Duelling Quotes
James Marston Fitch’s ‘Murder at the Modern’

Harry Margalit
UNSW Sydney

Abstract
After a long academic career, James Marston Fitch could not contain his dismay at the retreat of American architecture from the ideals espoused in the post-war years. The article at the core of this paper is Fitch’s polemic Murder at the Modern, published in the Architectural Review in 1997. In it Fitch quotes three authors extensively: Robert Venturi, Vincent Scully and Arthur Drexler. He sees them as having executed an about turn through their rejection of high modernism, and their espousal of historicism as a prelude to, and precondition for, post-modernism. All of this is well charted, but what remains striking about Fitch’s invective are the essentially materialist roots of his argument, and the dismay it reveals. He finds Venturi’s grounds for embracing complexity slight, and oblivious to the class dimensions and incongruities embodied in Venturi’s historical references. For Fitch, admiration for the Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo periods is a betrayal of the technical fundamentals of modern architecture. Since these cannot be reversed or compromised, architectural agency is confined to tame matters of expression. As champion for Venturi, Scully is drawn into the critique through his introduction to Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. Again the sense of betrayal is palpable, perhaps only slightly less than that directed towards Arthur Dexter as editor of the 1977 publication for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition The Architecture of the Ecole Des Beaux-Arts. This too is seen by Fitch as a key document in valorising reactionary architectural models. The paper will examine the roots and persistence of Fitch’s materialist beliefs in contrast to those of Scully, Drexler and Venturi, and how they shaped his opposition to the post-modern turn in American architecture. In Murder at the Modern this was given form through quotes from key publications produced by the Museum of Modern Art.
Murder at the Modern

Towards the end of his life, James Marston Fitch revealed his sense of the betrayal of modern architecture in America by some of its most avid early proponents. He gave vent to these feelings in a sharp polemical piece published in the Architectural Review in 1997 titled Murder at the Modern. The murder in question was that of the modernist ethos, and the Modern referred to New York’s Museum of Modern Art.¹

Two events in particular drew Fitch’s ire: the Modern’s publication in 1966 of Robert Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, and the exhibition titled “The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts”, curated by Arthur Drexler and shown from October 1975 to January 1976.² Fitch pointed the finger at Drexler and Philip Johnson as those most responsible for the turning of the Modern away from the contemporary.

As testimony to the central role played by the Museum of Modern Art in sponsoring modern architecture, Fitch noted Hitchcock and Johnson’s seminal show “The International Style” of 1932, as well as the 1947 show on the work of Mies and the 1952 exhibition “Built in the USA: Post-war Architecture”, both achieved with Johnson’s assistance. He also noted that in 1960 Drexler had published a monograph on Mies, which included the line “With Mies, architecture leaves childhood behind”.³

The specifics of Fitch’s complaint are teased out as a critique of Complexity and Contradiction, with both Venturi in his sights, as author, and Vincent Scully as apologist and writer of the introduction. Venturi is treated as something of a naive, with little reputation to explain the appearance of the book in 1966 through an eminent publishing institution. The only explanation, for Fitch, is that “his ideological posture had won strong support within the institution”. His harsher criticism is directed at Scully, an established figure who, in Fitch’s eyes, should have known better. He quotes from Scully’s introduction at length, noting that the tone is “almost viperish”. The passage Fitch chooses is Scully’s characterisation of high modernism – his term is the “Bauhaus generation” – which Scully chides for “its utter lack of irony, its spinsterish disdain for the popular culture but shaky grasp on any other… its lip service to technology, and its preoccupation with a rather prissy purist aesthetic”.⁴

Scully’s Previous Form

Perhaps this turn may have been less of a surprise to Fitch had he paid attention to the ambivalence inherent in some of Scully’s earlier writings. The title of his 1961 book Modern Architecture: the architecture of democracy is not a simple essay for modernism. Indeed, on the first page Scully writes of the predicament of modern man

The old, Christian, preindustrial, predemocratic way of life has progressively broken away around him so that he has come to stand in a place no human beings have ever quite occupied before. He has become at once a tiny atom in a vast sea of humanity and an individual who recognizes himself as being utterly alone.⁵

The book is prefaced with a passage from Camus’ The Rebel, and the first chapter begins with a quote from Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. These are not only literary devices, but as quotes they serve to locate Scully’s position regarding modernism as an historical product, and in this he retains his discomfort towards the modern world at large. Scully elucidates this discomfort through the rest of the first essay of Modern Architecture. In it he already shows his nostalgia for pre-modern space that, for him, constituted the essence of humanist building. Taking the Spanish Stairs in Rome as an “image of Late Baroque architecture as a whole”, Scully claims as its central device a progression of space that aims towards the dramatic, and the enclosing solids serve this end:
It is therefore an architecture that is intended to enclose and shelter human beings in a psychic sense, to order them absolutely so that they can find a known conclusion at the end of any journey, but finally to let them play at freedom and action all the while. Everything works out: the play seems tumultuous but nobody gets hurt and everybody wins.\(^6\)

Scully contrasts this with Le Corbusier’s High Court in Chandigarh, where the opposite seems true:

The space between the natural and the man-made forms is essentially a void between opposing solids, so that the human beings who occupy it are neither sheltered nor brought to a single conclusion. Instead they are exposed to the two separate and hostile realities of human life: what nature is and what men want to do.\(^7\)

Scully accepts that the fragmentation of the Baroque synthesis of freedom and order that he so admires is “perfectly logical” in the face of the rise of individualism, but he shows little enthusiasm for this.\(^8\) Indeed this is a recurring theme, which allows him to characterise Wright’s work after 1914 as an attempt to bridge the shift “between two very different Americas, the old one with a few roots in the earth, tough and inventive, the new one fully industrialized, purse-proud and insecure”. Hence Wright’s embrace of pre-Columbian architectural cultures like the Mayan, evident in the Barnsdall House of 1920.\(^9\)

This \textit{zeitgeist} sociology that Scully applies leads to his explanation of the draw of Mies’ work as an idealisation of static space that transcended the confusion of the modern age. In his words “his classicizing limitation of himself to a few simple shapes, to ‘almost nothing’, was at first a virtue but it had certain dangerous restrictions in it, since it answered all problems by ignoring most”.\(^10\) Thus Scully’s historical schema emerges: the fall represented by modernism, and the modern world, from the ideal synthesis embodied in the Late Baroque with its highly refined order that creates the impression of freedom with structure, in Scully’s view the essence of humanistic space.

**The Classist Roots of the Divide**

Given these early indications of Scully’s deep suspicion for 20\textsuperscript{th} century culture, his support for Venturi’s book is unremarkable, except perhaps for the delight that he takes in discomforting the credo of high modernism. To return to ‘Murder at the Modern’ – when Fitch quotes Scully at length, he does so to emphasise the self-satisfied vindication that marks the foreword to the second edition of \textit{Complexity and Contradiction}, which has the passage “I feel doubly honoured to have been invited to write the original introduction, which now seems to me not so well written as the book itself…but embarrassingly correct in its conclusions”.\(^11\) For Fitch this is further evidence that the purpose of Venturi’s book, with Scully’s support, was to discredit modern architecture by ratifying its antithesis. As Fitch writes:

And what could be more antithetical to the rational, pro-democratic commitments and icon-free, structurally responsive forms of modernism than the aristocratic-theocratic bias and historicising ornamentality of the Mannerist, Baroque and Rococo periods?\(^12\)

The key idea that differentiates Fitch’s viewpoint from Scully’s is, of course, that of social class. For Fitch this is the essential ingredient overlooked by Scully and Venturi, and it colours his whole view of the architecture of the periods they venerate. For Fitch these are the buildings of the “princely courts of the Counter-Reformation”. He notes that in Venturi’s book the buildings cited as models comprise a handful of utilitarian structures, as against tens of churches and monasteries, palaces and grand houses. He writes with some bitterness
Thus the overwhelming majority of his models of complexity and contradiction were generated by the exigencies of those societies least likely to offer useful paradigms to modern American society. The ruling classes of those societies – clergy, royalty, aristocracy – had not confronted (indeed, could not confront) the basic tasks of modern productive society.13

Yet the divide between Fitch and Scully is not simply predicated on an acceptance or rejection of historical models drawn from a pre-modern past, valorising a pre-modern aesthetic. Fitch, in his long career at Columbia, came to be known for his writings and teachings on architectural preservation. Following a visit to Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s to see the preservation work undertaken under the then-communist regime, he returned to Columbia to found its seminal preservation program in 1964, which continues today as the Master of Science in Historic Preservation. Thus his interest in historical models at least parallels that of Venturi and Scully, but in a decidedly different direction.

Fitch had spent the Depression years working with New Deal agencies and advocates, including the Tennessee State Planning Board and the Federal Housing Authority in Washington. These experiences left him with a lifelong interest in statistical methods as descriptors of broader life, and in the economics of efficiency in the service of class amenity. A stint in the army as a meteorologist added to these interests, and reconciling them with architecture as a practice led to a number of books which chart the development of technology in building. The purpose for him was clear, as he states in his 1947 survey of American building (as opposed to American architecture):

…it is no more possible for an architect to design a satisfactory building by traditional methods – a knowledge of Vignola and Williamsburg, a ‘feeling for materials,’ and a couple of handbooks on plumbing and heating – than it would be possible for the local tinsmith to design a modern plane. Thus, from both the standpoint of the user and that of the designer, health-protecting and health-extending building implies the fullest application of the scientific method, the widest use of technical resources. Recognition of this fact is the historical contribution of the moderns to architectural theory.14

For Fitch the liberating aspects of modern life were unequivocal insofar as they applied to modern practice. His dismay with the post-modern turn of the 1980s in America was not so much that it valorised history, but rather that it did so without any historical consciousness of the material and psychic conditions under which its historical models were produced. Assailing the “counter-revolutionaries” who wished to deny the revolutionary work of the Bauhaus in de-historicising design, Fitch writes of “their failure to understand what it was like to have been an architect under the dictatorship of fin-de-siecle eclecticism: and their failure to appreciate the freedom of esthetic action which the revolution has given them”.15

This point relates to the production of architecture, and has its roots in Fitch’s early years in practice designing houses in the modes of the nineteenth century, but fitted with modern services. The curiosity here is his interest in preservation at a time when it was just emerging as an academic discipline and a focus for community action. Like Scully, Fitch was shocked and angered by the demolition of New York’s Pennsylvania Station in 1963, perhaps the most galvanising event in modern American architectural preservation. His respect for the changes in practice engendered by modernism sat alongside his veneration of the utilitarian structures of modernity, as these assumed a role in public life that cut across class bounds. In this he regarded the modern age as essentially progressive, as much for its egalitarian potential as for its technological sophistication in making buildings comfortable.
Fitch Quotes Drexler

The degree to which Fitch seemed intent on pointing out the evident ills of early post-modernism, its pastiche and symbolic denial of modern building services, can be seen as a response to the architecture of the 1980s and 90s. The particular examples he cites, such as Johnson and Burgee's AT&T Building (69), were part of a passing phase. But the demise of class as both historical lens and political imperative leads Fitch to take issue with another perpetrator of murder at the Modern, in his eyes, Arthur Drexler. The locus for the attack was the exhibition "The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts" and the book of the same title which followed. The opening essay of the book, Drexler's 'Engineer's Architecture: Truth and its Consequences' is a meditation on the consequences of the reductive nature of modernism. Sometimes overreaching himself, as in his equating simplicity with death using Shaker furniture and its sterile accompanying prohibitions as an example, the piece draws Fitch's ire because of its consistent attempt to denature the political inherent in modernism. When Drexler writes “Most of us now understand that architecture is the least suitable instrument with which to achieve social justice”, Fitch cites it as embodying the essentially reactionary position underpinning Drexler's argument, and his interest in the techniques of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

Fitch’s argument with the politics of post-modernism, and hence with two of the landmark publications that provided the intellectual justification of the turn away from modernism in architecture, rest on what might be termed the arithmetic of class-based progressivism, following the journalist Nick Cohen. Cohen’s point is that while not a universal principle, in general action that benefits more people rather than less is the greater good, especially when the benefit takes into account that need varies by class. As noted above, the raw distinction between Fitch and Scully is the former's embrace of class as a major analytic category of history, with its attendant view of architectural history as always embodying a class component. This is key to understanding not only his refusal to divorce Venturi’s historical models from the politics of the Counter-Reformation, but also to explain his particular view of the modern relevance of preservation and its lessons. In 'Murder at the Modern' he asks why Venturi and Drexler, and by extension the Modern, chose “those two historical periods that, by their very nature, were most antithetical to modernism”. He proposes a different emphasis:

...why not the archaic Greek that so intrigued the early Le Corbusier? Or the Roman which Jefferson had found so useful in building the first Republic? Why not suggest that the modernists study the Shakers, whose work had inspired our own Craftsman movement? Why not urge young engineers to study the Crystal Palace, the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Eiffel Tower?

The answer, in retrospect, seems obvious. Fitch’s examples were accepted precursors to modernism, not only due to their structural innovation but also due to the long association of the classical tradition with rationalist architecture, dating back to the revival of Justinian’s civil laws in the 11th century for the rules of objectivity they brought to legal procedure. The rationalist view of modernism had always acknowledged its debt to classicism: this selective association is precisely what Drexler and Venturi were aiming to undermine. And since class as a category had been so central a component of rationalist social analysis, it too had to be marginalised in the recovery of the full range of pre-modernist practices.

The Politics of the Divide

Perhaps what is most instructive in this exchange is the ambivalence of establishment figures like Johnson, Scully and Drexler towards a politics that described architectural intent as an extension of class awareness. The arithmetic of progressive modernist politics was an outgrowth of the utilitarian morality of securing the maximum good for the most people, but its incorporation of class invited in the whole panoply of the extended classicist cosmology: capital, historical agency and the ideological functioning of architectural design. For Drexler this is simply too much weight for architecture to bear, hence his insistence that it is a poor medium for political action. However in the writings of Scully it is
possible to trace an alternate search for architectural meaning in an essentialist tradition that skirts any ideological role for architecture, understood in the classical Marxist sense.

Scully’s first major work of architectural history was his dissertation on the Shingle Style, which dealt with American domestic architecture of the period 1840-1887, with a coda on Frank Lloyd Wright. Neil Levine, in his short biography of Scully, has made some key observations on his subject’s intellectual development. According to Levine, Scully’s early allegiance to the art historian Focillon, who taught at Yale in the early 1940s, stood in contrast to the German tradition of art scholarship that took hold at Princeton, Harvard and Columbia. Scully was well aware of this: indeed, he first takes issue with Fitch in 1954 when he writes in *The Shingle Style*:

> Following the rather mechanistic determinism which was one aspect of Giedion’s approach, some later discussions of American tradition have tended to concentrate upon technological and “functional” problems and to dismiss 19th-century phenomena which could not be explained in those terms (James Marston Fitch, *American Building, the forces that shape it…*)

This awareness persists throughout his later work, as he wrestles with producing a formal mode of analysis that links to the experience of space but in essentialist, rather than historicist, terms. This was not always successful, as Levine relates. His 1962 book *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture* garnered hostile reviews including charges of “mysticism” and of its schema being the “fabrication of a modern mind to suit a modern interpretation of a given set of ancient phenomena”.

Thus, the materialist tradition was neither kind, no of great interest, to Scully, despite his anticipation that mid-century materialism tended to oversimplify and denature the very material that it championed.

It is impossible to explain Scully’s enormous appeal as a teacher and a writer without acknowledging that he was onto something, specifically the issue of aesthetic experience and the changing aspirations it embodied. The historical view he embraced is not predicated on a morality of winners and losers, as class-based analysis tends to construct, but rather that there is a consciousness that corresponds to an age and can be read through the aesthetic experiences engendered by that age. It does not quite carry the sense of historical imperative of the *zeitgeist*, with its Hegelian unfolding, but rather acts as a means of recovery of an essential outlook. Few things are as exciting in history as this sense of historical excavation of consciousness.

However the tools at Scully’s disposal were limited, and led to the poor reception of his work in some quarters. It was not only his work on classical Greek architecture that failed to convince scholars outside of his field. In his follow-up work on the Pueblo settlements of the South-Western United States he attempts to apply his essentialist interpretation of building to structures that, for him, are links to a pre-modern past. The book can be seen as an attempt to broaden his inquiry in order to validate is earlier work on Greece. Indeed this is made explicit in its in Preface, where Scully writes that the book was intended to

> ...open up several wider avenues of thought about architecture – about, that is, all our natural and man-made environments and the meaning of human action in them. As such, this book grew directly out of my previous work in Greece, whose landscape the American Southwest strongly recalls, not least in the forms of its sacred mountains, and the reverence of its inhabitants for them. Only in the pueblos, in that sense, could my Greek studies be completed, because their ancient rituals are still performed in them. The chorus of Dionysos still dances there.
The book chronicles Scully's extensive travels in the south-west, and his observation of scores of ritual dances. It is written in his animated and erudite style, but relies heavily on concordances he sees between the landscape and the cultures that inhabit it. It is not, in many ways, verifiable, but it was not meant to be. Few could duplicate Scully's passage through what he saw as settlements and cultures that were "the direct heirs of a long tradition of human life on this continent".

Fitch's work has an entirely different intent, and historiography. Although associated with architectural preservation, the bulk of his writings were on the history of technology in architecture. Perhaps his most representative book is *Architecture and the Esthetics of Plenty*, a survey of themes and architects that he regarded as having shaped American architecture of the 20th century. Published in 1961, it traverses many of the same themes and people as Scully's work, in particular Frank Lloyd Wright. It is precisely its scope that makes it representative of his thinking, and as can be expected from his later views on post-modernism, Fitch was more inclined to view history as marked by a linear progression, with less of the sourness of Scully towards the modern age. Its enormous potential fascinated him, even as its crudeness became manifest: photographs of the earthmoving that preceded tract housing were included by Fitch with the caption "Modern technology has raised the power of the modern engineer to literally geological proportions, with no commensurate increase in his wisdom."

Like Scully, he took pre-modern cultures seriously, but more for their empirical achievements than their cultural ones. He sees traditional building cultures as based on an underlying material evolution in response to climate. The igloo, for him, is the perfect response to the need for shelter that maximises insulation and hence minimises the need for heating. Mud and masonry construction in the Middle East has high thermal inertia, and "when the architect is called upon to build in the South Pacific, with its continuously high humidity and heat, the historian should provide him with factual studies of the local architecture. No better comfort formula could be found than in its airy, stilted, wide-roofed platforms". Ignorance of these historical types was not only confined to the exotic – it extended, in Fitch's opinion, to the New Orleans of his childhood, where the traditional architecture went unappreciated for its logical attributes, an attitude he describes as "not only not scientific, it is not even civilized".

**Conclusion: Two Sides of a Coin?**

In this, as in much else, we can discern a closeness between Scully and Fitch, at least as regards their reaction to urban development in post-war America. As such the gulf between them in later years might seem to be a matter of degrees, as two distinguished scholars reveal their prejudices. But in historiographic terms, as alluded to above, there are real lessons to be drawn. Scully, from early in his career, had trained himself to "empathize with works of art", aided by his search for Jungian archetypes. The return of the vernacular that he supported through the New Urbanist work of Plater-Zyberk and Duany had an element of nostalgia, but it also embodied the experiential insight that he took away from a well-publicised stoush with Norman Mailer about the relevance of modern architecture. Conducted through the pages of the *Architectural Forum* in 1964, Scully argued the side of a progressive and adaptive style against Mailer's attack on modernist buildings. But he "came away haunted for life...by Mailer's argument that the work of the heroic modern architect was leaving us 'isolated in the empty landscapes of psychosis'".

The phrase has less precision than Scully would have us believe, and is clinically without meaning. But a generation grasped its critique of the modern world that saw it fail not on the arithmetic of class progress, as Fitch might have argued, but on the grounds that it was psychologically deficient. Fitch himself understood this in complementary terms when he wrote of the uncivilised nature of progress. Indeed Mailer’s view would be developed in much greater detail by writers like Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*. It was part of a broad critique of modern life that emerged in the
1970s where modern capitalism’s failings were seen in its insults to the psyche rather than its insults to specific social classes.

For Fitch the materialist underpinning of traditional leftist critiques of the 20th century maintained their relevance, and he continued to argue the technical merits of historical models. He could not overlook class as a major constituent of historical identity, and he could not suspend this to see the architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, or the Baroque, as finely tuned products of aesthetic awareness and intention. For him the class framing of these always resonated through the work, and cast an indelible stain on its origin. Despite his clarity on this matter, it resulted in no great consistency in his work, since he was responsible for the preservation of a number of buildings in later life that may not have passed his test of contemporary relevance.

Curiously, neither Fitch nor Scully held professional qualifications in architecture. Scully had commenced at Yale as an English major, and switched to art and architectural history as a graduate student. Fitch had started in architecture at Tulane University in New Orleans, but he never graduated due to financial problems. He did gain extensive experience in designing houses through the early Depression years and in his later years as an academic, as well as through working in public agencies with planning agendas. His main avenue to an academic career came through his position as an editor at *Architectural Record*, where he became friends with Jane Jacobs.

Both had started their careers writing histories of American architecture, in a common attempt to understand what might constitute its promising historical threads. In a sense their experiential response to both this question, and the demolition and engineering projects that transformed American urban centres after the war, left them both disillusioned. Yet in the end the perceived corrective left them bitterly divided. Within the confines of modern American historiography, the alternatives presented revolved around either a persistence of the materialist tradition, with class as its distinctive category of analysis, or the idealist notion of the dominance of ideas and their experiential extension. If we accept that we are witnessing the passing of an era marked by the dominance of the symbolic over an occasionally crude materialism, then there is much to be learned from two antagonists from the early years of this struggle of method. Understood in those terms Scully may have been the more entertaining in quotation, but Fitch the more reproducible.
Endnotes

1 The piece was originally published with illustrations in *arq*: Architectural Research Quarterly, 2, Winter 1996, pp.60-71. It was republished in edited form in Martica Sawin, ed., *James Marston Fitch: selected writings on architecture, preservation and the built environment* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 156-170. References are to the *arq* version.


4 Fitch, “Murder”, 63.


11 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction* (2nd ed.), 12

12 Fitch, “Murder”, 63.


15 James Marston Fitch, “A Funny Thing Happened…”, in Martica Sawin, ed., *James Marston Fitch: selected writings on architecture, preservation and the built environment*, 66. The piece was originally published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* vol.69, 1, January 1980

16 Fitch, “Murder”, 70.


18 Cited in Fitch, “Murder”, 68.


20 Fitch, “Murder”, 70.


29 Fitch, *Esthetics of Plenty*, 244.


32 Cited in Conniff, “The Patriarch”.
