and Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates.<sup>14</sup> The architects were given approximately four months to prepare for a presentation to the committee with a set of guidelines outlining the museum's goals, which included the need for an addition sympathetic to the existing Wilkins building and a set of galleries whose quality and character are appropriate to the paintings. In January 1986 the committee announced its final selection of VSBA for the Sainsbury Wing addition. In response to the announcement Robert Venturi remarked to the press, "Our goal has been to create a building positive in its architectural quality – and yet sensitive to the rest of Trafalgar Square and appropriate as a context itself for the masterpieces within it."<sup>15</sup> As in the previous VSBA addition projects discussed in this study, context was the dominant theme underlying every design aspect.

The National Gallery extension commission involved an awkwardly configured site and an extremely demanding program. [Fig. 4.2] Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates began the project with an analysis of the contextual issues, both historical and modern. Regarding the urban context of the site Venturi stated,

"I see the site as something of a metaphor. I think of medieval London lying underneath a layer of twentieth-century order. I consider the great mass of a public building in

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Venturi in Amery, pp. 57-65.





relation to the intimate personal human activities that will happen within it. Denise Scott Brown and I have always been interested in the two scales of the individual. In the case of The National Gallery I realized that any new building had to be perfectly functional but also have a formal, public symbolic role.”<sup>16</sup>

The public role of The National Gallery is directly related to its location at the head of Trafalgar Square. The Wilkins building stretches the full northern edge of the square, forming a low-key background. At the square’s northeast corner is the justly famous St. Martin-in-the-Fields (1721-26) designed by James Gibbs.<sup>17</sup> In the opposite corner of Trafalgar Square, to the west of the National Gallery, is the site for the new Sainsbury Wing. Flanking Trafalgar Square on the west and east are Sydney Smirke’s Canada House (1824-7) and Sir Herbert Baker’s South Africa House (1935).<sup>18</sup> Along the south of the square, the sense of enclosure is dissipated through the presence of a large traffic roundabout. Within the center of the square is Nelson’s Column flanked on both sides by a fountain, forming a symmetrical composition within the square and reflecting the symmetry of Wilkins’ National Gallery façade.<sup>19</sup> Along with the symmetry, a second unifying factor within Trafalgar Square is the stylistic continuity between the pillared and porticoed masonry buildings, remains from the height of nineteenth-century English Neoclassicism. [Fig. 4.3]

An understanding of the contextual issues of London, Trafalgar Square, and The National Gallery formed the foundation for VSBA’s approach to the addition design. The formal necessity of linking the addition to the museum was the next logical step after identifying the contextual issues. Regarding the context and its impact on their design

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<sup>16</sup> Venturi in Amery, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 541.

<sup>18</sup> Amery, p. 38.



approach Venturi wrote, “We enjoyed being contextual – to use an over-used word. As a small building facing a big space it has to make some kind of gesture toward Trafalgar Square – to fill up that corner and reinforce enclosure...it has to read as part of the old building but separate from it too.”<sup>20</sup> The architects recognized that although the Sainsbury Wing was to be a separate element, distinguished from Wilkins’ National Gallery, the old building and new addition must correspond. Ideally, the old and new would appear as a single, unified composition.



Fig. 4.3 – Trafalgar Square facing the National Gallery.

Clearly, Venturi and Scott Brown based their design solution upon earlier theory established in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* regarding the architectural

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Baker, “The Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery by Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates,” *Architectural Design*, no. 94, 1991, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Venturi in Charles Jencks, “National Gallery – Sainsbury Wing: Robert Venturi, David Vaughn, & Charles Jencks: an Interview,” *Architectural Design*, no. 91, 1991, p. 49.



“obligation toward the difficult whole.”<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the Gestalt psychological theory of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, Venturi asserted that the whole, although greater, is fully dependent upon the inherent characteristics of the parts.

He wrote,

“Concerning the positions of the parts, for instance, such an architecture encourages complex and contrapuntal rhythms over simple and single ones. The ‘difficult whole’ can include a diversity of directions as well. Concerning the number of parts in a whole, the two extremes – a single part and a multiplicity of parts – read as wholes most easily: the single part is itself a unity; and extreme multiplicity reads like a unity through a tendency of the parts to change scale, and to be perceived as an overall pattern or texture...But an architecture of complexity and contradiction also embraces the ‘difficult’ number of parts – the duality – and the medium degrees of multiplicity.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the “difficult whole” is a complex design consisting of individual elements, each fully developed and seemingly independent, yet acting together to form a unified composition. The physical manifestation of this theory is found within the details of VSBA’s Sainsbury Wing, most clearly in the addition plan and the façade treatment.

With regards to the extension plan, the architects were faced with the difficult task of fitting the museum’s new gallery and service needs within the adjacent site. Visitor circulation was a concern because entry into the addition would occur from two directions: north from Trafalgar Square and east from inside Wilkins’ building. To solve the plan issues the architects first devised a framework of juxtaposed axes [Fig. 4.4], which was naturally in keeping with Venturi’s fondness for contradiction in architecture. The existing longitudinal axis running from east to west within Wilkins’ museum was

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<sup>21</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.



identified as one main axis. Offsetting from the rectilinear original axis was a second axis derived from the addition site configuration.<sup>23</sup> Once established, the juxtaposed axes provided a grid for the gallery plan on the second level. Further, it allowed the architects to create excitement and tension through irregularly-shaped galleries placed within the grid, all slightly offset from the regularity of the older National Gallery – creating a sense of disorder within order.

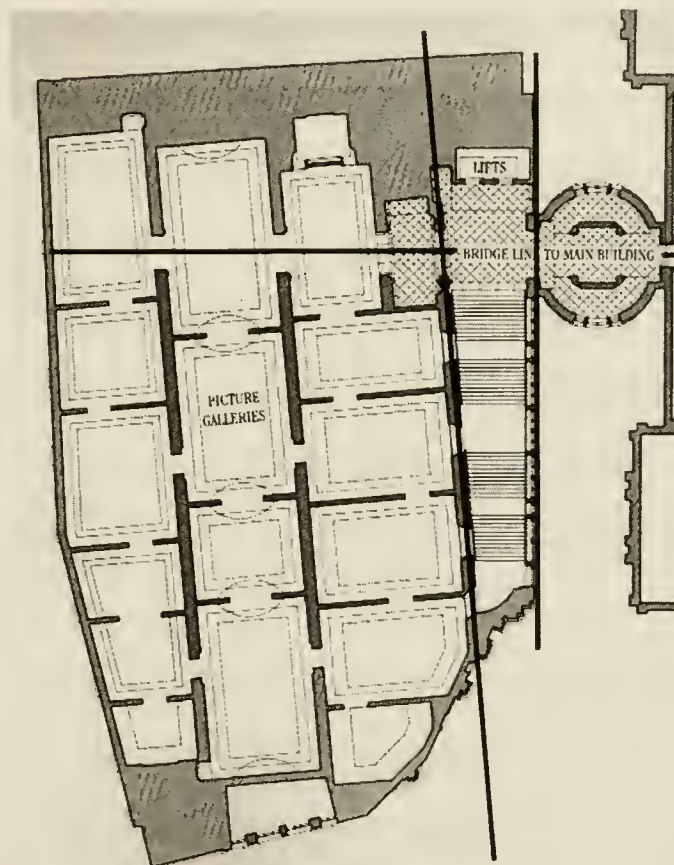


Fig. 4.4 – Plan of gallery level, showing the juxtaposed axes and the eroded Trafalgar Square facade.

The southeast corner of the site's irregular rectangle, facing the National Gallery and Trafalgar Square, was eroded away in plan to designate the entry into the Sainsbury Wing. [Fig. 4.4] This configuration was derived from the offset axis, where a radial

<sup>23</sup> Baker, p. 16.





vector was rotated from the longitudinal axis counterclockwise towards the National Gallery. The soft eroded corner contrasts the stronger geometry of the rest of the building. At this corner the architects layered the facades, setting solid masonry in front of glass. The masonry wall is punctured with large openings at ground level. [Fig. 4.5] Psychologically, entry through the eroded and punctured corner eases the penetration through the massive outer layer to the fragile inner layer and into the museum.<sup>24</sup> As well, the missing corner created a negative space that helps signify the entry and forms an open plaza. Theoretically the new face initiates a dialogue between itself and the older building by acknowledging the context and joining the two together. As Venturi described, “In our design for the extension, you will see we have tried to promote spatial enclosure for this corner of the Square via the shape of the plan, and a continuity with the original Wilkins façade through an inflection of the plan of the front and the rhythmic configuration of our pilasters on the façade.”<sup>25</sup> The façade treatment, which will be discussed further, along with the plan configuration are the integral connecting elements between old and new.

The juxtaposed axes devised for the interior plan configuration formed the foundation for the most significant interior design gesture – the grand staircase. Designed as the main fixture for visitor transport from the ground level entry up to the main level galleries, the staircase resolves a number of other formal and theoretical issues. The architects placed the staircase along the east wall that directly faces Wilkins’ building. [Fig. 4.6] Composed entirely of dark glass, the wall siding the stair acts as a counterpoint to the entry wall by dramatically reversing the enclosing layers. Suddenly,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Venturi, “From Invention to Convention in Architecture.” *Zodiac* 6, March–August 1991, p. 131.



the massive outer wall that was passed through to reach the entry becomes an exterior skin of glass. The stair is placed between the layers, so that upon ascension the visitor is found between the outer skin of glass and inner masonry wall.<sup>26</sup> The effect of the layering achieves exactly what Venturi and Scott Brown intended: a complexity and ambiguity between inside and outside. As Venturi discussed in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, tension occurs at the meeting of interior and exterior forces of use and space.<sup>27</sup> The point in change between inside and outside becomes the architectural event, which in this case is the grand stair.



Fig. 4.5 – The Sainsbury Wing, Trafalgar Square façade.

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<sup>26</sup> Baker, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p. 86.





Fig. 4.6 – Exterior view of glass-walled grand stair.

The main stair provides a second important role: it reconciles the juxtaposed axes. In plan, the stair's east wall corresponds with the perpendicular of the longitudinal axis while the west wall follows the new offset axis. Volumetrically, the stair cuts through the entire height of the addition. The resulting effect looking up from the entry level is a broadened perspective, psychologically a monumental vista as the stair is ascended.<sup>28</sup> [Fig. 4.7] As well, the glass wall along the east provides a sweeping view across Jubilee Walk to the exterior of Wilkins' gallery. This is a reminder of the contextual issues surrounding the Sainsbury Wing – that the visitor is within a modern structure that possesses a vital link to the historic building. Finally, upon arrival at the gallery level the

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<sup>28</sup> Baker, p. 17.



visitor arrives at the point of juxtaposition between main axes. To the east is the bridge to the older gallery and to the west is the Sainsbury gallery. This level corresponds with the National Gallery and it is in this vital space that the old and new are connected. The main circulation path is adjoined by the secondary circulation from Wilkins' gallery to form a single entry into the Sainsbury Wing galleries. Thus, each formal and theoretical element of the stair links the old museum to VSBA's new extension.

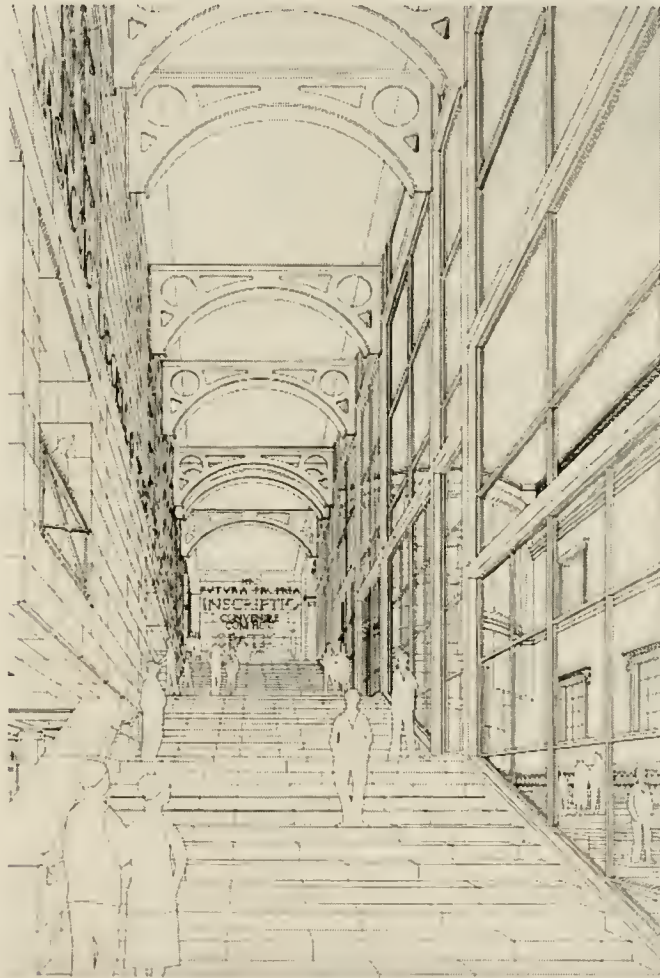


Fig. 4.7 – Perspective of grand stair.





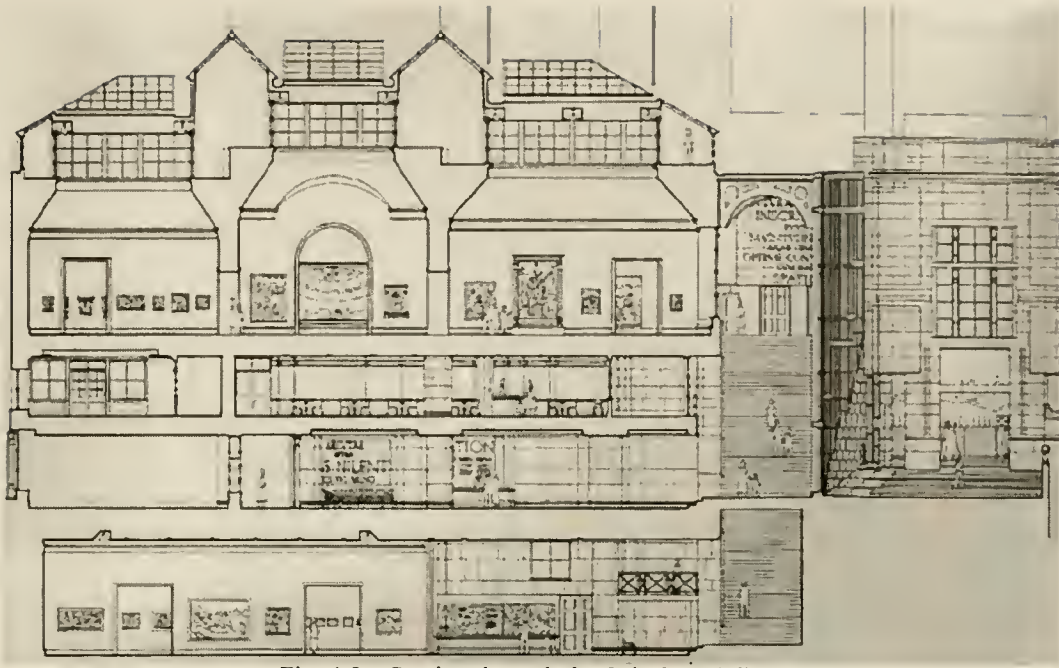


Fig. 4.8 – Section through the Sainsbury Wing.

In order to fulfill the multiple functional requirements for the new addition within the small site, VSBA chose to create a scheme with a number of levels. Three levels were packed into the same vertical height as one-and-a-half levels within the older gallery. The architects successfully manipulated their design to create a full 120,000 square feet of additional space.<sup>29</sup> A hierarchy of function and scale was devised among the levels to signify an increase in importance from entry level to main gallery. [Fig. 4.8] Entering through the eroded corner, the entry space is surprisingly contained. The low ceiling and heavy masonry of this space contains an information desk and gift store. Circulation is led toward the glass-lined grand staircase, initiated by the psychological desire for open space and light. Halfway up the stair is the partially-hidden mezzanine level, which contains a café and computer education center. The stairs end at the main level and circulation is directed toward the galleries. The lofty space in the galleries dramatically

<sup>29</sup> Stanislaus Von Moos, *Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates – Buildings and Projects, 1986-1998* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), p. 122.



contrasts the cramped space on the first and mezzanine levels. Roughly based upon Sir John Soane's Dulwich Gallery, VSBA's galleries were designed to provide light from clerestory skylights that contain acid-etched glass to diffuse daylight and protect the paintings.<sup>30</sup> [Fig. 4.9] The galleries, designed along the irregular axis, provide exaggerated perspective views through rooms and allow the doorways to frame the paintings architecturally. The overall effect is ideal for the National Gallery's permanent exhibit of Italian Renaissance paintings, providing a subtle backdrop appropriate to the extremely significant collection.

Just as the plan and spatial configuration of the Sainsbury Wing are integral to the link between old and new, so are the exterior facades. VSBA treated each façade differently, providing a separate personality for each face. As Venturi described the approach, "...the resultant contrasting facades reflect the contextual approach of our building accommodating different urban contexts on each side of our complex urban site."<sup>31</sup> The most significant façade in terms of relating to Wilkins' building is along the southeast corner. This façade was created as the architects eroded away the southeast corner in plan, the process of which was previously discussed. Facing both Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery, the southeast façade embodies a multitude of theoretical statements made by the architects. Already mentioned was the idea of layering within the façade where the solid masonry wall fronts an inner layer of glass. The contrast between the two layers is further emphasized by the blatant puncturing of the solid wall at ground level to allow entry. Even more obvious is the Classical imagery on this façade, which was clearly derived from Wilkins' museum.

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<sup>30</sup> Tzonis and Lefaivre, pp. 272-73.

<sup>31</sup> Venturi, "From Invention to Convention in Architecture," p. 132.





Fig. 4.9 – Interior of Sainsbury Wing galleries.

Rather than visually contrast the old and new museums, VSBA designed the Trafalgar Square façade with the intention of forming an analogous relationship with the existing Wilkins façade.<sup>32</sup> The exterior materials are similar, the cornice heights match, and the applied historical imagery corresponds. [Fig. 4.10] An early sketch shows Venturi's initial conception of the correlation between old and new facades. [Fig. 4.11] Essentially, in designing the Sainsbury Wing façade Venturi and Scott Brown created a fragment of the larger museum – an inflection that is part of the greater whole – as a means to unify the facades. Illustrating this concept are Venturi's writings in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* where he explains, "Inflection in architecture is the way in which the whole is implied by exploiting the nature of the individual parts, rather than their position or number. By inflecting toward something outside themselves, the

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<sup>32</sup> Jencks, p. 49.



parts contain their own linkage...Inflection is a means of distinguishing diverse parts while implying continuity. It involves the art of the fragment. The valid fragment economical because it implies richness and meaning beyond itself.”<sup>33</sup> Thus the design of the Sainsbury Wing within this theoretical framework reveals a number of important points. The addition is a fragment of the National Gallery and inflects from the older building, thus explaining its origination. The addition is also a separate entity and is not a part of the original museum’s fabric. However, it must be emphasized that the fragment would never stand on its own. The addition is fully dependent upon the main gallery for its validity, yet it is truly a unique product of modern thought and design. As Venturi clarified it, the Sainsbury Wing “...forms part of a greater whole, but it is also a building on its own and of its own time, contrasting tensely with, and being analogous to, the original building.”<sup>34</sup>

Addressing the vital contextualism in what is described as a ‘mannerist’ gesture, VSBA applied direct references of Classical ornament from Wilkins’ gallery to the Trafalgar Square façade.<sup>35</sup> Venturi described the new façade as, “...a manifestation of urban context and an example of evolving Classicism.”<sup>36</sup> Beginning at the edge closest to the west corner of the National Gallery, a series of overlapping Corinthian pilasters were applied in a seemingly random, irregular format. The pilasters create a rhythm, clustering nearest to the National Gallery and filtering out as the façade moves westward.

[Fig. 4.12] The pilasters’ movement provides a gradual transformation that ends as a

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<sup>33</sup> Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, pp. 88-90.

<sup>34</sup> Venturi, “From Invention to Convention in Architecture,” p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> John Morris Dixon, “Learning From London,” *Progressive Architecture*, August 1991, p. 80.

<sup>36</sup> Venturi, “From Invention to Convention in Architecture,” p. 127.





single Corinthian column.<sup>37</sup> [Fig. 4.13] In an ironic gesture, the architects meant for a straight-on view of the dynamic façade to represent an oblique view of the original façade.<sup>38</sup> It is obvious that the Classical ornament was derived directly from Wilkins and is intended to be a continuation of the original façade. However, the unique scale and rhythm found in Venturi's pilasters define the Sainsbury Façade as being new and separate. The use of both analogy and contrast within the fragmented addition unifies the old and new facades.



Fig. 4.10 – Old and new facades at Jubilee Walk.

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<sup>37</sup> James S. Russel, "To Mannerism Born," *Architectural Record*, October 1991, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> Jencks, p. 49.



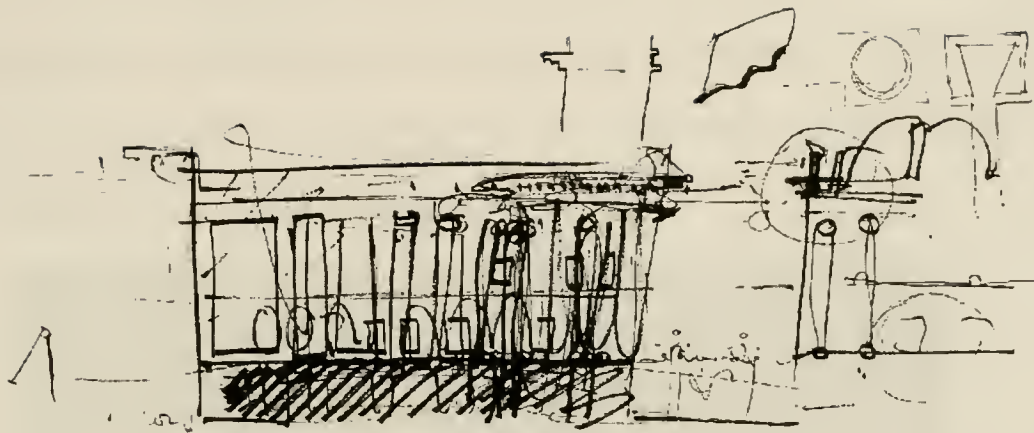


Fig. 4.11 – Robert Venturi, sketch of facades.

From the east façade moving westward along the Sainsbury Wing, Wilkins' Classical elements are fully acknowledged and then progressively denied. As the pilaster patterning dissipates and ends with the single column (reflecting Nelson's Column in the center of Trafalgar Square), the corner turns and reveals a completely different façade. [Fig. 4.14] A new set of proportion and scale is found on the south side facing Pall Mall.<sup>39</sup> As Venturi described the transition, "[The Trafalgar Square façade] has to read as part of the old building but separate from it too. As it evolves toward the left, to what you might call the 'second' façade, it becomes part of Pall Mall and there you have another kind of scale and imagery."<sup>40</sup> Here the masonry wall is punctured, continuing the modernist gesture that began on the Trafalgar Square façade. Above ground level the punctured façade forms a double-height set of windows, resembling a Regency-style window. The Pall Mall façade is yet another example of Venturi's imposed complexity. The window configuration is part of the exterior layer that hides two interior levels

<sup>39</sup> Bob Maguire, "Frontis," *RIBA Journal*, September 1991, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Venturi in Jencks, p. 49.



behind it. However from the interior, only the mezzanine level is allowed a view out. A solid wall conforming to a different axis fronts the gallery level behind the window. Clearly, not only is there layering along the Pall Mall façade but also juxtaposed walls and a contradiction between inside and outside representation.<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 4.12 – Applied pilasters on Sainsbury Wing façade.

The bridge between the National Gallery and the Sainsbury Wing was the final design gesture joining the two together. Critical to any addition scheme is the linking element between the old and new buildings. An addition may be directly attached to the original structure, as at Oberlin, or joined to the old through a transitional space as at The National Gallery. In whatever method the connection is made, the juncture of old and new and the transition between them are vital to the addition's success. The link between Wilkins' gallery and the Sainsbury Wing is a circular volume set between the

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<sup>41</sup> Baker, pp. 18-19.



two buildings at the deep end of Jubilee Walk. [Fig. 4.10] There is a dual nature to the bridge – its exterior function is different than the interior. From the exterior the circular pavilion is impartial to neither building. It divides the new from the old and acts as a neutral element between the competing facades. In contrast, the interior brings the old and new together by providing a space that eases the transition between the two. The main longitudinal axis that originates from inside Wilkins' building follows through the interior space. As soon as the main axis meets the offset axis of the Sainsbury Wing, VSBA's galleries follow the new grid. Despite the juxtaposition between axes, the perspective from the center of the pavilion is unobstructed in both directions. The architects permitted the longitudinal axis to continue through the new wing and provide a perspective through the entire length, visually joining the new and old. Thus the Sainsbury Wing is connected to the original museum through the pavilion, yet at the same time it is defined as new and different.

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown clearly identified the contextual issues of the National Gallery, addressed the programmatic needs for the new galleries, and produced an extension sympathetic to the historic museum yet monumental in its own right. After receiving the commission in January 1986 the architects worked for over a year with various museum officials and design consultants to fully develop the initial design. The final scheme was exhibited to the public beginning in April 1987. The completed Sainsbury Wing opened in 1991 to a barrage of criticism, as well as a fair amount of praise.<sup>42</sup> Mainly the Classical façade was viewed negatively, appearing to some as a remnant of a Post Modern pastiche. Those who criticized the Classical façade

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<sup>42</sup> Amery, pp. 76-83.





blindly based their comments on an aesthetic viewpoint. Truly, in order to appreciate VSBA's reasoning and method behind the Sainsbury Wing design an understanding of the historical and urban context is required.



Fig. 4.13 – Single column on Sainsbury Wing façade.





Fig. 4.14 – Sainsbury Wing, Pall Mall façade.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**



## CONCLUSION

Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates have provided examples of an unique approach to addition design through the projects at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in La Jolla and the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery. Chapter two of this study discusses the three possible approaches to addition design: contrast between the old and new, replication of the old within the new, and a combination of the two that respects the old while expressing the new. All three of VSBA's projects fall within the third category, where elements of the historic structure have been combined together with the new addition into a unified composition. The architects have proven that this approach, although the most difficult approach to execute successfully, allows the most freedom and inventiveness. Each project has a unique solution, yet VSBA has been consistent with their foundational theory.

The Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College was designed early in Venturi's career. Not as concerned with a visual connection between the older museum and the new wing, the architects designed a modern addition that corresponds contextually to the Cass Gilbert building. Venturi explained his approach at Oberlin in this way: "As to the main entrance façade, the question was at first to achieve unity either by being analogous, or by being contrasting, to the setting: we chose the more difficult role of making the addition essentially analogous to the old building, but with the parts within the overall being very contrasting."<sup>1</sup> Certain elements of the addition reflect the historic museum such as the façade materials and colors, although the overall effect is

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Venturi in Charles Jencks, p. 49.





contrast. According to Venturi, ambiguity of expression and contradiction were the vehicles for resolving the conflict between the old and new facades because they provide layers of meaning. As he wrote in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, “The calculated ambiguity of expression is based on the confusion of experience as reflected in the architectural program. This promotes richness of meaning over clarity of meaning.”<sup>2</sup> At Oberlin, Venturi addressed the complexity of the project – an addition to an important historic museum – by designing an addition that contrasted visually yet connected elementally. The original building was not replicated or mimicked, rather vaguely alluded to, so that Gilbert’s museum would appear as most significant.

At the La Jolla Museum, VSBA took quite a different approach. The museum’s historic significance as an important Irving Gill structure, as well as its contribution to the La Jolla Cultural Zone, inspired the architects to revive the house’s history. As discovered, contextual awareness was paramount to the addition design. The Scripps House, the Gill building that housed the museum, had been concealed by alterations in the 1950’s. Thus, Venturi chose to reveal the hidden Scripps House façade as the center of the new museum complex. In order to fulfill the La Jolla Museum program requirements of new gallery and service spaces, a sizeable amount of new construction occurred along the front façade. VSBA designed the new facades with obvious historical reference to Irving Gill in order to unite the new museum with its historic context. The completed composition is an essay in harmony between old and new.

Unlike the addition at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, where the old and new are visually juxtaposed and relate only through vague references, the La Jolla Museum

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, pp. 21-22.



contains significantly less tension and more visual harmony. The La Jolla Museum appears as an unified composition, while the Allen Museum remains as two seemingly opposing entities that form a connection. In a sense, these two examples appear to be extremes within this addition design approach. Both achieve harmony through visual references, however the Allen Musuem clearly defines the old and new as separate while the La Jolla Museum meshes the old and new together.

Somewhere in the middle ground between the Allen and La Jolla Museums is the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery. The Sainsbury Wing is both a visually continuous and clearly separate addition. Again, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown were concerned with the site's historic and urban context. Visual imagery, in this case the allusions to the classical ornament found on William Wilkins' National Gallery, was used to link the new addition to the old museum. However, the classicism was used in new and inventive ways so that the Sainsbury Wing was differentiated from the older building. The facades are layers that inflect from the older museum, appropriate only in their immediate context. The transitional pavilion formally connects the addition to the National Gallery, joining the two together yet separating them as well. The Sainsbury Wing, the Allen Museum addition, and the La Jolla Museum all fulfill Robert Venturi's theory regarding architecture – the addition designs are full of complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction that, when employed with historic context in mind, ultimately create harmony.

VSBA's foundational approach to the Allen Museum, the La Jolla Musuem, and the Sainsbury Wing is a valid model of appropriate addition design for historic buildings. Architects may learn a great deal from this approach about respect for historic buildings



and settings. The historic context is the primary theme. However, the presence of modern techniques and materials is also acknowledged. The historic building is not viewed as a relic, rather it is a fragment of history forced to adapt to a constantly changing environment. The addition, in turn, is new yet it also responds to its historic neighbor through allusion and reference. Values extracted from both the old and new are integrated, providing an addition that is clearly new as well as fully respectful of its historic context.



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