Towards a Revised Approach to Designing From the Outside In: Contextualizing the Preliminary Proposal for the Fourth Addition to Bard College Library

Aidan Galloway
Bard, ag3008@bard.edu

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Towards a Revised Approach to Designing From the Outside In: Contextualizing the Preliminary Proposal for the Fourth Addition to Bard College Library

Senior Project Submitted to the

Division of the Arts at Bard College

By

Aidan Edward Galloway

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December, 2022
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Abstract

Before creating the new, architects are faced with the existing. An enormous oak tree might be within the bounds of the site you’ve been hired to build a house on. Do you cut it down, or leave it? A tall brick building might be next door. Do you imitate its scale, its materiality, its style, or do you create something that looks entirely different?

These kinds of questions, while perhaps always fundamental to architecture, were especially pertinent in mid-to-late-twentieth century debates surrounding “context” as architects like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown challenged the conventions of “orthodox” Modern architecture. “Frank Lloyd Wright said architects should design from the inside out,” said Venturi in his 1991 acceptance speech for the Pritzker Architecture Prize. “But we now accept within our more complex view of things, as we acknowledge context as an important determinant of design, that we design from the inside out and the outside in.”¹ But what constitutes the “outside?” And what did designing “from the outside in” mean to Robert Venturi?

Using their 1990 addition at Bard College Library as a case study, the first part of this thesis investigates what “designing from the outside in” might have meant for Venturi, and, specifically, examines how his ideas about context in architecture intersected with the literal orchestration of movement of bodies through space. Beyond writing in the traditional essay format, I present a series of diagrams, images, and other architectural forms of representation alongside written commentary to communicate various findings of this research, the most

¹ “Robert Venturi’s Response at the Pritzker Prize Award Ceremony at the Palacio de Iturbide, Mexico City, May 16, 1991,” in Robert Venturi, Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room (Cambridge, Mass., London: The MIT Press, 1998), 101. Wright was Louis Sullivan’s student; Sullivan was famous for coining “form follows function.”
striking being the extent to which the existing context — both inside and out — is physically inaccessible.

Plans to create a fourth addition to the library have been expressed publicly in Bard’s 2017 Masterplan. The masterplan expresses needs for updates to circulation on campus in general, but does not integrate that into its brief for the “library expansion project”; its only mention of the circulatory needs of the building are expressed in terribly brief terms: “Pedestrian access from existing building. Reconfigured dock.” Yet it is clear that this site is an important node of the largely inaccessible network of paths with too-steep gradients and uneven surfaces. The brief for the project would better be framed in the following way: The fourth addition should consider both that there is pressure from the library to expand “inside-out.” And: That this site is also a nexus of circulation outside and around.

In reinterpreting Venturi’s claim that architects “design from the inside out and outside in,” the ensuing conceptual design proposal attempts to address both the needs of the library in its expansion and the needs of its surrounding context, where the surrounding context is understood primarily as a network of inaccessible paths of circulation. Whereas the existing building has restricted movement due to its controlled points of entry and exit — in part by Venturi’s aesthetic intention, and in part by nature of it being a library which attempts to keep books secure — in my scheme for the fourth addition, myriad points of entry and exit blur the line between route and goal; one could go from “A” to “B,” but also from “C” to “E” and “F”

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3 The “both-and” is a nod to Venturi’s analysis of architecture demonstrated in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.
back to “A” — all while following a playful network of accessible infrastructure that aims to open up new possibilities for the way human beings with various abilities relate to space.
Acknowledgements

…as a building is designed from the inside out and the outside in, so, one can say, is an architect designed in that way—that is, his own development as an artist can work through his development inside—through his intuition, ordered by means of analysis and discipline—but also through his development outside, via the influence of persons and places.⁴

The following is an insufficient acknowledgement of the many I have learned from and been supported by during the development of this project and ongoing development as a thinker and student of architecture;

I dedicate this project:

to my dependable parents, friends, and mentors for their boundless patience and support through times of calm and turbidity (and for the many hours they helped me “talk through” my ideas);

to my first “client,” Francis Karagodins, for “hiring me” to design (ironically) a staircase that would double as a stage in front of the 1893 Greek Revival part of the library;

to Helene Tieger and Debra Klein from the library’s Archives Department for their hours spent retrieving and sharing essential archival material with me, as well as for their efforts in helping me plan an exhibition of my work which would take place in the library (that didn’t happen — yet, at least by the time of the submission of this thesis to the College);

to Betsy Cawley, director of libraries, who gave me incredibly detailed information about the existing library and her ideas about what it needed in its next “revision”; I don’t know what I would have done without her enthusiastic collaboration during the early phases of this project;

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to Bard’s Horticulture Department, especially: Amy Parrella, who helped me understand the soil composition of the site and the way water moved — or got stuck — in this area; and Dan McKenna, who helped me understand nearby trees and plants;
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to Peter Gadsby and all working at Bard’s Registrar in general; to the Office of the Dean, David Shein, and the myriad other staff who have been so accommodating and helpful through various difficulties and logistical complexities during my time at Bard;

to my senior project advisor Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, for, to say the least, pointing me towards the topic of site analysis and context in architecture and encouraging me to read *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning From Las Vegas* — and for her patience in working with me as I learned how to finish things on time;

and to Ross Exo Adams; Betsy Clifton; Montserrat Bonvehi Rosich; Michael Robinson Cohen, for directing my focus towards a consideration of the library’s thresholds; Sofia Pia Belenky, for introducing me to the power of the 3d modeling software, Rhino-3D (the primary design tool for this project) and for believing in me and saying “I think this [architecture] is your thing, Aidan”; to Olga Touloumi; Dan D’oca and Interboro Partners; to Carlos Bedoya; in short, to the blossoming department of Architecture at Bard College and all the generous, inspiring faculty with whom I have had the pleasure of crossing paths.
I remember my first impression vividly.

“What a mess!” — “Who designed that?”

I did not yet know what it was for, that awkward cube with a strange diamond pattern running across its towering brick facade.

“How did he get up there?” — “Can I get up there?”

We were instructed to look up at the photographer standing on its high, flat roof.

“Is it still under construction?” I wondered.

A freshman in a new environment surrounded by strangers, I had no sense of where I was in relation to the campus at large. I did not yet know, for instance, that where I stood was an incredibly ceremonial and memorialized location: a rugby field named in memory of the deceased founder of Bard’s rugby team; the site of Bard’s biggest event, graduation, during which that rugby field is covered by an enormous, white, swooping tent equipped with temporary flooring to keep feet dry from the swampy grass field below. I did not yet know that that Greek Revival temple peaking its head out behind that awkward cube with a strange diamond pattern
was *connected* to that awkward cube with a strange diamond pattern. And I did not yet know that that awkward cube with stout proportions and horizontal bands that made it look like a slice of lasagna was created by an architectural firm whose co-founders spent much of their careers focused “squarely on context.”

The site I saw.
Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, the polemical duo famous for their various criticisms of Modernism and subsequent association with the Postmodern movement in architecture (although they themselves maintained feverishly that they were not Postmodernists), found more than just aesthetic inspiration for their architectural creations in the visible and invisible surroundings of buildings. “Our ‘Learning from’ studies took a more muscular view of context than had the Moderns,” wrote Denise Scott Brown, reflecting later on the analytic studies which resulted in their famous book, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972, written also with Steven Izenour), which emerged from a research studio at Yale in 1968, around the time Denise Scott Brown met and became intimately connected to Robert Venturi.  

Among its myriad iconoclastic claims and jabs against some of the most cherished beliefs of Modernism, *Learning From Las Vegas* urged architects and urban planners to learn from “the existing environment” as opposed to tearing it down and beginning again, “as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s.” It called for extending the period of trying to understand what is before proposing what should be; it said that architects could be revolutionary by “question[ing] how we look at things”; and, as Pop Art was doing contemporaneously, it asked that we consider how

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something ordinary and everyday — something which already existed — could be transformed not by changing the object or environment itself, but by changing its context.⁸

“Bob [Robert Venturi] came to believe that focusing squarely on context could enrich the design of buildings — that context had ‘meaning,’ and that each increment of new building could reinterpret and add further meaning to its surroundings,” wrote Scott Brown.⁹ “Meaning,” she writes, in quotations; Venturi first spoke about “meaning” in relation to context in his 1950 Master’s Thesis at Princeton: “The thesis of the problem in short is that its setting gives a building expression; its context is what gives a building its meaning. And consequently change in context causes change in meaning.”¹⁰ “Expression”; “meaning”; interpretation (I might add): these ways of considering context, which followed Venturi’s “Eureka-like response in 1949 when [he] came across the idea of perceptual context in Gestalt psychology,”¹¹ were certainly distinct from École des Beaux Arts’ and “orthodox Modernism’s” oversimplified treatment of context. For the Modernists, a building’s surroundings were often viewed as sunlight hitting abstract forms or a romanticized dreamscape of empty parkland.¹² For Venturi, that which surrounded a

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⁸ I speak a lot about Venturi’s ideas about context in this paper, but it is important to credit Denise Scott Brown for her “learning from” studies.


¹² This is indeed a reference to Le Corbusier’s schemes for Ville Radieuse, where the old city would be cleared away, and, in its place, a city designed with perfect proportions and provisions for light, air, and greenery could emerge. This was one of the utopian visions to which Learning From Las Vegas reacted when its authors wrote those famous lines calling on architects not to “tear down Paris and begin again.”
building was nearly more important than the building itself; without context, without the
presence of something *else*, something *outside*, a building, standing alone, was meaningless.13

For all of the variation in definition of the idea of context, for Venturi, Scott Brown, and
their mid-to-late-twentieth century contemporaries, it seems that, speaking in broad strokes,
context tended to constitute that which was somehow *external* to what was deemed *central* or
*inside*. For instance, Christopher Alexander, in *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964), spoke of
context as if it were a set of constraints imposed from the outside which could be solved by way
of mathematical optimization: “Every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness
between two entities: the form in question, and its context. The form is the solution to the
problem; the context defines the problem.”14 For Alexander, context was loosely synonymous
with “environment,” but Alexander did not use the word “environment,” *per se*, postulates the

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13 In the Foreword he wrote in 2008 for his 1950 thesis, Venturi reflected specifically on the idea of
“meaning” in relation to context: “It should also be noted that the significance of including meaning —
not only expression — in architecture was acknowledged here, perhaps for the first time in our age, and
that this opened the way for an acceptance of plurality and multiculturalism in architectural approaches to
University, 1950,” in Andrea Gleiniger and Georg Vrachliotis, *Complexity: Design Strategy and World

14 Quoted by Adrian Forty in *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London:
Thames & Hudson, 2004), 133. For what it’s worth, according to Forty (also on page 133), Alexander
“softens” this “mechanistic relationship” later in the book.
architect, theorist, and historian, Adrian Forty, so he could “include cultural variables” within his own individual use of the term context.\textsuperscript{15}

For Collin Rowe, too, whose urban design studio at Cornell in the 1960s was famous for introducing “contextualism” to the mid-twentieth century architectural vocabulary, context referred to something surrounding or outside of — and also a significant force present in the shaping of — a building. To quote Forty again: “Le Pautre’s preservation of the internal symmetries and room relationships while adapting the standard arrangement of the Parisian hôtel to an irregular plot was one of Rowe’s favored examples of satisfactory relation of building to

\textsuperscript{15} Forty credits Alexander for the first detectable use of the word “context” in the discourses of Modern architecture in the English-speaking world, but goes on to say that Alexander’s use of the term had “little to do with its subsequent usage” (134). Forty elaborates this point further. To paraphrase: Italian architect Ernesto Rogers had written of ambiente; in \textit{The Architecture of the City}, Aldo Rossi, who developed his own concepts of the “genius loci” and the “monument” to discuss matters of collective memory in the city, criticized (to continue to quote Adrian Forty) the “vagueness of the ‘collective historical consciousness’ of the city that was Rogers’s \textit{preesistenze ambientali}.” Forty stresses that when Rossi writes, in Italian, “As for the term context, we find that it is mostly an impediment to research,” “context” is a poor translation of the more nuanced ambiente, and it was ambiente to which Rossi reacted. Although Forty doesn’t include Venturi or Scott Brown in his essay, the way he describes what Rogers was discussing in Italy in the 1960s certainly resonates with many of their ideas: “Rogers criticized [the tendency of Modern architects] to treat every scheme as a unique abstract problem, their indifference to location, and their desire to make of every work a prodigy. Rather, Rogers argued, consider architecture as a dialogue with its surroundings, both in the immediate physical sense, but also as a historical continuum.” Given the term’s ambiguity, it’s no wonder it fell out of popularity by the 1970s alongside Rem Koolhaas’ famous provocation, “is ‘fuck context’ becoming the theme?” Here, it’s worth noting, Koolhaas meant “the city” by “context”; it seems “context” appeared more in discussions of the city than of the countryside. For more on this discourse and the larger history of the word “context, see “Context,” in Adrian Forty, \textit{Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture} (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 133-135.
context.” Adjusting a building to its context was a matter of adjusting “internal symmetries and room relationships” to the external shape of a plot.

This idea that a “satisfactory relation of building to context” occurred when the “standard arrangement of the Parisian hôtel” was adapted “to an irregular plot” positions Rowe’s analysis alongside a functionalist point of view, which embraces the idea that “form follows function,” as Louis Sullivan famously declared, where “context” is just what the expanding “soap bubble” of an interior pushes up against. In this approach, an architect starts with a particular precedent — a typical library and its interior organization of stacks, for instance — and then morph and rearrange it based on its external pressures which are identified in the architect’s site analysis. To design “from the outside in,” on the other hand, is to begin with the building’s surroundings, with its context, and create from there.

So in approaching their “Stevenson” addition to Bard College Library in 1989, Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates (VSBA) designed “from the outside in” — and, as Venturi said in

16 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 134. This regular arrangement of rooms in Rowe’s “favoured example,” while not a “type,” per se, is perhaps reminiscent of the way Kenneth Frampton defines “type” in his analytic category of “context/type”: “The emphasis in *Comparative Analysis of Built Form* falls on a programmatic reading of the idea of type in as much as the buildings are compared as institutional types responding to a similar program. Thus, houses are compared to houses, public buildings to public buildings, and so on; however, the formal and/or organic antecedents of two buildings under consideration are by no means ignored, nor is the fact that certain works are hybrids of the formal and the organic.” Kenneth Frampton, *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form*, ed. Ashley Simone (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2015), 32.

17 It’s worth noting that for the architect and theorist Peter Eisenman this idea of the duality between inside and outside may have been a question of what was intrinsic or extrinsic to “architecture as such,” (as if such a thing exists) whereby architecture could be autonomous or free from context, governed by its own intrinsic laws; the “interior,” self-contained essence of architecture, in this view, might be hampered by the “exterior” elements of context. (Here, I derive my interpretation of Eisenman’s views primarily from page 3 of Esin Komez-Daglioglu’s 2017 dissertation at Delft University of Technology, *Reclaiming Context: Architectural Theory, Pedagogy and Practice since 1950.*

18 A building is like a soap bubble. This bubble is perfect and harmonious if the breath has been evenly distributed and regulated from the inside. The exterior is the result of the interior.” Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Reprint (London: Dover Publications, 1986), 181.
his Pritzker Architecture Prize acceptance speech, “from the inside out” — but they designed, 

mostly, “from the outside in”; what did Venturi mean by designing “from the outside in,” and how did that manifest in the design of Bard Library?19

19 Note to the reader: when I discuss Venturi’s own writing, although it, like any written work, emerged as a product of an individual’s collaboration with number of other sources, I say “Venturi”; when I discuss the ideas that emerged during the period when Venturi was in explicit collaboration with Denise Scott Brown, I say “VSB”; and when I am describing the architectural team who worked on the Stevenson addition to Bard Library, specifically, I say “VSBA.”
Hoffman (built 1893), as it appeared from the perspective of the north approach in the early 1900s. Image courtesy of Bard College Archives.

The new box on the left: the “Kellogg” addition (completed in 1976). This was more or less what the site looked like when VSBA came to see it for the first time in 1989. Image courtesy of Bard College Archives.
When Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates (VSBA) looked at Hoffman, they didn’t just see a Greek Revival temple with a box stuck to it. They saw a painfully disharmonious composition made of two parts: a perfectly proportioned, but tectonically fake temple in the ionic order;\(^{20}\) and, well, Kellogg. When they looked at Hoffman a second time, perhaps they saw the Acropolis, high on a hill, full of symbolic potential. And when they looked again at Kellogg, perhaps they saw a half-built, designed-from-the-inside-out extrusion that vaguely referenced Hoffman’s formal qualities by way of its cylindrical stair shafts.

Insofar as their “Stevenson” addition was a “decorated shed,” it was designed from the outside in insofar as it was painted by this context;\(^{21}\) it was a shed — its overall composition emerged not just from the outside in, but also from the inside out: it contained a series of floor plates that supported the weight of stacks, tables, and senior carols— and it was decorated — its yellow, orange, and purple facade facing Hoffman has a playful, non-mimetic but certainly-on-speaking-terms relationship with its neighbor.

\(^{20}\) Many of the materials used in Hoffman’s construction — its tin roof, for instance — were not authentic to Greek architecture.

\(^{21}\) This way of seeing architecture either as a “duck,” whereby the overall form and series of elements contorted to symbolic meaning — architecture as sculpture — or a decorated shed, whereby symbolic decoration was applied as ornament on the outside of an otherwise simple, function-driven arrangement of parts, appeared in *Learning From Las Vegas*, but it was actually not Las Vegas that gave rise to this theory, but, rather, what appeared in Venturi and Scott Brown’s minds when they saw the “Long Island Duckling” in Peter Blake’s book, *God’s Own Junkyard*. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Revised ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1988), 88.
In comparison to how the architects of an addition to the nearby Kline Dining Commons responded to Hoffman, VSBA created a more abstract and playful response (left), whose fit with its context, on first glance, perhaps seems to have nothing to do with its context. But on second and third and ... thirty-first glance, one is able to see the subtle allusions in its fenestration.
The 2012 addition to Kline (designed by PSA Studios) referenced Hoffman (visible in window’s reflection) by the simple formal gesture of the inclusion of a colonnade. Venturi and Scott Brown surely would have scoffed at these much-too-obvious efforts to speak to context.
Designing from the outside in also meant bringing elements normally found outside — windows whose frames say “exterior,” in this case.

(Note: This photo shows the northern interior of the Stevenson wing of the library, which is lined with offices or study spaces, and which faces the area that has been designated as the location of the library expansion project.)
Looking down at Stevenson’s main entry area from a group study room in the fourth floor, one can see the “loft” within (above the dotted line on the left) — whose fenestration emphasizes horizontality, in contrast to the vertical beams of the atrium shell facing Hoffman (dotted line on right); here, again, elements one would expect to see outside are brought inside: the windows, most obviously, but also the columns of Hoffman abstracted in a wooden material (highlighted by the rectangle).
That Stevenson’s loft-like quality “learned from” the form of a “19th century mill building” that would be found in this part of the world on this kind of sloping topography, as opposed to some easily locatable reference (like the nearby Kline Commons’ colonnade that mirrored Hoffman’s), was to practice what Denise Scott Brown preached when she said: “Our ‘Learning from’ studies took a more muscular view of context than had the Moderns.”22 (Was this not a precedent [a loft building] contorted by its context? Was this, too, designing from the “inside out?”)23


23 I first encountered the description of Stevenson as a “loft building” when digging through archival materials, but later also discovered it described like this in one of Scott Brown and Venturi’s published books. Reflecting on the project in the context of a book which explored how their work engaged “symbolism and ornament and emphasize[d] iconographic content,” (41), Venturi described the building differently from how he had in the early 1990s: “A flexible loft whose front façade is identified by its vivid colors as the main entrance of the complex almost hidden around a corner. The rhythmic composition relates to that of the Classical façade of the original building to which it is attached, and to the entrance pavilion which responds symbolically to the same historical façade.” Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, *Architecture as Signs and Systems: For a Mannerist Time*, The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 56.
When VSBA saw Kellogg’s atrium (pictured here), did they “learn from” how it re-contextualized Hoffman’s columns by bringing them into an interior condition?
To VSBA, designing “from the outside in” meant that their design emerged in response to their perception of the existing stylistic and symbolic context. VSBA considered not only the relationship between the existing and the new, but also their reciprocal influence on one another. Designing from the outside in, at Bard, meant considering that which fell outside of the programmatic requirements defined in the project brief and 1989 Masterplan. But it also meant something quite literal, something related to the way architecture is designed to control the movement of bodies navigating space.

24 “Frank Lloyd Wright often mentions the important effect of its site on the design of a building. But this thesis maintains that this effect is reciprocal. […] by means of its relationship to its setting, [a new building] becomes a part in a perceptual whole,” wrote Venturi in 1950. Curiously here, Venturi equates “site” to “context”; perhaps this equation further shows the importance of history and change in relation to these ideas: in other words, both “context” and “site” are what came before the new building — and that new building will, eventually, become the “context” of another new building. And so on and so forth.


25 Perhaps to understand what Venturi meant by designing “from the outside in,” it is important to investigate how he conceived of the relationship between inside and out in general. This question goes outside the bounds of this thesis, but I will include two quotations which bear striking relevance to Stevenson’s design. In Complexity and Contradiction, Venturi writes: “Contradiction between the inside and the outside may manifest itself in an unattached lining which produces an additional space between the lining and the exterior wall.” This evokes the entry atrium of Stevenson. And later on that page: “The essential purpose of the interiors of buildings is to enclose rather than direct space, and to separate the inside from the outside.” This idea of “directing space,” perhaps, has something to do with circulation. Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), 74.
In the addition to the Bard College Library, the flow of pedestrian traffic expected to trickle down from the hillcrest is first gathered in a vesicle-shaped forecourt, where it is turned sideways and then pumped, as it were, towards the interior. In such a way the building, which at first glance may almost be reduced to the colorful yellow and white curtain wall that emerges to the side of the old Ionic peripteros, turns out to be essentially a mouth, or the architectural representation of a gulp [....]26

The column in the path does not just interact with its exterior context in terms of its aesthetic allusion: it also engages with the literal flow of people moving into the space from the outside in physical way. Concretized metaphor encounters the beings which give it meaning.
It was in his M.F.A. Thesis where Robert Venturi first articulated his aim to create successive perceptual experiences for imagined “viewers” moving through space who would, upon their “changing visual impressions” of the environment, perceive an architectural composition unfolding before them in motion. Conceiving of context in terms of two parameters, form and position, paths of movement were designed in order to orient the eyes of a perceiving subject to the shifting positions of forms in space for the sake of aesthetic and symbolic experience:

The second main consideration concerning position involves the relation of the location of the building to the path of motion of the observer. The designer’s partial control of the changing visual impressions — what is seen, how it is seen, and in what sequence — can be employed for establishing harmony and expressing a whole. Through the adjustment of the exit and entrance driveways, by revising the existing one-way traffic system, and through the relation of the new building to them and the existing buildings, the chapel is to be seen first at an appropriate angle by the entering automobile and thereby through its form is to establish the architectural character of the composition as a whole and create a frame of reference for the other buildings to be seen within the whole when their forms come into view. A historical precedent occurs in the relative position of the Propylaea which acts not only as the entrance of the Acropolis but as a means to control the approach to the Parthenon.27

These “Propylaea,” the plural and Acropolis-specific version of “propylaem,” controlled the approach to the Parthenon in two senses: in terms of the physical possibilities of movement, and in terms of the perceptual.

At Bard, VSBA created a grotesque, iconographic version of a Greek propylaem (or propylon), which is an element found in Classical architecture that serves as an entrance before the entrance to a temple, was both a nod to the famous precedent at the Parthenon and an attempt

to bring unity to the overall composition of the library. It is not a perfect reproduction of a propylaeum, and is therefore a perfect example of VSB’s tendency not to copy, but rather to “learn from,” and play with, historic precedents. All it frames, from afar, is nothing more than a plain brick wall and a terribly unexciting, desolate bench.

Two of its too-big, brutalist-inspired columns (whose materiality speaks to Kellogg, perhaps) are squished together on one side to make room for a side “doorway” to a second path of movement; there, a flight of stairs lead to a swampy grass field below and the unpaved paths towards the campus’ biggest dirt parking lot and, beyond, Stevenson Athletic Center and a growing concentration of where students live on campus. Those approaching the building or the campus’ “central spine,” as it was referred to, from these northern points of origin pass through the library’s propylaeum and make use of the library’s circulatory infrastructure to access the context beyond.

The propylon frames the approach to the temple for both the eyes and the feet; it controls the literal path of movement and and the extent of movement reachable by the eyes of the person moving through space. Circulation paths were designed to situate the “observer” to the larger architectural composition which was understood in terms of a whole comprised of a series of compositional parts. “Observer” is an interesting choice of words in lieu of “user,” and it is indicative of Venturi’s conception of architecture as art.
At Bard’s library, VSBA’s “propylaeum” to this “temple” of learning serves as a doorless threshold before the forecourt. It was only recently that the word “library” appeared on its edifice. (It seems it did not communicate its meaning through its form — so it’s not quite a “duck”; but it’s also not quite a decorated shed, since, well, it’s not much of a “shed”—would it be more appropriate to call it a *decorative duck*?)
From the northern approach, the propylaeum serves both as an entrance to the library (1) and as an entrance to main campus (2) — that is, if you can climb the stairs.
Part Two: Analysis of Path Accessibility

The two walkways will be constructed in the lawn area south of Hoffman to provide campus access to the new library entrance plaza. As stated earlier, the expected presence of rock near ground surface will limit regrading in this area. The "New Library Walk" will be cut into the existing grades to accommodate access for the handicapped to the main library entrance. The second walk (identified on the site plan as "new Walk"), serving primarily as a shortcut path for students approaching the library from the "Manor" path, will be constructed with a steeper grade, so as to reduce rock removal, and therefore will not serve as handicapped access route. The walkways will be constructed using bluestone walkway pavers. Asphalt will be indicated as an alternate material for cost reduction.

A minor pedestrian walkway will be provided along the west side of the new building between the plaza staircase and the new service drive. This walkway will be constructed with a gravel surface.

All lawn areas disturbed by the construction will be fertilized, topsoiled and seeded to re-establish vegetative cover as soon as practical.

Archival record of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates’ 1990 Additions and Renovations to Bard College Library Schematic Design Volume 1. (Highlights are my own.) This document shows the rationale behind their decision to not make what is now called Kappa path accessible-grade. Courtesy of Bard College Archives.

It was in the middle of VSBA’s design-development when the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was finally passed. Stevenson had the lever handles recommended by the
advocates of Universal Design, the adequate number of accessible parking spaces, and an
elevator which met the new code requirements.28

In a way, Stevenson did make main campus more accessible. Hoffman and Kellogg did
not attempt to negotiate between the levels of topographic change, and, instead, sat much more
clearly on the higher ground. The library’s director told me that some students use the building’s
(one) elevator to access the otherwise inaccessible main campus. But to do so is a multi-step
procedure:

1) Ring the doorbell (if it’s between 9AM and 5PM — if not, call campus security) and wait to
be let in;

2) Awkwardly move through the two sets of doors in the narrow entry vestibule with someone
holding the doors open for you;

3) Get escorted through the office area, passing through a number of narrow corridors and
beyond more heavy fire doors;

28 Commenting on the lever handle, Aimi Hamraie — author of Building Access: Universal Design and
the Politics of Disability and who is the “assistant professor of medicine, health, and society and
American studies at Vanderbilt University,” (to quote the back of the book) — offers historically situated
commentary on an image in one of the Universal Design handbook where “a marginalized user,
encumbered by what she carried, and therefore [who] benefited from the added leverage of the door
handle, which she pressed down with her elbow” (187). For Hamraie, the illustration in Universal
Design: Housing for the Lifespan of All People serves as an example of how “the apparently young,
nondisabled African American woman’s image becomes legible as part of ‘all’ users by serving as an
emblem of racial difference itself” (187-8).

Hamraie is critical of the possibility of designing for “all”: “Building Access has challenged the idea that
Universal Design is merely commonsense, good design for all. Accepting this idea on its face elides the
frictioned struggles and strategic interventions that accessible design produces and therefore tells us little
about the critical work of negotiating, contesting, and remaking access-knowledge” (259).

Instead, Hamraie advocates for a different framework, namely, “disability justice: “Reorienting Universal
Design toward disability justice lets us imagine futures in which the legacies of racial segregation, mass
incarceration, homelessness, immigration systems, and environmental injustice, alongside aging,
disability, and gender, are issues that shape who counts as ‘everyone’ and how designers can know.” Aimi
Hamraie, Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 261.
4) Face a quite-possibly broken down, minimum-size elevator — again, while being escorted through (the elevator is rather tight for more than one person);

5) And, finally, once arriving at Level One (the elevation of main campus), go through another two sets of doors, whose mechanical door-openers will quite possibly be broken.

6) (Oh, and then you have to get from that point to main campus, moving around puddles, ice, loose stones, and other obstacles in the path — but that’s for next project.)
The building is inaccessible for staff too. It’s good that staff and deliveries have their own entrance, she said, and it is convenient for the offices to be near where deliveries are made — and convenient for the staff entrance to be near their offices (especially after the relatively long walk from the staff parking lot). But many members of the staff are on the second, third, and even fourth floor, as in the case of the archivists, so when the building’s only elevator breaks down, they are forced to climb a narrow concrete stairwell to get to their offices.
In this diagram of the greater context, lines indicate general movement patterns used by students. Those which are of inaccessible gradient or which have other barriers to access are red; those which are relatively accessible are blue.
Here, the famous “Nolli” plan of Rome is reinterpreted to communicate the inaccessibility of the higher elevation of campus. The existing building -- and the site of the expansion -- sit at a critical vector of these paths of movement.
One of the greatest sources of this building’s inaccessibility is its effort to restrict movement through one controlled main entrance and exit for the sake of book security and architectural experience. This drawing shows the locations of what are currently “emergency exits” in terms of their elevation in relation to various nearby paths. Might their re-definition — and a redesign of the doors themselves — be the simplest way to instantly improve the building’s accessibility in respect to its surrounding context?
Design

To learn how to create a more accessible architecture, I had to step outside of the world of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown and apply their idea of “learning from” to other sources of knowledge. Of the myriad examples of thoughtful accessible design, a precedent which offers
Reproduction of the entry area of Ed Roberts Campus in Berkely, CA, by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects.

an example of providing multiple means of accessible vertical circulation in its immediate entry area can be found in the Ed Roberts Center for Disability Studies in Berkeley, California,
designed by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects and named after one of the pioneers of the Independent Living movement, which predated ADA by twenty years.29

Upon entering through automatic sliding glass doors (1), visitors have several options for reaching the second floor: an extra-wide (seven-foot), double-sided elevator with buttons designed with wheelchair users in mind (2); a gently sloping spiral ramp, which also serves as a history of the disability rights movement and encircles a space for gathering, with rests every quarter turn (3); and, for those who prefer stairs (or because of egress code requirements), stairs (4).

As I also learned from my friend Tallulah who has a physical disability but does not use a wheelchair, long horizontal paths — such as those found on long networks of ramps — can pose a challenge: to have an elevator close to the entry area, therefore — and other options to take elevators for vertical circulation at various moments when one may confront a long ramp — is absolutely pertinent.

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29 Of the Ed Roberts Campus in particular, Hamraie writes: “A triumph for disability movements, the Ed Roberts Campus embodies Universal Design’s spirit and function and simultaneously symbolizes potent histories of crip noncompliance and disruption. But the building is also a single, vulnerable node in the contentious politics of systematic change.” Aimi Hamraie, Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 258. For a broader political-historical discussion on Ed Roberts and the “Independent Living Movement,” see, especially, Chapter 4 of that book.

Revised Project Brief:

How can this addition respond to its context, where the context is understood as:

1. the proximity to an aesthetically eclectic library last revised by VSBA, with an awareness of VSBA’s approach to architecture, especially as context and circulation are concerned; and

2. the terribly inaccessible “accessible” entrance and treacherous network of paths here and at Bard campus in general (and the tendency for libraries elsewhere — even recently built [the Queens Public Library, for instance] — to be organized around stairs), and;

3. the “programmatic” needs of:
   - students
     - “We need another coffee shop! And covered areas outside to work and hang out!” (I paraphrase.)
   - the President
     - “The most important thing for the library expansion project is to provide beautiful study space.”
   - and of the library, as indicated by staff members (and especially the director, Betsy Cawley)
     - “Where do I begin… We need a lot of things, including:
       - More stacks [book storage],
       - More classrooms,
       - More offices,
       - A consolidation of library services — the Interlibrary Loan area, for instance, should be on the first floor,
       - The improvement of archival storage space,
- More exhibition areas for student and visiting artists’ work,
- and,
  - We value sustainability,
  - And accessibility,
  - And, what else? Oh, we don’t want our roof to keep leaking.”

“Why does the roof leak, do you think?” I asked Betsy.

“IT’s made of rubber, and the vultures who sometimes perch on it have sharp claws!”

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30 See “Epilogue” and “Appendix” for more on the consideration of vultures and hostile roofs.
Whereas the existing building has restricted movement due to its controlled points of entry and exit, in this scheme, there are myriad points of entry and exit.

Paths of circulation can be used for study or rest, at any point in space. To use a cliche, the journey is the destination.
Learning from the vertical circulation of the Ed Roberts Campus, the design is essentially organized around three cylinders — forms which emerged from the new accessible circulatory paths which move in, out, and around the building — whose intersections serve as undefined liminal spaces and whose insides serve different needs identified in the “Revised Project Brief.” There is both a prioritization of accessibility in designing for the experience of moving through space and in the positioning of a number of services that should be accessible outside of the library’s envelope.

Learning from Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s approach to designing from “both the inside out and the outside in” — where the “inside” (the library’s programmatic needs in its expansion) grows in harmonious tension with the “outside” (the surrounding context, defined here in terms of paths of movement), these spaces are organized in terms of “outside,” “outside/inside,” and “inside”:
“OUTSIDE”— the approach, the conception of the whole — doorless sheltered areas

Movement: long, trying to get somewhere

- for the approach for cars, especially delivery drivers, staff, people getting dropped off, and, most notably, those with mobility related disabilities traveling from car to access the building or main campus
- or the approach for bikes and other dismountable vehicles, an area to store bikes;
- and, for the approach for those who do not need to store vehicles somewhere — those in motorized wheelchairs or on foot, for instance, traveling from North Campus towards the Rugby Field — who need to get out of the rain when the “building” is closed.
A liminal, ambiguous space which serves as an entrance to the library envelope, an area accessible to both the library “inside” and those traversing the surrounding context “outside”—a café serving coffee and light meals, and its surroundings, many luxurious bathrooms which could also serve those attending graduation or visitors to Bard campus at other times, a lactation room (identified as a need by director of libraries, Betsy Cawley), spaces to gather, noisier spaces to study, hang out, perform plays and present art.
“INSIDE”

Movement: stillness, deep thought, silence, the realization of the “difficult whole,” which is both a part and a whole.

The area within the “envelope of the library,” which houses additional, more protected exhibition space, where books, archival material, and quiet areas to study or think (or “think-not-think,” to reference Zen) are kept safe, where classrooms with large monitors can be locked for the night, where library staff have offices and can assist those inside the library proper; it is an area inside with an accessible rooftop courtyard outside (the addition otherwise has a dominance of enclosed space, due to the increasingly unpredictable climate in Annandale-On-Hudson and the world at
large, but one should be able to access the outdoors from inside the envelope of the library proper. large); it is an area that reaches towards the light, next to treetops, next to vultures, where an accessible library can facilitate knowledge beyond the book; it is, (not to sound grotesquely poetic or anything) an area where “context” dissolves into the silence of the absolute, and the project of the library can finally be “finished.”
Epilogue

How do the Vultures Perceive the Building?

•

What is it to design thinking about the existing architecture in terms of how birds “see” it?

Styles slip away.

Materials selected to reference the architectural context —

or selected to accommodate the overall architectural form which was designed in response to its context

— the roof was flat to celebrate Hoffman’s through contrast —

— now seem absurd, crumbling, or pecked away, full of leaks, and not because of the birds.
Stevenson Athletic Center, built around the time VSBA came to Bard in the early 90s, sits across Campus Road in line with the site of the planned library expansion project — has an even more uninviting roof than Stevenson Library.

Pictured here, vultures are discouraged from perching and pooping near the HVAC infrastructure. Fake vulture carcasses are hung next to a spike-topped air handling unit. On the right is an inflatable flailing “scarecrow” (or “scarevulture,” in this case).
Vulture perched on the library’s roof.
Appendix

In this section, I have included additional “parts” which I feel are worth sharing but which I could not readily synthesize into the main body of this thesis (a thesis which Venturi might consider to be a “difficult whole” — or just difficult — if he were alive — and willing — to read it.)

Some pieces are photos, “contextualized” by captions or by their placement in relation to one another. Hopefully, at the very least, those will provide further historical record for what Bard campus looked like around 2020-2022.

Other pieces are excerpts from my design “notebook” — which is often my iPad, and other times black pen on white paper (I haven’t quite yet figured out color). Perhaps these provide glimpses into the movement of my design ideas over the course of this project.

Key:

• = rest / end of “meditation period.”
Diagram showing my understanding of the distinction between the meaning of “context” and “site.” I drew this on my iPad sitting in my car in front of the library as I often do while listening to strange synthesizer music in a creative state of meditative anxiety.
Less-invasive design concepts

- UPDATED SIGNAGE. Addition of new signs show how to get to main campus or through the building. This could be a printed version of an axonometric diagram showing how one can get from various points on the lower elevation to the higher elevation where main campus is while avoiding the use of stairs.

- STUDY / REST “LEAN-TOS” ALONG MAIN CIRCULATORY PATHS. A network of simple shelters — propylae? — which could be expanded incrementally could be built along the main circulatory paths, expanding the campus’ stock of study space without the need to
create an enormous new building. Whereas VSB’s propylaeum did not provide much space to pause and perhaps intentionally encouraged movement, these “propylaea” would be designed to contain the necessary sedentariness of a Bard student rushing to finish their senior project.

- RE-DEFINITION OF EXISTING DOORS. Reconfigure existing entries/exits (inspired by VSB), replacing existing entrances and exits and redo entry / exit paths to make accessible when needed. Building remains operational as it is but it can now be “passed and meandered through” as opposed to “entered and exited.”

- RE-DEFINITION OF EXISTING BUILDING WINGS. This proposal involves not only an opening up and revised definition of the existing doors, but also a redefinition of the existing (and additional, if built) wings of the building. “Hoffman” becomes a place of blisteringly quiet study surrounded by safe-guarded books on the Classics. “Kellogg” becomes a 24/7 accessible study space with computers, printers, classrooms, and a revised café. Stevenson remains the location of where most Library services per se are housed — offices, the reference and circulation desks, interlibrary loan, etc.

- Submerged building with turf roof as boundless accessible paths. Path edges, important for those who are deaf or have a reduced field of vision, are painted in bright colors.
Precedents: OMA, VSB, Kahn.

Venturi-Scott Brown’s “internal streets,” which they described as being inspired, in part, by Louis Kahn, were based on thoughtful considerations of streets which already existed. Denise Scott Brown writes:

Lou Kahn evolved a typology of streets, which he likened to waterways, and eventually he added an extra category — the street within the building. Learning from Kahn, Crane, and transportation planning, we have taken this internal street, tied it to external pathways that lead to the building, and made it the spine of the public sector of our buildings.31

At the Campus Center at Bard, there is a kind of street through the building. One of the cafés is literally called Down The Road (DTR). This kind of organization around a series of hallways, each of which have multiple possible points of entry and exit, is conducive to social encounters, and, because of the tiling end, prevalence of hard surfaces, tremendous noise and echo.

There are seats along the hallways, and Offices, and other kinds of “destinations,” and these seats are rather appealing work spaces for those who focus best in an environment of movement, noise, and activity.

Would creating a “street” through the existing library not take away the quiet of the stacks, which is perhaps one of the most characteristic features of the library? Would students seeking silence really like to have circulatory paths of movement right next to them as they study?

I think the answer is that some would and some wouldn’t. People have different kinds of preferences for study environments. And those preferences may change based on the task, their mood, whether they’re having a fight with someone they’d rather not see — there are ways of designing a building such that someone can see who is in an area before being seen, if they are trying to avoid certain social encounters.)

So the answer, to me, is to appropriate some of this idea of streets through a building, but not take that street through the entirety of the building, and have a variety of noise levels and proximities to paths of movement.

The street should only go through the already “busy” part of the building; the higher, quieter levels should have circulation routes adjusted delicately and maintain the envelope of the library.
Images of where the new addition would “puncture” the existing, and perhaps create a “street through the building.”
Explorations in ramp design and circulation paths

Three easy circles. The middle is where inside and out dissolve.
(TRI-DIRECTIONAL) ELEVATOR AS STRUCTURAL ELEMENT
Circulation studies with bread clasp. 1.
Circulation studies with bread clasp. 2.
Given that the height of Bard’s library is much taller than the entry area of the Ed Roberts, it would be dizzying to have just one central spiraling ramp. Therefore, a series of “Ensō circles” (perfectly incomplete) are linked together to form a winding series of spaces with varying degrees of “inside-ness.”
In this scheme, those trying to access main campus can use the infrastructure of the new whether or not the library itself is open. From the north approach, two routes allow one to pass through the building: a circular elevator (represented by the small cylinder) takes one to either the elevation of Level One (the entrance to the library proper) or the elevation of main campus beyond. This path is the shortest horizontal distance. The arrow on the left is another accessible route for those who don’t mind a longer horizontal distance but for whom steep gradients are a barrier to access.

By way of the addition of a part, the whole is re-contextualized and turned into a kind of giant double-functioning propylaeum. It makes the conditions for comfort, gathering, and learning accessible for both the library and the campus at large, like many good public libraries, in academic or non-academic contexts.
Graphical Works Used

For drawings of people, furniture, and other details beyond the line-work generated via my 3d model, I used Cad Lab Studio’s isometric vector figures (https://studioalternati.com/products/isometric-mega-pack?pr_prod_strat=use_description&pr_rec_id=c87c3d12a&pr_rec_pid=6673077305407&pr_ref_pid=6673061543999&pr_seq=uniform)