

Allen Memorial Art Museum Teacher Resource Packet - AMAM 1977 Addition



Robert Venturi
(American, 1925 –
2018)
Allen Memorial
Art Museum
Addition, 1977
Sandstone façade,
glass, brick.

Robert Venturi was an American architect born in 1925. Best known for being an innovator of postmodern architecture, he and his wife Denise Scott Brown worked on a number of notable museum projects including the 1977 Oberlin addition, the Seattle Museum of Art, and the Sainsbury addition to the National Gallery in London. His architecture is characterized by a sensitive and thoughtful attempt to reconcile the work to its surroundings and function.

Biography

Robert Venturi was born in 1925 in Philadelphia, PA, and was considered to be one of the foremost postmodern architects of his time. He attended Princeton University in the 1940s, graduating in 1950 summa cum laude. His early experiences were under Eero Saarinen, who designed the famous Gateway Arch in St. Louis, and Louis Kahn, famous for his museum design at the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas and at Yale University. The AMAM addition represents one of Venturi's first forays into museum design, and was intended to serve as a functional addition to increase gallery and classroom space.

Venturi was also very well known for his theoretical work in architecture, including *Complexity and Contradictions in Architecture* (1966), and *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972). The second book presented the idea of the “decorated shed” and the “duck” as opposing forms of architecture.

The Vanna Venturi house was designed for Venturi’s mother in Philadelphia, and is considered one of his masterworks. Its façade, like that of the Allen addition, features a pastiche of architectural styles. The Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, London is another notable building by Venturi. Prince Charles, notorious for his dislike of new architecture, called the building, “an egg on the face of a distinguished lady.”



Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown marked the 30th anniversary of their addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum with a visit to Oberlin in 2007.

Venturi was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1991. He held teaching positions at Yale and Harvard, and remained active in his practice out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania well into his 80’s, involving himself with numerous commissions around the world for museums, academic plans and buildings, and various civic buildings. Venturi passed away at age 93 in his home in Philadelphia on September 18, 2018.

Function, Form/ Style

The 1977 addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum represents what Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown identified as a “decorated shed.” This insistence on applied meaning stood in contrast to the program of the modern architects -- who Venturi labeled as creating “ducks.” The design of the addition was intended to represent its purpose in its appearance and serve as a bridge between the “rarified temple” embodied in Cass Gilbert’s design and the “self-effacing warehouse for art” which was needed.

The building itself is a box-like form with flat surfaces of varying materials which recede into space with “jogs” in its plan. The presence of the asymmetrical strip windows and low overhang of the roof help provide overall unity with the old

building, while the recession back into space lessens the effect of the duality between old and new, diminishing the bulk of the addition compared to the old building. Likewise, the use of similarly colored pink granite and sandstone serves as a visual cue to associate the two structures synthetically. Venturi wanted to unify the physical actualities of site and situation to the design of the building, creating structures which reflect their function in a playful and harmonious way.

The 1977 Venturi addition was conceived of as a highly functional space. It was constructed to meet the growing needs of both the museum and Art department. Venturi had to address the necessary and daily functions of the museum while maintaining a visual flow with the old building. The addition served four primary purposes: to add a large gallery to the existing museum, to increase facilities for the Art department, to rehouse the art library, and to renovate the existing museum with a print study room and new storage facilities. Disavowing a strictly functionalist architecture, Venturi nonetheless designed the back spaces of the addition as a functional space. According to Venturi, the new building was not intended as a “competing work of art by an architect.”

Instead, the new building linked the functional spaces needed to the ideological program presented in the original building through visual and spatial cues. In contrast to modern architecture, Venturi sought to create an architectural addition that would be both “symbolic and ordinary,” rather than “heroic” and “original.” Like Gilbert, Venturi’s design creates a historical pastiche that relates more to purpose than to fulfilling the need for an abstracted architectural statement.

As a postmodern architect, Venturi viewed the “decorated shed” as the most appropriate direction for architecture. He also coined the phrase, “less is a bore” in response to the famous modern architect Mies van der Rohe’s claim that, “less is more.”

Cultural and Historical Importance

Venturi’s addition is distinctly postmodern. Designed in 1977, the building has brought the architectural firm Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, a concurrent series of prominent museum projects, including the Seattle Museum and the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery, London. As a rebuke to modern architectural aesthetics, the museum addition was unapologetically an “exaggerated loft.” The addition exists in a revolutionary place at the beginning of the architectural shift away from modern to postmodern aesthetics. Located in Northeastern Ohio, it represents a unique slice of postmodern and innovative architecture difficult to view elsewhere in the region.

In relation to the long architectural history of Oberlin College, the building stands in as one of the newest representatives of an ever evolving and changing architectural record.

The Ellen Johnson gallery was an essential part of the overall addition. It was envisioned as the new gallery space for the museum and exists as an intriguing approach to gallery design. Like the addition as a whole, it is unique in its situation within the “white cube” paradigm of modern art galleries. The EJ gallery is a neutral and rotating space, intended to bring “a sense of space as well as place” to the art housed within. The Ellen Johnson

gallery plays with the idea of the rarified and sacred nature of the art work, in opposition to the white cube aesthetic of museums such as the Modern Museum of Art in New York. Two large windows, one of which reveals a view of the “ironic column” allow the museum visitor to orient themselves to a real and outside world within the “sacred spaces” allowed for in the museum itself. This ability to contextualize the viewing experience echoes Venturi’s aesthetic principles in creating a relativistic approach to architectural design and art display, dependent on both setting and context.



Image Credit: Ava Prince

Visual Analysis

The Venturi addition to the Allen Memorial Art Museum stands in a complex and oftentimes complicated relation to the original building. It is attached as if fused together at the seams. Rather than a link, the addition seems to grow from, or be jammed into, the 1917 structure. Far enough back that it does little to disrupt the original’s symmetry, it takes a moment to notice when looking at the complex head-on. The checkerboard pattern of the front piece of Venturi’s addition is immediately noticeable. Looking at the building longer, one notices the continuity in color and geometric ornamentation that link the two buildings.

The red granite and sandstone checkers of Venturi take up the theme from Gilbert, visually filling in the red geometric rectangular outlines on the tan sandstone of the façade.

The low overhang and angularity of the roof line can in turns eclipse or recede from the original building depending on the perspective of the viewer. The roof extends away from the museum in two ninety degree angles, neatly obscuring the second portion of the façade of the Venturi building. The exterior front façade of the addition consists of two cubes, visually delineated by material. The section closest features the dominant checkerboard pattern. Like all of Venturi's architecture, it is not without its visual quirks. A large glass window sits in the bottom left of the façade, echoing in size and shape the geometric squares on Gilbert's building. Part of the brick path leading to both buildings comes to an awkward termination below the window. Immediately below the roof line, Venturi begins a long succession of ribbon windows. The windows on the checkerboard portion of the addition feature window panes dividing each window into four. When they reach the second, and increasingly set back portion of the building, the windows become divided into six rather than four portions.

The second cube of Venturi's structure is made of buff brick, rather than the red checkerboard pattern of before, using the materials to visually differentiate the functions of the spaces within. A second set of windows also begins on this portion, below the first and offset



Interior of Ellen Johnson Gallery, 2018.

to the middle of the building.

The horizontality and sheer expanse of glass present in the windows recalls the ribbon windows made famous by the French architect Le Corbusier and illustrate Venturi's willingness to engage in visual pastiche. The buff brick emphasizes the functionality of the space and visually connects it to Hall Auditorium, built in 1954, that is next to the Venturi addition and features both the same buff brick as well as similar square aluminum panels, included in the addition to the auditorium in 2018.

In this way, Venturi's addition is related both to the 1917 structure and its surrounding environment. The double set of windows and buff brick continue back to the rest of the structure, forming a formidable and somewhat industrial loft structure in the rear of the building. The back of the building joins the 1917 building without decoration, merging into the structure with no formal acknowledgement of the connection. A large window opens from the art gallery within to the walkway between Gilbert's rear cloisters and Venturi's structure. A small overhang of the building is supported by a column. The column is made of an orange hued wood, and is striking in its stoutness. The wood is arrayed in small, vertical slats, capped by an exaggerated Ionic capital. The capital is cartoonishly oversized and simplified, resulting in a smooth and distinctive feel. While this "ironic" column serves as an icon from both inside and outside the gallery space, it also serves the functional purpose of concealing a steel support beam. The column, particularly in contrast to Gilbert's juxtaposed cloisters, serves as a reminder and visual cue of the continued and articulate playfulness with which Venturi approached his architectural agenda.

Classroom Ideas

Visual Arts/Social Studies: design your own addition to the museum (picture of the museum with free space, drawing activity). What would you design to make the buildings flow together? Think about the visual elements would you include to link the two. Now think about the structural requirements of the new building.

Uses of space, form and function, tie into the community design project done by teacher from the workshop

Science: (thinking about gallery design/light/art conservation): project with light- the effects of natural vs. artificial light on art works/paper/etc. talk about conservation, experiment with rates of fading (different inks, materials)

Math: measure the dimensions of the ironic column, talk about ratios, ratios of 3 traditional orders vs. Venturi's, idea of mathematical harmony

Vocabulary

decorated shed: The concept of the decorated shed, introduced first in Venturi's 1972 book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, is a building which serves first as a conventional shelter and then fulfills any ideological role through the application of symbols and ornament.

duck: the term duck in architecture is used to describe a building whose exterior is in the shape of the everyday object they relate to. In Venturi's definition, a "duck" is a building in which the architecture is subordinate to the overall symbolic form.

Functionalism: A philosophy of design holding that form should be adapted to use, material, and structure.

Modernism: A self-conscious break with the past and a search for new forms of expression. In architecture, the urge to create universal archetypes, without reference to surrounding or past styles, that relied on modern materials such as concrete, steel and glass.

Postmodernism: A reaction to modernism characterized by a return to traditional materials and forms. In architecture, the desire to create structures with references to past and place.

ribbon window: A long, horizontal, sheer window first introduced in the home design of French architect Le Corbusier and made possible only by using "modern" materials.

Ohio Academic Content Standards – Benchmarks

Language Arts

Acquisition of Vocabulary; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Writing Applications; Research Standard; Communications: Oral and Visual Standard

Mathematics

Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Patterns, Functions, and Algebra

Science

Physical Sciences; Science and Technology

Social Studies

History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods

Visual Art

Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Creative Expression and Communication; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships and Applications