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***Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown***  
***Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego***  
***La Jolla, California, 1986 - 1996***

**Paul Goldberger**

It's strange to think of an art museum as the work of a noted architect when he didn't design its exhibition galleries, and probably stranger still to praise it as one of the high points in his recent oeuvre. But how else to describe what Robert Venturi has just done at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Francisco?

The museum, which maintains a small exhibition space in downtown San Diego but has its main quarters here, a few miles up the coast, has occupied the landmark Ellen Browning Scripps house, a triumphant 1916 work of the great California architect Irving Gill, since the institution's founding in 1941. During the fifties and sixties, as the museum grew, local architects oversaw the evolution of the building from a house to a public institution by adding a series of gallery and service wings. None of these were distinguished, and they had the collective effect of almost obliterating any sense of the magnificent structure that was the museum's core.

Enter Robert Venturi, the senior design partner of the Philadelphia firm Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, who was hired in 1986 to, as he put it, "accommodate the extremely complex program of a modern museum and to make of the outside a new civic building for La Jolla."

In other words, he was to make the museum bigger, more modern, more coherent and more respectful of its history, a set of goals that contains a built-in contradiction. Taking a hodgepodge and giving it some order is difficult enough; giving more prominence to the house while expanding the complex all around it is tougher still.

The transformation took ten years, in part because of problems with raising money, in part because Venturi was side tracked by much larger commissions, including the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery in London. But La Jolla, small as it is, turns out to have been very much worth waiting for. This is an exquisite project, overflowing with those qualities that make Venturi a designer of extraordinary gifts.

The expanded museum is respectful of every piece of its complicated history, yet it has a strong and clear identity as a different building. It is a sharp and lively presence on the street, yet it is woven into the fabric of La Jolla with consummate delicacy and grace. The sense of balance between old and new, between object and context, is as subtle and as sure as anyone could ask for.

In a sense, the program Venturi has been given here is not so different from what I. M. Pei was asked to do at the Louvre: add a grand entrance and lots of fresh public space, and do some behind-the-scenes fixing up, all intended to bring a series of disparate sections together into a coherent whole. Yet in La Jolla the solution is not an abstract object intended to excite by total contrast, as Pei's glass pyramid aims to do beside the classical pavilions of the Louvre, but a series of smaller architectural additions, subtractions and alterations intended to play gently on the themes of the earlier wings of the museum building. Venturi has not directly imitated the architecture that

preceded him - few visitors will have trouble figuring out which sections are new - but he has allowed it to set the themes.

And what wonderful themes they are! To understand why Venturi was so at home on this site overlooking the Pacific Ocean, it is necessary to speak first of Irving Gill, one of the great figures of early twentieth-century American modernism.

Gill, who had worked with Louis Sullivan in Chicago, settled in San Diego in 1893 and slowly built a career that by World War I had yielded a remarkable group of concrete buildings that magnificently balanced the starkness and clarity of modernism with the sumptuousness and urbane order of Spanish mission architecture. Gill's architecture, with its arches stripped down to their clean, pure essence, seemed to combine comfort with technology and modern life with a respect for traditional urbanity.

Ellen Scripps was one of Gill's great patrons, and she commissioned him to design not only her own house in the center of La Jolla but numerous other buildings including the San Diego Woman's Club and the La Jolla Recreation Center and playground, both across the street from the Scripps house.

Together, the Gill buildings and the Episcopal Church of St. James-by-the-Sea constitute a remarkable grouping: an agglomeration of architecture made up of different civic and private functions coming together to create a public presence that is larger than any of them could have achieved alone.

The group feels almost Italian in the way its delicate scale and repetitive architectural motifs join comfortably, and if this collection of buildings is organized around automobile-filled streets rather than a piazza, well, this is Southern California, not Italy. But rarely in Southern California is there any cluster of buildings so serenely civilized.

Venturi has cleaned up the front of the Scripps house, revealing it again as the centerpiece of the composition of the museum. Then he added one large wing to the left, containing an expansive entry court, museum shop, and lobby, and a smaller wing to the right, containing a café. Each uses Gill's trademark arches, but on a larger scale. Sleek windows and walls of glass poke out from the sides, as if to underscore that these wings are not truly Gill's. The Venturi wings also have a slight curve to them, reflecting the bend of Prospect Street along the building's front, which both distinguishes them further from Gill's rectilinear shapes and weaves them even more effectively into the cityscape.

If there is any problem with the museum's façade as it now stands, it is in the way visitors enter. The door to the Scripps house remains front and center, exerting a strong magnetic pull. Yet it is not the front door to the museum; visitors must enter an outdoor courtyard and make an illogical turn to the left to arrive at the front door that Mr. Venturi has created. The contradiction is hard to get away from: the Scripps house has pride of place, but its wonderful arched doorway is but an artifact. Mr. Venturi was unable to resolve the conflict between the requirement that the great old house have visual pre-eminence and the need for the new wing to serve as the museum's real front door.

So be it. More important is the way this graceful composition adds to the museum's public presence on the streets of La Jolla. Only Robert Venturi could have got it so right, I suspect; the building is a riff on all the complex and subtle rhythms of the streetscape, rhythms not only of architecture but also of time.

There is no wish here to blend in so fully that the building seems always to have been there, as with Robert A. M. Stern's pleasant and exceedingly well mannered group of shops at the other end of Prospect Street in La Jolla's commercial center. Venturi wanted the building to be of this moment, which he sees as asserting its meaning by reaching across time to embrace other periods, and taking them all into its grasp. He struggles to tease out of a highly complex context a kind of serenity that does not deny complexity.

Thus the shapes of the building are complicated and uneven; thus there are accents of neon signs in the windows; thus the starburst of glass and metal over the new main hall, a jazzy element that replaces a dome originally proposed. And thus the self-consciously "modern" fenestration peeking out from behind the arched stucco walls.

Irving Gill is prime Venturi material: his architecture is simple, almost dumb at first glance, and wonderfully rich and deep the more you probe into it. Responding to a Gill masterwork that has had years of awkward additions and subtractions, all within a busy urban context, is an architectural problem tailor-made for Robert Venturi. And the result is a good demonstration of what Venturi, often misunderstood as more of a theorist than a designer, has always been trying to make his architecture do.