



Italian American Culture: Robert Venturi vs. Frankie Valli

Tom Verso (March 23, 2009)



Italian American culture is southern Italian/Sicilian culture filtered through Little Italies



Anthony Tamburii wrote: "We need to take our [Italian American] culture more seriously. We simply cannot continue to engage in a series of reminiscences that lead primarily to nostalgic recall. Instead, we need to revisit our past... and reconcile it with our present."

The "nostalgic recall" he refers to, I believe, is an attempt by post 'Little Italy' Italian Americans to redefine their Italian identity. It seems to me, Italian Americans are struggling to find Italianita threads; i.e. objects, people, signs, and images that represent symbols of what it means to be Italian. They are seeking the cultural threads that connect the 19th century southern Italian /Sicily peasant culture with the early 20th century urban "Little Italy" culture with the present 21st century suburban culture. Italian Americans have a profound sense of being Italian, but cannot articulate what it means to be Italian; they are not Italian nationals (nor do they want to be) and they are no long residents of "Little Italy"(nor can they be).

Below, I suggest, the biographies and work of Italian American artisans Robert Venturi and Frankie Vallie's "The Four Seasons" brings to light one such Italianita thread that connects today's Italian Americans with their progenitors, and may help us define our Italianess in post "Little Italy" America.

Recently I happened upon some library books by and about the architect Robert Venturi. I explored the books and frankly I was not impressed with his work. I found it to be uninspiring, uncreative - dare I say - boring. As it turns out, I'm not the only one.

The renowned architect Philip Johnson wrote about the plans Venturi (et al) submitted for the 1967 Brooklyn Housing Project competition:

"To the majority [of judges], of which I was one, [the Venturi and Rauch-Kawasaki submission] seemed a pair of very ugly buildings. We felt...that the buildings looked like the most ordinary apartment construction built all over Queens and Brooklyn since the Depression, that the placing of the blocks was ordinary and dull" (LFL '72 p135)

Interestingly, such lack of beauty and inspiring form in Venturi's work was not to his mind a failure, rather a manifestation of his design philosophy. He specifically rejects 'beauty' as an architectural criterion. He says:

"[I] use 'ugly and ordinary' (boring, if you will) elements in a building like Guild House -brick, sash window, the TV antenna - to give a realistic expression of the use of the building and a meaning familiar to the inhabitants. Actually the term 'ugly and ordinary' derived from a derisive description of our Transportation Square office-building project in Washington, D.C., which we adopted as a positive slogan." (interview p147)

In short, Venturi's goal as an architect is to achieve structures that are 'ugly', 'boring' and 'ordinary.' Respectfully, I think a survey of his work demonstrates that he is very successful in achieving those objectives.

When I think of 20th century Italian names in architecture; names like Pietro Belluschi and Aldo Rossi come to mind. Venturi doesn't remotely approach their creativity. Compare, for example, the brickwork on Venturi's much discussed Guild House with that of Belluschi's St Philip Neri Catholic Church and you will understand what Venturi means by 'ugly and ordinary' verses, what I would call, a quest for eloquence and beauty. More generally, perhaps because he rejects 'beauty', there is nothing about Venturi's work that conjures in me a sense of Italianita, a sense of being Italian.



If any single characteristic permeates the culture of the Italian people it's 'beauty'. From per-Roman mosaics to Renaissance frescos and sculpture to contemporary Milan fashions to the vegetable and flower gardens of my Italian neighbors, the 2500-year history of Italian culture is differentiate and defined, to my mind, by a single concept - 'fa bella figura'. Even our gangsters try to "show some class." Venturi's explicit rejection of beauty as a characteristic of architecture made me wondered if he was Italian in name only.

However, according to Sal Primeggia, who kindly responded to an H-ItAm inquire I posted; Robert Venturi's father had migrated in 1890 from the town of Attesa, Abruzzi. His mother's parents came from Puglia. Venturi is absolutely Italian. The apparent contradiction of a hundred percent Italian American artisan rejecting beauty was perplexing and in turn lead me to reflect on the nature of Italian American culture.

Nature and Nurture

Psychologists say an individual's behavior, ideology and indeed total Being is the product of 'nature' (genetics) and 'nurture' (environment). While, Mr. Venturi's 'nature', per his parent's nationality, was very much Italian, his biography indicates that his 'nurture' was very much not Italian American.

Young Robert Venturi attended school at the Episcopal Academy in Merion, Pennsylvania. "The Episcopal Academy, founded in 1785, is a private school for grades Pre-K through 12 and has been consistently ranked as a top private school in the nation by various media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal."

Notable alumni include:

Lionel Barrymore - 1931 Academy Award winner for Best Actor

Richard Harding Davis - Managing Director of Harper's Weekly.

R.W.B. Lewis - professor of English at Yale, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize

John C. Bell, Jr. - Pennsylvania Governor and Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice

Significantly, in the much longer list of notable alumni, Venturi is the only Italian name. Venturi then went on to graduate summa cum laude from Princeton University; again, not a school where Italian Americans are generally found. In short, his education is not what one would call the 'nurturing' of 'the typical Italian American boy'.

Further, he married far removed from Italian Americana: Denise Scott Brown, a Rhodesian born Jewish woman who went to a South African university and came to America via London. An architect, she became his colleague in teaching, business and design. Also, Venturi's professional life was not characteristic of Italian Americans. Relatively few Italian Americans get teaching positions in Ivy League Universities. Venturi taught at three Ivy League Schools: University of Pennsylvania, Yale School of Architecture, and Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

In sum, while he was very much Italian by 'nature', the life (nurturing) of Robert Venturi was not remotely similar to Italian Americans generally. In statistical parlance, if one were to randomly



sample the population of Italian American males, Venturi would be a very atypical “outlier” – indeed.

“The Four Seasons”

At the same time I was reading about Venturi and wondering about the absence of Italianita and the quest for beauty in his work, I went to see the fantastic stage musical production “Jersey Boys” about the lives of Frankie Valli’s group “The Four Seasons.” WOW! If you want an example of creativity, passion, and the pursuit of beauty, one would be hard pressed to do better than those four Italian American boys from Little Italy neighborhoods in New Jersey.

Tommy Devito, the founder of the group quit high school in the 8th grade. His family was so poor during the Depression that he would steal milk. The other members of the group came from similar backgrounds. In short, the “nurturing” of the Four Seasons’ singers was very different than Robert Venturi’s, and much more typical of Italian American males through the 1950’s. In statistical parlance: if one were to randomly sample Italian American males of Devito’s generation, the nurturing experiences of Four Season’s singers would be close to the mean.

Street Corner Society

Near to the last scene of “Jersey Boys”, the Frankie Valli character, reflecting on the phenomenal success of the group, waxes nostalgic and harkens back to his singing origins “under a street light”. Immediately what came to my mind were the two great anthropological studies of Italian Americana: W. F. Whyte’s “Street Corner Society” and H.J. Gans’ “The Urban Villagers”. The lives of the four Italian American boys who created the music of The Four Seasons were quintessential examples of the Italian Americans described in those great social scientific studies. They were ‘urban villages’ whose social life centered on ‘street corners.’

In sum, the present day culture of the Italian American people is the product of the 19th century peasant culture of southern Italy and Sicily modified by the early 20th century ‘urban village’ culture of American Little Italies. I’m wondering if the architecture of Robert Venturi does not speak to me of Italianita because, unlike the Four Seasons, he was insulated from and did not absorb the historic ‘bella figura’ culture of Italy as it was filtered through American Little Italies. Given his Italian bloodline and his masterful craftsmanship, I can’t help but wonder what ‘beautiful’ things he might have designed had he gone to public school, hung out on a street corner, and studied architecture at a Community College – just a thought.

Finally, Anthony Tamburii writes: “We need to be sure that our progeny is aware of our culture.” To my mind, the most important thing we can teach our children about Italian American culture: whatever endeavors private or public, humble or grand, cultivating a fig tree or carving marble – ‘make it beautiful.’ In our efforts to redefine what it means to be Italian Americans, ‘fa bella figura’ is a very good place to begin –indeed!

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robert-venturi-vs-frankie-valli

Links

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