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**Re-Building as Innovation:
Transformations from within the American campus by Venturi,
Scott Brown and Associates.**

A new kind of assignment

In terms of design strategy the campus projects of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates (VSBA I) are exemplary for a kind of assignment that has become topical in the practice of architecture today. Essential is that the brief is not formulated in clear-cut architectonic terms, but holds more vague objectives such as 'finding a new identity'. Formulating the program is part of the assignment. The premise put forward in this paper is that the methodology of VSBA that assembles urban as well as architectural strategies, research as well as design, matches extremely well with this kind of assignment. VSBA has been practising and developing an 'inclusive' approach since the sixties, that entails a watchful eye and a self-evident appreciation for the existing and for the potential of the existing. Their designs are creative manipulations of the results of their observations. They evaluate from research. The design can therefore not be determined by preconceived aesthetic principles, but must be 'discovered' along the research and design process.

The American university

There are different reasons for the American university today to 'recapture its identity'. One is that universities have grown outwards over the years, spreading into formless agglomerations. The constraints of this are felt the more now that the university is transforming from a closed, elitist institution to a modern one that has to be open to a diverse, heterogeneous population. Other related reasons are the changing methods of education and research, as a result of which universities have to be more user directed, meaning student directed, and have to direct themselves towards interdisciplinary collaboration in research as well as education. President Bollinger of the University of Michigan put it thus (2): 'We need to conceive of our campus as a whole and consider its place in the larger Ann Arbor community. We need to take a long view, to consider what our university campus might be like, what its character should be, one hundred years from now'.

Identity is an important item in recent architectural debate. Cities as well as industries claim identities. Although VSBA has a long tradition of urban research that also incorporates socio-cultural variables, as in the study 'Signs of Life: symbols in the American city' (3) or the study 'Locus genius of Jim Thorpe' (4) – studies in which they researched the meaning of architectural elements as articulations of a societal impact -, Denise Scott Brown is reluctant about pinpointing identity. In a recent text on the rebuilding of New Orleans (5) Scott Brown avoids the subject of New Orleans's identity: she surveys the complexities in the re-making of a city using a series of examples, such as London-after-the-fire or bombarded-Rotterdam. With these examples she effectively points out what may be the numerous different processes and parties involved. She suggests how architects and planners should shift between those forces with 'visionary as well as expedient' actions. Yet her conclusion is modest and also relaxed: a new New Orleans will come out as it will, she claims. Identity is found and not created.

University projects

In the university projects that I want to discuss VSBA was urban planner and architect. As planners they were able to research the campus and to find the goals, options, possibilities and problems that are at stake. As architects they were able to realize a first 'increment' as Denise Scott Brown names it; a first initiative to give form to possible and desirable future developments. These building projects stand for an urban strategy: a precision-intervention to transform the campus from within. They do so with a minimum of architectural mass but a maximum of intended progressive effect.

Inevitably the first phase in VSBA's university planning processes concerns mapping the existing situation. For both universities at issue in this paper, the universities of Philadelphia and of Princeton, the research focuses on *activities, routing and connections*. The choice of these variables that recur continuously in the research of VSBA, demonstrates an interest in the city as 'a system of communication'. This view on the city was formulated for the first time in the study of Las Vegas by Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour in 1972 (6). In this view Venturi and Scott Brown are aligned to many urban theoreticians as Melvin Webber or Manuel Castells (7), who have described the essence of city life as an exchange of information. This interpretation of modern city life is important for the way VSBA will interpret the task that universities stand for today. For VSBA the abovementioned developments of densification of campus population and educational and research methods result in an increasing need for meeting spaces and connections. This is in fact the architectural interpretation of an increasing need for exchange of information at all levels.

Having said this it makes sense that many universities today, as those of Philadelphia and Princeton, decide to realise a student center as a binding element to restore the unity of the university, as an 'identifier' for the university as a whole. In this student centre diverse common spaces are assembled for meeting and lecturing, for getting information and dining and for other services and consumer facilities.

Perelmann Quadrangle

For the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (8) a master plan was made by VSBA in which they mapped the university. The maps that were made showed amongst others the patterns of routing from classrooms to dormitories and vice versa and maps that show for example the location and the amount of present lecture space. From the combination of these and other variables the observation was extracted that a lot of student movement passed by the original core of the campus but did not come into the central space in the main block, former Houston Plaza, now Wynn Commons. Research also showed that the old buildings around Houston Plaza were underused, of which especially Houston Hall, America's first student union. The buildings did hardly relate to the old center, while their main entrances were from origin facing the surrounding streets.

The research showed that this location in the heart of the campus had the potential to become the centre of the campus once again when re-animated with the student centre program. The choice for this location implies a revaluation of the potential of the typical American campus as an open grouping of loose standing buildings on a green, described by Paul Turner as the 'urban campus' (9) that is typified by 'its spaciousness and openness to the world' and that 'has largely rejected the European tradition of cloisterlike structures in favour of separate buildings set in open green space'. This connotation of the 'urban campus' of America matches very well with a new open, modern university.

The second so to say 'invention' that this choice of location implies is the revaluation of the monumentality of the old nineteenth century, institutional buildings. They are revaluated as symbols of a higher level than the buildings themselves, the level of communal interest.

Here then we have two important ingredients of a modern identity 'as found' (to quote the Smithsons 10): the open, urban campus and monumentality as an expression of communal interest. To these two are added a program of communication and the expression of an urban architecture as I will show.

A most important and complex phase in the design process is to assemble the necessary program to ensure the right kind of activities on a campus wide scale (11). Important for the new Student Centre Precinct is the new restaurant that is partly situated under the Commons, also the centralization of student administration in College Hall and the renovation of Irvine Auditorium. Next to this is a long list of other activities added to the precinct.

The new Student Centre Precinct (Perelmann Quadrangle) is yet characterised in the first place by Wynn Commons, the central space between the buildings. This space has elaborately been re-arranged as the central communal outdoor space for the university population in general. The emphasis in this project is thereby not on a building but on its users.

The main architectonic intervention that was done to realise this is seemingly small but powerful: the buildings were as it were turned around. In the new situation multiple entrances are added in the surrounding buildings that give on Wynn Commons, making this side in fact the front side or active side, while the street side beholds a more formal function.

Wynn Commons is arranged as a public place: it is covered with great stone tiling and carefully furnished with terraces, benches and an amphitheatre in the same material; it is signposted with big information boards and markers also in stone. The interiors of the re-build buildings also articulate a public quality. The venerable interior of Houston Hall, America's first student club, is mostly respected, but the ground floor is re-laid with black-and-white tiles to accentuate the more public nature of the student center. According to Denise Scott Brown this was inspired by Dutch Renaissance merchant's houses: and in fact here the high, glazed, black-and-white tiled front room, the 'zaal', is meant for trading and is an intermediary between the inner and the outer world (12).

A brilliantly colored Information Desk is positioned in the central hallway and in the basement a cafeteria is installed between the old masonry and steel structure, which is contrasted with modern signposting.

In VSBA's interpretation the student center is essentially a public place, characterized by its openness to the campus population within the city of Philadelphia. This is visible from their choice and interpretation of the location as well as from the materialization of the site.

Princeton University and Frist Campus Center

The choice of location for the new Frist Campus Center for Princeton University (13) is also based on the master planning studies done by VSBA. The shifting patterns of circulation were mapped. It showed that the former Palmer Hall building became situated in the center of campus movements as a result of new activities in the South East corner. Consequently the new student center is realized in this building, one of the original buildings in 19th century Elizabethan style that used to be a physics classroom building. To this end the original building was enlarged twofold.

In the new Frist Student Center the surprising experience of finding oneself in a seemingly old, yet at second glance totally new environment is even more articulated than in Philadelphia.

Coming from the north one will observe Palmer Hall from over the glowing lawn as the serene and respectable building it has always been. But getting closer one's eye will catch the stony arcade that runs along the north façade. This calls attention because of the unorthodox, monumental lettering on top of it, stating FRIST CAMPUS CENTER. Standing at the inside of the arcade the excavations in the arcade surface filled with information boards stand out. The ground level of Palmer Hall is lowered and multiple entrances are boldly cut out giving entrance to the basement of the old building. Broad flights of steps lead down to them leaving the former monumental, single entrance somewhat enfeebled.

But only after one has entered and submerged in the crowds that circulate and linger in the 'streets' and adjacent spaces full of exchange and activity, does one fully appreciate the subtle yet fascinating make over Palmer Hall underwent. At the end of the low streets abundant light comes from a four stories high glass facade that encloses the campus restaurant.

In the Frist Center the biggest 'invention' may be the re-interpretation of the structure of the basement as a maze-like pattern. The 'Circulation and Activities Diagram' shows streams of movement in the building like a subway map. The campus pattern of circulation is continued inside the building. This non-articulate streaming can be interpreted as a characteristic of modern city life and of a plural, democratic society, as Venturi said more than once about its equivalent the American urban grid (14).

These streams of movement from the basement are continued in the seriality of the entrances and in the arcade in front of Frist Center. The arcade has often been used in the architecture of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown as an intermediary between the building and the city. As a freestanding screen it can communicate to the public as well as organize the different movements between the surroundings and the building and inside the building itself. In the case of Palmer Hall the arcade intermediates also between the new and the old.

Thus the public domain outside is clearly articulated with architectural elements as the arcade and stairs. The expression of the architecture inside the Frist Center is as 'urban' as outside. Walls are materialized as exposed brick walls, where upon inscriptions are made like graffiti or like street signs. The concern of the architects with the right expression of spaces at all levels is illustrated by the remark of Scott Brown that they must follow up every detail as far as the hinges of the doors 'or else our coffee lounges won't be public' (15).

Conclusion

These campus projects show a re-interpretation of the original American campus model. The essentially 'open' urban lay out is continued inside the building. The originally self centered buildings representing the distinct institutions, have been turned outwards and integrated in a communal system of connections within the campus. A new architectural expression counterbalances the monumental quality of the old architecture; it is open to the public without discrimination. A new environment has emerged out of old elements that can be characterized by the term 'urban environment', in which an indiscriminate exchange of information is essential.

The working method that VSBA uses in these campus projects may be regarded as 'bricolage', the term by which Colin Rowe described a design approach starting from the existing in his famous essay (16) that underlies our colloquium. Yet these projects may also show that 'making do with whatever is at hand' is not enough. To discriminate between 'whatever is at hand' the architect must have a vision. Venturi and Scott Brown have developed their vision long ago from research when they started observing the city in the post war period. From this research they concluded then -and they still do- that 'architecture should communicate' (17),..

because' they said recently (18) 'communication is important to community'. The existing environment is the standard by which people can give meaning to what is around them and it is therefore the main source of information for architecture that does not wish to be self referential only. That is why the research of the environment has such an important position in the work of Venturi and Scott Brown.

In these projects is shown that this view also includes enabling communication between people. That why Venturi and Scott Brown are concerned with connections and activities. And this is why their architecture is essentially an 'urban architecture'.

Notes

1. Venturi Scott Brown and Associates, architectural office in Philadelphia, started as Venturi and Rauch in 1964.
2. *The University of Michigan Campus Plan*, Overview by VSBA, April 1998
3. R. Venturi and D. Scott Brown *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City*, exhibition in the Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. 1976, see in Venturi, Scott Brown *On Houses and Housing*.
4. D. Scott Brown *Urban Concepts*, Architectural Design Profile, London 1990, p.53.
5. ("What should New Orleans do?" in Artforum, December 2005
6. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Isenour *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1972
7. Melvin Webber *The Non-Place Urban Realm* in 'Explorations into Urban Structures', 1962; Manuel Castells *The Informational City*, 1989
8. The Perelman Quadrangle, a Student Center Precinct, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 2000
9. P.V.Turner *Campus* MIT Press Cambridge Mass. 1984, p.4
10. A. + P. Smithson *The 'As Found' and the 'Found'* in D. Robbins 'The Independant Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty', MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1990; p. 201.
11. K. Theunissen *Re-building as Urban Tactic* in *The Architectural Annual 2004/2005*, Delft mei 2006
12. Denise Scott Brown *Architecture as Patterns and Systems* in Venturi and Scott Brown 'Architecture as Signs and System', The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Mass. 2004; I wrote about the Dutch Merchant's House in K. Theunissen *A Loggia facing the city* in H. Cornelissen (ed.) 'Dwelling as a figure of thought' SUN Amsterdam 2005; p.49-55.
13. Frist Campus Center, Princeton University, Princeton, New Yersey, 1960-1999, in S. von Moos *Venturi Scott Brown and Associates: buildings and Projects 1986-1998*, The Monacelli Press New York 1999; p. 252
14. Robert Venturi *An Evolution of Ideas* in Venturi and Scott Brown 'Architecture as Signs and System'; p.11
15. Scott Brown *Introduction* in 'Architecture as Signs and Systems'; p.4
16. Colin Rowe *Collage City*, MIT Press Cambridge Mass. 1978
17. see note 6.
18. In Februari 2005 Venturi and Scott Brown were guests from the Delft University of Technology for a week, also lecturing in the NAI Rotterdam on which occasion Venturi's quotation was made.