

5-3. What is, and what is not, ornament? What is its use?

Michael Ramage's response

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “ornament” as “1.a. An accessory or adjunct, primarily functional, but often also fancy or decorative” and “2.a. Something used to adorn, beautify, or embellish, or that naturally does this; a decoration, embellishment.”

The definition is particularly broad, but nevertheless useful for architecture. It points to a symptom in the field that ornament in and of itself is not open to question, and that we should instead be looking at the application of ornament as the question on the table.

Let's consider a basic element of buildings today, the light switch. When does the light switch move from functional to ornamental, and when might it be possible to consider that the ornament of the light switch has overwhelmed its purpose? As a fundamental element, the light switch controls the flow of electricity between wires, so as to allow one to turn electric lights on and off. This can be accomplished with a metal bar on a hinge that either completes the circuit or doesn't. Function completed. It's reasonable to further consider that the switch must evolve functionally into a closed box so that one doesn't get electrocuted while fumbling for it in the dark. So we have a cover plate. But of what nature? Wood, stainless steel, plastic, faux wood, brass are all common materials for cover plates, and all are ornament. One can argue that each is of a different degree of ornament, but fundamentally each moves the switch cover plate into the realm of an object that is designed for aesthetics in addition to function.

Architects constantly make decisions that involve ornament, whether they be integral to the structure or applied elements. Modernism championed an aesthetic of stripped down ornament, but not one devoid of ornament. Ornament arises in many ways, and not all are equal. The ornament of Pier Luigi Nervi, for example, is one of specificity and structure. His works are celebrated because of the consideration he gave for each structural member, but the structure of his sports halls remains ornamental. It is not a crime.

Ornament in architecture can be seen much like fashion in clothing. Clothing is a necessity, but a burlap sack will suffice. An Armani suit, however, is much nicer, both to wear and to look at. Clothes serve fundamentally to protect the body, but fashion serves to enhance the image of the body. Ornament does the same to architecture, and just as we can argue the aesthetics and quality of fashion, we can argue the attractiveness and appropriate application of ornament.

But we cannot argue that there is no ornament, or that it is a crime. It is a necessity, and architecture, without ornament, is not.

Ornament

jimmy shen

Ornament is typically seen as a layer that acts as embellishment to beautify or accentuate a specific quality of a subject, be it a person, object, or space. Because ornament tends to be found as a surface condition in architecture, it is often observed as something that is superficial. It is a façade that can be seen as the pleasant visible face that hides that which is less pleasant behind it.

But perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of ornament is its function as symbol. Ornament contains the myths and beliefs that define culture, it is both a construction of meaning and an enabler of the construction of meaning.

But I would like to argue that every aspect of architecture inevitably contains within itself meaning or intention, for the act of design itself is an act of intention. Even given a set of requirements and program the designer has no choice but to insert external forces to give form to these requirements for the requirements alone are not enough. Therefore the more something is designed the more meaning there is contained within it.

The modernists approached this issue not by arguing that ornament should not exist but rather the current type of ornament was no longer relevant to the cultural context at that time. The ornament found in architecture was one that resisted the acceptance of the great technological changes that were defining that period. In other words they were against an architecture that lacked honesty in its image. Wigley establishes this dishonesty as a kind of disorder, quoting Auguste Perret's claim that ornament "always hides some fault of construction," inferring that flawlessly constructed buildings require no ornament. Wigley goes on to say that "it is not that the superficial ornament is necessarily disorderly. On the contrary, it is precisely by representing a nonexistent order that the ornament can most threaten order." (Wigley p.154)

Therefore the question is not what is ornament, but rather whether or not the ornament is relevant. The power of the function of ornament can be seen in an example that Loos gives where he describes a situation where he is willing to pay a shoemaker more money than what is expected. He explains how this brings joy to the shoemaker until he brings up the condition that the shoe must be void of any ornament. Loos goes on and says "With this I have cast him down from the heights of bliss to the pity of despondency. He has less work, but I have taken away all of his joy." (Loos, p.24) The ornament for this shoemaker represents the culmination of his experience, his training, his craft which gives meaning to his work and his trade. To deny this from him is to remove his personality from his work, it dehumanizes his work. And in return it may also result in a product that is of worse quality. I propose that it requires more intention and more work to craft a shoe with less "ornamentation." The struggle is not about ornament itself but the ramifications of the secular machine age and whether the designer is able to rectify the difficulty of integrating the industrial condition with the resulting cultural environment, its beliefs or lack thereof.

Lilly Donohue

In his 1908 manifesto, "Ornament and Crime", Adolf Loos writes of ornament as an invention of primitive man. He describes a tendency towards ornament as a characteristic which will be rendered extinct as a new and more sophisticated man evolves past this barbaric preference. (Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime", in Ulrich Conrads. Programs and Manifestos on 20th Century Architecture. MIT Press, 1997)

In light of these claims, it is interesting to note, that seventy years later, E.H. Gombrich publishes his book, *The Sense of Order*. Like Loos, Gombrich enlists evolutionary and biological arguments, yet he asserts a directly opposing theory; that ornament is the product of biological impulse to generate an underlying structure. He writes, "I believe that in the struggle for existence organisms developed a sense of order not because their environment was generally orderly but rather because perception requires a framework against which to plot deviations from regularity." (Gombrich, E.H. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1979. p. xii)

Ornament is commonly defined as merely an element generated for pure aesthetic value, as opposed to holding some greater functional purpose. However this definition is misleading since many aspects associated with a modern functionalist approach can be revealed to have been designed with an equally aesthetic principle. Ornament then, has a more complicated definition which is more closely allied with the human psyche than simply an non-utilitarian function.

As Gombrich suggests, the human mind craves a "careful balance" between complexity and order. We are bored by the simple grid which is easily deconstructed without active intention, yet we become disengaged from a system so complex that we cannot identify its underlying structure. The mind constantly edits environments to extract situations that meet this demand for a "careful balance".

One way to better understand ornament is to make a comparison with pattern. Pattern may be viewed as an abstract notion that signifies some aspect of recurrence. Pattern is constantly generated in nature at every imaginable scale and form. It is only when the human mind isolates these moments of pattern and renders them physical that they become part of culture and therefore ornament. Ornament necessitates a physical and psychological relationship with a human being. It is a tangible method of striving to engage the human psyche by achieving that previously mentioned balance between monotony and complexity.

Ornament as Aspect: Toward an Understanding of Ornament in Contemporary Practice

Robert Campos

Ornament, rather like pornography, is often easier to identify than to define: “we can’t tell you what it is, but know it when we see it.” This seems to be especially true of those for whom use of the word is strictly pejorative. But scholarship tells us that modern architecture has never really been un-ornamented, and modernist architects never against ornament *per se*. Loos titled his essay “Ornament *and* Crime” and cataloged the *misuses* of the former as categories of the latter, rather than state categorically that *using* ornament *is* crime. Loos had his own rationale for when ornament was acceptable, largely centering on chauvinistic notions of “the progress of civilization”—a position few would take today. But his polemic also sought to define his notion of the *Raumplan*, the primacy of interpenetrating volumes of space articulated by the (correctly) ornamented surfaces of his architecture. Mies would probably not have disagreed that his own obsessive detailing of structure and connection was “only” to the end of aesthetics (rather than such tropes as “functionality” or “efficiency”), specifically a modernized aesthetic appropriate for the conditions of machine production (itself a trope, as we well know). For architects bent on “total design”, such as the proto-modern Morris and the uber-modern Corb, ornament was the solution to the “problem” of the heterogeneity of the new, industrialized architecture: Morris and Philip Webb carefully detailed their joinery while Corb painted everything, and often (but not always) white. And to figures such as Owen Jones, ornament is nothing less than a kind of Kantian/Goetheian “grammar” which, when deployed correctly, is capable of describing (abstractly) the fundamental geometrical orders of nature.

Surveying the readings on the subject, we can identify three primary “uses” or aspects of ornament that characterize it from about the mid 18th to early 19th centuries. A list of such uses is helpful at this point, even if we have not exactly identified what ornament is (or was). I will call these three qualities the “Semiotic”, the “Structural”, and the “Symptomatic”.

1. Semiotic: Ornament had a signifying role, i.e. it signified a given and definite signified (not necessary the same as #2)
2. Structural: Ornament described the ideal morphological “types” of nature which underlie living organisms (in Goethe's philosophy)
3. Symptomatic: Ornament betrayed anxieties about the rapid industrialization of architecture.

What would such a list look like of ornament in the late 19th and 20th centuries look like? What about a list made of ornament today? And what of distinctions to be made between “good” and “bad” ornament, and its use thereof?

Rather than attempt to answer these questions directly, I will propose instead to examine ornament as an *aspect of a particular building system*. A column, for instance, has a structural aspect—or function—which is to transfer loads to the ground. Let us call this its “physical” function. This is not, by anyone’s definition, an ornamental function. But the column has other aspects—other functions—and has a material presence “in the world”. The column organizes space around it, and transfers its loads in a particular manner according to its geometry and material. While simple economics or engineering or other such circumstance may have dictated some of its resolution, let us assume that the column can still be considered the “product” or intention of a discrete author or authors, and that its design reveals in some manner, positively or negatively, the values and intentions of these authors. The column has been constructed according to some set of rules—some design—and those rules respond to aspects beyond the “simply” physical or structural requirements of load transfer. A Nervi column is not the same as a Mies column which is not the same as a Corb column, although all presumably transfer vertical loads. Each column does not look like the other, and does not perform the same role (structural or otherwise) in exactly the same manner. A Nervi column organizes space differently than a Mies column, just as a (chromed) cruciform Mies column organizes space differently than an I or H-section Mies column. And each “communicates” something differently than the other. It is the column “as we perceive it” which performs these functions, which is to say, we can distinguish these aspects as being “sensory” rather than purely physical or structural. It these particular *aspects* of any building system (but not the building as a whole) which I submit can be considered ornamental in contemporary architectural practice. Again, it is an aspect of the element, or system, that can be understood as ornament, not a system or element itself. Cladding systems, for example, have a physical aspect (not necessarily structural but certainly environmental. But that same cladding, as a perceived element, has other, “non-physical” functions. It has other, sensory, aspects: its shape and surface conditions, its 3-dimensional geometry, its tactility. It is in these aspects—the Surface, Formal, and the Extravisual—that architecture becomes, always, ornament.

The matrix below outlines my proposal. “System” categories should be self-explanatory, except perhaps by “Identification” by which I mean signage and other textual elements. Most systems have examples of all three ornamental aspects, although some may not. (See attachment)

System Aspect:	Surface	Formal	Extravisual
Sitework	a1	a2	a3
Structure	b1	b2	b3
Connection	c1	c2	c3
Exterior	d1	d2	d3
Fenestration	e1	e2	e3
Interior	f1	f2	f3
Mechanical	g1	g2	g3
Identification	h1	h2	h3

Examples of certain ornamental aspects for some systems:

Sitework—paving—hard vs. soft, loose-packed vs. monolithic, patterned or plain.
Surface (a1) and Extravisual (a2).

Structure—bearing walls, poured concrete—formwork patterning, etc...Surface, Formal,
and Extravisual.

Fenestration—window for view, for ventilation, for light—articulation of functions,
frame for particular view, light diffusion. Surface, perhaps Formal.

Mechanical—lighting and HVAC systems—hidden or exposed. Surface and Formal.

Such an analysis, which seeks to arrive at a more current understanding and *definition*
ornament in and of itself, admittedly does not necessarily make clear its *uses*. But perhaps
the answer lies in the very definition of ornament as *sensory aspects of building systems*:
the physical interface between environment and the sensing organism, body and mind.