

VANNA VENTURI HOUSE
(Mother's House)
8330 Millman Street
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-6776
HABS PA-6776

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VANNA VENTURI HOUSE (Mother's House)

HABS No. PA-6776

Location: 8330 Millman Street, Philadelphia (Chestnut Hill), Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

The Vanna Venturi House is located at latitude – 40.070662, longitude – 75.208105. The coordinate represents a point at the center of the building's roof. It was obtained using Google Earth imagery, dated April 11, 2010. The Vanna Venturi House location has no restriction on its release to the public.

Significance: The Vanna Venturi House is a national and international icon of Post Modern architecture, appearing in numerous architectural history texts. Robert Venturi (b. 1925), the architect who provided many of the theoretical underpinnings for the movement, designed the house; it is held to be the first significant Post Modern building constructed in the United States. The building represented one of a number of architectural pathways that emerged from and reacted to the Modern glass and steel boxes dominating design in the decades immediately following World War II. The house was his first solo commission and an intensely personal one as the client was his recently widowed mother; as such, the residence is also known as "Mother's House." The building is equal parts a representation of Venturi's emerging concepts of contemporary architecture and physical manifestation of the specific needs of a strong and independent woman with whom he had a unique relationship.

Robert Venturi received his degrees in architecture and design from Princeton University and also studied at the American Academy in Rome. After his return from Europe in 1954, Venturi began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, first under Louis I. Kahn, and later as a professor in his own right. In the late 1950s, Louis I. Kahn was beginning his rise to national and international importance as an architect who, like Venturi later, was seeking alternatives to mid-century Modernism.¹ While ultimately distinct in their approaches and outcomes, working with Kahn at this time surely energized Venturi's own thought process.

Venturi's father died in 1959 after which his mother purchased a lot in the posh and leafy Philadelphia neighborhood of Chestnut Hill. Venturi was unmarried at this time and still living at home. He later reflected on how she came to choose her son for the design: "I think it was very simple: she had a son, she loved architecture and he did, and she trusted

¹ Louis I. Kahn's Margaret Esherick House stands a few lots away at 204 Sunrise Lane, a dead-end road entered directly across Millman Street from Mother's House. For more information on the Esherick House, see: HABS No. PA-6775.

him. I guess that's it."² The design went through a number of entirely distinct conceptual stages, which balanced Venturi's unfolding ideas about architecture and the functional needs of the client. A highly livable plan—with an open living-dining area at the center flanked by a covered porch and kitchen to one side and two bedrooms and a bathroom to the other—provided his mother a complete house on a single story. While not fully apparent from the front, a studio-bedroom, tiny bath, and walk-in closet occupied the upper level at center with a small balcony positioned behind the rear parapet. The room was intended for Venturi himself, the single adult son, and later allowed for flexible living arrangements as Vanna Venturi aged and for the subsequent owners.

While laudable, Venturi's ingenious plan, and comfortable and sophisticated assemblage of domestic space and interior features, taken alone, are not the reasons for which the house has reached iconic status in the history of American architecture. Rather, for Venturi, it was the contrast between the seemingly solid façade and the dynamism of the domestic space behind the façade. He completed Mother's House in 1964 and two years later published *Complexity and Contradiction*, a foundational text for Post Modern architecture. In the book, Venturi pushed back against the hegemony and purity of Modernism, arguing that architectural hybridity—that which is “complex and contradictory”—was more reflective of American life in the mid-twentieth century.

Venturi's love of history, interest in the ordinary or the everyday, and attraction to the intellectual playfulness of mannerism all fed into the simultaneous production of the book and Mother's House. The broad sweep of the roof, the square windows, and the dominant chimney are elements drawn from traditional domestic architecture, and reinforced the idea of the house as a place of shelter. The broken pediment—inspired by Blenheim Palace, the English baroque masterpiece—and the placement of the segments of an arch intersecting with the dominant lintel of a trabeated porch opening reference mannerist architectural traditions. The broken pediment is more than a stylistic convention, it offers a viewshed into the complicated forms and spaces behind the façade, revealed as an individual moves into and through the space. With Mother's House, Venturi provided a thoughtful alternative to orthodox Modernism and a viable demonstration of the opinion that “less is a bore.” The house remains in the ownership of the family of the couple who purchased it from Vanna Venturi, in 1973, towards the end of her life.

Works Consulted

Curtis, William J. R. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. London: Phaidon, 1996.

Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 4th ed. New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2007.

² As transcribed in: Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 203.

Friedman, Alice T. *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998.

Ghirardo, Diane. *Architecture After Modernism*. New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art and Doubleday, 1966.

Video interviews with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown available at Web of Stories (www.webofstories.com).

von Moos, Stanislaus. "Venturi, Robert." *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Volume 4. New York: The Free Press, 1982. 305-308.

Project Information: The recording of the Vanna Venturi House was sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service. Support and access provided by Agatha Hughes. The documentation was undertaken in 2009-10 by HABS under the direction of Richard O'Connor, Chief of Heritage Documentation Programs, and Catherine C. Lavoie, Chief of HABS. The project leaders were HABS historian James A. Jacobs and HABS photographer James Rosenthal.