A Review of
Robert Venturi's
COMPLEXITY AND CONTRADICTION
IN ARCHITECTURE

It may be appropriate to consider the effect which the development of historical studies in architecture is having on current architectural theory; and in this respect, no recent publication could be more worthy of analysis than Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. He is not the first influential architect in the last half-century to expound his theory of architecture by reference to buildings of the past. Indeed, as Vincent Scully observes in his characteristically brilliant preface, a comparison between *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and *Vers une Architecture* is particularly instructive and profitable. Yet whereas Le Corbusier made no pretence of exceptional art-historical scholarship, the recondite and numerous precedents cited by Robert Venturi seem to be a deliberate testimony of the influence which the New Architectural History is having on today's leading practitioners and teachers of architectural design.

Hence this recent book must inevitably interest all teachers of architectural history; but it should prompt them to evaluate more cautiously the current relationship between history and theory, since it raises the issue of the extent to which creative artists really do need historical support for their ideas. Robert Venturi's book professes to put forward a philosophy demonstrated by historical precedent. But in fact, this philosophy seems to be supported solely by historical forms, rather than by historical ideas; hence it seems debatable whether the type of validity he claims for those forms is really justified.

He attempts to justify his thesis by associating it with Mannerism, and defends Mannerism on grounds similar to those employed by John Summerson in *The Classical Language of Architecture* (1964), where Bramante's work is classified as "prose" whilst Guilio Romano's is classified as "poetry." This view of Mannerism is also, of course, at the root of Le Corbusier's panegyric on Michelangelo, though in the 1920's the lack of the necessary art-historical terminology prevented Le Corbusier from stating his case with the same clarity as Robert Venturi. Yet although the latter *seems* to employ a specifically historical scholarship, one may wonder whether he is not, like Le Corbusier, simply exercising the artist's right to be inspired by whatever forms take his fancy, and using history only to illustrate rather than to justify his choice. To put it more bluntly, is the extensive erudition which he crams into seventy-five pages really a historical proof of his
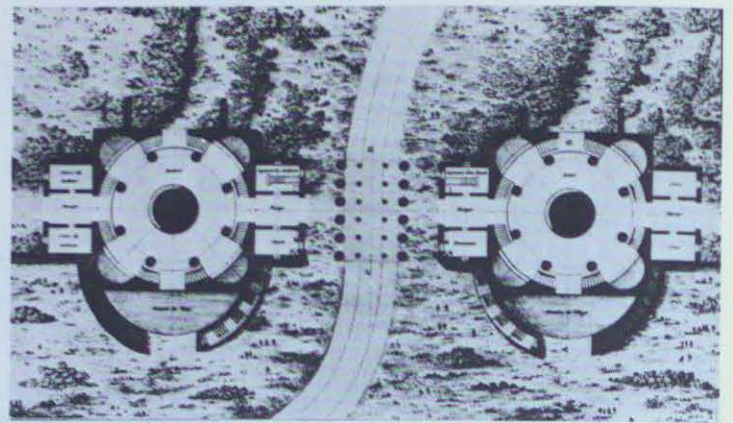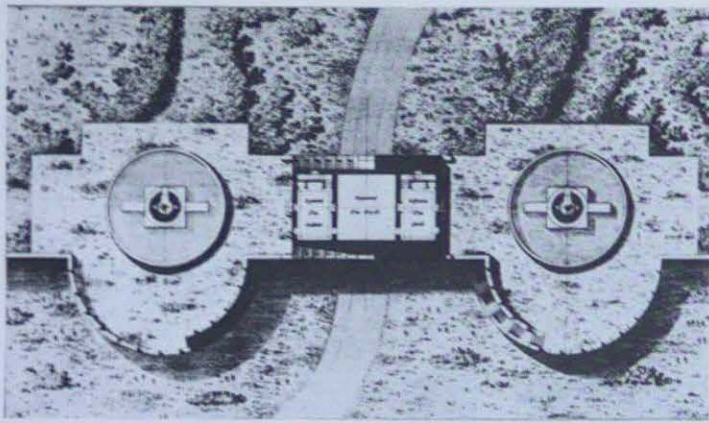

Coupe sur la Ligne C D du Plan
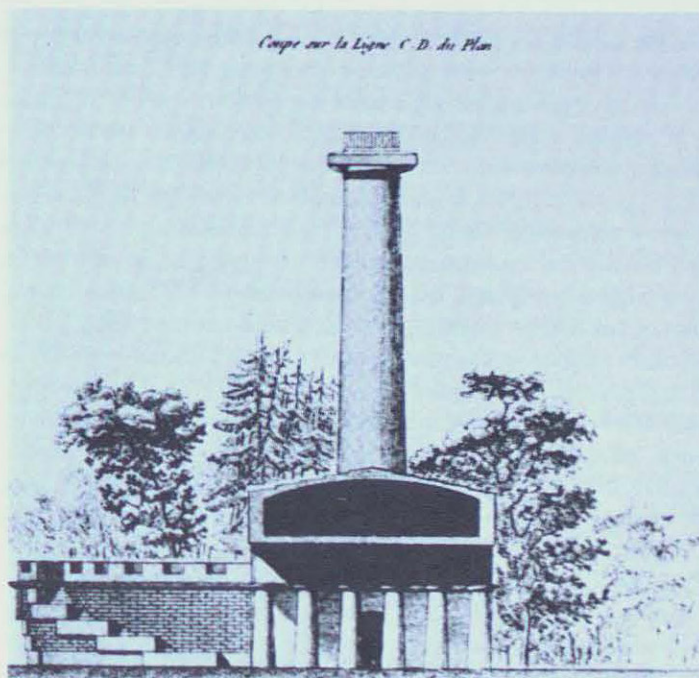
Bourneville—Park Entrance

Michel Gallet, *Ledoux*

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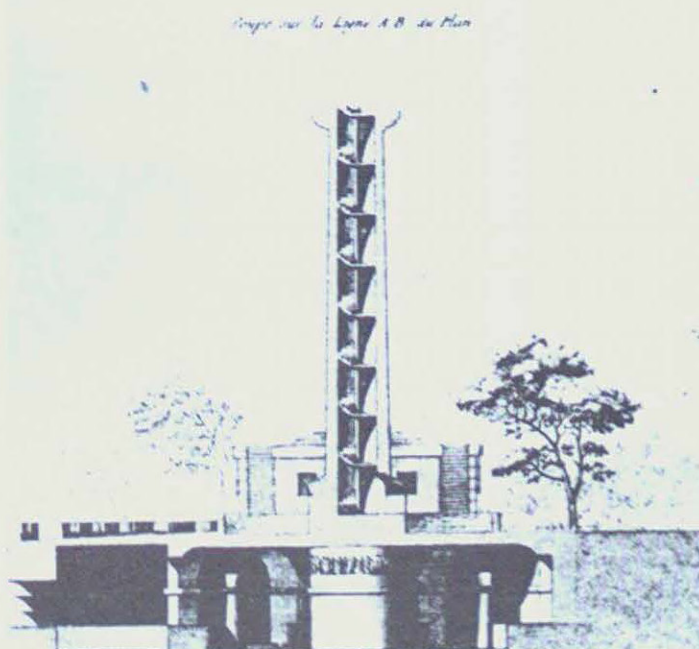
thesis, or is it a subtle device for by-passing-historical proof under a smoke-screen of name-dropping *kuntwissenschaft*?

In my opinion his argument needs no historical support; but assuming this to be of value, his argument would have been more forceful if he had selected fewer examples, and given these a fuller historical analysis—though the psychological advantage to be gained by bludgeoning his readers with historical monuments at the average rate of seventeen per page should not be underestimated. But architectural historians and architectural critics would probably find his arguments easier to assess—though far less stimulating—if the many controversial examples (such as the chapel at Fernes) had been weeded out, and more space devoted to the structure, planning, and sociological context of the examples which remained. Indeed, some examples are only relevant if one ignores completely their historical and even their literary context.

For example, figure 58 shows the facade of Ledoux's "Gateway at Bourneville."[1] No plan is reproduced, but the accompanying text on pages 44-45 states; "In the project for a gateway at Bourneville by Ledoux, the columns in the arch are structurally rhetorical if not redundant. Expressively, however, they underscore the abstractness of the opening as a semicircle more than an arch, and they further define the opening as a gateway." Now an inspection of the plan shows not only that the columns are far from being structurally redundant (since the monumental "arch" is subdivided inter-nally to contain rooms for two guards and gardener); it also shows that the giant flanking columns, which are even more "rhetorical," stand on windowless cylindrical substructures which in fact house a dairy and a laundry respectively. In other words, although Robert Venturi's theory seems (and unquestionably is) extraordinarily pertinent and valid, Ledoux's theory was the complete antithesis of the ideals which he is urging.

It may be said, then, that although (as Eduard Sekler points out above) architects may well derive the essence of their theory of arhitecture from a study of architectural history, they will presumably only do this if they derive it from total history rather than from the forms which constitute its visible photographable records. Le Corbusier considered the curve of the echinus to be "as rational as that of a large shell." Whether the analogy was with a sea-shell (like the ceiling of Ronchamp chapel) or—as the original text of *Vers une Architecture* makes clear—with an artillery shell, is as immaterial as the analogy with the Parthenon. The important fact is that he was not inspired by the history of obsolete artifacts, but by the artifacts themselves; and it is only by emphasizing this fundamental distinction that the appropriate character of history courses in schools of architecture can be established, and their validity assessed.

NOTES:
1. Christ refers to it as the gateway to the park of Bénouville; but despite the omniscience associated with the author's name, there seems no evidence that the engraved title was misspelt.