

The Cultural Construction of Constructing, According to William Morris and Robert Venturi

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INTRODUCTION

If “construction” is interpreted to mean a discrete concrete manifestation of an idea, understanding construction demands theoretical context. Construction is not merely a matter of craft and technology; it is a medium of expression that merges science and art in an integral cultural construct. A complex matrix of material phenomena, theoretical concerns, and societal values gives meaning to constructing. The far-reaching influences of constructing assert influence, not only upon the design of the built environment, but also—and what is more important—upon how humanity perceives and experiences the places in which it dwells. Constructing is an ideology that, as image or myth, is firmly rooted in the unconscious of all who hold technology as an incontrovertible truth of modern and postmodern life. This assumption suggests that, through their consideration of and responsiveness to art, science, and society, history, technology, and construction might well share ontological and epistemological frameworks for advancing architectural knowledge and, ultimately, for enhancing our understanding of the cultural transformations that affect changes in our very notion of what constitutes architecture.

Historians read tectonics as ideological texts. So too, construction must be read as a text of culture that mediates between the collective concerns of the present and the artifact, and the issues and intentions of the past. Moreover, the larger cultural ramifications of technology cyclically generate unique interrelationships among historical inquiry, criticism, and design praxis, involving the framework of the popular—the interpretation of the built environment from the ordinary perspectives of ordinary people. Through the intervention of the popular, constructing attains meaning. Perhaps no figures in modern architectural history better exemplify such an overarching framework for constructing as a cultural text than William Morris, and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. This paper explores their ideologies concerning construction, constructing, and the technology that facilitates them as agents of societal change that not

only demand critical and practical responses from the design professions, but also engage the collective of the larger community.

Initially, the relativistic juxtaposition of Morris, the medieval revivalist and socialist of the late-nineteenth century, and Venturi and Scott Brown, the super-mannerist upstarts of the second half of the twentieth century, might seem a strange coupling of architectural bedfellows. Indeed, they symbolize opposite points along the chronological path of the Modern Movement. With sweeping historiographic gestures, the proponents and apologists for the Modern Movement have traced its roots to Morris, teleologically pointing his theories to Gropius and the Bauhaus.¹ At the other end of the spectrum, Venturi and Scott Brown’s early identification of the parallels between linguistic and architectural structures, and their concomitant pleas for symbolism and meaning are among the prominent contributory factors in the death of Modernism. Nevertheless, as people of the first and second machine ages, respectively, their conceptions and interpretations of high and popular culture afford parallel contexts for exploring the potentials, problems, and design implications of tectonics and construction. Morris directly confronted the broken promises of the Enlightenment; Venturi and Scott Brown revealed that science was doing very little to serve humanity’s ordinary needs. Thus, at pivotal times in history, Morris, and Venturi and Scott Brown sought to bridge the schism between the applied, or popular, and the fine arts which was intensified by the high technologies which enabled the dominant means and methods of constructing in their respective periods. So too, each understood popular culture as beliefs and practices—and the objects through which they are organized—that are widely shared among a population.² As a result, each propounded an underlying societal agenda: the aesthetic improvement of everyday life which necessarily engaged an inclusive popular taste. For both industrial Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and technocratic nineteen-sixties’ America, the popular was born of the construction of constructing.

NEWS FROM NOWHERE, THE REMEDY LIES WITH THE HANDICRAFTSMAN

Although William Morris (1834-95) never designed a building, construction and constructing provided an overarching framework for his critique of Victorian society. Renowned for his hand-crafted furnishings, medieval-inspired wallpapers and textiles, and romantic poetry and narrative, Morris was neither a man of science nor a great proponent of its methods. As a commentator on Victorian society, however, he could not ignore the harnessing of science in industrial technology. Morris's theories resonate with his reactionary response to the age of machines and the capital that fueled them. From John Ruskin, he appreciated the division of manual and intellectual labor created by industry; from Marxian socialism, he understood the division of labor and capital. In spite of the degree to which past-focused traditions were touchstones for Morris, whether he was advocating the production of hand-crafted decorative arts objects or the improvement of laborers' living conditions, Morris's thinking was clearly present, if not future focused. Necessarily it engaged a critique of industrial technology's newest means of constructing and the products they yielded.

Morris's avowed distaste for "the cheap and nasty" products of the machine and the "dreary utilitarianism" of Victorian engineering are subject to conflation with a wholesale dismissal of technological progress. On the contrary, he advocated any progress that contributed to "the attainment of people in order and freedom;" but, to his mind, the produc-



Fig. 1. Design for "Evenlode," William Morris, Victoria and Albert Museum.

tion of, "more stuffed chairs, more cushions, and more carpets" demonstrated no such progress.³ The creature comforts enjoyed by a few did not outstrip the ravages of technology in human and environmental losses.⁴ It is perhaps, more surprising to discover that Morris believed that the machine could do everything—everything except make works of art. Thus, mechanization was not inherently bad; indeed, many of Morris's own wallpaper designs were reproduced by machine and commercially marketed. It was the capitalist framework of industry that Morris disdained. No advocate of science for its own sake, he sought balance between industrial means and ends, succinctly pinpointing key dilemmas of mechanization and modern life, underscoring that it was "allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures the beauty of life."⁵ Morris did not wish to banish the "tangible steel and brass machine," but to undo the "intangible machine of commercial tyranny." The products of machines were only as good, or as bad, as the ideologies and capabilities of those who operated them, and Morris's critique of the products of industrial culture was scathing. An industrial craftsman was no better than the capitalists for whom (s)he worked, a co-conspirator in meeting the public's "cravings for something new, not for something pretty."⁶

To a great extent, Morris resolved his polemics about art, industry, and society in the romantic narrative, *News From Nowhere*. "Nowhere," his utopian village of the future, was conceived of those qualities that Morris admired in past civilizations. The ethical and aesthetic influence of the middle age, a period when craftsmen derived satisfaction in their work, fueled Morris's ethos of constructing. In the final analysis, he declared industrial labor "degrading at once to body and mind," a grave contrast to the workaday world of his medieval exemplar. Appropriate mechanized work, however, could produce a desirable outcome—more efficient labor. So liberated, workers could spend as little time as possible tending the machine, and more time producing hand-crafted objects.⁷ Thus, Morris's social and aesthetic programs became one, merging the reality of the present—the industrial factory, with the ideals of the past—the medieval workshop. In so doing, the working class was placed firmly at the forefront of the production of a popular art; it was the handicraftsman who could provide the remedy for a public "(so) set on having things cheap ... that they do not know when they get them nasty."⁸

Morris's popular art is distinguished as a reaction to, not a result of, technology and constructing as cultural constructs. If an ordinary "peasant art" was at the essence of his theory, it was testimony to the looms, printing blocks and embroidery needles that survived in spite of mass production. By extolling pre-industrial means of construction—the crafts of house building, joinery, carpentry, pottery, glass-making and weaving—Morris did not merely posit a theory of art vested in the making of things; he constructed a social order. So too, he pre-empted a paradigm shift from the view of the work of art as object to the alternative view of art as

practice. By thus engaging the context of production, or construction, art could, once again, convey meaning in lieu of merely embodying style.

LAS VEGAS, THE GREAT COMMONPLACE

Morris's discourses propounded a method, the hand-craftsmanship of popular decorative arts, as a panacea that could correct all that he believed to be wrong with British industrial technology and its support system, capitalism; as a happy by-product, a new vernacular architecture free of conscious styles could emerge. Nearly one-hundred years later, in *Learning from Las Vegas*, Venturi and Scott Brown sought a method for documenting and analyzing another new vernacular. If Morris's industrial England was without precedents, so too was Venturi and Scott Brown's Las Vegas, a city "built in a day," radically different from the traditional iconography of urban space. *Learning from Las Vegas* meant confronting a later and larger marriage of capitalism and construction than those which Morris challenged. Where Morris questioned the meaning of overstuffed chairs, machine-carved frills, and gas lamps, Venturi and Scott Brown embraced the imagery of cloverleaf highways, neon-lined steeples, and air conditioning ducts.

While Venturi and Scott Brown's Las Vegas could not exist without the technology that keeps its slot machines clanging and its automobile wheels spinning, it was not a driving force in their conceptual framework. Their analysis is a discrete study of communication, but technology is the larger cultural means that made communication in the built environment unique in the late-twentieth century. So too, it altered and extended the meaning of "constructing." Nevertheless, Venturi and Scott Brown's celebration of Las Vegas's ubiquitous mechanization should not be read as a blind acceptance of the technology that makes the city tick, (or perhaps more accurately, tinkle). Although their thesis asserts the connections between a common place assimilation of technology in popular signs and symbols to which our late-twentieth-century sensibilities, steeped in mass mediation, respond, they argue that the architect's romance with

high technology's sophisticated ways of constructing has produced little of meaning in the built environment.⁹ Architects created "technological voodooism" rather than developing "a humane meshing of advanced scientific and technical systems with our imperfect and exploited human systems."¹⁰ They share with Morris a high regard for the individual as the definitive cutting edge for making meaning in the built environment.

Morris's criticism of the "obtrusive and ugly" high Victorian architectural mainstream of his age is echoed by Venturi and Scott Brown's critique of the International Style and its bigger and sleeker recapitulation in late-modernism. According to them, "it is significant that the advanced technology favored by progressive modern architecture continues to be, even today, that of mass production and industrialization, nineteenth-century style. The discrepancies between substance and image in modern architecture's technological machismo...emerged earlier than architects would admit."¹¹ Although Venturi and Scott Brown's rhetoric about broken promises of 20th-century construction technologies are absent of the overarching economic and political agenda that resonates through Morris's work, they share a key belief: there is nothing wrong with technology itself. It is the inappropriate and inhumane appropriation and exploitation of a "compulsive, depersonalized, power-driven technology" that created an aesthetic and cultural problematic for their respective ages.¹²

Morris's rejection of the Victorian era's ornamental excess and Venturi and Scott Brown's dismissal of the Modern Movement's antiseptic purity share another foundation. In both instances, the artificial constructs of "tastefulness" and "High Style" generated architecture and design that was exclusionary. Machine-made art for the "country house" and "total design" of machines for living, respectively, were absent of accessible, referential, and traditional content with which people—not some universal "man", could make cultural sense. Albeit in very different languages of design, Morris's tulip wallpaper and Venturi's sculptural television antennae for Guild House were conceived and constructed for a great consensus of ordinary people who routinely find denotative and connotative meanings in their built environments. They shared a belief that using and constructing conventional elements evokes associations and stimulates the production of meanings in broad and rich terms. In other words, in reaction to the formidable ramifications of science and technology on art and design, Morris and Venturi and Scott Brown defined an aesthetic of inclusion. Perhaps Venturi and Scott Brown had Morris in mind when they noted that "fine art has followed folk art before."¹³ Venturi and Scott Brown came to conceptual and methodological terms with the reality that technology had changed the signs and signifiers with which architecture communicates and constructs. In Las Vegas and along innumerable commercial strips, retrofitted downtowns, and suburban sub-divisions, the iconography of automobile transportation, billboards, and storefronts absent of merchandise but

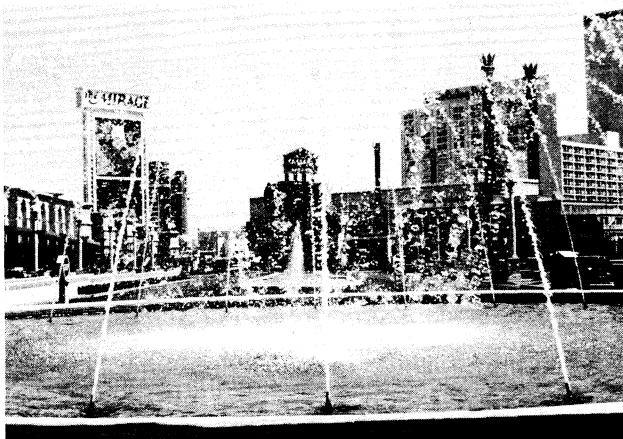


Fig. 2. View of the "Strip," Las Vegas, Nevada.

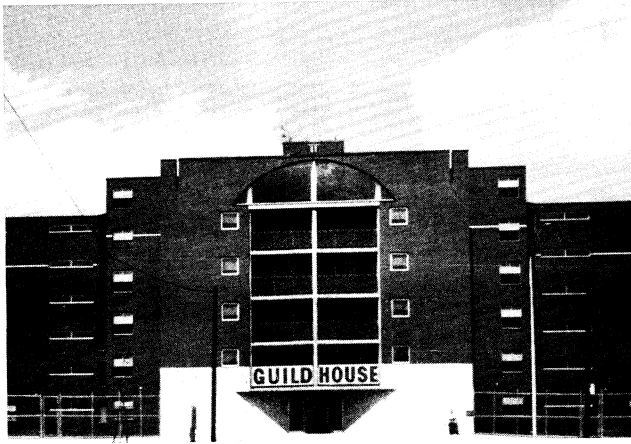


Fig. 3. Guild House, Friends Housing for the Elderly, Philadelphia, Venturi and Rauch, Cope and Lippincott, Associated Architects, 1960-63.

filled with electrified message was as real, as common, and as popular in twentieth-century America as a romanticized vision of a picturesque medieval townscape had been in Morris's Victorian Britain.

Unlike Morris, Venturi and Scott Brown do not judge their ducks and decorated sheds. If the strip is an exemplar, it is one of communication, a familiar and referential vehicle that somehow makes popular cultural sense. According to them, "allusion and comment, on the past or present, are our great commonplaces...inclusion of the everyday in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day architecture."¹⁴ Indeed, the real symbols of and allusions to the machine age are found in popular, accessible artifacts—billboards, movies marquees, and gas stations. They are icons of American life as it is experienced daily that are proving to be more enduring symbols than I-beams and curtain walls. After all, technology entered the American home in user-friendly forms from streamlined Philco television sets to TV dinners in aluminum trays and roll-on deodorants in polyethylene dispensers. There are more Tupperware bowls than Bauhaus teapots in the American dreamscape. Learning From Las Vegas challenged architects to "have fun with architecture that reminds them of something else."¹⁵ This exhortation is rendered in the same spirit as Morris's dictate that "a genuine new birth of art will be the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people."¹⁶ How that "whole people" perceive, understand, and come to cultural terms with technology—their cultural construction of constructing—is an unavoidable component of each of these belief systems. It is, moreover, a function of their respective world views and cultural contexts.

FROM NOWHERE TO LAS VEGAS

Substance for the architect consists not merely of those realities (s)he thinks (s)he discovers, it consists of those realities which have been made available to him(her) by the

literature and idioms of his(her) own day.¹⁷ Technology as a conveyor of ways of knowing construction and constructing is such a reality of our own times, coloring the lens of the present through which we view the past. Morris's popular art eschews the machine-made while Venturi and Scott Brown's construction of the ordinary accepts the mechanization that, by the second half of the twentieth century, was firmly imbedded in the consensus narrative of a hegemonic American culture. In the context of this study, it is not important to relativistically assess the respective conclusions of Morris and Venturi and Scott Brown about technology and the popular. What is important is that their viewpoints were the products of new modes of experiencing time, space, and history as a result of the pervasive influence of construction and constructing. Ultimately, the meaning of the making is not measured by empirical scientific methods or discrete artifacts, but by the relationship and integration technology achieves with the culture of everyday life. It is an ideology; it can gratify a culture's most esoteric and banal desires as well as it can serve its most essential and uplifting needs.

An analysis of their respective discourses suggests that Morris, and Venturi and Scott Brown not only compre-



Fig. 4. The Red House, Bexley Heath, designed by Phillip Webb for William Morris, 1859-60



Fig. 5. Chestnut Hill House, Venturi and Rauch, Philadelphia, 1962.

hended a tangible spirit of their ages in the making of things, but through a acute appreciation of applied technology and its susceptibility to multiple readings, they also initiated the process of changing the cultural status quo of their times. Our very notion of architecture is not an exclusive matter of construction as technology, materials, and built forms, but an inclusive cultural construct that links history and technology in space, time, and society. Constructing is rooted in experiencing and apprehending the most ordinary manifestations of the making of objects—popular artifacts and environments; culturally constructed, it addresses the necessary sense of identity and participation of the individual in society that the project of modernity, through its scientific underpinnings, had promised but never provided.

In the period that separates the works of Morris and Venturi and Scott Brown, the Modern Movement thrived. Science was its eternal truth and the myth of the machine the objectification of that truth. If, or when, the myth of the machine is abandoned as Morris, and Venturi and Scott Brown urged designers to do, what will replace it?¹⁸ The inherent ambiguities and pluralism of postmodern culture do not offer any ready answers. Architecture is one of the languages with which society communicates, and its codes are necessarily complex. Although modern architecture and its aftermath may well have been conceived in a womb ripe with technology, its interpretation demands broader methods than the science that produced that technology can offer. Morris looked to history and tradition, Venturi and Scott Brown looked to language. A critical discourse that engages history, construction, and the popular underscores that reading the intertextuality of this century's architecture requires more than genteel awe and appreciation. Today's built environment demand analyses that engages the context of its production and reveals its multiple meanings. As Morris's and Venturi and Scott Brown's rhetoric suggests, architectural criticism is most meaningful when the diverse interpretations of the consumers of the built environment are taken into consideration. That involves value judgments, judgments which are often conditioned by and directed toward

the overarching presence of technology, construction, and constructing, at their most common place occurrence in the realm of the popular.

NOTES

- ¹ See especially Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Architecture from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939). Pevsner asserts that "the phase between Morris and Gropius was an historical unit."
- ² For an elaboration of this definition of popular culture see Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture, Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).
- ³ William Morris, "The Beauty of Life," a lecture delivered in Birmingham as, "Labour and Pleasure versus Labour and Sorrow," in A. Briggs, ed., *William Morris Selected Writings and Designs* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), 105.
- ⁴ See especially William Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live," in *Selected Writings*, 163.
- ⁵ William Morris cited in Paul Thompson, *The Works of William Morris* (NY: Viking Press, 1967), 177.
- ⁶ William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 1878, in *Selected Writings*, 93.
- ⁷ Morris, "How We Live," 174.
- ⁸ Morris, "Lesser Arts," 100.
- ⁹ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 116.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.
- ¹² See Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine, The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 434-35.
- ¹³ Venturi et. al., *Las Vegas*, 3.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ William Morris, "The Worker's Share of Art," originally published in *Commonweal*, in *Selected Writings*, 142.
- ¹⁷ R. Poirier, "T.S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste," *The New Republic*, 20 May 1967, 21.
- ¹⁸ David Harvey argues that the myth of the machine has already been abandoned as a concomitant of the information age. See his *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).