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Boredom and the Architectural Imagination. Rudofsky, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steinberg in Andreea Mihalache's Research

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Book Review / THEORY

Boredom and the Architectural Imagination. Rudofsky, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steinberg
By Andreea Mihalache
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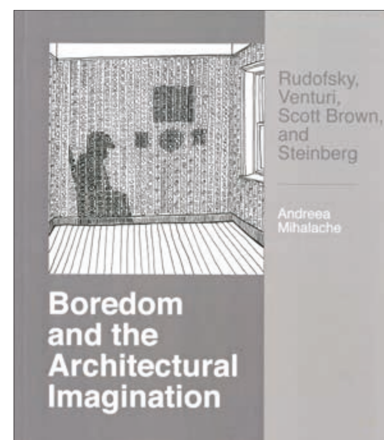

"Boredom is anything but an evil to be thought of lightly [for] ultimately it depicts on the countenance real despair," wrote Arthur Schopenhauer in the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). Schopenhauer's statement may read a tad too melodramatic, viewed from today's perspective, but it is true that boredom, tedium, *ennui*, once a bourgeois privilege, has been democratized to the point of becoming a social concern. If today's society lives largely ignoring the existence of death – with the hope, like a child covering his eyes, of somehow avoiding it – we also live trying to escape from boredom at any cost, horrified at the prospect of not being entertained, especially if the subjects of this

entertainment deficit are of a short age and live with us. Fear of this malaise peaked in early 2020, when the leap from boredom to despair seemed as likely as undesirable. One only needs to do a quick search to be remembered of the unprecedented attention media paid to boredom throughout the lockdown and beyond. Articles with colorful titles such as “Why Neuroscientists Say Boredom Is Good for Your Brain’s Health” (*Forbes*), “Why It’s Good to Be Bored” (*The Guardian*), and others in *The New York Times, Time Magazine, National Geographic,* or *The Harvard Business Review*, among a long list, reassured their panicking readers (at the risk of reinventing the wheel) by reminding them not only that boredom was not anything to be afraid of, but that it was an inalienable companion to a creative mind.

However, before the pandemic boom brought it to the front (web)pages via trivial feel-good pieces, boredom was already gaining traction as a subject of academic study. Scholarship on boredom, initially tackling the phenomenon from an a-historical perspective, welcomed in the 2000s an increasing number of works that sought to historicize it, such as Lars Svendsen’s *A philosophy of boredom,* and Elizabeth S. Goodstein’s *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity,* both from 2005, and Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani’s *Essays on Boredom and Modernity* (2009). These weere joined throughout the 2010s by others that explored the connections of boredom and art, such as Julian Jason Haladyn’s *Boredom and Art: Passions Of The Will To Boredom* (2015), and by multi-disciplinary approaches such as Haladyn’s and Michael E. Gardiner’s subsequent *Boredom Studies Reader: Frameworks and Perspectives* from 2016.[1]

It is in this latter group that belongs Andreea Mihalache’s *Boredom and the Architectural Imagination* (2024), a study which, overlapping with some of the preceding, aims at examining different ways in which boredom appears, both as a topic and/or strategy, as well as a driving force, in the work of several figures located somewhat on the fringes of (modern) architectural orthodoxy: architect/critic/historian Bernard Rudofsky, architects/theorists Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and architect/cartoonist Saul Steinberg, a colourful cast of characters whose selection as case studies Mihalache explains in the prologue. The multiple perspectives granted by their location in different corners of the periphery of the discipline – or its official discourse – in a sort of threefold panopticon built around the topic, would suffice.
However, the author supplements it with a succinct but convincing summary of the web of connections linking all three case-studies and four figures: Rudofsky and Steinberg were friends and occasional collaborators with a common “approach to architecture focused on embodied cultural practices and those habits and customs that define the nature of a place.” Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steinberg share an alternative take on boredom and architecture “as the failure of an aesthetic language” that lead them

to "alternative modes of practice and criticism." Finally, the critique of Rudofsky and his orientalist focus on the "remote vernacular," implicit in *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) by Venturi, Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, are somewhat mirrored, coming full circle, by his and Steinberg's challenging of the couple's glorification of consumerism. Those still not persuaded by this relational scaffolding will most probably be by the many conceptual, strategic and thematic overlaps the text identifies in the words and works of the four figures.

Building on this premise, the book is disciplined into a very strict tripartite structure, where each part, roughly of the same length, is subdivided into a sequence of three equally-tiled chapters: "Genealogies of Boredom" (chapters one, four, and seven); "Critiques of Contemporary Tedium" (chapters two, five, and eight); and "Tactics of Resisting Ennui" (chapters three, six, and nine) with each chapter donning a subtitle that clarifies the way in which these genealogies, critiques, and tactics apply to each specific case study.
The apparent rigidity of this apparatus, which seems more suitable for a doctoral dissertation, does affect the narrative, which is agile and varied, and rich in references to other works, as well as in the inner connections in its discourse. The book does indeed spring from Mihalache's own dissertation, *Boredom's Metamorphosis: Robert Venturi and Saul Steinberg* (2018), with which it obviously overlaps, but, as evidenced by the subtitle, neither the structure nor the contents have been directly imported from there, making the latter an interesting behind-the-scenes look for those who are left wanting after finishing the book.[2] This second approach to the topic keeps the order in which the case studies were presented in the dissertation. The discussion on Steinberg follows the one on Venturi and Scott Brown, but inserts its new acquisition as the opening section, in a narrative progressively moving from the center – of the discipline, of modernity's official discourse – to its periphery.

WANDERING, WAITING, WONDERING

Part I, "Wandering," devoted to Rudofsky, establishes the rules the subsequent sections will follow; starting with his second book, the retroactively Wolfe-esque *Behind the Picture Window* (1955), the chapters in this section bring up a series of concepts – leisure, and its mechanization/commodification, consumerism and conformity, disprivacy, embodied time – while at the same time reconstructing its lineage backwards and forwards, from Martin Gumpert's *The Anatomy of Happiness* (1951), to John Keats's *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), with stops in Émile Tardieu and Marcel Kiven. "An unconventional book on the unconventional modern house and the inscrutable ways of its inmates," *Behind the Picture Window* collected essays which – the dust jacket stated – posed "an emphatic warning against the chain reaction of organized boredom." Rudofsky agreed with Gumpert that "a society

suffering from boredom will soon go extinct," and with Tardieu that "the ally in the fight against boredom is… the art of living well." If this last thought resounds with strong echoes of Steinberg, subsequent chapters will show how it also relates to Venturi, via his upbringing, creating one of several threads that run throughout *Boredom and the Architectural Imagination*. The essays in Rudofsky's book, especially the closing chapter, "On Boredom and Disprivacy," outlined his sceptical view on modern living, as defined by the – suburban, American – modern house, ultimately represented by the titular "picture window."

A key device in the fabrication of "disprivacy," that is: not "a lack of privacy, but rather a [mechanized, manufactured] privacy… designed to be showcased and put on display," the picture window becomes, per the book's discourse, an artificial and literal display for post-war standardized life that works less as a purveyor of visual comfort than as a frame for commodified vignettes of domesticity – rhyming, as the reader foresees, with forthcoming parts of the book – that are offered to the surrounding American subtopia. In the context of Rudofsky's book, it also becomes a framing device (pun not intended) for a discussion on the effects of the democratization of boredom upon modern society, and for the solutions to it proposed by the author. From here on, the text makes us join him in his reflections about mechanized leisure, the commodification of tourism, and also in a tour, mirroring his lifelong, world-wide *flânerie*, through several of his house designs in Italy and Brazil, some completed, some unbuilt. Presented as an illustration of his ideas on what a "healthier, more comfortable, and less mechanized living" would look like, these projects also provide the opportunity to find him drawing pre-Steinbergian whimsical vignettes, as it happens in the floor plan of his project for a house in Procida (1935-38), where each space is inhabited, as if a comic panel, by allegorical cartoon-like figures, another theme that will become recurrent. Some may find the luddite and orientalist aftertaste of Rudofsky's reflections problematic, and his proposals less convincing than the narrative apparatus in which they have been carefully inserted. However, the compelling read on the architect offered by these three chapters, together with their intermingling with the book's overall narrative not only more than justify its inclusion, but make this added part, despite its third leg nature, an inseparable part of it.

As mentioned, the remaining sections of the book share a similar narrative structure and methodology, selecting one or several texts by each author, reconstructing the intellectual genealogy of both, and analysing how the ideas in them overlap with/stem from the topic of boredom, in order to subsequently look at the ways they translate into their corresponding work. In this sense, Part II, "Waiting," devoted to Venturi and Scott Brown in that order, starts, as one could expect, with *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* and, both suitably and inevitably, with a reference to his well-known adagio "less is a bore." Possibly the second-best pun

on Mies Van der Rohe's "less is more" – itself an import from Robert Browning – only behind the beautifully economical "mess is lore," it was also the second reference to boredom in his 1966 treatise. Section 1, "Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Gentle Manifesto," includes, amongst Venturi's list of his preferences on architecture, the clause "[I like elements which are] boring as well as interesting," but only, as Mihalache explains, in the revised version: the reference to "boring elements," which sets the context for Venturi's catchphrase two pages later, was absent from the first manuscript. This digging up of obscure but significant backstage data becomes instrumental in the development of this part, where Venturi's upbringing in the Quaker faith, "a biographical detail largely overlooked in architectural scholarship," is discussed as a major influence in his work. Throughout chapters four, and, to some extent, five, Mihalache makes the case, and convincingly so, as to how Quakerism, traditionally less concerned with living in the world than (again) with how to "properly live" in it, informed design strategies that favored "waiting, tarrying and lengthening time" as a way to transform "a deadening tedium into a mental and physical space appropriate for reflection." Once this link is established, many aspects of Venturi's work can be remarkably easily traced back to the Quaker doctrine and customs, from their stoic attitude towards life to the acceptance of conflicting positions sharing the same time and space, even down to formal strategies: Venturi's penchant for flattening – historical and physical – finds, through this exegesis, a precedent in the Quaker preference for silhouettes over traditional paintings.

The references in his writings are equally enlightening. Retaking an earlier discussion, Mihalache notes that "Venturi recognizes that mid-century alienation emerges from a collective discontent with social structures, conformity, and consumerism," an idea that finds its roots in August Heckscher's *The Public Happiness* (1962), a book quoted several times in *Complexity and Contradiction.* Heckscher argued that "Puritanism and rationalism quintessential to the American character" had "muted people's 'ironical' voice," that "the real problems of our society… are… boredom, loneliness, alienation," and vindicated playfulness, believing play was at the core of the understanding of leisure not as "entertainment, or distraction," but as "a creative pursuit." As with Rudofsky, these ideas find their concrete expression in a series of works by Venturi B.D. (Before Denise), both student and professional, lesser and better known, built and unbuilt. Among those, the analysis favours the two that close *Complexity and Contradiction: Three Buildings for the Downtown of North Canton* (Venturi and Rauch, 1965), and their 1966 proposal for Boston's Copley Square (Venturi, Rauch, Clark, and Jones). Both unbuilt, they significantly featured the words "boring" and "boredom" in their descriptions in the book, and exemplify Venturi et al's use of tedious architectural structures as a stratum on which to orchestrate a complex balance of controlled tedium and chaos: "paradox" as "another tactic against the flat line of boredom," like Heckscher suggested. Meanwhile, the drawings of both projects

reproduced throughout chapter five create their own connections with the preceding sections and the ones to come. As in Rudofsky, the façade in North Canton creates “stage sets” for vignettes of everyday life to play. Similarly, the cross-sections of Copley Square are populated by funny characters occasionally expressing themselves in speech balloons – as in the work of a certain cartoonist whose work also achieved a paradoxical concurrence of simplicity and complexity.

The discussion on Denise Scott Brown, both “before” and “after” Bob, happens in chapter six, which, similarly, starts by looking at *Learning From Las Vegas*, and more specifically, the first chapter of Part II, “Some Definitions Using the Comparative Method,” which starts with a quote from Andy Warhol (“I like boring things.”), and ends somewhat symmetrically with the section “Is Boring Architecture Interesting?”. The aim of this chapter is examining Scott Brown’s “ideas about time as duration through the dialectic of the boring and the interesting,” starting with the creation of a genealogy of the “interesting,” which stops in Susan Sontag’s and Giorgio Agamben’s dismissals of it, and concluding by repositioning Scott Brown’s concept of “deferred judgment.” The final thesis is that “through waiting and deferring judgment, one makes space for reflection,” and that by being “more reflective and less reactive” we become capable of finding “the resources to withstand boredom.” In any event, as with other parts of the book, it is rather the trip than the destination that matters – which those who favor the interesting over the important will most probably find no problem with. The connections with Ed Ruscha, and Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as Denise Scott Brown’s other writings, with this discussion, are something which those familiar with her work may already suspect, but which is nevertheless interesting – controversial as this concept may be in the context of this chapter’s discussion – to discover.

Picking up concepts from previous chapters, but imbuing them with a life of their own, Part III, “Wondering,” focused on the work and method of Saul Steinberg, might be, engaging as all parts are, the highlight of the book for some. Starting with a quote by Steinberg himself, who, in 1966, declared that he worked “to chase boredom, the boredom that is the great foe,” only to later add that “my best work springs out of boredom and trying to amuse myself,” the content of these chapters seem to naturally develop from trying to give a both reasoned and illustrated response to the several statements hidden in these sentences. Steinberg’s work is born “within” and “as a response to” boredom, and also uses it as an underlying, ongoing theme. Boredom is the scenario in which the act of creation takes place, the trigger for it, and the source of its content, and Mihalache sets out to argue the different ways in which this recurring motif materializes throughout his oeuvre: she traces his penchant for “faux-script diplomas,” illegible letters, and other by-products of bureaucracy to the tedious amount of red tape he had to suffer in his years as émigré in different countries.

Second in this classification of Steinbergian tedium would be the modern city, whose "false-front, package, and rubber-stamp architecture" can be characterized as "the three conditions of the built environment born out of, but also generating, the boredom of a commodified culture." All of them featured prominently in cartoons where "the *ennui* in the built environment and everyday life" was embodied by "International Style graph-paper skyscrapers… cookie-cutter architectures, suburban boxes," and, sometimes, suffocating agglomerations of vehicles and people. The third would be Steinberg's masterful vignettes of unremarkable domesticity, often presented in one-point perspectival views of closed rooms, akin to theatrical sets – as do his "false-front-façaded" depictions of "small-town Main Streets" – where the monotonous, melancholic tragicomedy of the everyday takes place. All three together, they illustrated some of "the sources of modern alienation giving rise to individual and collective boredom: the failure of language, the car culture, and the built environment" of "the mid-century American city and its suburbs," a landscape correspondingly described by August Heckscher as "a disquieting space where bareness and crowdedness alternate."
If boredom, be it urban or intimate – perhaps taking place in one of the Steinberg-esque rooms of their 1976 *Signs of Life* exhibition – was the environment in which introspection took place in the case of Venturi & Scott Brown, "Steinberg's drawings present the imprecise territory between boredom and daydreaming," an optimum state of mind to "look, in wonder, for some twisted, often elusive, never straightforward truth."

Part of the seductive power of this chapter lies in the items selected to study Steinberg. A man who invariably refused to caption or explain his cartoons, he often characterized himself as "a writer who draws." This in no way means he remained silent. Interviews with him were published in *Life, Art in America, Cahiers d'Art Contemporain, The Paris Review*, Selden Rodman's 1957 *Conversations with Artists*, and in different exhibition catalogues, among many other places. Following the book's established methodology, Mihalache selects two rare instances where Steinberg decided to accompany his cartoons with his written thoughts on architecture: "Built in the USA" (*ARTNews,* 1953), and "Our False-Front Culture" (*Look*, 1968), which bookended a fifteen-year period also including two of his usual wordless monographs: *The Labyrinth* (1960), a fifty-page collection of Steinberg's cartoons from 1954 to 1960, and *The New World* (1965), which does the same with *The New Yorker* cartoons up to that date.

Those fascinated by Steinberg's cartoons in *The Art of Living,* his fictional city maps, drawings on photographs, photographs of drawings and other photo-drawing hybrids, or his pastel cityscapes from the 1980s, will find in the images that illustrate this chapter a compilation of mesmerizing agglomerations, mazes of many kinds, zigzagging lines, abstract diagrams, cubist people, objects transformed in literal "figures of speech" through their morphing into impossible speech balloons – not bubbles –, unintelligible texts, dreaming typefaces, rocking chairs (Rudofsky again [3]), modern

façades, empty suburban streets, inscrutable handwriting in pseudo-Gothic *Littera Bastarda*… An atlas of topics and tropes, but also of styles and techniques, they illustrate Steinberg's characteristic refusal to settle on a formula… even within the same drawing. Collaged photographs, figures clipped from books, rubber-stamped drawings… allowed him to "avoid the narcissistic pleasure of hand work. Work is a trap that keeps people from thinking – it's therapy." Rather bored and/thus lucid than busy but mindlessly entertained.

The discussion on Steinberg ends with a quote from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927-40) which is reproduced again at the top of the epilogue, "Inside out," on the facing page: "Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream." Intended reiteration or casual slip-up – surely the former –, the alliteration only works for the benefit of the narrative, seamlessly merging the last chapter and the conclusion in a book whose different sections are tightly sawn together by a network of developing threads, call-backs, argumentative recurrences and thematic overlaps. As a coda to the exploration of Steinberg, Benjamin's quote, which continued with "we are at home in the arabesques of its lining," salutes the many entanglements, both semantic and graphic, displayed in the odd sixty pages that precede it. In the context of the book, it mirrors the quote, also from Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, that opens the prologue, joining the many symmetries, nods and reverberations scattered throughout both text and images. Another great decision in the book has been to illustrate it almost exclusively through drawings, creating a visual continuity that further helps bring together its different parts.

A thoroughly researched study, *Boredom and the Architectural Imagination* is also an eminently quotable work, thanks to Mihalache's finely tuned statements and precisions, both on her subjects of choice, and on the use of terminology. In the prologue, she states that the study draws from Martin Heidegger's structure of boredom, as explained in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929-30, publ. 1983), and "from a few lines that Walter Benjamin writes about boredom in the years leading up to World War II." Together with Benjamin, the reader will find excerpts from some other usual suspects of twentieth century architectural and visual theory, such as the Sigfrieds – Giedion and, especially, Kracauer –, Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, and, in no particular order, Josef Frank, Le Corbusier, Lewis Mumford, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander, and a myriad of other referents that open up a similar number of connections s/he will feel tempted to check up. A deep, rich, yet agile and engaging read, but perhaps not one to engage in a mode of distraction, *Boredom and the Architectural Imagination* succeeds in contributing to fill a persistent gap in a growing field of academic study almost universally neglected by architectural academia.[4] And this book does it in a seriously entertaining way.

Notes

1. For a bibliographic review of boredom, check, for instance, the recent "The Significance of Boredom: A Literature Review," by Mariusz Finkielsztein, published in the also recently founded *Journal of Boredom Studies* 1 (2022): 1–33.
2. Some parts of this book were also firstly published as articles: Andreea Mihalache, "Saul Steinberg: Saul Steinberg's Stories of Dor," *Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture,* eds. Paul Emmons et al. (Routledge, 2016); Andreea Mihalache, "En el mundo, pero no de él," *Actas De Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea* 5, (2018): 86–101; Andreea Mihalache, "Musings on Boredom, Midcentury Architecture, and Public Spaces," *The Plan Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020): 119–38.
3. In "The Chair as Crutch and Symbol" (*Behind the Picture Window:* 53–76), which also includes some cartoons, although none by Steinberg, Rudofsky looked at several mobile/moving home devices, including hammocks, barber chairs, operating tables, rocking, swivel, and vibrating chairs ("constructed on the principle of the milk shake" which, "disguised as furniture, found their way into the house.")
4. It is worth citing here, as Mihalache does in the book, the work on this subject by Christian Parreño, who has produced in the last decade a string of publications on the intersections of architecture and boredom, most notably *Boredom, Architecture, and Spatial Experience* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

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