Ornement et Subjectivité, de la Tradition Vitruvienne à L'âge Numérique.

Ornament and its users: from the Vitruvian tradition to the digital age

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Ornament yesterday and today: continuities and discontinuities

During the past decade, the practice of architecture seems to have changed much faster than its theory. Major developments such as globalization, computerization, and the growing importance of environmental concerns have profoundly altered the conditions under which architects work. Against this background, theorists find themselves compelled to explore the new topics of inquiry introduced by programmatic and technological change, and to take up old questions which they thought had long since been dealt with.

Among the questions that we supposed had been, perhaps not answered definitively, but at least precisely formulated, was that of ornament. Recent years have seen a vigorous revival of ornament, but of a kind quite different from that we know from the past. Before the modern movement decided to dismiss it as a minor component of the architectural project, ornament exhibited several predictable characteristics, which are not necessarily in use today.

First, in the past architectural ornament was restricted to specific areas, concentrated at key points of a building. In many contemporary projects, by contrast, it covers the entire facade, applied as an overall element, a feature of the skin of the building as a whole. This is true of projects as diverse as the pharmaceutical research laboratories in Biberach designed by Sauerbruch Hutton and the John Lewis department store in Leicester designed by Foreign Office Architects.

Second, ornament was previously viewed as "supplementary" in a special sense; it was expected to be superficial, an appendage tacked on to the real substance of the building, yet at the same time essential, all the more so precisely because it was possible to imagine it not being there.[1] Ornament was cosmetic, in both the original senses of the term: it was as slight a surface detail as a hairstyle or makeup, but it also revealed an underlying structure. The words "cosmic" and "cosmetic" derive from the same Greek root, meaning arrangement or order. The traditional rules governing ornament reflected this disconcerting etymological connection between the superficial, the trivial, and the fragile, and the underlying essence of reality. These rules were still being applied to many nineteenth-century buildings: this is the only

[1] For a philosophical discussion of this idea of the "supplementary," see for example Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (1972), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

possible explanation for the important role that Schinkel assigned to the decorative panels of his Bauakademie, which were simply attached to the outside of the building but yet essential to the project.[2]

These rules no longer apply to ornament, since it is no longer removable either from the façade or from the building itself. Its new status reaches an extreme in the blurring of the traditional distinction between structure and ornament, as exemplified by buildings such as the Olympic Stadium in Beijing designed by Herzog & de Meuron. The giant latticework designed by Cecil Balmond can be read in a way as a piece of jewelry, as one gigantic ornament.

One more difference, last but not least, between past and present is that whereas even the simplest forms of ornament traditionally had symbolic significance of some sort, it is now assumed by a range of theorists and practitioners, from Jesse Reiser to Farshid Moussavi, that ornament has no external meaning.[3] Theorists and practitioners are both trying to distance themselves from the excesses of postmodernism, but the break they want to make is just as much a rejection of the previous ideas of architectural decoration with which postmodern architecture sought to ally itself.

What are we talking about when we speak of ornament now in any sense more specific than simply decoration intended to give pleasure? The hypothesis we would like to propose at this point is that, today as yesterday, ornament is closely linked with the question of the person, or rather the people, that architecture is concerned with. We will try to show that the role of the individuals concerned may be the real clue that links past and present – ornament as understood in the Vitruvian tradition, before the modern movement broke with that heritage, and ornament as often implemented in contemporary architectural production.

Ornament and its people

We have noted that a variety of people are concerned with architecture. In the case of ornamentation, we may divide them into those who design ornament, those who manufacture it, and those for whom it is intended.

First, the designer. At least until the eighteenth century, ornament was supposed to reveal something essential about the architect. It reflected character, both personal and professional. Even the profiles of the moldings bear the stamp of human character, as Jacques-François

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[2] Cf. Barry Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: An Architecture for Prussia*, New York, Rizzoli, 1994.

[3] Jesse Reiser and Nakano Umemoto, *Atlas of Novel Tectonics*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2005; Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo, *The Function of Ornament*, Barcelona, Actar, 2006.

Blondel emphasizes in his *Cours d'architecture* (published starting in 1771), illustrating this via a series of plates showing the various ways the main authors of treatises in the Renaissance addressed this topic.[4]

Ornament is one sign of the architect's creativity: this in turn raises the question of the relationship between this spirit of creation and the rules of architecture, and of the limits of artistic license,[5] an issue hotly debated in the Mannerist period. This issue cast a long shadow; it comes up in the case of Piranesi, whose inventiveness was manifested especially vividly in the realm of ornamentation,[6] and again in the case of Louis Sullivan, of whom Frank Lloyd Wright said that there was something energetic in his way of thinking about ornament.[7]

Ornament also has to do with another sort of person, those who carve, sculpt, and polish – the artisans and skilled workers that art theory does not always know quite what to do with. Augustin-Charles d'Aviler, author of an influential textbook and dictionary of architectural terms that was reprinted many times in the early eighteenth century, believed that it was important to be on good terms with the artisans and other workers in order to create architectural decoration. This was the point of the well-known illustration presenting side by side the terms used by artists and those used by artisans to name the different types of moldings.[8]

John Ruskin and his followers saw the sculptor whose hand shapes the ornament as an essential element in their account of what organic architecture ought to be. Unlike Viollet-le-Duc, who tended to reduce ornament to the logical outcome of structural decisions, Ruskin saw Gothic ornament as a sign of the artisan's freedom. What made the Gothic truly organic, in his view, was its ability to reconcile individual freedom with collective inspiration.[9] Ruskin also introduced the idea that ornament was bound to be slightly imperfect, since it always bore the mark of the hand that fashioned it. Along with the condemnation of useless ornament by the modern movement, this conception was to have a permanent influence on Le Corbusier. In his mature works, such as the Unité d'habitation in Marseille, the marks left on building surfaces by the casings might be seen as evocative of Ruskinian ornament.

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[4] Jacques-François Blondel and Pierre Patte, *Cours d'architecture, ou traité de la décoration, distribution et construction des bâtiments*, Paris, Desaint, 1771-1777, vol. 1, plates X-XII.

[5] Jacques-François Blondel and Pierre Patte *Cours d'architecture, ou traité de la décoration, distribution et construction des bâtiments*, Paris, Desaint, 1771-1777, vol. 1, plates X-XII.

[6] Cf. Didier Laroque, *Le Discours de Piranèse. L'Ornement sublime et le suspens de l'architecture*, Paris, Éditions de la Passion, 2000.

[7] Frank Lloyd Wright, "Louis H. Sullivan: His Work," *Architectural Record*, No. 56, July 1924, pp. 28-32.

[8] Augustin-Charles d'Aviler, *Cours d'architecture*, Paris, Jean Mariette, 1720, plate A.

[9] Cf. Michael W. Brooks, *John Ruskin and Victorian Architecture*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1989.

Second, the one who actually manufactures the ornament, either the designer or the artisan. Some nineteenth-century theorists refused to distinguish clearly between these two, believing in a kind of impulse to ornamentation that transcends distinctions in job description. There is clearly something anthropological or even psychoanalytical about this attitude. Gottfried Semper is quite typical: on his account, ornament has its origins in an impulse that is initially universal but takes different forms from one society and one era to another.[10] In this context we might bring up the thorny question of the ornamentation of machine-made goods, such as the elaborately decorated iron stoves that regularly feature in the catalogues of Universal Exhibitions – a prominent type of manufacture in that industrial century. Do industrialized societies still bear the traces of an age-old impulse to ornamentation? In the sphere of building construction, the question becomes even more pressing with the mass-production of ornament, well documented in the United States with its systematic use of decorative elements in terracotta, but almost as typical of European architecture as well.[11]

It is interesting that the modern movement also came to adopt the view of ornament as an expression of a basic anthropological impulse – but in order to condemn it all the more comprehensively. *Ornament and Crime* is a very revealing work in this context. Adolf Loos, in fact, was directly influenced by the work of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who argued that the use of ornament was linked with forms of childhood behavior that prefigured criminality. After Loos, ornament was associated with children, women, and criminals:[12] an adult, male architect whose goal is to better human society has to beware of yielding too readily to its wiles. Modernity takes this image of the architect as exemplary, even though here and there we encounter a female figure or some other curiosity wandering in the byways of the profession.

Lastly, there are the intended recipients of ornament, from the client who commissions a building down to the casual passer-by who looks at the decoration on a facade. Among the traditional functions of ornament was that of announcing to the world the quality and rank of the building's owner. In the vocabulary of classical architecture, this purpose was related to the ideal of decorum, that is to say due proportion between the effects produced by buildings and the social class of their inhabitants. Palace, country estate, town mansion, or ordinary

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[10] On Gottfried Semper, see for example the introduction by Harry Francis Mallgrave to his *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2004.

[11] Cf. Valérie Nègre, *L'Ornement en série. Architecture, terre cuite et carton-pierre*, Brussels/Liège, Mardaga, 2006.

[12] Jimena Canales and Andrew Herscher, "Criminal Skins: Tattoos and Modern Architecture in the Work of Adolf Loos," *Architectural History*, No. 48, 2005, pp. 235-256.

house: these different kinds of building, at least in theory, should all obey the principle of decorum, and do so by means of suitable ornamentation.

This challenge became complicated in the late seventeenth century with the beginning of the separation between public life and private life. "Architectural ornaments must be sober on the outside, because they are seen by all sorts of people and at all times, and one owes it to the public not to appear before it except in proper garb. Architectural ornaments may be bizarre and even grotesque on the inside, since no one enters there except those who are invited in, and then only at times of one's own choosing."[13] This remark by Charles Perrault in his *Pensées chrétiennes* signals the development of a much freer, even bizarre and grotesque, type of ornamentation in the interiors of aristocratic and upper-bourgeois dwellings during the Enlightenment. Intended to reflect the character and feelings of the occupants of these interiors, this kind of ornamentation was seen as highly gendered. Many writers have pointed out, for example, the decidedly feminine character of many Rococo interiors.[14]

This inner-outer separation was to persist through the nineteenth century, giving rise to the bourgeois interior as well to extreme manifestations of self-expression such as the houses of Sir John Soane and Pierre Loti, whose extremely complex decorative programs are recognizably autobiographical statements.

We can see that whether it is designed, manufactured, or perceived, traditional ornament takes on a strongly personal character. We may note in conclusion to this section that ornament may involve many other people along with the architect, the artisan, and the client. The origin of the Corinthian capital, according to the story told by Vitruvius, was a basket of offerings in memory of a young girl who had recently died. The basket was placed on top of an acanthus plant whose leaves grew up around it, inspiring the sculptor Callimachus to create a new order: the person who was lost and then is remembered is key to the story.[15] François Blondel, the first professor at Colbert's Academy of Architecture, was thinking along the same lines when he claimed that capitals were a transposition of the funeral urns that in former times were placed on the tops of columns.[16] Ornament is also a means of remembering the dead, as the nineteenth century was well aware when it lavishly decorated the graves in its cemeteries.

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[13] Charles Perrault, *Pensées chrétiennes*, manuscript published by Jacques Barchilon and Catherine Velay-Vallantin, Paris/Seattle, *Papers on French seventeenth-century literature*, Biblio 17-34, 1987.

[14] Cf. Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1995.

[15] Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, tr. Morris Hicky Morgan, Cambridge. MA, Harvard University Press, and London, Humphrey Milford and Oxford University Press, 1914, Book IV, ch.1, section 9.

[16] François Blondel, *Cours d'architecture*, Paris, P. Aubouin and F. Clouzier, 1675-1683, Part II, pp. 2-3.

The return of the question of ornament

Armed with this handful of historical references, we can now address the issue of the reappearance of ornamentation that we brought up at the beginning of this article. To be more precise, what seems to be reappearing is not so much ornament itself as a generally favorable attitude to ornamentation, an attitude closely linked, as we shall see, to the question of its designers, makers, and users.

Let us look more closely at some of the characteristics of what is now understood by ornament. First of all, contemporary architectural ornament is much more superficial, or rather surface-bound, than traditional ornament, which might take the form of carvings jutting out from the plane of the wall. There is nothing like this today: ornament seems to form the actual skin of the building. It may have a textured effect, looking like scratches or scars, or be closer to tattooing. But regardless of the form it takes, it essentially stays on the surface of the wall without ever breaking away from it.

Contemporary ornament also exhibits a tactile quality, as if its function were to encourage the viewer to go beyond the visual experience and literally caress the surfaces. This tactile quality is present in many projects, sometimes to the point of caricature. The de Young Museum by Herzog & de Meuron, for example, seems to be covered by protrusions that look rather like the Braille alphabet. It is as if visual perception were to be folded into a more comprehensive experience that also involves the sense of touch.

With respect to the visual experience, many contemporary ornamental devices have something hypnotic about them. They recall some of the techniques of 1960s Op Art, such as the repetition of patterns that seem to have taken on a life of their own. The swirls on the facade of the John Lewis store seem to be spinning as the viewer looks at them.

The examples we have just mentioned all tend to call into question the traditional separation between the observer and the object observed. It is as if they sought to dispense with the idea of a single point of view identified with a particular distance between observer and object, and instead see the two as continuous. Many of the designers now exploring the potential of digital design tools explicitly identify themselves with this position. The use of Deleuze's notion of "affect" is one aspect of this, evoked by architects as diverse as Ali Rahim and Farshid Moussavi.[17] Within the continuum between observer and object it is affects that flow, rather than emotions in the traditional sense: diffuse rather than concentrated, affects occur in

[17] Ali Rahim, *Catalytic Formations: Architecture and Digital Design*, London/New York, Taylor and Francis, 2006; Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo, *The Function of Ornament*, *op. cit.*

situations in which the observer is immersed in the environment, whereas emotions create distance between the observer who experiences them and the world outside.

This type of philosophical context in turn connects with a conception of the world understood in terms of fields, gradients, and flows. Such a world is not populated by stable entities, by discrete observers and objects, but rather by events that occur in space and time. This is the world envisioned by Whitehead in the early twentieth century, and ultimately the world as described by quantum mechanics, which challenges the idea of absolute boundaries between a thing – a particle or a group of particles – and its environment.

What seems to be emerging through this discussion of the question of ornamentation is a new type of observer, one not distinct from its surroundings but continuous with the environment it exists in, an observer characterized by multiplicity and expanse. It is in the context of this observer that we should probably understand why Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, and more recently Peter Sloterdijk, are so often invoked by architects attempting to work out what this perspective means concretely, for the project.

Contemporary neuroscience tells us more about this notion of an observer that is both multiple and extended well beyond the limits of the physical body. For one thing, the neuroscientists' picture of the brain is that of a network structured in ways not unlike the Internet. It is when this network breaks down that we see mental illnesses like Capgras syndrome, a pathology that the American novelist Richard Powers dramatized in *The Echo Maker*. As Powers points out, the brain has been likened in turn to the steam engine, the telephone exchange, and the computer, but is now more often compared to the Internet, with its structure of nearly two hundred modules in constant interaction.[18]

The observer as network, the observer as environment or ecology, is a notion already present in the later stages of cybernetics. It is the connecting theme of the series of essays published in 1972 by anthropologist-cyberneticist Gregory Bateson under the title of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.[19] Many other links connect the conception of the observer found in the later stages of cybernetics to that which is developing today, its "surface-bound" character being only one of them. Steeped in references to cybernetics, *The Postmodern Condition* is particularly explicit on this point: Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern observer, drawn from the concepts of neo-cybernetics, has a thoroughly "superficial" character.[20]

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[18] Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker*, New York, Picador, 2006, p.190.

[19] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, New York, Chandler, 1972.

[20] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Among the features shared by the observer of cybernetics and the observer that contemporary architectural ornamentation is intended for is the tendency to identify patterns rather than individual forms in the traditional sense. Images, even representational ones, as on the facade of the library of the Eberswalde Technical School in Germany designed by Herzog & de Meuron, are repeated as in a mosaic or on a pavement.

As Reinhold Martin has shown, the perception of patterns rather than discrete forms is one of the characteristics of the cybernetic approach to visual and spatial phenomena.[21]. This is what brought the artist György Kepes, who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1950s and 1960s, to write extensively on ways of adapting cybernetic principles to art and architecture. The patterns that Kepes discusses share several features with contemporary architectural ornamentation.

However, the new conception of the observer that we see emerging today differs in a number of respects from that developed by cyberneticists in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. For one thing, it has a new and somewhat contradictory nature – as it were dispersed, continuous with its surroundings, as we have said, but also unique and deeply personal. Leibniz' monad is perhaps the only concept that combines these two characteristics: it is as if we were no longer discrete substances in the metaphysical sense, but completely individual perspectives on the world. This connection would help explain the return to favor of monadic models today. Architecture for monads? What seems to be reappearing yet again is the link between the question of ornament and the nature of the observer, which in turn brings us back inevitably to the problem of the individual.

However, some questions still remain unanswered. Who makes ornament today? With the development of computer-aided manufacturing, are we seeing the last of Ruskin's artisans who leave their personal imprint on what they make? This is indeed the dream cherished by many designers, who imagine a "non-standard" architecture relying on the possibility of creating infinitely varied solutions, manufactured with absolute precision and at reduced cost, thanks to computer-controlled machinery.[22] It is interesting to note in this connection the ornamental character of many experimental structures that make use of the possibilities of robotic fabrication, from the undulating walls of Gramazio & Kohler to the surface structures of Martin Bechthold. Sometimes it would seem as if the architect is trying to take over the roles of artisan and worker, by permanently usurping their authority over what they create.

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[21] Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003.

[22] See Frédéric Migayrou and Zeynep Mennan (eds.), *Architectures non standard*, Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2003.

We should also ask ourselves whether the person who designs and / or makes ornament is different from the one who encounters it, either as client or mere passer-by. Here too, the trend is toward assimilating these observers to the emblematic figure of the designer. More generally, the different individuals and their complex interplay, which architecture addressed in the past, are apparently becoming reduced to a single generic individual swimming in a fluid realm of patterns and affects. And this abandonment of the traditional distinctions between the designer, the maker, and the observer of ornament, and the focus on a fluid environment in which the traditional boundaries between observer and object are dissolving, seem to go along with a kind of suspension of the historical dimension, as if architectural creation could no longer be understood except in the present, a present that is unbounded and lacking any real past or future.[23]

This confused situation, this sense that we are at the "end of history," may well be connected to our current uncertainty about the political significance of architecture. Despite the increasing range of opinions about the political or social effectiveness (the agency, so to speak) of the project, we must admit that it is difficult to give concrete substance to the need to get beyond the realist approach to things so typical of the last two decades, influenced as they have been by Rem Koolhaas.

Can contemporary ornamentation escape this question of the relationship between architecture and politics? Until the late nineteenth century, ornament had clear political significance, not least because it helped to define the respective roles of the architect, the artisan, and the client, while at the same time signifying the rank and ambition of the people or institutions that commissioned buildings. It is clear that this kind of political component has been lost. Is it possible to be concerned with the individual without raising the question of politics? It would seem not.

How can we reinvent a politics, if not of ornament per se, at least of architectural ornamentation? The strength of the links forged in recent decades between architecture and the mass media might be a clue. Like ornament in the traditional sense, contemporary ornament is bound up with a desire to communicate. It cannot use functional constraints, like the panopticon as analyzed by Michel Foucault, to make things happen. Its links with power seem rather to operate through shared codes and values that it has to convey and reinforce.

It is impossible at this stage to neglect the problem of meaning, or of symbolic significance, although many contemporary designers claim to have abandoned it, as we have already

[23] We have expanded further on this idea in *Culture numérique et architecture. Une introduction*, Basel, Birkhaüser, 2010.

pointed out. As the theorist Robert Levit has noted in an insightful article, meaning – a meaning that is more than the pure play of volumes, textures, and patterns – always reappears, even when it has supposedly been eliminated in the name of the deployment of purely architectural affects.[24] How else to interpret the neo-Islamic allusions in some of the projects produced by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA, Rem Koolhaas) or by Zaha Hadid?

This does not mean that we ought to revert to the proliferation of signs, torn out of their historical context or vernacular culture, with which postmodernism claimed to be responding to the question of the political and social responsibilities of architecture, even if we are now rediscovering the effectiveness of some of the answers postmodernism proposed. We must equally avoid endorsing the present-day nonsense of logo and brand that is so hard to get away from. The point is rather to reconnect with architecture's function as a means of communicating political and social values, something that has to leave behind individual feelings and experiences – dimensions whose rise to power seems inexorable – and make its way back to the realm of shared experience.

In this context the question of monumentality needs to be addressed again. We have never before built so many monumental buildings: every city of any importance wants its own museum, cultural center, or library, if possible the work of a big-name architect. These grand buildings are more and more often ornamented, but their ornamentation does not send a clear message. All messages are eventually doomed to grow old, but aging is the price to be paid to become part of history. Contemporary architecture, like the individuals it is addressed to, probably needs to accept the aging process rather than seeking a non-existent formula for eternal youth.

Ultimately, we need to reflect on what architecture, via ornamentation, could contribute to a new democratic project that would unite individuals in the age of the computer. Thanks to political scientists' and sociologists' studies of the Internet, we are now beginning to identify some of the key features of this project.[25] On a more general level, the social network in which we live is becoming a little more comprehensible. It is, for example, possible to view in real time the events that convulse it, as we have learned from the recent series of political uprisings in which mobile phones and Twitter enabled the demonstrators to coordinate their

[24] Robert Levit, "Contemporary Ornament: The Return of the Symbolic Repressed," *Harvard Design Magazine*, No. 28, spring/summer 2008, pp. 70-85.

[25] For example, Dominique Cardon, *La Démocratie Internet. Promesses et limites*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

actions and the rest of the world to watch them. We need to ask ourselves how to translate this new knowledge into architectural form.

From the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, architectural decoration was considered to be the primary framework within which human actions took place. It took on a highly political coloring, as the philosopher Pierre Caye has shown in his fascinating study, *Empire et décor*.[26] The point is certainly not to reinvent the vocabulary of orders, moldings, caryatids, and urns, but to find out how we can draw upon the new resources of architectural ornamentation so as to give new meaning to collective action. This is one of the tasks that theory today has to undertake.

Translated from the French by Linda Gardiner

[26] Pierre Caye, *Empire et décor. L'Architecture et la question de la technique à l'âge humaniste et classique*, Paris, Vrin, 1999.