

LEARNING FROM BOB & DENISE

A Documentary on the Architecture and Ideas of Venturi and Scott Brown



FILM SYNOPSIS

LEARNING FROM BOB AND DENISE explores the complex and contradictory world of the architects, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Husband and wife partners, they are widely considered among the most influential designers of the 20th century. In their provocative parlance, *vulgar* is good, *tasteful* is bad, and the *ugly and ordinary* almost always triumphs over the *heroic and original*. Architects, writers, and philosophers of sorts, Venturi and Scott Brown are radicals in architecture and urban planning. Although their early buildings and the theories espoused in their books, *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, have been absorbed in mainstream architectural practice, they shocked the modernist establishment of the 1960s.

By the 1960s, the revolutionary passion of modern architecture had evolved into a dogma that architects had to follow to the letter, or risk ostracism. Venturi and Scott Brown instead developed their “learning from” approach, where comparisons of analogous but not obvious relationships were used as a design tool, and disparate influences—such as the historical architecture of Rome and the commercial architecture of Las Vegas—were embraced with equal enthusiasm and respect. These varied sources helped them to rediscover what they called the forgotten symbolism of architecture, a concept that modern architects had rejected in favor of an abstract aesthetic. When architectural powerbrokers, such as Philip Johnson and Gordon Bunshaft, dismissed the firm’s early work, which employed symbolism, pattern and ornament, as “ugly and ordinary,” the couple proudly embraced this label.

Venturi’s criticism of late modernism began gaining traction by the late 1970s. Many who had maligned the firm’s work years earlier now became converts, including Philip Johnson, who borrowed liberally from Venturi’s Vanna Venturi House for his AT&T skyscraper. Yet even followers’ understanding of Venturi and Scott Brown’s work was often superficial—they copied the historical references without understanding the thought behind the ideas. Postmodernism in architecture became short hand for simplistic historical revival, and Venturi was unwillingly named the father of this movement. Later, this misunderstanding would both help and hurt them.

In the late 1970s, their firm, which had become artistically but not commercially successful, began to be selected for prestigious projects. Princeton University asked them to design the first in what would be a series of major commissions. Other universities soon followed. Museums in Seattle, Austin, London and San Diego were suddenly asking for “a Venturi Building.” A star was born. Venturi and Scott Brown found a niche in the world of arts and academia.

LEARNING FROM BOB & DENISE

A Documentary on the Architecture and Ideas of Venturi and Scott Brown



Everything changed in 1991. Bob—but not Denise—was awarded the prestigious Pritzker Prize; the firm’s masterpiece, the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London, garnered a mixture praise and abuse; and postmodernism died a sudden death. In almost the blink of an eye, the firm went from sensation to near bankruptcy, and Venturi and Scott Brown were transformed from young Turks to old fogies.

The couple was back in the wilderness. Once again they found themselves unpopular—a consistent theme throughout their lives—but they continued to work by finding commissions overseas. Over the next decade, projects such as the Kirifuri Resort Hotel in Nikko, Japan and the regional state capital building of Toulouse, France offered opportunities they could only dream about at home, where they found it more difficult to obtain and keep clients. The Philadelphia Orchestra fired the firm, which had worked for years on a new concert hall, and replaced them with a flashier New York architect. A year later, Venturi and Scott Brown would resign from the Whitehall Ferry Terminal Project after their designs were repeatedly vetoed by local politicians. The loss of this commission was particularly painful, as it would have been their largest civic project and their first major use of electronic iconography—a technology that the couple first fell in love with in Las Vegas. Unable to build the work of his dreams, Venturi, wrote about it in *Iconography Upon a Generic Architecture* (1998). The ideas articulated in this book, and first glimpsed in the firm’s early work, began attracting younger admirers.

Learning from Bob and Denise will take viewers on a journey from their early years to the present. The film will explore the many disparate influences upon the couple, including their extraordinary parents and childhoods, their collaborative design process, the “star-system” in architecture and Scott Brown’s pioneering role for women in the field.

Through looking at the firm’s work and seeing interviews with the subjects, members of their office, clients, colleagues, friends, and critics, the audience will gain an understanding of Venturi and Scott Brown’s philosophy, and find the universal themes applicable to many aspects of contemporary society. The filmmaker, their son, hopes this film will help to support and inspire those whose ideas go beyond what the dominant culture promotes.