

Beyond Realism: The German-Swiss Reception of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

Abstract

It is commonly thought that postmodernism played only a marginal role in Switzerland. However, a closer look at the architectural discourse of the 1970s and 1980s shows frequent evidence of postmodern thinking, such as an emphasis on the communicative potential of architecture, on symbols and signs, paired with a strong interest in architectural history and everyday culture—topics that can be found in the Swiss reception of Robert Venturi (1925–2018) and Denise Scott Brown (b. 1931). This essay sheds new light on the transfer of ideas from Venturi and Scott Brown into Swiss architectural discourse, drawing on unpublished archival material and interviews with educators and critics who were active at the time. Courses taught at the ETH Zurich, publications in architecture journals, and the 1979 exhibition *Venturi and Rauch: Architektur im Alltag Amerikas* are considered, indicating a continuous presence of postmodern concepts in Swiss discourse from the late 1960s up to the 1990s. Attempts to incorporate the ideas into Swiss architecture were followed by subsequent marginalization, possibly due to oversaturation and the appeal of a new form of abstraction starting in the late 1980s—a shift from symbolic ordinariness to pure simplicity. In spite of the marginalization of Venturi and Scott Brown, notable figures on the Swiss scene have praised them as key figures in the development of contemporary architecture. This paper suggests a new reading of recent history and argues that it was richer and more complex than has previously been acknowledged.

Keywords

Swiss architecture, ETH Zurich, 1970s and 1980s architecture, Postmodernism, Debate on Postmodernism, Reception, Idea transfer, Realism, Ordinariness, Pop art, Semiotics, Representation, Signs and symbols, Meaning in architecture, Estrangement, Irony, Las Vegas, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott