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VINCENT SCULLY PRIZE AWARD CEREMONY

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown
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Official Transcript

ROBERT VENTURI: Everyone here knows that being creative is accompanied by agony—agony as well as ecstasy—and because of the agony factor, it is appreciation and encouragement that are essential to us struggling artists. I love the quote of Eliza Doolittle, “To be a lady I must be treated like a lady.” And so Denise Scott Brown and I are especially grateful for this gracious form of recognition today—hypergracious form of recognition—on the part of the Scully Prize jury, an event also generously attended by so many friends. And then we especially appreciate your treating us as partners and recognizing thereby that in our complex time—at least in the complex medium of architecture—collaboration is essential within the process of creativity. A single genius in the ivory tower is no longer essential—at least, again, in the medium of architecture.

And then there is the Scully factor—involving the individual who first recognized me and my ideas almost 40 years ago, along with the then-young Yale student, Robert Stern, at the risk, in the case of Vince, of compromising his established reputation at the time. And who has understood and supported us ever since. And whom we all here continue to learn from. Viva Vince Scully!

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: I just want to add at this point a little piece of information. The Scully Prize comes not only with a beautiful glass obelisk but also with $25,000, and this unexpected windfall we’ve decided to give to CHAD. CHAD should now come up on the slides.

The AIA held its convention in Philadelphia in the year 2000 and left a legacy project as they always do in the host city. In Philadelphia, local architects persuaded them to fund a charter high school for architecture and design. Charter schools, run by independent groups, but using public school funds, help the struggling Philadelphia school district.

Architects, designers and members of the construction industry have entered into CHAD enthusiastically as volunteer teachers and supporters. Scott Killinger from the Hillier Group and Natalie Weathers of Philadelphia University, both on the board of CHAD, and Barbara Chandler Allen its Director of Development, are here, if you want to ask them questions later.

CHAD is a tuition-free, public independent high school. It has a 9th through 12th grade, academic, college prep curriculum, but its pedagogy also has a design basis and much teaching happens via studio. Its kids are mostly from very poor, minority families, yet 82% of the 2002 graduates went on to college, and there is a 95% average daily student attendance—almost unheard of in Philadelphia city schools. In learning creative problem solving through design, these students don't necessarily intend to be architects. They're learning how to manage life.

At CHAD there are teachers from many different professions: architects, illustrators, scientists, people from the fashion industry. I've heard that about 40% of the students in art schools have dyslexia. It surely can't be too different for architects. We architects know that people who think visually tend to learn differently from those who are more verbal. This is a difference, not a disability, and educators are giving increasing attention to the notion that there are different styles of learning. I believe that, by marrying special education and studio education, CHAD could do much for those who learn best visually, whoever they are. This would benefit education in general and kids all over. So we've asked CHAD to use some of our donation to help their special ed teachers and their studio teachers to talk and write about studio as a means of learning that has an applicability to many types of education.

These are the reasons why our hearts are with CHAD. It's a wonderful thing for the AIA National to have started. It's a wonderful thing to continue. (applause)

Please put on the other two slides. There you see their kids. Look at their style.

ROBERT VENTURI: Now for the subject: I shall first, via a kind of Ungentle Manifesto, engage the subject of Context in Architecture and Urbanism—context as the subject I introduced in my master's thesis at Princeton 52 years ago—and as an element that dominates architectural thinking and process today—while it is at the same time often misunderstood. Here is a quick manifesto:

- Context is an essential architectural element because meaning derives from context as affirmed in Gestalt psychology.
- Context is important because it acknowledges a whole beyond the single building and enhances an extended unity.
- Acknowledgement and accommodation of context does not mean the new has to look like the old in architectural or urban composition: harmony can derive from contrast as well as from analogy, as my teacher Jean Labatut proclaimed many years ago; you can wear a gray suit with a gray necktie, or a gray suit with a red necktie, and engage perceptual harmony. But you can also wear a gray suit with a gray necktie which has red polka dots, and engage thereby dissonance.
- And dissonance, as well as lyricism—I love to point out, as in the works of Beethoven—can be appropriate in a composition that engages tension.
- And all this must be acknowledged as very relevant in our time within the design review process or processes that dominate the practice of architecture of our time and engage hundreds of kinds of bureaucratic review boards and committees pervading our Byzantine era, and that can work to persecute architects and stultify architecture. Here is an idealistic idea—that of community participation—that in the end, has succumbed largely to special interests.
- Let's not forget the appropriate range of complexity involving context or contexts in the plural, cultural, sociological, urbanistic, aesthetic, rather than just formal or ideological. Let us not forget our First Amendment rights that promote freedom of speech, but should engage freedom of

expression, artistic expression as well as verbal expression! A bas Fascist unity: Viva vulgar, or, at least, messy vitality. Zoning restrictions, yes. Ideological dominance, no.

- Lastly, a prime example of a particularly American kind, and valid kind, of urban contextualism which engages contrast as well as analogy, dissonance as well as unity—and this is the typical American gridiron system of planning established in the 17th century plan of William Penn's Philadelphia, each of whose streets extends to an infinite frontier and works not as an axis with an equivalent of a ducal palace as a termination, but where the consequent consistency of the gridiron plan is balanced by architectural individuality within the blocks, that can engage valid and vital chaos. Across the street from the mayor's house can theoretically be a delicatessen. Here evolves order and democracy, where a building's importance derives not from its hierarchical position but from its inherent quality. Note: there can be wonderful exceptions, as in L'Enfant's juxtapositions of diagonal axial avenues upon the American gridiron system, creating an element of hierarchy in Washington appropriate for a national capital.

These subjects have been broadly and beautifully analyzed by Denise Scott Brown in our *Learning From Las Vegas* book and in her articles in *Lotus International* and the *Harvard Design Review*. Her part of our talk will continue this discussion of context in context.

DENISE SCOTT BROWN: There's a lot of talk about context, especially in Washington. The discussion derives largely from Postmodernism and has to do with fitting in and with borrowing. In choosing the title "Context in Context," our idea was to broaden the discourse, to enlarge the idea of context. Starting a long way back: As a student living in South Africa, I worked vacations on a paleontological site, camping in a real wilderness where there were no people, except us, as far as the eye could see. And because I always got incompletes in school and had to finish my drawings, there were times when I stayed back at the camp while everyone else went to work at the fossil site.

So I was set up in a small hut with a drawing board and, when the others left, animals started coming around. With the singing veldt around me, I had the feeling of being part of the overall pattern of the wilderness, as if I and my body and the landscape were one—I felt a child of nature.

This was a romantic vision, for sure, and my notion of the wilderness landscape where a resourceful camper could find all needs satisfied, was overblown, but I count myself lucky to have had this experience in my life. As campers, our entry into that landscape left no trace and at that time I could imagine no building on this landscape. There was no building that I felt would not sully it.

Back from the wilderness, I was taught in architecture school in the late 1940s that I would have to decide whether to design buildings that stood out from the landscape, like Le Corbusier, or that entered into the landscape, like Frank Lloyd Wright. This was a Modernist, early Modernist, view of context, although that was not the word they used. Context for my teachers was the landscape. It was something the building stood against or nestled into, not an element in its own right, having its own dialogue with the building. I sometimes go to an old dictionary, one that doesn't know about electronics, and context there is defined as "the parts of a discourse or writing which precede or follow, and are directly connected with, a given passage or word." In other words, context surrounds text—what my teachers felt.

The Modernist view of context as a passive background was transferred to urbanism. Early modern architects wanted to clear away the existing city and replace it with light-seeking towers in a green landscape. Later, landscape became townscape, and modern architects aimed to achieve unity with the existing city via contrast with it. Jean Labatut, as Bob said, suggested that analogy and contrast were both ways of producing harmony. Our particular addition to that thought is the gray tie with the red polka dots.

These—ours included—are early Modernist views. They are the substance of the Modernist debate with context. For example, Gunnar Asplund's addition to the Gothenburg Law Courts was much admired in the 1950s by my teachers at the Architectural Association in London, because it maintained the dimensions and the façade plane of the existing building, yet it was starkly modern.

A second strain in Modernism produced prescriptions for well-behaved in architecture. In 1944, A.T. Edwards wrote *Good Manners in Architecture*. Manners required that proportions, cornice heights and other regulating lines of the building next door be maintained in the new building. He was, you could say, an early proponent of thinking about context in a Postmodernism way. My generation of students at the AA called this "ghastly good taste."

I have always preferred the red polka dot approach. I maintain that the architect who doesn't respond to context is a boor, but the architect who responds only to context is a bore. Our "learning from" studies didn't derive from a view of good manners. For Bob, the major influences were his Princeton education and his experience in Rome, where he came to believe that attention paid to context in architecture could enrich the design of buildings and that, to the extent context had meaning, it could be interpreted anew with each increment of building. You heard Bob say that. He said that in the 1950s, as Vincent Scully showed. Bob also introduced me to something Frank Lloyd Wright had written: "The house did something remarkable to that site. The site was stimulating before the house went up, but like developer poured over a negative, when you view the environment framed by the architecture of the house from within, somehow, like magic—charm appears in the landscape and will be there whenever you look. The site seems to come alive."

I've often pondered whether Wright's approach was applicable to my problem of not wanting to add at all to the African wilderness, that you could bring new meaning to it. Maybe some African wilderness. But some other parts I may still not want to touch at all.

Another aspect of growing up in Africa was that I was tuned to dissonance between cultural groups. The whole world knows the horrible side of that dissonance, but there was a lively, creative side too. The confrontation between African and European cultures I saw in my childhood, and the English New Brutalist embrace of working-class cultures I saw as a student in London in the early 1950s, suggested that these cultural schisms could be a vital source of creativity in architecture and urbanism.

Our early experiences led both Bob and me to become friends when we met in 1960 and also to question the tenets of late modern architecture. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, we found the ideas of the social planners very challenging. They defined context as the vibrant, although suffering, social city around us.

At the same time, Pop artists were investing everyday objects with new meaning. We began to consider the architectural approach to context one-sided; seeing the new building as the only element of change, not seeing that context was shifting, as well; forgetting that our architecture will continue to change in the future, past the first program into subsequent, then later and later, programs. This was the beginning of the notion of generic architecture.

So we took a more muscular view of architecture in context than the Modernists had. If context was always of, or for, or around something, there was nevertheless an active engagement between object and context. Context was much larger than its object. It had a vital life of its own, depending on forces that caused it to keep forming and reforming; forces that would act on the individual project as well. An examination of fluctuating contexts might deliver planning principles and guidelines, to be learned from but not followed slavishly. The designer of a building or complex had the possibility of entering into the changing context almost as I entered the wilderness landscape, using and adapting its meanings in the individual project and, in so doing, changing the context once again. And both go on changing together forever.

On the basis of these thoughts, we fault Postmodernist tendencies to borrow indiscriminately from what is metaphorically next door—that is, from ideas that are intellectually proximate for architects. The first Postmodernist borrowings were from architects that Modernists had liked, for example, Ledoux. We questioned what was relevant about Ledoux for America today. You could make a better case for Palladio. His design influences have oscillated between Italy, England, and America for four hundred years and continue today, right into Levittown. So borrowing from Palladio would be culturally relevant.

Or when designing an office building in Chicago, why borrow from Sullivan's theater as the Postmodernists did? The early office buildings of Chicago could show how to mix grace with sturdiness in defining a commercial scale that is elegant but less than the civic. This is to repeat what Bob said: That we should think of our cultural context, that we should refer to sources that are relevant to the project at hand, not borrow from, for example, the building next door.

Thank you.