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

> "Neither high-tech modernism, nor 'postmodern architecture' as described by Charles Jencks, nor deconstructivism could really take root […]."[1]

It is commonly thought that postmodernism played only a minor role in Switzerland. This can be seen in a number of publications and is part of a narrative on the international success of Swiss architecture in the 1990s.[2] In this narrative, postmodern architecture has been regarded as an expression of "moral decadence," to which the minimalist "Swiss boxes" formed a counterproposal.[3] Here lies a paradox, however: if postmodernism played only a marginal role, how was it able to trigger such a strong reaction? And if there was a Swiss postmodernism after all, what were its origins, and how did it develop over time? Before we continue, it is worth commenting on what is understood by the term "postmodernism." Besides being an eclectic, historicizing style, postmodernism can be understood in a larger sense: as a societal shift, as a philosophical concept, or as a number of converging theoretical discourses, related to semiotics and the return to meaning in architecture.[4] What does this broader understanding of postmodernism mean for the analysis of developments in Switzerland?

In this paper, I will discuss this notion of postmodernism by focusing on the reception of Robert Venturi (1925–2018) and Denise Scott Brown (b. 1931) in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. I will investigate a possible transfer of ideas by looking at architecture education at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH Zurich) from the late 1960s onwards, architectural publications in the 1970s, and built production and critical discourse in the 1980s. Focusing on the reception of Venturi and Scott Brown is appropriate, since they are widely regarded as being two of the most prominent intellectual originators of postmodernism in architecture.[5] Since a crucial part of their reception took place before the term "postmodernism" was popularized from 1977 onwards,[6] however, it is necessary to identify possible

1 Tschanz 1998: 45, English translation by the author. "Weder der High-Tech-Modernismus, noch die 'postmodern architecture', wie von Charles Jencks beschrieben, noch der Dekonstruktivismus konnten wirklich heimisch werden […]."

2 Tschanz 1998: 45; Cf. Disch 1991; Allenspach 1999.

3 Davidovici 2018a: 276–279.

4 Cf. Jencks 1977; Klotz 1987; Beckel and Kübler 2012; Kennel 2015.

5 Cf. Moos 1987: 12; Scott Brown 2020: 398.

6 Jencks 1977. Venturi has commented: "I don't want to sound pretentious, but as people say Freud was not a Freudian, or Marx was not a Marxist, we are not postmodernists. We never called ourselves postmodernists or ever used the term in our writings." Koolhaas and Obrist 2001: 616.

proto-postmodern discourses. Among these, the term "realism" stands out, as seen in several issues of the journal *archithese*, featuring, among others, Venturi and Scott Brown.[7] This realism is understood as the incorporation of the everyday environment into the creative process of the architect, thus transcending boundaries of taste between high art and mass culture, seeking an alternative to the "heroic" idealism of the Modern Movement.

7 Davidovici 2018b.

However, the understanding of realism by Venturi and Scott Brown went beyond mere repetition of everyday reality "as found." Inspired by pop art methods, they strove to comment critically on reality by manipulating, twisting, and transforming it—a strategy known as "estrangement." The strategy was used to create a distance to the reference and "distinguish their work from unreflective revivalism."[8] It has been compared to Bertolt Brecht's "defamiliarization effect" ("*Verfremdungseffekt*") in which "the actor stands back from the role he performs, in order to allow the spectator not to be overwhelmed and 'taken in' by the plot."[9] In using this strategy, architecture turns into a "performance critique" in which design ideas and comments on them are uttered simultaneously.[10] The attitude is characterized by an ambivalent, ironical stance toward contemporary existence—what Emanuel Petit refers to as a "self-conscious moment of modernity," that includes an "anti-heroic lack of pretension."[11] The theory of Venturi and Scott Brown is thus situated in the field of tension between an interest in the "real" (as opposed to the ideal or the heroic) and its transformed representation.

8 Jencks 2004: 16.

9 Moos 1999: 48.

10 Petit 2013: 22; Steinmann 1991a: 12.

11 Petit 2013: 22–24.

In this essay, I will look closer at the implications of this approach, seen in parallel with intertwined tendencies of emerging popular culture and symbolism. The interest in symbolism and meaning in architecture relates to the postwar "linguistic turn" and the discourse on semiotics.[12] To focus on the communicative potential was a way for architects to escape the abstraction of late modernism, striving for pluralist content and a richness of meaning. The "pop" estrangement strategy of Venturi-Scott Brown, as described above, arguably combined the discourse on semiotics with the interest in history and in the everyday, sowing the seeds of what would later be known as postmodernism. The investigation will begin with a little-known chapter of recent architectural history, namely the teaching on Venturi-Scott Brown at the ETH Zurich in the late 1960s and early 1970s, drawing on unpublished archival material and interviews with educators and critics active at the time. The evaluation of a theory course at the ETH will be followed by a closer look at publications in architecture journals and the 1979 exhibition *Venturi and Rauch: Architektur im Alltag Amerikas*—examples suggesting that the Swiss reception of Venturi and Scott Brown was more extensive than has previously been acknowledged.

12 Nesbitt 1996: 32.

Design Theory in the 1970s: on Pop Art and Ordinariness

> "No one in the past ten years has sent such shock waves through the professional world. No one has contributed more to the fact that we are now able to see the everyday environment differently and in a new way."[13]

13 Furer 1977a: 63, English translation by the author.

The Swiss architect, critic and educator René Furer (b. 1932) became an important disseminator of the ideas of Venturi and Scott Brown in Switzerland, primarily through his teaching at the ETH between 1968 and 1994. As indicated above, the impact of the American architects began as early as the 1960s, at a time in which architecture education at the ETH Zurich was still largely proceeding in the tradition of *Neues Bauen*. In 1959, the design professor Bernhard Hoesli initiated a novel basic course (*Grundkurs*), in which he sought to make modernism teachable. However, the nascent critique of modernism and other established ideas would set the tone of the era. "Perhaps *the idea of the Modern* in architecture had faded and begun to lose its power," as Hoesli wrote in March of 1968, just before the student revolt unfolded.[14]

The new "eclectic situation," as Hoesli describes it, was personified by Robert Venturi.[15] Venturi was known in Switzerland from international publications, in journals such as *Architectural Forum*, throughout the 1960s.[16] The periodicals were available in the library at the ETH, and Robert Krauthammer offered international books in his legendary bookstore in Zurich. The first edition of Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*[17] was available shortly after its publication.[18] An excerpt had already appeared in the Yale School of Architecture journal *Perspecta* in 1965,[19] and in April 1969 a German translation of Venturi's first joint article with Scott Brown on Las Vegas appeared in the Swiss architecture journal *Werk*.[20] Possibly inspired by this article, Hoesli wrote to Venturi to suggest an exhibition at the newly founded Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) in Zurich.[21] In June 1969 Hoesli's students were introduced to the work of Venturi as the teaching assistant René Furer, deputizing for Hoesli, gave three lectures on the "Philadelphia School": on Romaldo Giurgola, Louis Kahn, and Robert Venturi.[22] One year later, in June 1970, Furer became the first Lecturer in Architecture Theory at the ETH Zurich.[23]

Furer's dissemination of the theory and architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown is seen most prominently in the spring semester of the third-year elective course in Design Theory entitled "Contemporary American Architecture."[24] Although the annual course developed throughout the 1970s to include other architects as well, the first years were dedicated solely to the architecture and theory of "R. Venturi."[25] In the introductory lecture on April 21, 1972, Furer provided a comprehensive overview of Venturi's built and written work, but without referring to the book *Learning from Las Vegas,*[26] which was only published in the fall of the same year.[27] Using *Complexity and Contradiction* as the theoretical foundation for the course, Furer presented three main influences on Venturi's work—Kahn, mannerism, and pop art.[28] Furer only sparingly mentions a fourth main influence, namely Venturi's personal and professional partner Denise Scott Brown.[29]

As Scott Brown had experienced firsthand, "pop" had been a buzzword since the beginning of pop art in London in the 1950s.[30] Pop art developed in the wake of the booming postwar economy of the United States, dealing with the new culture of mass media and consumerism through the transfor-

14 Hoesli 1968: 31.

15 Caragonne 1995: 384.

16 René Furer, interview with the author, October 10, 2018. The private archive of René Furer includes a comprehensive collection of articles on and by Venturi and Scott Brown. A detailed bibliography can be found on their website: http://venturiscottbrown.org/bibliography/

17 Venturi 1966.

18 Robert Krauthammer, interview with the author, October 6, 2017.

19 Venturi 1965.

20 Venturi and Scott Brown 1969.

21 Hoesli writes that the exhibition "would have a tremendous didactic impact not only on our school but also on Swiss architecture. The time is ripe: here as elsewhere there is some kind of post-modern suspense in which new ideas must be precipitated." The exhibition would, however, remain unrealized. Bernhard Hoesli, letter to Robert Venturi, April 17, 1969, gta Archives, ETH Zurich: Nachlass Adolf Max Vogt.

22 Furer showed slides with extracts from *Complexity and Contradiction*, discussed Venturi's design for the Copley Square in Boston, concepts such as "pop" and "mannerism" were used, and Bernini's Sant'Andrea al Quirinale was presented to illustrate the topic "both–and" instead of "either–or." Folder "Wahlfach 1969," gta Archives, ETH Zurich: Nachlass Hoesli.

23 Furer taught the subjects of Architecture Theory (*Architekturtheorie*, in the first year referred to as *Architekturunterricht*) and Design Theory (*Gestaltungstheorie, Gestaltungsunterricht*) from 1970 to 1994 with the title of "*Dozent*", not a full professorship. Furer was succeeded by Francesco Collotti and Wilfried Wang from 1994 to 1996 and by Ákos Moravánszky from 1996 to 2005 as Lecturer and from 2005 to 2016 as Honorary Professor in Architecture Theory. Simmendinger 2010: 205.

24 In German, "*Amerikanische Architektur der Gegenwart*." Unpublished lecture documentation such as slides, notes, syllabi, and audio recordings is meticulously kept in Furer's private archive. Audio recordings of several lectures allow detailed insights into their content. (René Furer, private archive).

25 According to official course documentation (ETH Zürich 1975–1976).

26 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972.

mation of recognizable images. "Pop" as a cultural tendency was related to what Susan Sontag described as "camp"[31] in 1964: an attitude toward contemporary existence that "sees everything in quotation marks."[32] American protagonists of the movement were exhibited at the Venice Art Biennale in 1964, making a lasting impression on Furer.[33] In his lectures at the ETH, he praised pop art as an "extremely powerful, important, and creative phenomenon," from which Venturi and Scott Brown had drawn much inspiration.[34]

The connection between the American couple and pop art seems to have been generally known at the ETH Zurich during the late 1960s and early 1970s, not least by Martin Steinmann (1942–2022) who finished his architecture studies in 1967.[35] As curator of the exhibition *Tendenzen* in 1975, Steinmann writes in the catalogue that pop art

> "uses familiar forms as its material in an obvious manner, the ideological-critical statements remaining secondary to the statements about the nature of painting. Pop Art represents a breaking with the conventions of tachism [abstract painting]. Thus, in his 'brushstroke' pictures, Roy Lichtenstein uses color application as his material, repeating a brushstroke, but with his own tools: spray gun and stencil. The result is 'the same and not the same': it is the goal of the 'répétition différente' (to use the term proposed for this operation) to create this tension."[36]

In other words, according to Steinmann, pop art uses the strategy of "different repetition" to speak of everyday phenomena from a critical distance.

Similar references to pop art are frequent in *Learning from Las Vegas* and other writings of Venturi and Scott Brown, such as in *Architectural Forum* 1968, stating that "Pop Art has shown the value of the old cliché used in a new context to achieve a new meaning: to make the common uncommon."[37] The "pop" aspect of Venturi and Scott Brown's theory was expanded on in Furer's lecture of June 3, 1972 on "Ducks & Sheds" ("*Enten & Sheds*") in which he explains how "Venturi" identifies two ways in which buildings can communicate—namely, through being a symbol ("a duck") or by using applied symbols ("a decorated shed"). Furer states that the "duck" evolved due to modernist architects' inability to use applied signs, which resulted in the distortion of whole structures into symbols. The "shed," on the other hand, separates symbolic messaging from the functional form.[38] The lecture was likely based on the articles "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or, the Decorated Shed," part I and II, published in *Architectural Forum* in 1971.[39]

To summarize, Furer regarded Venturi as the "dominating figure of the 1970s."[40] His focus on Venturi alone must be understood as an expression of gender discrimination, unfortunately typical for the time.[41] Albeit the lack of correct attribution, Furer's dissemination of Scott Brown's and Venturi's ideas continued throughout the decade. Furer's first assistant, Bruno Reichlin, credits Furer for reintroducing Venturi back into the discourse. Reichlin had read the early publications in *Lotus and Zodiac* in the 1960s and has mentioned

27 René Furer, audiotape recording, "Gest-Unterricht 21.4.72. Einführung & Uebersicht zu Venturis Werk," ETH Zurich (René Furer, private archive).

28 René Furer, audiotape recording, "Gestaltungsunterricht: Complexity and Contradiction am Beispiel des Kreuzgrundrisses," April 28, 1972, ETH Zurich (René Furer, private archive).

29 There were many instances in which the joint authorship with Scott Brown was not attributed correctly. The collaboration of Venturi and Scott Brown had started in 1960, as they were both teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Custer 2019: 31. Scott Brown became a partner in the architectural office in 1969.
The office was known under various names: Venturi and Short 1960–1964, Venturi and Rauch 1964–1980, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown 1980–1989, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates 1989–2012, and VSBA Architects and Planners since 2012.

30 Alloway 1992: Stierli 2010.

31 Sontag 1966: 280.

32 This quotation is underlined in a Xerox of Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" in the folder "Robert Venturi 1" (René Furer, private archive).

33 René Furer, interview with the author, January 13, 2019.

34 René Furer, "Gest-Unterricht 21.4.72" (see note 11).

35 Martin Steinmann, email to the author, June 20, 2018.

36 Steinmann 1998: 252.

37 Venturi and Scott Brown 1968: 91.

38 René Furer, audiotape recording, "Gestaltungsunterricht, 3. Juni 1972, Venturi: Enten & Sheds," ETH Zurich (René Furer, private archive).

39 Venturi and Scott Brown 1971a, b.

40 "Venturi […] als die massgebende Figur der Siebzigerjahre, wie Kahn fur das vorausgegangene Jahrzehnt." René Furer, "Gestaltungstheorie II, Vorlesung vom 25. Juni 1976: Robert Venturi über die Vielschichtigkeit und den Widerspruch in der Arch." ETH Zurich (René Furer, private archive).

41 Scott Brown 2009a, see also Grahn 2022.

the importance of Venturi in interviews.[42] Reichlin would later play a major role in the development of Swiss architecture.[43] Apart from Reichlin, Furer would influence several generations of students, including Roger Diener who graduated in 1975. In an essay, Diener refers to Furer's lectures as "cultural events" that were followed by large numbers of students. For Diener, Venturi had been "a second, important experience" (after the first-place Aldo Rossi).[44]

For all the reverence that Furer showed for the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, he could also be a poignant critic. In the aforementioned 1977 article in *werk-archithese*, in which he refers to "shock waves," he drew a distinction between projects which were real "assimilations of Pop Art into architecture," such as The National Hall of Fame (1967), and others, such as the Yale Mathematics Building competition entry (1970), that were ordinary in a banal manner. Furer expressed strong disapproval for the latter and saw an urgent need for artistic processing of references.[45] Here we see how Furer's distinction between "pop" and "ordinariness" echoes the idea of "making the common uncommon" as laid out by Venturi and Scott Brown. Whereas formal-eclectic concerns had been predominant in the late 1960s, reflecting the content of *Complexity and Contradiction*, the topics of the ordinary and of symbolism grew more significant in the 1970s. The architectural press went through a parallel development, as will be seen from the reception of Venturi and Scott Brown of the journal *archithese* from 1971 to 1980.

Media Reception in the 1970s: from Pop Art to Postmodernism

Parallel to Furer's teaching at the ETH Zurich, an intensive debate took place in the Swiss architecture journal *archithese*, starting in the mid-1970s and culminating in the exhibition *Venturi and Rauch: Architektur im Alltag Amerikas* in Zurich 1979. The initiator was the Swiss art historian Stanislaus von Moos (b. 1940): founder and editor-in-chief of *archithese*, professor at Swiss and American universities, curator of exhibitions and author of numerous publications. The preoccupation of von Moos with Venturi and Scott Brown was highly influential, as seen in his much-cited articles and in two monographs on the office.[46]

After his a doctorate in art history in 1967, von Moos traveled to the United States where he read Venturi's recently published *Complexity and Contradiction*, which he mentioned in his book on Le Corbusier a year later.[47] Von Moos was intrigued by Venturi's formal-analytical method, which he found reminiscent of Heinrich Wölfflin's.[48] In 1969, von Moos lamented that Swiss architecture was lacking the "frivolous flirt with the muses of historically remote European architecture" which, according to von Moos, would endow "many recent buildings in the United States with their sophisticated aura."[49] Here von Moos might have had early projects by Venturi in mind. In 1971, von Moos co-founded the journal *archithese* with the intention of reflecting on the historical dimension of architecture, as well as on the contemporary built environment.[50]

In 1973, von Moos reviewed *Learning from Las Vegas* for the Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. The article is an eloquent and vivid account of

42 Stalder and Reichlin 2015.

43 Bruno Reichlin, telephone interview with the author, July 22, 2020. Reichlin played a major role in Swiss architectural discourse: as an architect together with Fabio Reinhart and Bétrix & Consolascio, as an assistant of Aldo Rossi at the ETH, as co-editor of one of two Realism issues of *archithese* with Martin Steinmann, as co-author of *Architektur 1940–1980*, and as a professor in Geneva and Mendrisio. Together with Fabio Reinhart, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the ETH Zurich in 2017. As Ruth Hanisch and Steven Spier write, the influence of Reichlin and Steinmann on their generation can "hardly be overstated." Hanisch and Spier 2009: 669.

44 Diener 2012: 11; Moos, Steinmann, Diener, Lamunière 1995: 60. English translations by the author.

45 Furer 1977b: 82.

46 Moos 1987; Moos 1999; Gimmi 2005; Colomina and Buckley 2010; Moos and Stierli 2020.

47 Moos 1968: 387.

48 Stanislaus von Moos, interview with the author, August 24, 2017.

49 Bachmann and Moos 1969: 24.

50 Stauffer 2004: 6, Colomina and Buckley 2010: 485.

the book and of the American urban environment at large. As seen in the previous example, von Moos largely and unfortunately omitted Scott Brown in the initial phase. He describes "Venturi's position" as an acceptance of the "visual reality" of an era, as opposed to architecture seen as an "instrument for articulating utopian alternatives."[51] According to von Moos, this was comparable to a futurist enthusiasm for the bustling urbanity of modern life.[52] One year later, the first meeting between von Moos, Venturi, and Scott Brown would take place in Berlin, followed by an interview held in Philadelphia that was published in *architheses* in 1975 in an issue entitled "Las Vegas etc. or: Realism in Architecture" ("*Las Vegas etc. oder, Realismus in der Architektur*").[53] The interview "Laughing in Order Not to Cry" ("*Lachen, um nicht zu weinen*") would be of epochal significance for Swiss architectural discourse.[54] (Fig. 1)

In the conversation, Venturi and Scott Brown explain how they, since the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction*, had expanded their iconography to include contemporary sources, such as anonymous commercial architecture.[55] Subjects from the ordinary world were changed in context, scale, or proportions in a process inspired by pop artists such as Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Ed Ruscha, seeking to avoid literal quotations and historicist revivalism. Venturi and Scott Brown explain their use of irony as a way to comment critically on the American reality and its widespread social injustice.[56] Here pop art estrangement is once more a central theme of the discussion, as seen previously. A strong ambition can be sensed on von Moos's part to represent the intellectual position of Venturi and Scott Brown in a correct manner. However, the choice of the title "Laughing in Order Not to Cry" can be seen as an effort to nuance their potentially controversial message, emphasizing their ambivalent stance towards Las Vegas and other expressions of the everyday landscape.

In 1977 von Moos produced a special issue on the architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown (and their office, still known as Venturi and Rauch) with a

51 Moos 1973.

52 The impression of undivided enthusiasm for Las Vegas was later corrected in a letter from Venturi to von Moos: Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour did not wholeheartedly approve of Las Vegas, but were rather analyzing it with a critical distance. Venturi also criticized von Moos's omission of his co-authors. Stanislaus von Moos, interview with the author, August 24, 2017.

53 Placing the work of Venturi and Scott Brown under the heading of realism might appear contradictory, but von Moos was not the first to do so. Vincent Scully had already used the term in the catalogue of an exhibition in Washington in 1971 (Scully 1977: 7). The historical context and the intertwining of different realisms have been explored by Silvia Malcovati (2016) and Irina Davidovici (2018b).

54 Moos 1975b.

55 Moos 1975b: 19.

56 Moos 1975b: 22.

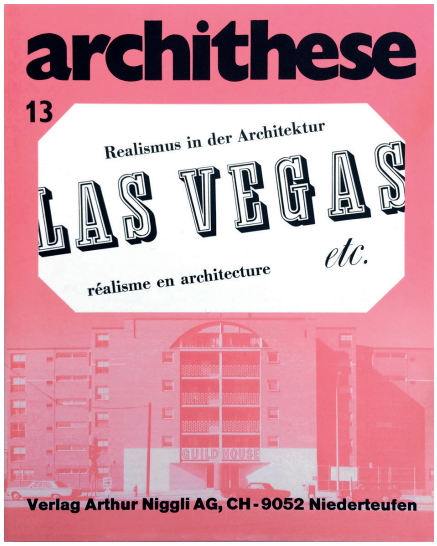

Fig. 1 Cover of *architheses*, no. 13, 1975, *Las Vegas etc., oder Realismus in der Architektur*.

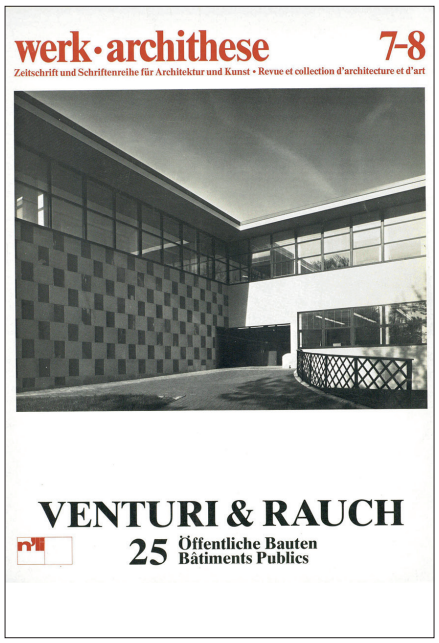

Fig. 2 Cover of *werk-architheses*, no. 7–8, 1977, *Venturi & Rauch: 25 öffentliche Bauten*.

follow-up article on realism entitled "Two Kinds of Realism" ("*Zweierlei Realismus*").[57] (Fig. 2) Here von Moos addresses two different versions of realism present in the Swiss debate: Italian "neo-rational" realism, inspired by Aldo Rossi and expanded on in an issue of *archithese* conceived by Martin Steinmann and Bruno Reichlin,[58] and American anti-utopian "pop" realism, illustrated by a recent exhibition by Venturi and Scott Brown, *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* in the Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.[59] The exhibition was clearly informed by Scott Brown's studies of urban sociology during her master's degree in City Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, 1958–1960.[60] This urban-sociological study of the contemporary American city focused on three kinds of environment: private housing, the inner-city Main Street, and the car-oriented Strip. The section on housing explored the iconography of suburban homes, looking at design choices as symbols expressing the ideals and aspirations of the inhabitants. Stylistic features were commented upon using "pop" speech bubbles à la Lichtenstein, adding a layer of meaning to the domestic sceneries.

In addition to serving as an illustration of "pop" realism the exhibition in Washington had a larger impact on von Moos: The section on Main Street with its glowing collage of neon lights seems to have inspired him to apply a similar approach in Zurich. In September 1979, the exhibition *Venturi and Rauch: Architektur im Alltag Amerikas* opened at the Zurich Museum of Design.[61] (Fig. 3) The exhibition was more than a presentation of an architectural oeuvre: it brought a piece of the American everyday landscape to Zurich. This could be seen in the large McDonald's sign painted in fluorescent color and an enlarged version of Ed Ruscha's accordion-folded book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), which had been a major inspiration to Venturi and Scott Brown.[62] In the catalogue von Moos puts forward an argument in favor of the everyday, whereby he states that "good taste" had been used by the ruling elite "to discipline the rest of society aesthetically."[63] The stroke of pathos can be seen as typical for the zeitgeist. The theatrical setting had perhaps been a little too convincing, however: As Venturi commented at the opening, the McDonald's sign should have been altered—for instance, it should have been made really fat—in order to express a position beyond realism.[64]

The question arises to what extent Venturi and Scott Brown were indeed advocating for the contemporary urban experience, or if they were not as intellectually distanced from it as they were from historical architecture. It seems fair to say that their use of irony, as seen in "The Ironic Column" in the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College (1973–1977), was not an irrelevant parenthesis, but indeed a central feature. As Emanuel Petit puts it, "The formal deformations of the Ironic Column made abundantly clear that this motif of European architectural history was not used in a mode of historicist revival, or with the intention to reactivate the compositional and proportional totality of the Ionic order."[65] In the exhibition catalogue, Venturi emphasizes the importance of transforming references and argues for a "symbolism of the ordinary" to adorn the "functional shelter." The symbolic

57 Moos 1977.

58 Steinmann and Reichlin 1976.

59 The exhibition, curated by the Venturi and Rauch office for the Smithsonian Institution, was held in the Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C., between February 26 and September 30, 1976. The exhibition was reviewed by von Moos in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and published in an article by Scott Brown in *archithese*. Moos 1976; Scott Brown 1976.

60 Scott Brown 2009b; Scott Brown 1990; Grahn 2022.

61 At the time known as *Zürcher Kunstgewerbemuseum*. The exhibition, curated by Stanislaus von Moos and Margit Weinberg-Staber, took place between 18 September and 11 November 1979.

Fig. 3 Slide showing the main space of the exhibition *Venturi and Rauch. Architektur im Alltag Amerikas*, 1979.

62 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972: 26–29.

63 Moos 1979: 16.

64 Stanislaus von Moos, interview with the author, August 24, 2017. It is questionable if the irony would have been appreciated, however, since the fast-food company had yet to open its first restaurant in Zurich. Reinarz 2016.

65 Petit 2013: 46.

references should be flat and applied to the facade in order to maintain a distance to reality, not be confused with earnest traditionalism.[66]

For all the subversive potential, the exhibition and its message were well received both by the public and by professionals. Staff at the ETH Zurich, including René Furer and Martin Steinmann, gave tours of the exhibition, indicating a general acceptance.[67] The exhibition was covered extensively in the Swiss news media, with many papers celebrating the birth of postmodernism in architecture.[68] The media reports popularized the notion of a paradigm shift and introduced the American brand of modernism critique to a wide audience in Switzerland. The success might have contributed to consolidating Venturi and Scott Brown's position as "dominating figures" of architectural discourse. A year later, the Venice Architecture Biennale under the title *The Presence of the Past* was to continue this development, with Venturi and Scott Brown being invited as the leaders of a "school."[69] In Venice, Italian historicism and American pop symbolism were presented as a single movement, in spite of the absence of a common theoretical foundation. Pop subversion presented as postmodernism would make it susceptible to a new critique, as will be seen in the 1980s.

Media Reception and Built Production in the 1980s: from Ordinariness to Simplicity

In the 1980s the Swiss reception of Venturi and Scott Brown continued as part of a larger current of postmodern thinking. As the following section will show, references to Venturi and Scott Brown can be found in a wide range of architectural languages, from the ordinary to the eclectic. This reception was followed by increasing opposition, however, leading up to the abstraction that characterized Swiss avant-garde architecture from the late 1980s onwards.

The architecture critic Martin Steinmann became an important protagonist in this development, as he and Irma Noseda took over the editorship of *architheses* in 1980. As we have seen previously, Steinmann had first heard of Venturi in the 1960s in connection with pop art, moreover he had given a course on semiotics in architecture at the ETH (together with Reichlin) in the 1970s.[70] As he conveyed in 1989, Reichlin and his long discussions on semiotics in architecture had been "among the formative moments of [his] life."[71]

In his first issue as editor, Steinmann presented what can be understood as a mission statement: Venturi and Scott Brown's message on the "symbolism of the ordinary" was to be adapted to fit the Swiss context. The editorial starts out with a reflection on the dominant role of the United States in every part of postwar culture, including architecture, resulting in corporate glass boxes in a vulgarized version of the International Style.[72] Steinmann notes, however, that in response to the hype of American architecture the Swiss developed an inclination toward local typologies, seen in calcium silicate brick masonry and pitched roofs, as an interpretation of traditional Swiss barns. In this tendency Steinmann sees a counterpart to "Venturi's" interest in vernacular building.

Steinmann's argument builds on the thinking in signs and symbols typical of the time,[73] as seen previously. He states that architectural elements "signify"

66 Venturi 1979: 20–36.

67 The tours were advertised in *Tagblatt and Tagesanzeiger*. ZHdK Archive, Zurich: Venturi & Rauch. GBA-1979-D05.

68 Some forty reviews of the exhibition are kept in the ZHdK Archive, Zurich: Venturi & Rauch. GBA-1979-D05.

69 Szacka 2016: 159.

70 Martin Steinmann, email to the author, June 20, 2018.

71 Steinmann 2004: 179.

72 Steinmann 1980a: 5.

73 See Eco 1972; Jencks 1969.

different styles and languages. Though questioning the meaning of "postmodernism" (a word that he writes in quotation marks) he suggests that it has made us aware of the encompassing presence of symbolism: even modernist buildings are part of a system of meaning. Postmodernism has shown how buildings can both exist as real objects in the world and at the same time represent objects in the real world. This way of thinking is key to Steinmann's exposition in the main article, "Concerning 'Simple' and 'Ordinary' Architecture,"[74] in which he writes: "The Venturis' theory has been too strongly identified with the particular iconography they have studied. […] Architects in other countries, such as Switzerland, must draw from a different iconography in order to establish a harmonious accord with the place […] They should find inspiration in typological and morphological characteristics different from those of Venturi."[75]

Steinmann explores what Venturi and Scott Brown's theory on the "Ugly and Ordinary" might mean for Swiss architecture.[76] He states that they have brought the notion of the "ordinary" into architectural discourse, but predicts that their iconography is too unfamiliar, too exotic, to have any significant impact in Switzerland. Instead, Steinmann argues, Swiss architects need to make use of a set of symbols and images more related to their own context.[77] With the help of several examples, he distinguishes between "simple" buildings, which have a straightforward construction, and "ordinary" buildings, which are conceived as ordinary, representing an image of symbolic "ordinariness" that communicates its preoccupation with the ordinary, but without becoming it. Steinmann illustrates his reasoning with projects by Venturi and Scott Brown, praising the "ordinary" Nantucket Houses (1972) for their artistic treatment of vernacular architecture, seen for instance in the scale of the windows, and criticizing their House in Bermuda (1976), in which the distance to banality is too narrow.[78] Judging from the article by Steinmann, the artistic manipulation of references had become a main criterium for a successful architectural design.

The architecture of Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart is presented as another good example, since it is founded on a profound knowledge of both semiotics and local building tradition. The unbuilt house in Vezio, with a temple front towards the valley, is for Steinmann a project with a complex and self-referential meaning. He sees close connections to the theory of Venturi and Scott Brown, although (and perhaps all the more so since) the formal language is far from the iconography of the American Main Street.[79] Steinmann would later add the Blue House (1979–1980) by Herzog & de Meuron to the list of examples based on a thinking in signs.[80] (Fig. 4)

The theme of the "ordinary" returned in later issues of *architheses*, always in connection with discussions on reality and symbolism. One example is the "*Einfache Architektur*" ("Simple Architecture") by Basel architect Michael Alder, which combines columns, triangular pediments and overhanging eaves with simple masonry. In a comment, Alder refers to "Venturi's" sheds and ponders the topic of decoration.[81] A further example is seen in the *architheses* issue titled "*Lernen von …*" ("Learning from …"), which features workers' tenements that are so ordinary that they are difficult to distinguish from mere building.[82]

74 *"Von 'einfacher' und 'gewöhnlicher' Architektur."*

75 Steinmann 1980b: 8.

76 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour (1972): "Part II: Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or the Decorated Shed," in: *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press: 63–110.

77 Steinmann 1980b: 8.

78 Steinmann 1980b: 11.

79 Steinmann 1980b: 12.

80 Steinmann 1991a: 12.

81 Alder 1980.

Fig. 4 Herzog & de Meuron, Blue House, Oberwil, Switzerland, 1979–1980.

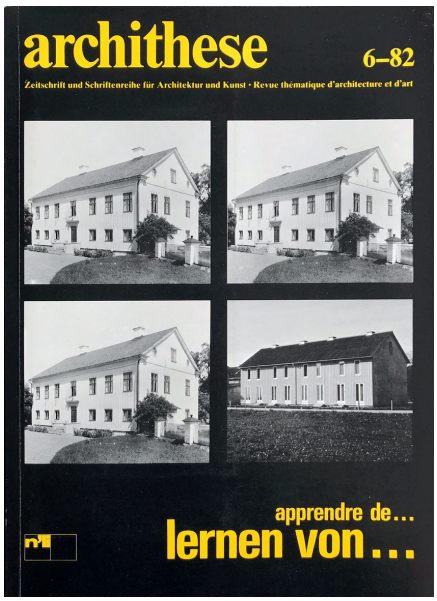

Fig. 5 Cover of *architese*, no. 6, 1982, *lernen von …*

(Fig. 5) The link to Venturi is recognized by Steinmann as well as by art historian Christoph Allenspach—a connection that is only comprehensible with an awareness of the underlying theoretical discourse on "ordinariness."[83]

Another reference to the "ordinary" can be found at the chair of Fabio Reinhart at the ETH Zurich in the 1980s. An interview entitled "Venturi Europeanized?," published in *werk, bauen+wohnen* in 1988, suggests a link between the *Analoge Architektur* ("Analogous Architecture") of Fabio Reinhart and Miroslav Šik and the theory of Venturi and Scott Brown.[84] In this case, the concept of estrangement is understood as a process of modifying the references until they are unrecognizable and completely incorporated into a new whole. The frequent references to Venturi and Scott Brown suggest that their ideas had become shared knowledge, fixed points in relation to which other positions were formulated. Interestingly, later commentators mention Venturi and Scott Brown in connection with Analogous Architecture as well, though describing it as neither "ironical"[85] nor "symbolically immaterialized."[86]

Nevertheless, some examples of "symbolic immaterialization" can be found in Swiss architecture of the time, perhaps most clearly by the Bétrix & Consolascio office together with Bruno Reichlin. Marie-Claude Bétrix and Eraldo Consolascio shared Reichlin's interest in semiotics and collaborated on the project for the ballbearing manufacturer Berani (1982) in Uster outside Zurich (Fig. 6). In comments on this building of the time, however, the term "symbol" is replaced by "image": René Furer remarks that the project represented "an image turned into a building and a building turned into an image." He refers to Swiss industrial buildings of the late nineteenth century, commonly known for their red and yellow masonry, here used by the architects as an "image" in an artistically modified manner. This is most evident in the main façade where diagonal stripes of polychrome masonry might remind the viewer of traditional factories. However, the diagonal pattern also creates movement in the façade, seemingly questioning its own massiveness.

82 *architese*, no. 6 (1982): 2.

83 Allenspach 1999: 126–128.

84 Reinhart and Šik 1988.

85 Willenegger, Imhof, and Professur Miroslav Šik 2018.

86 Cepl 2018: 14.

Fig. 6 Bétrix & Consolascio with Bruno Reichlin, Berani Kugellager, Uster, Switzerland, 1982.

Fig. 7 Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhart, Motel Mövenpick, Bellinzona, Switzerland, 1991.

The "ornamental estrangement of the brickwork" immaterializes the façade and strengthens its character as an "image."[87] This is seen in the project Motel Mövenpick (1988) by Reichlin and Reinhart as well, in which "images" of local monasteries and castles from the "treasury of collective experience" are used as intelligible references.[88] In a recent article art historian Jacques Gubler acknowledges the connection between Motel Mövenpick's use of "irony," its "collision of images" and the theory of Venturi and Scott Brown.[89] (Fig. 7)

In other cases, the references are less connected to the local context and more to the architect's personal paragons. In the Churwalden district school (1979–1983), an early project by Peter Zumthor, references to Louis Kahn (the combination of concrete lintels and masonry arches at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad 1962–1975) and the pediments of classical temples are sampled.[90] (Fig. 8) Zumthor comments in *architheses* that the foreign references "let air into the narrowness of Grisson."[91] He mentions elsewhere that *architheses* and topics such as "Learning from Las Vegas" had a liberating influence on his development as an architect in the 1970s.[92] These early projects by Zumthor can be interpreted as expressions of postmodern thinking, at least to a certain extent, although also related to the parallel discourse on neo-rational realism and on architectural autonomy.

In 1985, *architheses* produced a thematic issue on Eclecticism, with Venturi's *Eclectic House Series* (1978) on the cover, albeit the project was not featured in the issue.[93] (Fig. 9) The editorial quotes a letter from a reader declaring that the historical awareness of the 1970s had turned into "historicism—a style you need to have mastered if you want to have a presence on the market, in the same way that you need to have mastered English in business life."[94] Although the Swiss context is not further discussed in the issue, the quotation can be seen as a confirmation that postmodernism as a style had indeed reached Switzerland. Simultaneously, towards the end of the 1980s, eclectic references began

87 Furer 1985: 28.

88 Fumagalli 1988.

89 Gubler 2020.

90 cf. Petersen 2013.

91 "Sie verschaffen mir Luft in der Bündner Enge." English translation by the author/FG; Zumthor 1984: 27.

92 Zumthor 2014: 9.

93 Venturi 1984: 91. The fact that a project from the late 1970s is shown on the cover can be seen as a sign of an ongoing reception. Cf. Grahn 2017.

94 "[Die Auseinandersetzung mit der Geschichte ist] in kurzer Zeit zum Historismus geworden, zum Stil, den man können muss, wenn man auf dem Markt präsent sein will, wie man Englisch können muss im Geschäftsleben." English translation by the author/FG; Steinmann and Noseda 1985: 2.

Fig. 8 Peter Zumthor, District School, Churwalden, Switzerland, 1979–1983.

to be seen as increasingly problematic. What had previously been discussed in terms of "pluralist iconography" was now criticized as random and arbitrary.[95]

The critique of postmodernism would intensify with the advent of the 1990s. In an influential editorial in *Faces* 1991 Steinmann states that "the 'age of signs' is over," referring to Venturi and a reality "dissolved in images."[96] He returns to the topic in an essay published in Peter Disch's monograph on Swiss architecture of the same year, looking back on his preoccupation with semiotics during the previous decade. He explains that the symbolic, self-critical aspect of architecture, as propagated by Venturi and Scott Brown, leads to an ambivalent experience of reality, since "a building is 'there', as long as it refers to something else, which is not 'there.'"[97] He recognizes that this sought-

95 Steinmann and Noseda 1988: 145; Davidovici 2018b: 117.

96 Steinmann 1991b.

97 Steinmann 1991a: 16.

Fig. 9 Cover of *architese* no. 6, 1985, *Eklektizismus*.

after effect had a limited impact beyond theoretical discourse and concludes that themes such as "meaning" are giving way to a view of architecture as a "sensuous phenomenon, beyond historical allusion."[98]

This can be illustrated in the change that Zumthor's architecture went through after Churwalden. Zumthor's buildings for the Roman excavation site in Chur[99] would become a "turning point," adhering to a new and abstract formal language.[100] (Fig. 10) In this project, according to Steinmann, the reality of material expression formed a new phenomenological paradigm.[101] The new tendency implied a return to the autonomy of the abstract modernist architectural object and, as Irina Davidovici writes, a "removal from the everyday."[102] During this breakthrough of minimalism and neo-modernism in the 1990s, Venturi and Scott Brown became increasingly marginalized. In 1999, von Moos published the second volume of his monograph, writing: "With the demise of Postmodernism as the leading architectural fashion, an aura of mystery surrounds these architects, arousing in many critics curiosity as well as impatience, if not metaphysical disgust."[103]

Another insightful reflection on the Swiss development was made by Reichlin in an essay entitled "Beyond Signs" ("*Jenseits der Zeichen*"), published in 2001. Reichlin comments on how quickly Swiss architecture changed after postmodernism—which had been "influenced by Rossi or by Venturi"—and how this change called for a rethinking of interpretative approaches.[104] The thinking in signs and symbols had indeed undergone a dramatic shift, from being a quality label in the early 1980s to being outdated in less than a decade. The failure of "Venturi's symbolism and Rossi's rational-poetic analogies" had led Reichlin to reconsider the perception of signs. He argues that the sign should not be dismissed just because some architects "unknowingly inspired by Venturi and Postmodernism" had confused the sign with its subspecies, the symbol. This had created a situation of "allergy to symbols and the quest for meaning." Here

98 Steinmann 1991a: 13.

99 *Schutzbauten Welschdörfli*, 1985–1986.

100 Petersen 2013: 104.

101 Steinmann 1991a: 12.

102 Davidovici 2018a: 276.

103 Moos 1999: 7.

104 Reichlin 2001: 61.

Fig. 10 Peter Zumthor, Schutzbauten Welschdörfli, Chur, Switzerland, 1985–1986.

Reichlin is seemingly responding to Steinmann's articles a decade earlier. The oversaturation of postmodern thought had forced a generation to start all over again with a return to abstraction.[105] Reichlin concludes, however, that "without our interpreting cooperation, there is no architectural narrative" and that architectural signs can "arouse emotions and transmit sensations." In other words, reality cannot be reduced to an interpretation of symbols, but it is similarly impossible not to interpret reality, in a continuous, unconscious process of making sense. Reichlin gets the last word in this decades-long preoccupation in Swiss architectural discourse, from "pop" estrangement via postmodern imagery, ending with the modernist architectural object.

105 Reichlin 2001: 68.

More than Realism, or, "Making the Common Uncommon"

As this incomplete list of examples shows, there have been surprisingly frequent references to Venturi and Scott Brown in the Swiss architectural landscape, from the late 1960s until today. At the ETH Zurich, ideas such as symbolic content in architecture were disseminated by René Furer and in the professional press, Stanislaus von Moos provided a first-hand account of the relevance of pop art and ironical comment. Both strove to achieve a correct representation of Venturi and Scott Brown's ideas, but in both cases the trans-Atlantic distance remained somewhat palpable. Martin Steinmann's achievement was to detach the core message of symbolism from the American architects and apply it in practice as architecture critic in the Swiss discourse. During the 1980s we see how a range of heterogeneous expressions of the Swiss built production—such as simplicity, ordinariness, contextual symbolism and arbitrary eclecticism—can be traced back to Venturi and Scott Brown, in adaptations of their theory to local conditions and realties. Therefore, the reception of their ideas did not only inspire a rediscovery of the "real" (of ordinary and historical architecture) but also of its representation. Thus, it was not the mere repetition of reality, but rather symbolic-ironical comment on it that was the decisive factor. Reality was used as a material and elevated through the artistic strategy of estrangement—arguably the most characteristic feature of postmodernism.

Admittedly, not all buildings usually described as "postmodern" adhere to this sophisticated practice. So why discuss the influence of Venturi and Scott Brown under the label of postmodernism? Although the usefulness of the term is just about to be properly assessed, some benefits can be identified. Evaluating heterogeneous expressions under a single term helps to see them as variations on a theme, belonging to a common genealogy of ideas. To recognize different tendencies as examples of postmodern thinking can help in examining their outcome without preconceived images and moral imperatives. In doing so, a closer look at this episode in recent Swiss history reveals a development richer and more diverse than has previously been acknowledged, that adds a fresh perspective to developments in Switzerland down to the present day.

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Figures

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