VANNA VENTURI HOUSE

Architects: Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

Location: Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA

Area: 1,800 sf

Completion: 1964

This building is complex and simple, open and closed, big and little. Inside and out, it is a little house that uses big scale to counterbalance the complexity. Complexity in combination with small scale in small buildings creates a nervous busyness -- whereas big scale in this small building achieves an appropriate architectural tension.

The inside spaces are complex both in shapes and interrelationships. The plan is symmetrical, but the symmetry is distorted at times to accommodate the particular needs of the spaces. For instance, two vertical elements -- the fireplace-chimney and the stair -- compete, as it were, for central position. Consequently, on one side the fireplace distorts in shape and it and the chimney move over a little; on the other side the stair constricts its width and changes its path because of the chimney.

In contrast, the outside form is simple and consistent, the front creates an almost symbolic image of a house. However, it also reflects the inside complexities through the varying locations and sizes and shapes of the windows, perforations in the outside walls, and the off-center location of the chimney. The walls are layered to indicate enclosure yet punctured for openness. For instance, at the front center, where the outside wall is superimposed upon the two other walls housing the stair, each juxtaposes openings of differing size and position, becoming layered space rather than interpenetrated space.

This house is a seminal work. In the years since its completion it has influenced other designs by the firm and the work of a number of other architects. It has been written about, studied and discussed extensively in print and in classrooms and is often visited by architectural students.

Awards:

AIA Twenty-Five Year Award, 1989.

Honorable Mention, Architecture and The Arts Awards, Architectural League of New York, 1965.