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# HOW ARCHITECTURAL AND CITY THEORIES OF CONTEXT INFLUENCED THE IDEA OF POSTMODERN CULTURE: THE STUDY OF WRITINGS OF FREDRIC JAMESON AND DAVID HARVEY

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## W JAKI SPOSÓB TEORIE ARCHITEKTURY I MIASTA WPŁYNEŁY NA KONCEPCJĘ KULTURY POSTMODERNISTYCZNEJ: STUDIUM PISM FREDRICA JAMESONA I DAVIDA HARVEYA

### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to describe the role that early postmodern architectural and urban theories of context played in the conception of the broader idea of postmodern culture. This research suggests in its results that in their first attempts to define the postmodern culture in general, its main theorists, namely Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Andreas Huyssen, have relied heavily on architectural culture examples of build output as well as on architectural discourse of the sixties. Of the examples they provided, many can be traced back to the group of architects and thinkers connected to the VSBA office in Philadelphia (Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates), and traced forward to, for instance, Coop Himmelb(l)au and their works of the eighties. The main method used in this study is classical discourse analysis and epistemic contextualism. This research was made possible with the aid of a grant – the Fulbright Junior Research Award at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

*Keywords: architecture, context, culture, postmodernism, theory*

### Streszczenie

Głównym celem tego artykułu jest opisanie roli, jaką wczesno-postmodernistyczne teorie kontekstu architektonicznego i urbanistycznego odegrały w ustanawianiu definicji kultury postmodernistycznej. Wykonane badanie wskazuje w rezultatach, że czołowi badacze kultury postmodernistycznej – Fredric Jameson, David Harvey i Andreas Huyssen – w swoich definicjach polegali na przykładach realizacji i odniesieniach do dyskursu architektonicznego lat sześćdziesiątych. Wśród tych odwołań wiele wskazuje na silną rolę grupy Filadelfijskich architektów VSBA (Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates) w kształtowaniu podstawowych idei wykorzystywanych w definicjach kulturoznawców tego okresu. Późniejsza działalność architektów postmodernistycznych i ich rozbudowywanie teorii kontekstu architektonicznego, jak prace i pisma Coop Himmelb(l)au z lat osiemdziesiątych kontynuowały stanowione przez VSBA koncepcje. Głównymi metodami badań w artykule były klasyczna analiza dyskursu oraz epistemiczny kontekstualizm. Badanie zostało wykonane przy wsparciu grantu Fulbright Junior Research Award na University of Pennsylvania w Filadelfii, PA.

*Słowa kluczowe: architektura, kontekst, kultura, postmodernizm, teoria*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to describe the role that early postmodern architectural and urban theories played in the conception of the broader idea of postmodern culture. The research suggests in its results that in their first attempts to define the postmodern culture in general, its main theorists, namely Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, have relied heavily on architectural culture examples of build output as well as on architectural discourse of the sixties. Jameson and Harvey, despite being specialists in literature studies, philosophy, and anthropology, have all dedicated a large body of their postmodern culture definitions to architecture and urbanism. Of the examples they provided, many can be traced back to the group of architects and thinkers connected to the VSBA office in Philadelphia (Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates).

## 2. METHODS

The main method used in this study is classical discourse analysis. The methodology of a departure from an individualist understanding of architectural production to provide a wider scope of temporal architectural discursive culture is motivated by author's inquiry into the origins of postmodern architectural thought. Case study design and author's decision to choose and contrast two of most prominent and earliest authors on postmodern culture was due to their still relevant and established concepts. Conclusions are that in the conception of the idea of postmodern culture architectural writings and build output played a vital role. This research was made possible with the aid of a grant – the Fulbright Junior Research Award at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia that allowed the author of this paper to travel and consult their ideas with top researchers of Robert Venturi, as well as his former students, and specialists in theories of postmodern culture.

## 3. THE CONCEPT OF POSTMODERN URBANISM BY DAVID HARVEY

David Harvey as a renowned anthropologist at Cambridge since 1961, and influenced by Sigmund Freud, Jurgen Habermas, Edmund Burke, Ernst Cassirer, or Friedrich Nietzsche, acknowledges cultural postmodernism as a sort of “historical connection” rather than a set of concrete ideas<sup>1</sup>. Those conflicting notions within a postmodern culture make up for openness of both postmodern personal identities and identities of postmodern authors. It is their exercise to integrate their personas within the fluid and endlessly open postmodern landscape<sup>2</sup>. In Harvey's idea, one can characterize postmodern artifact as brutal, playful, self-ironizing, pastiche, depthless in metaphysical sense, modernist-reactive, embracing commerce, all of the above not necessarily as solely pejorative qualities, but rather self-conscious, critical procedures within a conflicted reality of modern city life.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of the Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

#### 4. SIMILARITIES IN HARVEY'S AND DSB'S IDEAS OF POSTMODERN CITY

Harvey's focus on postmodern city and city analysis resonates with the ideas of Denise Scott Brown. He imagines city as a theatre which is also similar to Charles Jencks observation in that matter. Inspired by the writings of Jonathan Raban, he envisions postmodern city as a coded entity that could only be encoded by a careful reading of its conflicting values. It sounds similar to the ideals of DSB, as she in the urbanism compartment "[has] been attracted by the opposites, ... by tensions between urban and rural, modern and traditional, western and African, ... sectional (Jewish, Italian, American) and of the whole world"<sup>3</sup>. Harvey writes about the postmodern urbanism's changed vision of the city as full of myth, illusion, aspiration, and fantasy of its entrepreneurs, referring to the conception of mass visual culture. All that highly resonates with VSBA's idea of complex analysis of Las Vegas cityscape. With their focus on its provocative commercial billboards, restaurants reminiscent of hot-dogs and burgers, or festive neon signage of casinos. All that styles, signs, and systems of communicating within the city are considered to be city's lifeblood, "liberating [postmodern] human identity", and at the same token seem almost like a nightmare of the previous more strict systems (like that of a modernist pure, geometric, rational city)<sup>4</sup>. Softness and fluidity were to be the main characteristics of postmodern city, affecting its citizens in a manner similar to the one Georg Simmel described in his "Architecture and the City", as a psychotic phantasm breaking former lifestyles and habits of its inhabitants. According to this idea, the postmodern city both liberates and changes human condition which was also a topic critically discussed by Jane Jacobs at the time.

It is worth mentioning that Harvey's concepts of postmodern culture are based mostly on literature and fine arts. In his writings, Harvey tries to define postmodern culture as a larger entity than style or theory. In his mind it is rather a phase in cultural development. In comparison, Harvey's constellation of postmodern authors is certainly less structural than that of Jencks, yet similarly large and varied. Harvey's basis for the thinking of postmodernism begins with the search for the proto period which was modernism or more generally the Enlightenment. His writings trace Ernst Cassirer's 1951 *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* for the causes of and main concepts within modernity. Cassirer was also vastly cited by Manfredo Tafuri. They both (Harvey and Tafuri) explored how the idea of "break from history and tradition"<sup>5</sup> has come to a twisting point around the mid-twentieth century, especially in Anglo-American universe. Such a disruption of tradition is what constituted the project of modernity, as researched by Jurgen Habermas.

#### 5. POSTMODERN ART AS THE ART FOR THE PUBLIC AND FOR THE MASS

David Harvey's thinking on postmodernity was influenced by the works of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas's framework included, but was not limited to, the breadth of ideas of German

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<sup>3</sup> D. Scott Brown, *Soane Medal Lecture 2018*, Sir John Soane's Museum, London 2018, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Raban, *Soft City*, The Harvill Press, London 1974.

<sup>5</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Dilthey, Husserl, and Gadamer, along with Frankfurt School and Weber, Durkheim, and Mead. In the linguistic compartment the sources included Wittgenstein, in American pragmatism John Dewey, and also other neo-Kantian thinkers. Harvey draws from Habermas's three pillars of postmodern culture, namely the representational culture, the public sphere [de. *Öffentlichkeit*]<sup>6</sup>, and commercial mass media. The first one referred to the culture that aims to represent chosen ideas to the audience (like religious ideals of purity, or institutional prestige and long history, or the governor's splendor). The second one, the *Öffentlichkeit*, was public and also free from such a mission, therefore more individualistic and particular in its quest to communicate effectively (journals, newspapers). Lastly, mass culture was aimed at the most passive consumers of culture, and could also be considered as entertainment or commodity. A switch in establishment architecture being an emblem of the first of those systems to the second one, or the third, was the touchstone for the emergence of postmodern architects and urbanists.

## 6. POSTMODERN URBANISTS AGAINST MODERN CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

Harvey after Max Weber acknowledges that Enlightenment's (modern) expectation of progress by the means of science and universal human freedom resulted in instrumental rationality. That is what postmodern authors aim at in their critique of the modern movement. Similarly to other critics of the Enlightenment, such as Horkheimer and Adorno, Harvey states that the modernist project was "doomed to turn against itself", transforming the personal emancipation into "the system of human oppression". Rational culture based on reason was around the mid-twentieth century believed to be no longer viable, as of being impersonal and against human nature. Resulting in what Nietzsche observes as early as in 1870, that modernity might actually end up in "individual alienation". For him humanity is destructively creative and creatively destructive as systems of culture overturn themselves in the constant battle of individualization and unity, as well as search for improved morality, universal rights, new, and better world. Destruction in the name of producing the new order is in his mind intensively humane, with multiple examples in the history of literature like in Goethe's *Faust*. Faustian destruction of the old world simultaneously produces a new "wasteland". The idea of creative destruction in modern urbanism was embodied by Hausman's Parisian boulevards, and Robert Moses' post-Second World War New York's redevelopment. The transformation of a city was linked to the transformation of a human itself, of all its citizens, a clearing, almost mythological transformative process. Against that stance of modernist destructive creation of a new world and new man, postmodern urbanists like VSBA rebelled.

Postmodern urbanists aimed for inclusivity of oddness, ugliness, and ordinary, even if it resulted in chaos. The authenticity of Las Vegas and its nonconformity to a standard of rational, citizen driven, or any form of traditional urban planning was, in VSBA's observation, a valuable lesson on urbanism freed from any restraints. Las Vegas simultaneous nihilism, celebration of commerce and technology, and symbolic load were an epitome of modern turned to postmodern urbanism. It represented early modern new conditions of transport and systems of communication, but also the explosion of consumptionism's representation within

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<sup>6</sup> J. Harbermas, *Modernity versus Postmodernity*, "New German Critique" 1981, no. 22, p. 3.

the cityscape. The image of postmodern city was not only researched by VSBA within the famous Las Vegas study. Another one of the series was *Learning from Levittown*.

## 7. HOUSE AS A SIGNIFIER OF POSTMODERN PLANNING

*Learning from Levittown* is a continuation and a break from the modernist thinking of a house. The Corbusian concept of modern house as a “machine for modern living” slowly develops into what Harvey observes, that the house could also be a “factory for the production of happiness”. The creation of a vision of an ordinary life has been the interest of professional architects and urbanists since the Enlightenment. The Weberian *Öffentlichkeit* and mass culture required artists to reimagine the frames of the everyday, reflecting on societal changes, then supporting or neglecting them. DSB’s *Learning from Levittown* was one of the three original architectural studios of hers that she taught with Robert Venturi on Yale in 1967–1970. All of those, (the last one was New York city Subway study) were urban conscious courses based heavily on student’s analysis. In Levittown, which in VSBA’s mind was a symbol of suburban post-war American life, they “sympathetically examined the success of residents and users in navigating environment in which they found themselves”<sup>7</sup>. The plates made as a result of the course included comic-like sketches of symbolic communication of suburban houses and their interiors. In little speech bubbles that covered almost all of the students’ sketches there were funny and witty comments about the style and specific elements, symbols, of Levittown houses such as “curving street!” or “rail fence!” That was VSBA’s way of mild critique of everyday suburban architecture, which however did not result in a book, but still fortunately was included in their “Signs of Life” exhibition in 1976 in Washington.

## 8. FREDRIC JAMESON’S POSTMODERN “AMBIGUITY YOU HAPPEN TO FAVOR”

Fredric Jameson’s idea of postmodern culture is broad and complex. He writes of “constitutive impurity of postmodern culture”<sup>8</sup>. His account resonates with complex and contradictory nature of postmodern architecture as defined by Robert Venturi, and structural imperfection of Manfredo Tafuri’s project of (postmodern) history. Jameson’s idea of postmodernism is in presenting contemporary architecture historically, and suspension of the belief in linear progressive history. His famous observation opens the book,

It is safest to grasp the concept of postmodern as an attempt to think present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. In that case it either ‘expresses’ some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted fashion) or effectively ‘represses’ and diverts it, depending on the site of ambiguity you happen to favor.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> D.B. Brownlee, D.G. De Long, K.B. Hiesinger, *Out of the Ordinary: Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Associates. Architecture, urbanism, design*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 2001, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1991, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

## 9. WHY DESIGNING HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA?

Jameson acknowledges postmodern consciousness as a form of internal theorization within the movement. Also, in *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi mentions conscious (operative) sense of the past and present, when he writes early on, “[a]s an architect I try to be guided not by habit but by conscious sense of the past – by precedent thoughtfully considered”<sup>10</sup>. And indeed he does, in his first book as well as in many further publications, search for the postmodern interpretation of various past architectural styles. For the sake of theorizing on postmodern architectural qualities like, for instance, ambiguity, he searches through the whole body of past objects with projective nonchalance. The author of this paper has traced the historical narrative of Venturi in their PhD dissertation of 2023 *Changing Attitudes Toward Architectural History in the Mid-Twentieth Century in the United States of America: A Comparative Study of the Architects Louis I. Kahn and Robert Venturi*, observing the multiplicity of historical examples used by Venturi:

Architectural ambiguity was in a single paragraph discussed [by Venturi] in relation with Villa Savoye, Grimsthorpe pavilions, Palazzo di Propaganda Fide, Casino di Pio IV, Nashdom Abbey, and apartments in Via Parioli in Rome. In that way the list consisted of the highly recognized modernist villa, eighteenth century wing of the Tudor castle, Italian Baroque Palazzo, patrician Mannerist villa, Neo-Georgian British country house of early-twentieth century, and Italian mid-twentieth century apartments, as all of the examples were used for the reflection on architectural ambiguity.<sup>11</sup>

The breadth of examples used by Venturi for justification of his architectural theories of complexity resulted in what Tafuri called “operative history” and “operative criticism” meaning that architectural history was again reopened for new interpretation and expression, but this time by designing and theorizing architects, not architecture historians. Thus, creating a new “space of conflict” (another one of the famous Tafurian architectural concepts) allowing architects to, once again, after the modernist pause, utilize past symbols, details, and architectural orders in their designs, somehow reimagining them anew.

## 10. VSBA’S SENSITIVE CONSTRUCTION, DECONSTRUCTION, AND RECONSTRUCTION

Jamesonian notions of postmodernism as a “fully human culture” or a “culture as a project of its own right” resonates with an observation made by Michael Hays, “since 1968, ‘architecture theory’ has all but subsumed ‘architecture culture,’ ... [it] can no longer be expected to arise spontaneously, as a matter of social course, but must now be constantly constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through more self-conscious theoretical procedures”<sup>12</sup>. The

<sup>10</sup> R. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd edition reprint, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> O. Chrzanowska, *Changing Attitudes Toward Architectural History in the Mid-Twentieth Century in the United States of America: A Comparative Study of the Architects Louis I. Kahn and Robert Venturi*, PhD dissertation, Lodz University of Technology, Lodz 2023, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> K.M. Hays, *Introduction* [in:] K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1998, p. v.

deeply inclusive and sensitive construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of modern and historical architecture symbols and ideas was one of the hallmarks of VSBA's architecture.

Various symbols and methods were recycled by VSBA designers. They borrowed from both modern and historical symbols. One example is a signage by Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown at Princeton's Gordon Wu Hall<sup>13</sup>, for its façade and chandeliers in the dining hall, they implemented classically informed shapes and silhouettes, which were also similar to the work of the same period of Mitchell's and Giurgola's Australian Parliament Hall in Canberra<sup>14</sup>. Beginning in the sixties, many architects experimented with historically informed designs and theses. "The Philadelphia School, term coined around the sixties, related to the reexamination of history of recent and distant past, by architects Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi, Ehrman Mitchell, Romaldo Giurgola, and Robert Geddes. Their designs related to the broad architectural heritage including modernism, works of Le Corbusier, and to works of each other"<sup>15</sup>.

## 11. COOP HIMMELB(L)AU'S CONTINUATION OF VSBA'S CONCEPTS

Context sensitive deconstruction is also a theme that characterizes works of the famous Coop Himmelb(l)au architectural and urban office. Its head, Wolf D. Prix, discusses contextuality within the design of the building, which is often considered to be the first realized Deconstructivist architectural object. The 1983 project is, in fact, only a rooftop remodeling on Falkestrasse, in Vienna, Austria. Yet, in its free form, undetermined by the constraints of a function, it happened to take a spectacularly complex shape. Reminiscent of a sculpture, conceptually, it is similar to phantasy-driven forms on the roof of Le Corbusier's Unite in Marseille<sup>16</sup>. Without the typical context and proportions, an object designed by the architects on the rooftop of another building can be shaped into any form, and therefore manifest its openness, fluidity, search, design process, here in the example of two helixes and a path merging into one another creating an artistic "line of energy".

## 12. VSBA'S CONTEXTUALISM THEOREM

Contextualism was a big, if not a leading, theme in VSBA's theoretical portfolio. Various entities were contextualized by the group, there was a context of history of architecture, the context of a site where the building was to be designed, the context of modernism, the cultural context of an American city. Postmodern historical contextualism of VSBA was represented as a rejection of both the early modern radical anti-historicism as well as historicism based on great canonical objects of the past. Their historical attitude was more nuanced and inclusive than their most famous predecessors such as Louis I. Kahn or Louis Sullivan (Robert Venturi practiced in both offices).

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<sup>13</sup> See R. Venturi, S. Brown, *Princeton University. Gordon Wu Hall, Butler College, 1980–1983*, Princeton, New Jersey 1983.

<sup>14</sup> See, Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp, *Australian Parliament in Canberra Hall, 1981–1988*, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>15</sup> O. Chrzanowska, *Changing Attitudes Toward Architectural History*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> W.D. Prix, *Out of the Clouds. Wolf dPrix. Sketches 1967–2020*, Birkhauser, Basel 2022, p. 287.

In *Complexity and Contradiction* Venturi presents a series of lessons that his contemporaries could learn from mannerism or from English eclectic cottage houses, objects not typically included in your curricula of traditional Beaux-Arts architectural education (established by the French duo: Theophilus Chandler, the creator of the 1890s UPenn Department of Architecture, who similarly to Sullivan studied under Émile Vaudremer – the architect of the city of Paris and Ecole’s star, and his right hand Paul Cret, one of department’s first teachers appointed in 1903 and Kahn’s mentor) or Bauhaus-based new American architecture programs<sup>17</sup>. VSBA’s additional fixation on recent past and contextualization of modernism as a part of modern cityscape was noteworthy. They speculated on possible impurity of architectural and urban context embracing the differences of styles even risking potential chaos arising from that. They accepted and raised the status of the vernacular ugliness of everyday non-stylistic commercial architecture in their famous study of the Las Vegas Strip, making serious studies on its morphology and analyses of its complex urban composition. The next couple paragraphs focus on the role of Denise Scott Brown’s fascination with photography, roadside vernaculars, and pop cultures in the authorship of *Learning from Las Vegas* and therefore on the conception of postmodern context analysis.

The three people immensely linked to the Las Vegas study were not surprisingly its authors Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Stephen Izenour. Of the three the most research and attention in the mainstream research is paid to Venturi, who got the most recognition for his architectural career. Denise Scott Brown’s influence on the project is yet not to be overlooked. Her Soane Medal Lecture of 2018 presents a profoundly personal view of how their postmodern study of the Las Vegas urban context was established. She mentions visiting Las Vegas multiple times before the project started, long before any serious architects would consider visiting it for any reasons other than gambling. She reminisces how she entered the city from Mojave Desert which reminded her of the vistas around her hometown Johannesburg (which at the time of her growing up in its suburb Dunkeld, in the thirties, was still a drastically expanding mining town in the middle of the desert). Her fascination with photography and pictures taken at both locations shows a striking resemblance of mid-century commercial vernacular in South African and American Midwest landscape<sup>18</sup>.

Denise photographed all three continents immensely. In Europe, her photographic urban analyses of British high-rise social housing projects document her time she spent at the AA with great social precision. And it was Denise Scott Brown who established after her (and Venturi’s) appointment in 1967 Yale the architectural studio “Learning from Las Vegas”. They searched and photographed the backs of those spaces and objects, their full context. The back of billboards, the parking lots surrounding the hotels. In respect to the studio’s methodology she mentioned:

... analyzing and documenting the city in a million different ways – through drawing, sketches, leprellos, stills and films, and through studies of its hotels, casinos, wedding chapels, gas stations, parking lots and signs, and in polemical provocations abouts its monumentalism and in all of its ducks and decorated sheds.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See J. Ockman, *Architecture School Three Centuries of Education Architects in North America*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2012.

<sup>18</sup> D. Scott Brown, *Soane Medal Lecture 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

All of that shows an immense force that contextualism had in the VSBA's repertoire. The objects under the study, the methods, the form of urban analysis were novel, challenging, and risky.

### 13. SUMMARY

This research suggests that the context of one's life might influence their fascinations, methods of interpretation and further also other people's views on certain concepts within the discipline. It follows a hermeneutic idea of architectural history and especially its actors – architects, searching for individuals' motives and trying to recollect their interpretations of meanings in architecture, that way trying to find some "truth" about the past. The previous paragraphs described contextual forces that determined the VSBA's legacy. In both Jameson's and Harvey's ideas on architectural postmodernism the VSBA's influence was speculated on. This paper argues that VSBA's Las Vegas Strip urban context analysis could be treated as an emblem of research into complex postmodern culture. The flow of actions and knowledge transmitted from VSBA in its books *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas* along with its structure and projected architecture and theories affected postmodern cultural historians.

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#### **A u t h o r ' s   N o t e**

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