Robert Venturi and his Architecture
Between the pages, on the walls and under the roof

In two short texts of Robert Venturi, published in his book *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture: a view from the drafting room*, Venturi seems to contradict himself in his thoughts on the media in relation to architecture. On the one hand he argues against architects focusing on publishing their work, but on the other hand he cares how his own buildings are represented through pictures in architectural reviews.

Venturi begins his text, “Ceci Tuera Cela” Is Now “Cela est Devenu Ceci”: Some Thoughts Concerning Architecture and Media, by arguing that the architecture establishment misinterpreted his book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, written together with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour in 1972. He says the book is about *learning from*, not *advocating* commercial roadside architecture. For Venturi, ‘today's architectural trends are primarily proclaimed by the press, and based on a quality of hype that parallels that of the commercial strip’. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi and his colleagues focus on ‘an architecture of meaning over expression’, acknowledging ‘symbolism over form’. This through Venturi’s eyes is a ‘more valid basis for architecture then the need today to catch your attention at a monthly pace via page of periodicals whose funny cropped, flashy colored photographs taken from weird angles seems to be the ultimate raison d’être of architecture’. The tempo, in which architecture 'wears out' in a few seasons, is now corresponding to the culture of fashion. ‘Architecture as an art can encompass within its dimensions elements of ornament and expressive flair, but architecture essentially is a constructible and meaningful shelter as background for living’. Today's ‘journalist architects’ and ‘architectural journalists’ are ‘promoters of ideology and their own cleverness […] at the expense of their subject’. In this text Venturi strongly proclaims an architecture as shelter accommodating his clients, rather than an architecture as photo or between pages.
The text was originally published as “Ceci Deviendra Cela”, meaning This will Become That, which he then changed to “Cela est Devenu Ceci”, That has Become This. These titles are references to a well-known theme introduced in the 19th century by Victor Hugo in his book Le Notre Dame de Paris. In one of the chapters titled Ceci Tuera Cela, This will Kill That, Victor Hugo writes: ‘The book will kill the building’. Before Gutenberg invented the letterpress, Gothic architecture (especially for The Church) would function as the book of society by depicting stories in sculptures incorporated onto the building. Gutenberg’s invention of the printed book would both take away the church’s power of controlling these stories and also change the artist’s medium of expression. In other words, Hugo writes: ‘the press will kill The Church’ and more troubling for him, ‘printed matter will kill architecture’. The book made out of bricks was exchanged for the book made out of paper; both had a similar social task of containing and expressing memories and thoughts, though printed matter as efficient, cheap and flexible medium, proclaimed the rights of expression leaving architecture to die. As Hugo writes, ‘the modern building of mankind will be made out of books’. Robert Venturi adapts Victor Hugos’ title of Ceci Deviendra Cela - This will Kill That into: Cela est Devenu Ceci - That has Become This. Following the rules of the riddle, Venturi is saying that Architecture has Become Printed Matter.

In another text, Letter Not Sent to an Architecture Critic, Venturi writes in a sharp tone towards a critic who has refused to use his photographic material in a review. According to Venturi, it is apparently customary to accept the photographic and graphic material supplied by the architect whose building is being reviewed. He writes: ‘You still don’t understand that an architecture critic accepts the photographic and graphic material supplied by the architect whose building he is reviewing and he uses it to illustrate his article’. The critic in question, is being accused of deliberately using an ‘unflattering shot by a news photographer, dispatched to the site on a cloudy day to snap the building sans shadows from a lousy viewpoint that features the admittedly unfortunate bridge at the back of the building that was added to the program at the last minute, and includes a rickety temporary construction fence next door that dominates the foreground of his shot and obliterates the base of our building’. Venturi is indirectly saying here that the media is ‘killing’ his architecture by representing it poorly; though it begs the question, is it the media that ‘kills’ it or is it the architect himself ‘killing’ architecture by trying to control it up until the moment of its appearance between the pages?
‘Architecture has become printed matter’ and looking at Venturis’ work one can see a lot of it, either in texts, books or photographs initiated by him or initiated by others. In both cases Venturi seems to be in charge of the photographic images of his buildings. He is trying to direct and control them; not only by supplying the media with the perfect image he has in mind, but he is also creating the picture in his designs, before the camera has even captured them. Intended or not, Venturi’s architecture is built in favor of a printed matter.

Looking at some of his buildings this becomes clear. On the façade above the entrance of the Gordon Wu Hall in Princeton, New Jersey, he creates a flat, graphic, rectangular image out of black and white marble tiles. It looks as if it is pasted or printed on a paper. Seeing the photograph of this building, taken from a straight angle, perfectly outlined, it looks more like an abstract drawing than a building. The photograph shows an image in an image. (fig. I)

Another example of what could be called Venturi’s picture buildings is the Tucker House in Katonah, New York. In this house, the silhouette of the façade (which already looks pretty picturesque) is repeated as flat volume around the fireplace in the living room. There it serves as a reminder of the outside image of the house. (fig. II) Looking down from the balustrade into the living room one sees next to the neat fabric furniture on a Persian rug, a desk with a GA magazine on it, featuring a full color central shot of the flat frontal façade of the Venna Venturi House. (fig. III-IV)

Over and over the same pictures are being published in magazines, books and on the Internet. They are ‘perfectly’ shot, in static angles, bright colors, blue sky, on sunny days. They are depicted ‘en trois quarts’ or ‘en face’, as if the building is a dancer endlessly posing to the audience. Venturi writes to detest ‘funnily cropped, flashy colored photographs taken from weird angles’, but what are weird angles anyway? Isn’t it weird to see a building framed as frontal and centered as it can be? Isn’t it weird to see a staged interior, perfectly clean without people in it? Isn’t that taking away all the reality of architecture as situation in space?

One can say that the buildings of Venturi are already trying to contain the media; they are trying to determine meanings and thoughts printed in the books, by inserting the images in advance onto his buildings. Like Victor Hugos’ favorite Gothic architecture, Venturi is trying to tell a story through signs and symbols attached or integrated in his buildings. In that sense his architecture is not ‘killed by the books’. As he writes in the letter to the critic, ‘the art of architecture must meld with the art of photography’ and if that happens architecture is saved…
Venturi is not saying, like Hugo, that the book and the media has killed architecture by existing, but he is indirectly saying that the media is killing architecture by existing in ‘the wrong’ way. Though why then is Venturi not claiming his work to exist as both ‘meaningful shelter’ and as printed matter? In the end, it is enjoyable to look at the directed and controlled images of Venturi. They are not about providing ‘shelter within space’, but they do produce a story that is as important and interesting as his buildings existing and functioning in real space.
Image references

I. Gordon Wu Hall in Princeton, New Jersey, designed by VSBA, Black and white photocopy from Charles Jencks’ The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, sixth edition 1991. (Published in full color)


Notes

4 Hugo, Victor. Dit zal Dat Doden in De Klokkenluider van de Notre Dame. Wageningen: L.J. Veen, 1974, p.155-167
5 Hugo, Victor. Dit zal Dat Doden in De Klokkenluider van de Notre Dame. Wageningen: L.J. Veen, 1974, p.155
8 Ibid p.283