

5-2. Describe the grounds on which the critique of decoration describes a modernist agenda in architecture.

## **Undecorated Space**

### **Ophelia Wilkins**

The modern movement grew out of the Industrial Revolution, so it is only logical that we make a natural and direct link between modern architecture and new methods of construction. However, what defines modern architecture on par with advances in technology is the “subordinated surface.” As technology becomes an enabler of creative freedom, the subordinated surface serves to delineate revolutionary intentions.

Today we fundamentally think of architecture in terms of quality of space. If we look back in time, this was not always the case. Think of slave ships, plantations, panopticons, and European landscapes. Architecture was about configuration, organization and even politics, but not pure space.

New means of production introduced new formal possibilities, leading to new conceptions of architecture. As Wigley states: “Each subsequent change ... has to be differentiated from fashion by being tied to the logic of a fundamental break necessitated by new materials and the technologies by which they are assembled. Construction and function must be seen to immobilize and thereby subordinate all the surfaces of architecture.” He concludes his point by stating that “it is the exhibition of the subordinated surface, rather than an exhibition of the new means of production, that renders architecture modern.” (both *White Out*, p. 155). The confluence of new means of production with the subordinated surface redefined the essence of architecture as a purely spatial experience.

If ornament used to be the “concealment of an internal disorder,” (*White Out*, p. 154), the neutral surface exposes spatial order. We see this clearly in William Curtis’ praise of Le Corbusier’s *Villa Savoye*: “Even a scrupulous inspection of photographs and drawings cannot hope to recreate the feeling of space, the sense of rising up into an illuminated realm, or the intensive lyricism of sun-lit geometries seen through layers of semi-reflecting glass. The building imposes its own order on the senses through sheer sculptural power ... windows, tiles, pilotis and other naked facts are raised to a new level of significance through an intense abstraction.” (“*Le Corbusier Ideas and Forms*”, p. 96).

The modernist critique of ornament is a wake-up call to abandon the comfort of familiarity, in order to redefine the future of architecture in which anything is possible. Through the work of Corbusier and others, the neutral undecorated surface becomes the medium of re-invention.

Curtis, William J.R., *Le Corbusier ideas and Forms*; Phaidon, New York : 1986.

## **Critique of Decoration: Language**

### **James Smith**

It is difficult to understand the impact the critique of decoration had on the modernist agenda in architecture without understanding what the definition of the modern agenda was at the beginning of the 20th century. Artists in both England and Europe disputed the meaning of modern design between the last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. At this time Modern Design does not have a clear agenda, or definition, it is in a suspended state defined loosely through independent written testimonies. It held different meanings defined through the visual arts, literature, architecture and urban design. Many would argue that the truest examples of the modern are defined by the work of the Bauhaus in Germany, the Italian Futurists, and the Russian Constructivists. It is through the definition of the modern that the distinction between decoration and design evolve.

The terms decoration and design are both subjective and are both described through a subjective language. Peter Wollen argues that language has obscured the role decoration has played "in the development of modernism." This language is expressed through cultural opposite terms, "function/decorative, useful/wasteful, natural/artificial.... machine/body, masculine/feminine, west/east." The dictionary defines decoration as something that "adorns, enriches, or beautifies; something added by way of embellishment; ornament." It could be described as a creation of a pattern on a surface or canvas. Matisse defined it through the term composition, which he said was "the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings." He was supported by the work of the Art Nouveau and the Vienna Workshops. Victor Horta, an Art Nouveau designer from Belgium, believed that "decoration enhanced architecture by helping the viewer's eyes notice features and contours in space or a building."

The opposite view point held by architects such as Adolf Loos, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, as well as various artists and writers critiqued decoration for its complicated tendencies and labeled it a distraction to space. They argued for simple, rational and machine made designs. Decoration was a waste of time and should be replaced through the use of mass production techniques and a machine aesthetic.

Adolf Loos argued against decoration through economical and historical reasons. He argued for intelligence and reason, economy and effectiveness, speed and purity, believing that decoration was both primitive and damaging to modern culture and posed a threat to masculinity. He labels the decorative arts as "degenerate" and "unmodern." Modern design is seen through the lens of masculinity. Decoration is old fashioned and feminine. This is a sexist reaction to the increasing role of the female designer at the turn of the century.

The critique of decoration can be viewed as a critique of language, rather than a critique of design. In this language, a new modern agenda was defined. Words like, simple,

rational, production, pure, economy, masculinity, defined the early 20th century modernist. They were in reaction to words such as wasteful, excessive, pattern, artificial, body. They described the “old-fashioned feminine.” Through language we define decoration and design.

1,3,4,5,6: Day, Maria A, “The Ideal Home Rompus”: Disputing Modernist Design in 1913, <http://www.eiu.edu/~modernity/day.html>

2: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=decoration>

## **Katherine James' response**

The modern movement in architecture was nominally an ascendance from the 'styles' of pre-industrialism. Modernism proclaims absolute purity in building, a supreme state that thereby declares immunity from the temporality of fashion. Le Corbusier states: "Purism strives for an art free of conventions which will utilize plastic constants and address itself above all to the universal properties of the senses and the mind" (Wigley, 153). Modernism is the universal end- the solution to the long-contemplated problem of what a building should look like.

The problem with the declaration of universality and corollary rejection of fashion/ ornament is that this precise stance is created in response to the ornamental tendencies that preceded industrialism. This reactive nature immediately marries modernism to the timeline of styles that it wishes to ascend, and it's placement on that timeline means that modernism is, and always will be, fashion despite the fact that "Modern architecture was indeed explicitly launched against fashion"(Wigley,152).

What happens when a group declares universality and tries to escape the timeline of style? The ego of the movement begins to chip away at its very credibility. Looking at a situation like the Farnsworth House, a modernist glass and concrete residence, we see both where the building succeeds as modernism—by purely expressing its structure and avoiding any superfluous ornament, and where it fails as architecture—by being virtually uninhabitable precisely because of its unmediated transparency and the refusal of the architect to allow the extraneous and ornamental window dressing to be introduced for fear that it would ruin that exact purity. Mies and his client bitterly disagreed not about the design of the house, but about it's method of occupation. Any personal object is seen as a subversion of the purity of the architecture. People must adjust themselves to the building in this ultimatum, rather than the building accommodating its occupants. We see this again with van de Velde, who designs clothing for his clients to match his buildings. "Woe to the lady who would enter such a room in a dress that was not artistically suitable" (Wigley, 186). There is fear of offending the building with the crudities of inappropriate style. (But aren't people meant to live in buildings, not to fear them?!)

And this is precisely the point at which modernism shoots itself in the foot; the stringent and often inappropriate application of the universal and absolute eventually makes modernism a logical strategy for no one individual. Decoration becomes everything besides the perfect, pure building itself, including the occupants, and the impracticality of this conclusion flies in the face of modernism's tenants of functionality and efficiency.

## surface

### Nicole Vlado

“Everywhere the discourse of modern architecture turns on the privileged status of the smooth surface.” (Wigley, 228)

The critique of decoration within the discourse of architectural modernism begins a larger debate around the role of “surface”. As documented by Wigley in his article “White Out: Fashioning the Modern”, the surface is stripped of decoration in search of its new identity, one defined by Le Corbusier as “revitalized” and reinterpreted by Wigley as that which embodies “discipline”(Wigley, 233). This “discipline” is the rigorous systemization of the modernist movement in architecture – a movement responsible for the editing of form (from decorated to functional). In modern architecture, the smooth white wall replaces all other surfaces, through the active removal of surface decoration, seen as the “old clothes” of the past (these “old clothes” can be likened to Gideon’s “historical masks” of an earlier debate around methods of construction, where now the focus is on the skin rather than the structure within architecture).

As a movement, these beliefs were not intended a mere shift in architectural styles, but rather reflected a shift in ideology as represented within influential texts (propaganda, perhaps) produced by such key figures as Le Corbusier (*Towards a New Architecture*) and Adolf Loos (*Ornament and Crime*). Many of the ideas presented in the literature written by and for (revolutionary) architects grew out of the culture of the industrial revolution. In his manifesto, Loos describes ornament as “wasted labour power”, a claim deeply rooted in the ideals of efficiency emerging from the factory production of materials. Utilitarianism and production are embraced by such movements as the Bauhaus. There begins a shift in architecture from mere space making towards a more creative innovation of use (here, industrial design and modern architecture begin to merge, as we see in the products created by the Bauhaus, and phenomenon that would continue to present day).

These thoughts followed an era (the mid to late 19th century) in which “ornament” became “pattern” within the factory setting. This phenomenon is described by both Barbara Whitney Keyser and Gülru Necipoğlu through their observations of industrial British pattern making. The systemization and mechanization of ornament in the factory, translated natural forms unto flat surfaces through the production of repeat patterns. Therefore, we see, decades before the radical shift to the smooth, white surface of Le Corbusier, a shift to towards flatness. The British patterns remained two-dimensional, and as a medium could be prefabricated and applied to a surface as wallpaper/fabric. Soon the wallpaper would be removed to reveal the smooth, white wall of modernist architecture. Rather than a radical reinvention of architecture, the white wall slowly emerged over a period of close to 50 years of transformation.

Still the impressions left by Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos were profound, and decorated forms are rarely found among contemporary examples. What has continued in the

discourse of architecture has been a fascination with surface, and now dynamic and responsive surfaces provide an example by which we can begin to discuss new modes of decoration.

Note: I find the discourse around the “surface” troubling (reductive?), and highlight it in regards to my own understanding of decoration within my current studio. I present Wigley’s quote regarding the privileged status of the smooth surface in modernist architecture to begin discussion around the “privileged status” of new surfaces (responsive, complex, etc). Currently, these new surfaces are isolated moments within architecture, and my concern is (if) when/where these “surfaces” will act to reinsert themselves into the discourse/practice of space making. Perhaps a study of non-surface decoration would enlighten such though (not necessarily that within structural design – here decoration/pattern exists at a scale often too large to experience at the human scale).

## **Catherine Fowlkes**

The tactic of criticizing decoration allowed for a clear and tangible illustration of modernist ideas. The ornament itself could represent the culprit and the act of stripping away decoration enabled the revelation of a constructed prehistory that validated modern architecture. “By systematically uncovering the fundamental condition of modern life that lies beneath the dissimulating layers of fashion, the historian can facilitate the emergence of the ‘new order’ without anxiety.” (Wigley p.162)

If modern architecture was to reflect the true spirit of the day, it needed to do more than be erected with new techniques and materials. It needed to outwardly show its new modes of construction. Ornament was seen to cover and complicate these achievements. In order to shed the “historicizing masks” of the past, ornament and decoration had to be pared down.

Decoration and ornament were seen as too closely linked to fashion – and in order to give modern architecture weight and validity, to underscore that it was not a reflection of changing whims and merely a style, it had to be distanced from decoration. “The newness of contemporary architecture had to be seen as the product of logic rather than the dictates of fashion.” (Wigley, p. 204)

Adolf Loos’ critiques in *Ornament and Crime* above all posited modern architects as practicing an evolved, and thus superior, form of architecture. Decoration and ornament were stagnated, “The ornament that is manufacture today has no connexion with us, has absolutely no human connexions, no connexion with the world order. It is not capable of developing.” (Loos, p.22) Those that preferred ornamentation and were horrified with the modern were “stragglers” who “slow down the cultural evolution of the nations and of mankind...” (Loos, p.21)

Not only were these stragglers retarding the evolution of man, they were not very practical. Modern architecture celebrated the utilitarian, the functional, the efficiency of the machine. The production of ornament was in direct contrast to this. “The ornamentor has to work twenty hours to achieve the income earned by a modern worker in eight...omission of ornament results in a reduction in the manufacturing time and an increase in wages.” (Loos, p.22)

In addition to contrasting with the efficiency of the machine, this exploitation of the worker did not reflect the social ideas surrounding modern architecture, rather, the manner of production “inevitably entailed a punitive form of craft slavery...” (Kenneth Frampton, 'Adolf Loos and the crisis of culture 1896-1931')

The pointed criticisms as well as the act of criticism itself positioned the modern as embodying a superior, evolved and inevitable architecture.