

# A Problematic Return

Over the past 10 to 15 years, ornament or rather ornamental practice has made a spectacular return in architecture. This return has taken diverse forms. The repeated silkscreened photographs used by Herzog & de Meuron at the Eberswalde Technical School Library (1997) differ from the coloured cladding of Sauerbruch Hutton's Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmacological Research

**Evan Douglass, Choice Market café in Brooklyn, 2010.**

In complete contrast with the straightforward floor, walls and furniture, the intricate decoration of the ceiling is not only reminiscent of Baroque or Rococo, it also plays out along the porous border between refinement and kitsch.





**Sauerbruch Hutton,  
Boehringer Ingelheim  
Pharmacological Research  
Laboratories, Biberach,  
Germany, 2002.**

The ornamental character lies in the use of a multicoloured glass cladding. The presence of operable glass louvres also contributes to the animation of the facade.

Foreign Office Architects,  
John Lewis department  
store, Leicester, 2007.

The swirling décor is produced with four different panels that can be easily combined because they share the same pattern at their edges. The double layer produces a 3D impression. It also enables the building to be more transparent from the inside than the outside. Indeed, the people inside typically look horizontally through the aligned swirls, while passers-by contemplate the facade from below, with the two levels of embroidery creating additional opacity.

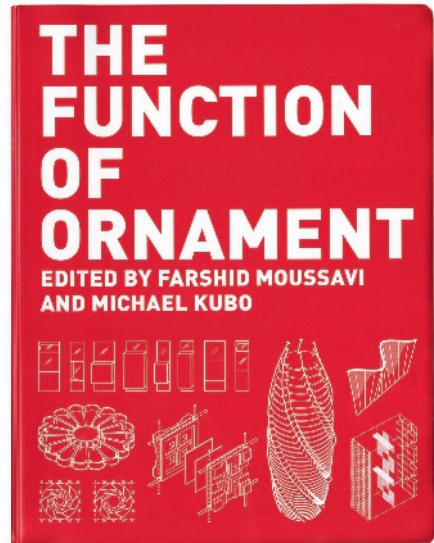
Laboratories (2002). Despite their shared fascination for spiralling patterns, Evan Douglass's baroque ceiling for the Choice Market café in Brooklyn (2010) follows principles that have nothing to do with those mobilised for the envelope of Foreign Office Architects' Leicester John Lewis department store (2007).

## The Ornamental Revival in Contemporary Architecture

This diversity has made the return of ornament even more striking. Its importance for the architectural discipline has been generally acknowledged by theorists and practitioners. It has been discussed in articles such as Greg Lynn's 'The Structure of Ornament' or Robert Levit's 'Contemporary "Ornament": The Return of the Symbolic Repressed'.<sup>1</sup> It has given birth to books such as Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo's *The Function of Ornament* or Andrea Gleiniger and Georg Vrachliotis's *Pattern: Ornament, Structure, and Behavior*, both of which have attempted to draw systematic lessons from this revival.<sup>2</sup>



To fully grasp the novelty and radical character of this revival, it is necessary to remember how modern architecture had been suspicious of ornament almost from the start. In his famous 1929 essay 'Ornament and Crime', Viennese architect Adolf Loos had disparaged ornament as unnecessary, childish, and even 'criminal' in a sense that will be discussed later in this essay. 'The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use,' declared Loos.<sup>3</sup> Since it claimed to be 'of everyday use', modern architecture tended to discard ornament as an incongruity from the past. Most of its proponents followed Loos when he stated that: 'there is no longer any organic connection between ornament and our culture, ornament is no longer an expression of our culture'.<sup>4</sup> In addition to its attempt to be of everyday use, modern architecture aspired to reconnect with the culture of the age of the machine. In this light also, ornament was doomed as a relic.



This widespread condemnation did not mean that the ornamental dimension disappeared totally from modern architecture. It remained, for instance,

present under different guises in the work of Mies van der Rohe: in the use of precious materials like marble and onyx for the Barcelona Pavilion (1929); or later, at the Illinois Institute of Technology (1958) or the Berlin National Gallery (1968), in the careful design of constructive details somewhat reminiscent of the traditional vocabulary of the orders. Traces of ornamental practices can actually be found in the work of almost every major modern architect, especially after the Second World War, when Modernism finally became culturally dominant. This dominance created the conditions for a new and tacit indulgence towards neo-ornamental elements.

Cover of Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo, *The Function of Ornament*, Actar, 2006.

From Kazuyo Sejima's Christian Dior Omotesando Store in Tokyo to the Herzog & de Meuron Laban Dance Centre in London, the book offers a comprehensive catalogue of contemporary ornamental practice. It has been used as a practical guide by architecture students around the world.



Poster for one of Adolf Loos's lectures on 'Ornament and Crime' given in 1913 in Vienna. The argument of Loos's famous essay was tested from 1909 on, in a series of lectures given in Berlin and Vienna such as this one.



**Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, 1929.**

In Mies van der Rohe's German pavilion for the Barcelona Universal Exhibition, the precious materials – marble, red onyx and travertine – are not the only ornamental elements. The pieces of furniture designed by the architect, the Barcelona chairs, also appear as ornaments.

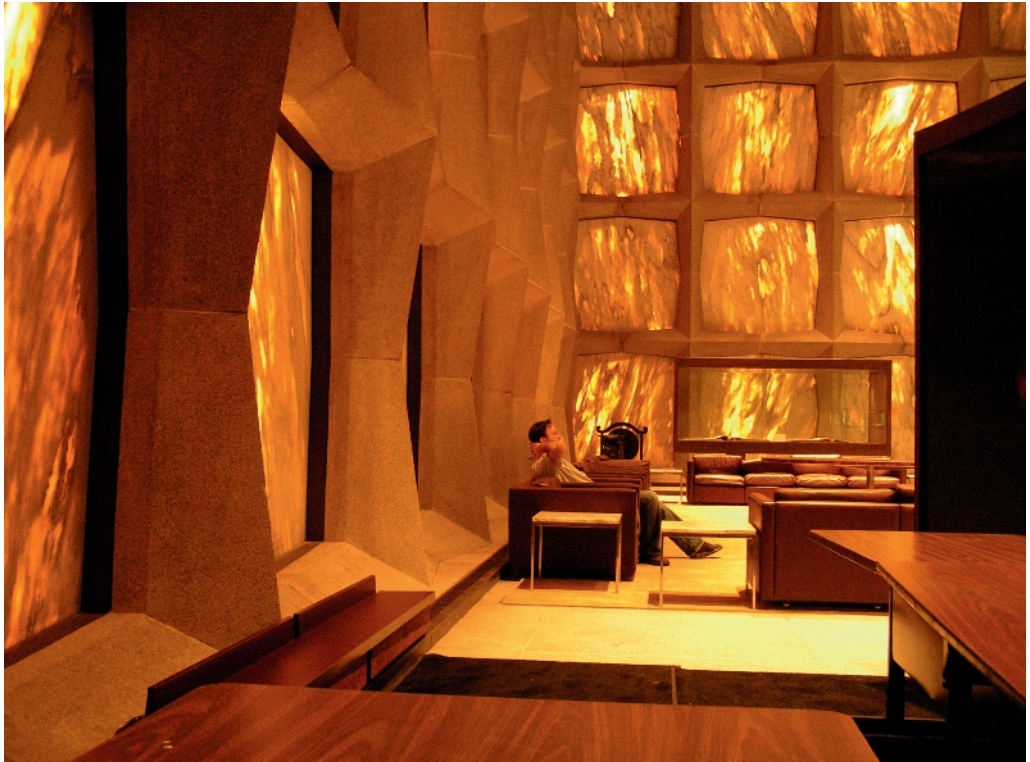
In the late work of Le Corbusier, the traces left by the concrete formwork belong to this neo-ornamental vocabulary; they are actually supposed to make the viewer aware of the productive hand of the construction worker in a way that is strongly reminiscent of one of the key functions of ornament according to 19th-century English theorist John Ruskin.<sup>5</sup> The ornamental character of elements like the Modulor Man at the entrance of the Unités d'Habitation of Marseilles (1952) and Firminy (1967) is even more evident.

In *The Function of Ornament*, Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo show themselves aware of this ornamental dimension of modern architecture. In addition to contemporary realisations, they review examples like Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Laboratory Tower (1950) with its rhythmic use of bands, or Gordon Bunshaft's Beinecke Rare Book Library on Yale Campus (1963) with its sophisticated play on the translucence of marble.<sup>6</sup> They could have added many other cases, like the decorative use of brick by French



**Le Corbusier, Unité  
d'Habitation of Marseille,  
1952.**

In true Ruskinian manner, the irregular traces of the formwork on the pilotis contribute to the overall impression of harmony of the construction. At La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland, Le Corbusier had received an initial education permeated by Arts and Crafts ideals. From Marseille to Chandigarh, the influence of these ideals becomes noticeable in many of his postwar realisations.



SOM/Gordon Bunshaft,  
Beinecke Rare Book  
Library, Yale University,  
New Haven, Connecticut,  
1963.

Inside the library the thin Vermont marble panels appear translucent. Their ornamental character is reinforced by the contrast with the granite frame that hides the supporting Vierendeel structure.

architect Roland Simounet at the Lille Museum of Modern Art (1983) recently extended by Manuelle Gautrand.<sup>7</sup>

But one should avoid excessive generalisation when drawing on these examples. Neither the Johnson Wax Laboratory nor the Beinecke Rare Book Library openly claimed an ornamental character. At the time of their completion, ornament was officially supposed to belong to the past, just like architectural styles that Le Corbusier had famously compared to the feathers in a woman's hat in *Toward an Architecture*.<sup>8</sup> Above all, modern ornamental practices remained secondary to the quest for architectural space, a quest that was generally linked to a tectonic approach to construction, as Kenneth Frampton has convincingly argued.<sup>9</sup> Defined as the way structural elements contributed to the production of space, the tectonic proved far more important to the Modernist project than the scattered ornamental elements that had survived Loos's condemnation.

At the turn of the 1970s and '80s, Postmodernism began explicitly to reintroduce the question of ornament. As critic Charles Jencks remarked, with Modernism 'ornament, polychromy, metaphor, humor, symbolism, and convention were put on the index, and all forms of decoration and historical reference were declared taboo'.<sup>10</sup> To overcome what they perceived as a dramatic self-mutilation of the discipline, architects like Leon Krier even



'Caesars Palace signs and statuary', photograph illustrating Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, 1972.

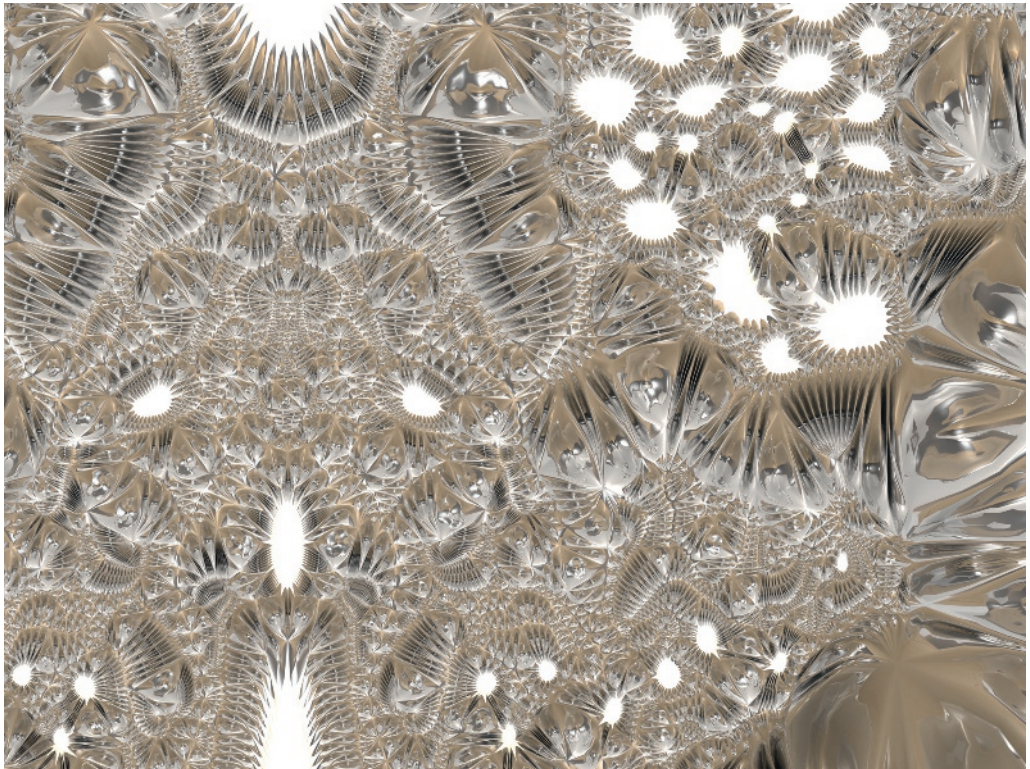
In Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's manifesto, Modernist architecture is criticised for its attempt to substitute tectonic articulation for ornament, and more generally to substitute expressivity for symbolism. With its kitsch mix of billboards and artistic replicas, Las Vegas appears as a possible antidote to this shift.

Ruy Klein, *Klex 1*,  
installation, New York  
City, 2008.

This CNC-milled high-density foam finished in pearl-gold Chromalusion offers a striking example of the new possibilities of ornamentation through digital modelling and fabrication. The result possesses a strong organic connotation. It appears simultaneously reminiscent of the intricacies of Islamic and Gothic vaults, not to mention Antonio Gaudí's architecture.

tried to return to the use of architectural orders. But for the majority of the theorists and practitioners involved in the reaction against the shortcomings of Modernism, ornament remained secondary to the issue of symbolism and semiotics. It epitomised one of the ways in which architecture could reconnect with its various audiences. But it was not the only path, far from it. Ornament was certainly not at the epicentre of the Postmodern enterprise, even if Jencks listed it among the key dimensions banned by Modernism. It played a relatively minor role in the writings of Colin Rowe, Aldo Rossi or Robert Venturi, even though the 'ducks' and other billboard signs invoked by the latter in *Learning from Las Vegas* possessed an ornamental dimension. Typology, composition and their symbolic potential presented far more pressing issues.

The widespread return of ornament that can be observed today is actually inseparable from the massive diffusion of the computer in the architectural



profession that had started by the mid-1990s. Since the early steps taken in this direction like Columbia University's 'Paperless Studio' – founded by Greg Lynn, Hani Rashid and Scott Marble – that clearly marked a turning point, design software and computer-aided fabrication have opened new ornamental perspectives. It is possible to generate textures and patterns with previously unknown ease. Complex geometries have become accessible to anyone who knows how to use a computer. In this regard, 3D printers, laser cutters, mills and routers have simplified the realisation of intricate ornamental elements.<sup>11</sup>

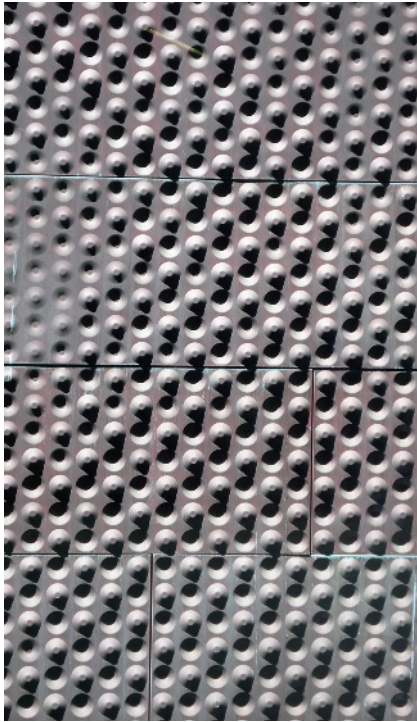
But there are more profound driving forces in the affair than mere instrumental facilitation. As noted elsewhere, the rise of digital culture in architecture has been accompanied by the weakening of the tectonic approach and the increased importance attached to surface.<sup>12</sup> In many contemporary projects, the envelope seems to matter much more than the structure. If Frank Gehry's projects, such as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997) or the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (2003), offer perhaps the most striking expression of this attitude, similar tendencies can be observed in many other instances.

This evolution is linked to broad technological and programmatic evolutions. With regards to technology, the battlefield has moved towards the periphery of the building with the new energetic and environmental requirements implied by sustainability. The distribution of stresses and strains inside its structural members tends to matter less today than the exchange of heat and light between exterior and interior. The evolution of programs reinforces the strategic character of the envelope that appears

Marc-Antoine Laugier, frontispiece of the second edition of the *Essai sur l'Art*, 1755.

According to Laugier, the primitive hut is both the origin of the architectural tectonic and the initial incentive for decoration.





Herzog & de Meuron,  
De Young Museum, San  
Francisco, 2005.

The envelope of the De Young Museum is based on a complex series of transformations starting with an image of vegetation on the site, which is inverted, then pixellated. In the following stage, the pixels are translated into protruding or depressed dots of varying depths. Finally, a series of perforations for light and ventilation purposes are superimposed on this pattern. The resulting envelope seems to merge view and touch.

often disconnected from interiors, which should be as flexible as possible to allow for periodic change of destination. One is confronted with a growing number of 'blank' building types, department stores, shopping malls and even museums that do not presuppose an organic relation between the outside and the inside. In this context, 'the architect's role is becoming increasingly specialized in the design of the outer shell, leaving the interior to other designers'.<sup>13</sup>

Could ornament represent a mere antidote to the risk of seeing architecture disappear under the pressure of sustainability or programmatic requirements? After all, this would not be the first time that the discipline would define itself around the notion of a decorated shed. During the second half of the 18th century, in relation to the rise of new utilitarian concerns, theorists like Marc-Antoine Laugier had already suggested such a path. For Laugier, architecture had developed from the archetype of the primitive hut by transposing its tectonic principles into stone and, above all, by adorning it.<sup>14</sup> Should one interpret the contemporary return of ornament in a similar perspective? Despite the superficial analogy, there are profound differences between then

and now, between the conception of ornament that prevailed in the 18th century, at the time of Laugier and his primitive hut, and the present-day understanding of the term. Such dissimilarity should make us cautious about the sense of déjà vu that may be experienced now and then when listening to contemporary architectural debate.

## Textures, Patterns and Topology: A Different Ornament

Under the influence of digital tools, today's ornament indeed presents a series of new features. First, ornament often lies in the superficial texture, which the computer enables us to modulate and represent on the screen with a vividness that transforms it into an essential part of the design. Of course, texture was always an important aspect of architecture. But digital technology has allowed it to become a more autonomous dimension, present from the start in the design process and imbued with a definite ornamental



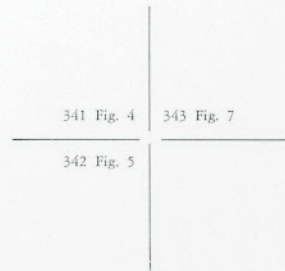
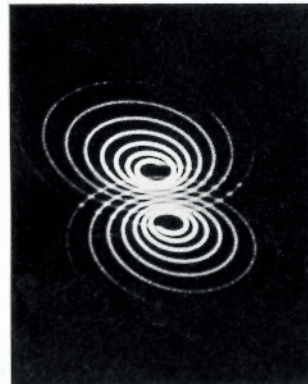
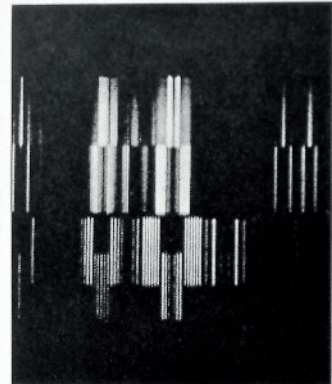
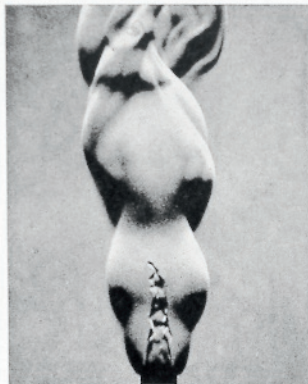
Francis Soler, French  
Ministry of Culture, Paris,  
2004.

In Soler's project, the image  
that serves as a basis for  
the composition is distorted  
in a way reminiscent of  
anamorphosis. The result  
evokes some gossamer-thin  
web cast on the building.

character. Moreover, as Stephen Perrella has noted, computer software makes possible the texturing of any surface with any picture, thus blurring the distinction between texture and image.<sup>15</sup> The play with this new continuum has led to ornamental practices ranging from ‘pixellation’ to extended ‘wallpaperisation’. In projects ranging from the San Francisco De Young Museum (2005) to the Minneapolis Walker Art Center (2005), Herzog & de Meuron have made extensive use of pixellation techniques. Francis Soler’s silver screen for the French Ministry of Culture in Paris (2004) provides a good example of wallpaperisation. The abstract lace that envelops the buildings is actually the result of a computer-aided deformation of a Renaissance composition by Giulio Romano.

György Kepes, illustrations provided for Norbert Wiener’s article, ‘Pure Patterns in a Natural World’, published in Kepes, *The New Landscape in Art and Science*, 1956.

In the 1950s, patterns related information and the visible world. They play a central role in Kepes’s reflections on the connections between science and art. Their ornamental character appeared as the direct result of underlying regularities at work in the physical or social worlds. A few years later, they were mobilised by Christopher Alexander in his *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, which attempt to rebuild the architectural discipline on new foundations compatible with nascent computer-programming techniques.





Second, pattern that used to play a relatively minor role in the Western ornamental tradition, contrary to the Islamic one, now appears as one of the most common forms taken by ornament in contemporary projects. Many examples of contemporary architectural ornamentation are based on patterning and related practices such as tessellation. Foreign Office Architects' Spanish Pavilion at the Aichi World Expo of 2005 uses tessellation, for instance. From the 1950s on, patterns have been present in many enterprises that tried to relate computer and cybernetic culture to arts and design. They were, for instance, at the core of György Kepes's attempts to weave together information and the visible organisation of our environment in exhibitions and books like his 1956 *The New Landscape in Art and Science* in which authors like cyberneticist Norbert Wiener are placed side by side with architects like Richard Neutra.<sup>16</sup> In contrast with the limited character of these pioneering experiments, the novelty lies in the generalisation of the use of patterns on building facades today. This diffusion has been facilitated again by computer software. With the possibilities offered to the designer to manage complex patterns through deformation, tiling and tessellation, they constitute one of the bases of contemporary ornamental practices.

**NOX, Maison Folie, Lille, France, 2004.**  
'We made the black box glow with a luminous skin that transforms with movement in and around the *Maison Folie*, a shimmering, almost holographic dress that incorporates the pulsation of art and life', writes Lars Spuybroek on a project where the entire facade becomes ornamental.

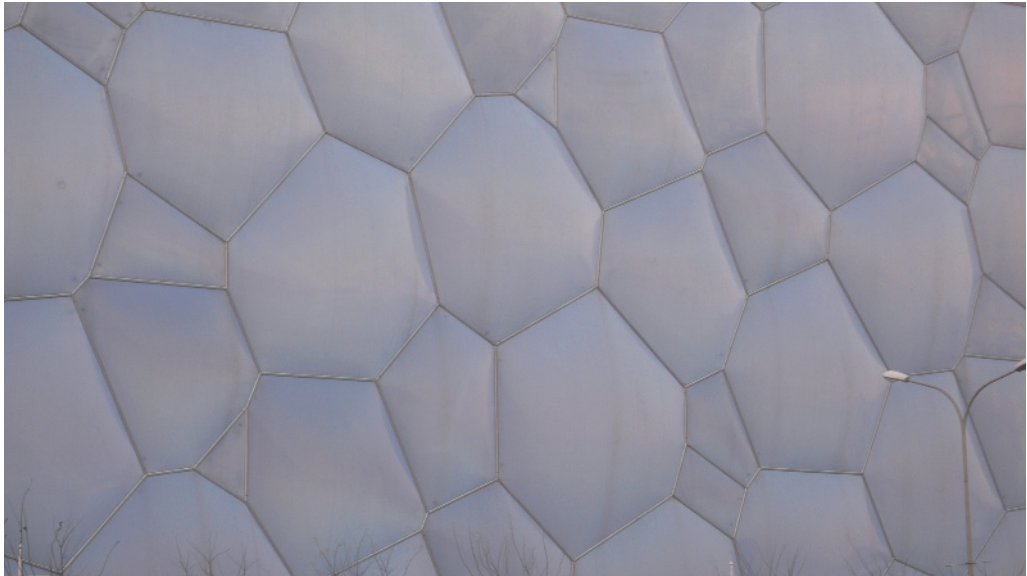
Preston Scott Cohen, *Tel Aviv Museum of Art*, 2011. The central 'Lightfall' of Preston Scott Cohen's Tel Aviv Museum of Art extension appears both as the expression of the overall logic of the building, which was generated through a double movement of stacking and twisting, and as a gratuitous moment of architectural bliss. It may be seen as a giant ornament; just as the entire new building itself can be interpreted as an ornament for the city.



Lastly, the very movement of the facade can become ornamental. With their soft curves imbued with an almost Baroque fluidity, Lars Spuybroek's *Maison Folie* in Lille (2004) or Jeanne Gang's *Aqua Tower* in Chicago (2010) clearly illustrate this possibility fostered by the ease with which designers can now manipulate complex geometry and 'animate' form, to use Greg Lynn's expression.<sup>17</sup> The twisting movement of the facade of Preston Scott Cohen's Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011) may also be interpreted in this manner. Like another facade, interior this time, the central 'Lightfall' of the building possesses an even clearer ornamental turn. Beside texture and pattern, topology is part of contemporary ornamental vocabulary.

Beyond these three well-defined possibilities, a whole range of hybrid ornamental practices have also emerged. Although the figure of the continuous fold belongs in principle to the topological category, it has been often reduced to something more graphic, pattern-like, in buildings like Diller, Scofidio + Renfro's *Boston Institute of Contemporary Art* (2006). In numerous cases, the structural elements tend also to acquire an ornamental character, often in relation to a desire of liberation from an allegedly Cartesian frame.<sup>18</sup> Voronoi tessellations or Weaire-Phelan structures, such as the one used for the *Beijing Water Cube* (2008) by PTW Architects, are typical of this blurring between the structural and the ornamental. In close proximity to the *Water Cube*, the confusion between these traditionally distinct genres can also be observed in a building like Herzog & de Meuron's *Olympic Stadium* (2008), also known as the 'Bird's Nest'. Its net of beams – some load bearing, others not – possesses a surprisingly ornamental turn, which is somewhat detrimental to traditional structural legibility, as if traditional tectonic principles did not matter any more.

With its frequent use of intricate geometric patterns and tessellation, contemporary



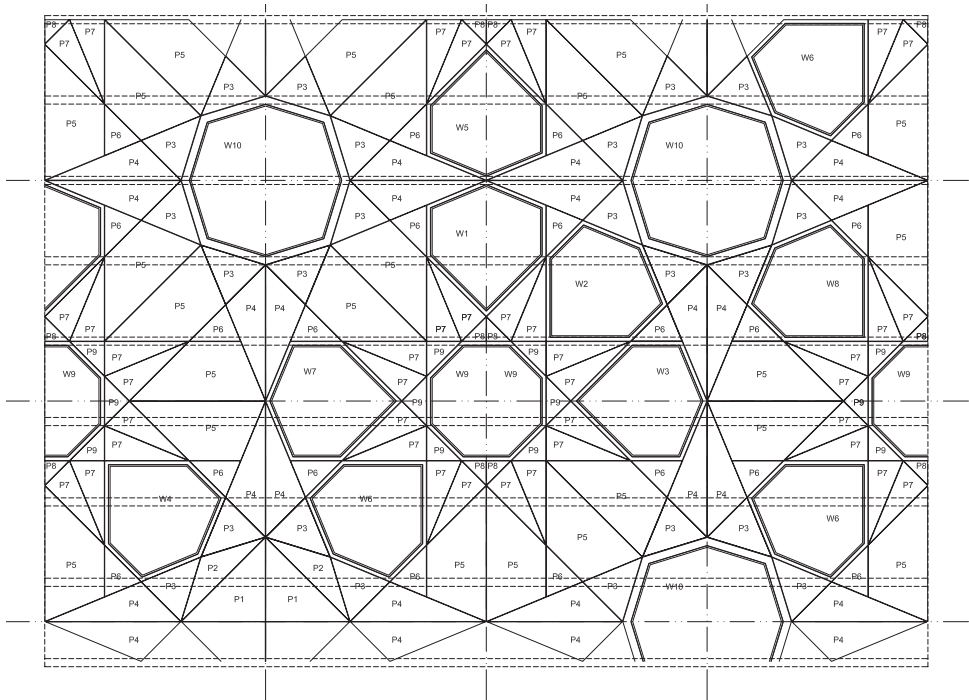
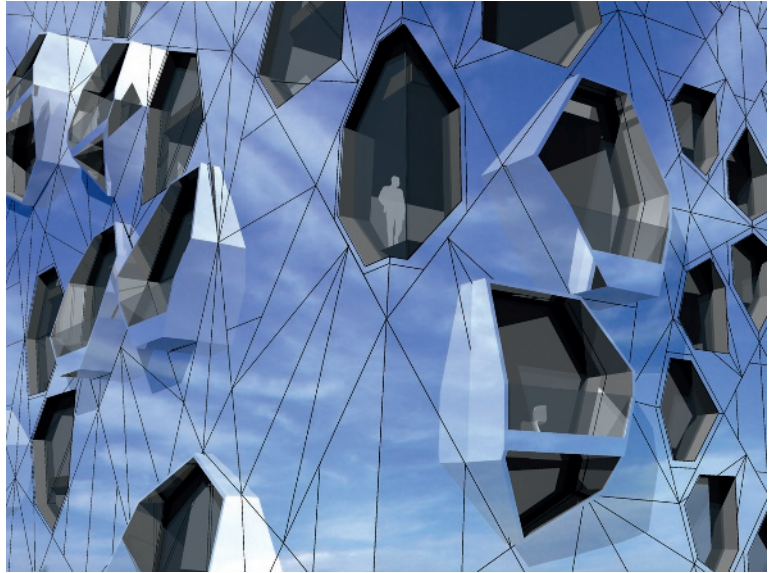
digitally designed ornament is sometimes reminiscent of Islamic décor. Zaha Hadid has explicitly played on this connection, for example, in the Marsa Dubai Residential Tower project (2005). To explore it fully could be in itself the subject of an essay. Here we would prefer to insist on the difference between contemporary ornamentation and a Western tradition of ornament that developed from the Renaissance on, claiming for a long time the theoretical heritage of Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius, as well as a practical inspiration derived from the study of Ancient monuments.<sup>19</sup> This Vitruvian tradition exerted its influence well into the 19th century, and even beyond, if one takes into account some of the aforementioned ornamental practices of modern architecture.

In this book, we will also leave aside the European Middle Ages and their treatment of ornamentation. Romanesque and Gothic will appear only when revived by the age of industry in a perspective that in fact owes a lot to the conception of architecture and architectural décor that had emerged at the Renaissance. Neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic are not Romanesque and Gothic, but hybrids between medieval formal references, the architectural legacy of Renaissance and Baroque, and 19th-century concerns. Once again, the Vitruvian tradition and its reinterpretation of Greco-Roman architecture represent our true point of departure.

**PTW Architects, CSCEC + Design and Arup, Beijing National Aquatics Centre, 2007.**

The Weaire-Phelan pattern on which the design of the Water Cube is based derives from the natural formation of bubbles in foam. Under the irregularity of the superficial patterns lies a geometry that can also be found in molecular structures and crystals.

Zaha Hadid, *Marsa Dubai Residential Tower*, 2005.  
In this project, the influence of Islamic décor can easily be traced in the overall pattern used for the facades, even if this pattern is less easy to read when wrapped around the tower.





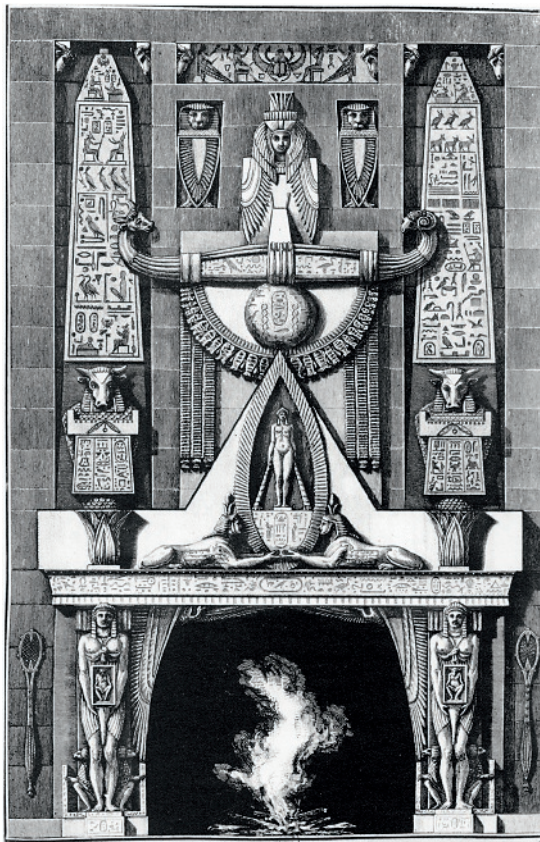
The differences between today's ornament and the conception that prevailed within the frame of the Vitruvian tradition actually go much deeper than the increased importance of textures, patterns and topology. In Renaissance and Baroque architecture, ornament seldom covered the entirety of the buildings' facades and interiors. It was usually concentrated at certain key points. Well into the 19th century, some of these key points were directly correlated with the use of architectural orders. Even when orders did not fulfil a purely aesthetic purpose – when columns were invested with a real load-bearing function for instance – they carried a profusion of ornaments like delicate and complex mouldings, intricately carved capitals, friezes. But even the most ornamented facades had to show some restraint. Overabundance jeopardised one of the fundamental roles of ornament, which was to reinforce the main rhythms of architectural ordinance rather than merely spreading a decorative layer over them. As the 17th-century French painter Nicolas Poussin explained

**Basilica of the Holy Cross in Lecce, Italy, completed in 1695.**

The upper part of the facade of the church of the Holy Cross in Lecce presents an unusually rich ornamentation with exuberant floral motives, fantastic animals and grotesque figures. The intricate, almost fractal décor seems a curious hybrid between the Vitruvian codes and the highly personal inspiration of architect Giuseppe Zimbalo (1617–1710), the main designer of the facade.

in one of his letters, one had to refrain from 'the confusion of ornaments ... (which) were invented only to soften the severity of simple architecture'.<sup>20</sup>

**Giovanni Battista Piranesi, chimney in the Egyptian style, from *Diverse Maniere d'Adornare I Cammini ed Ogni Altra Parte degli Edifizi*, 1769.** Fragmentation, accumulation and collage are the key principles at work in such a composition. In the eyes of Piranesi, design is primarily a matter of invention.



Every principle has its exceptions. In a number of circumstances, this restraint was not followed. The upper part of the facade of the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Lecce, Italy (1695), does not fit into the dominant model. The decoration of many Latin-American Baroque churches appears even more exuberant. Their facades look like heavily decorated altarpieces in which not a single square foot is left without an ornament of one kind or another. In some of his extreme compositions, such as those which illustrate his 1765 *Osservazioni (...) sopra la Lettre de M Mariette* (Observations on the Letter of Mr Mariette), or his 1769 *Diverse Maniere d'Adornare I Cammini ed Ogni*

*Altra Parte degli Edifizi* (Diverse Manners of Ornamenting Chimneys and All Other Parts of Houses), Giovanni Battista Piranesi also rejected soberness in the name of the unbounded power of imagination. But such exceptions did not invalidate the general rule: rather than a pervasive condition, ornamental décor was conceived as a discrete series of embellishments. Their distribution was not without analogy with the writing of music: discontinuous notes that were nevertheless meant to produce a continuous stream of sensations and affects.

In addition to theoretical reasons rooted in the Vitruvian belief in the primacy of order and proportion, or based on the crucial importance of composition, which began to be substituted for Renaissance and Baroque order and proportion towards the end of the 18th century,<sup>21</sup> there were also practical reasons for this approach. Often carved by professional sculptors, ornament was labour-intensive and costly. Its price contributed to putting a check on temptations of unbridled use.

The possibility of a crisis of this dominant model of reasoned thrift loomed when

new materials enabled the mass production of decorative elements. New possibilities of repetition and proliferation were afforded by 19th-century terracotta and cast-iron ornaments, epitomised by the profuse décor of many American office buildings. The ornamental excesses of many bourgeois exteriors and interiors reinforced an uneasiness to which we will return later in this chapter. Let us note immediately that such unease appeared directly correlated to psychological flaws of the individuals involved in their creation, from the architect to the client, like the symptom of a civilisational disease that called for drastic curative measures.



Giuliano da Sangallo, *Studi di particolari architettonici e piccolo putto*, Codice Vaticano Barberiniano 4424.

On this page of drawings after the *Antique* by Giuliano da Sangallo (c 1445–1516), ornaments seem to float freely like the detachable fragments they are supposed to be, at least in theory.

This impending crisis – a crisis that was at the origin of Loos’s passionate denunciation of what he perceived as a decorative spree inherited from the 19th century – did not lead, however, to the notion that ornament could become something like a general superficial condition. Yet this is precisely what has occurred with the recent return of ornament. In most cases, as texture, pattern or topology, ornament appears as an overall property of the envelope.

This pervasive presence usually goes hand in hand with another feature: the impossibility of imagining the building envelope without its ornamentation. This inseparability is partly linked to the typology of contemporary ornament; textures, patterns and topology appear an integral part of the building skin. It has also to do with techniques of fabrication. Whether carved, milled or extruded, today’s ornaments often appear physically inseparable from their support.

Such inseparability might be considered as a minor point, but it actually represents a profound departure from a long tradition of thinking about ornament as something that could be theoretically, but also in many cases practically, separated from the fabric of the building. For the Romans of the Imperial period, ornament constituted a legal category of items usually affixed to the floors, walls and ceilings, such as precious marbles, statues, vases and lamps that could be removed if necessary, contrary to structural elements, and with greater difficulty than mere furniture.<sup>22</sup>

Simultaneously, traditional ornament was generally seen as a marker of the difference between anonymous construction and architecture as an artistic production. Ornament was key in denoting architecture up to the point that the architectural discipline could almost be defined as the art of adorning an otherwise unexpressive fabric. Vitruvian order and proportion needed ornaments and their coordinated effects in order to become fully visible to the spectator. The characterisation of architecture as the art of decorating buildings, an old notion revived by Laugier in the second half of the 18th century, rested on the strategic character of ornamentation.

This led to what one may call the paradox of traditional ornament, namely that ornament was all the more indispensable in that it was actually added, and that one could imagine a building deprived of it. This paradoxical status possessed a philosophical dimension, which expresses itself in the origins of the word. The Latin word for ornament, *ornamentum*, shares, for instance, a common etymological origin with the verb *ordino*, meaning to organise,

to order, as if an ornament, any well-conceived ornament, expressed the underlying order of things.<sup>23</sup> This mysterious kinship between ornament and ordering is confirmed by another pair of words, 'cosmetics' and 'cosmos'. Both derive from the Greek verb *kosmein* meaning to adorn as well as to arrange. Again, what seems at stake is the intimate relationship between superficial, almost gratuitous-looking appearances covering reality like make-up applied to a face, and the deep structures present under their thin veil.

From a philosophical standpoint, ornament was an illustration of the disconcerting capacity of the supplement to become a defining feature of that to which it was added, a situation admirably analysed by Jacques Derrida in texts such as *Of Grammatology*.<sup>24</sup> According to Derrida, the supplement is neither outside nor inside, neither accidental nor essential in the philosophical sense of these terms. It marks a paradoxical threshold, the possibility of an indefinite process of differentiation that is characteristic of Western thought, although philosophy has repeatedly tried to establish a clear hierarchy between the non-structural and the structural, the accidental and the essential. Through its capacity to be both added and indispensable, ornament challenged such hierarchy. Actually, the attitude of architects towards ornament balanced between two opposite approaches that epitomised this disturbing mode of existence. On the one hand, they had to recognise that ornament was not strictly speaking structural. On the other hand, they were tempted to define it in intimate connection with the fundamental articulations of the building, with its overall structure and proportions. Despite the conception of ornament as lavish décor that had begun to prevail in Imperial Rome, Vitruvius himself had tried to enforce this restrictive definition.<sup>25</sup> As we will see in the next chapter, the crucial questions of licence and invention were inseparable from the problems raised by the ambiguity of ornament.

Because it blurred the distinction between the non-structural and the structural, the status of supplement implied also that ornament did not correspond to an entirely stable category of objects. In other words, something could be both ornamental at a certain level and structural at another. Such was the case of the column that was sometimes presented as the most important ornament of architecture, sometimes as its fundamental structural element. This ambivalence was already present in Alberti for whom the column was both a 'strengthened part of the wall' and an ornament, an ambivalence duly noted by Rudolf Wittkower in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* who spoke of Alberti's 'incongruous statements on columns'.<sup>26</sup> It explained why, from Alberti to Semper, architectural theorists

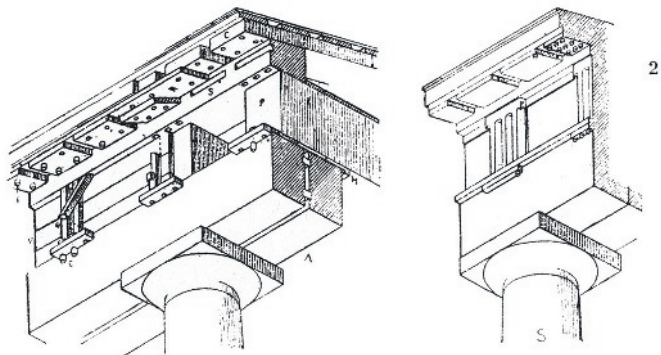
almost never approached ornament as a fixed collection of parts and elements, but rather as the result of a series of operations of differentiation between supported fixtures and their supports. Many parts and elements in a building could appear alternatively as supported and supporting.

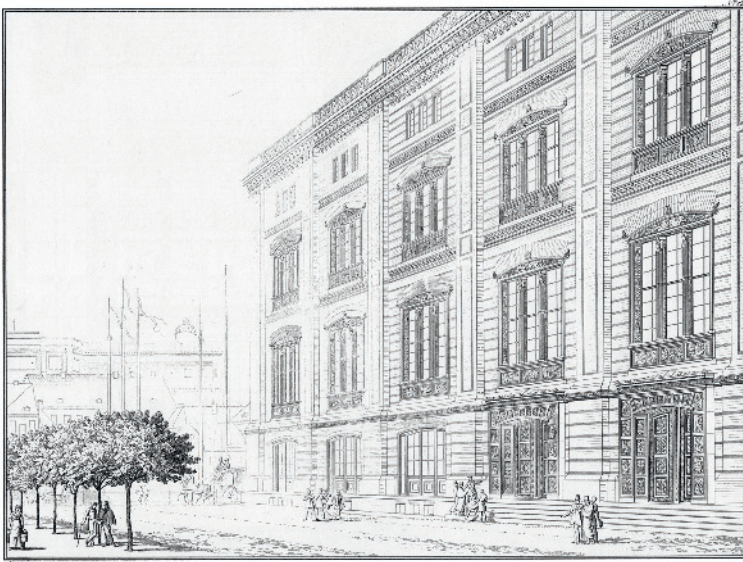
Just as traditional ornament supplemented the fabric of buildings, architecture itself was for a long time interpreted as a supplement of construction. Hence the fascination and disturbance it was met with by philosophy, if we are there again to follow Derrida.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, architecture seemed to possess a clear foundational character; on the other hand, this foundational character was threatened by its supplementary status. Architectural expression began to unfold at the point when the structural was no longer the only dimension present. Returning to the mythic apologue of the primitive hut, it is worth noting that this process began precisely at the point when the wood structure was translated into stone, a process that deprived some elements of their original constructive function, thus giving birth to the tension between the structural and the ornamental and to the possibility of an autonomous aesthetic expression. For Vitruvius, this process of translation was the true foundation of ornament. In his *Histoire de l'Architecture* (History of Architecture), published in 1899, engineer and architect Auguste Choisy would give the definitive interpretation of the Doric style as a derivative from carpentry.<sup>28</sup>

The conception of architectural ornament as a necessary supplement remained present throughout the 19th century, in the writings of theorists such as Gottfried Semper as well as in the works of architects such as

Auguste Choisy, the origin of Doric ornaments, from *Histoire de l'Architecture*, 1899.

In his monumental history of architecture, Choisy gives the definitive interpretation of how key elements of Doric décor such as triglyphs, metopes, mutules and guttas may be interpreted as direct transposition of carpentry assemblages into stone.



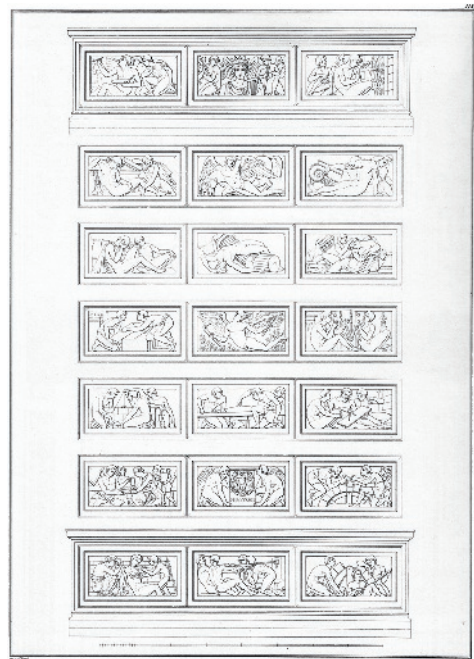


Karl Friedrich Schinkel, facade and terracotta panels décor of the Bauakademie in Berlin, 1836, from *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe*, 1858.

The Bauakademie offers a brilliant demonstration of how ornament can be both added and essential. The terracotta panels were meant to evoke the origins and early developments of construction and architecture in Greece and Rome, their subsequent fall, their new rise in the Middle Ages, from the ruins of Antiquity, and their final triumph in the age of reason and industry.

Karl Friedrich Schinkel or Louis Sullivan. ‘One must not understand the word ornamentation or decoration to indicate something that lies outside the object and its essence or essential idea,’ declared Schinkel.<sup>29</sup> At Schinkel’s Bauakademie (1836), the terracotta ornamental panels appeared both conspicuously added to the structure of the building and absolutely essential to the composition. They reinforced its structural articulations while commenting on its function – to house a school of architecture – by providing a reflection on the origin and development of the architectural discipline. The role of ornament was equally determining in Sullivan’s Wainwright Building in St Louis (1891) where its rhythm was an integral part of the overall tectonic expression.

Until the dawn of the 20th century, ornament remained in the eyes of many architects an essential supplement to the tectonic. Modern architecture ruined this conception by relegating it to the status



**Louis Sullivan, Wainwright Building in Saint Louis, 1891.**

The Wainwright ranks among the most accomplished solutions given by Sullivan to the problem of the skyscraper. Ornaments are added and at the same time constitutive of the overall organisation of the facade. The contrast between the ornamented spandrels and the bare vertical piers reinforces the latter. Interestingly, one pier out of two does not encase a steel support. Décor appears both as a lie and as the revelation of the higher truth of the steel frame, that of a rhythmic dynamism.



of mere accessory – Le Corbusier's feathers in the hat – even if its remnants did not always conform to this demeaning attitude in practice.

Although ornament has regained importance in contemporary design, it has certainly not recovered this supplementary status, far from it. As a pervasive condition, it appears inseparable from the envelope. Thus, it is impossible to consider it both as added and essential. This major difference with the past should in itself represent an incentive to question the notion of a mere



return of what was. There is as much invention as recovery in the affair, the invention of a new type of ornamentation fundamentally different from the traditional one.

Such difference accounts for another puzzling feature of contemporary architectural production: the capacity of what used to be considered as pure structure to appear ornamental. The Beijing 2008 Olympic Stadium designed by Herzog & de Meuron, the so-called 'Bird's Nest', provides a good example of this transgression of established boundaries. In an interview with French art historian and critic Jean-François Chevrier, Jacques Herzog insists on the blurring between structure and ornament that characterises such a project.<sup>30</sup> Its crisscross of beams evokes some giant piece of jewellery, especially at the end of a beautiful day, when the setting sun gives it a golden hue, or at night when the network of beams becomes more transparent.

The current situation is not entirely comparable to the ambiguity that used to prevail in some cases between the structural and the ornamental, in as far as in many cases it now affects elements that were not supposed to possess a potentially ornamental character. It is as if ornament were contaminating structure instead of playing the complex game of supplementarity with it.

**Herzog & de Meuron,  
Olympic Stadium, Beijing,  
2008.**

One of the objectives of the architects was to avoid creating a mere decorative skin. The complex structure generates an intermediary space between outside and inside, city and sports arena. The traditional distinction between the structural and the ornamental no longer applies to an object that tries to transcend these categories.

Manolo Nuñez-Yanowsky, police station of Paris 12th arrondissement, 80 boulevard Daumesnil, 1991.

Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* can be found today in the Louvre. Manolo Nuñez's provocative quotation of this well-known piece of sculpture raises the question of how far you can go in the use of a symbolic architectural décor. Today's refusal of meaning is a direct result of the rejection of such excesses.



Another major difference between traditional and contemporary ornament lies in the systematic refusal of any kind of symbolic meaning, at least publicly. Theorists and practitioners have been almost unanimous on that point. In their *Atlas of Novel Tectonics*, Jesse Reiser and Nanako Umemoto call, for instance, for the use of 'asignifying signs', since 'an architecture that has to explain itself, or be explained, has failed to present its own qualities'.<sup>31</sup> Behind their attitude, one detects the fear of a potential return to some of Postmodernism's most blatant limits: the use of a symbolic vocabulary distributed on the facade of the building without true connection to its overall architectural organisation. With its concrete copies of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* protruding on its top floor, a police station designed by architect Manolo Nuñez-Yanowsky in Paris (1991) epitomises the extravagant results to which this attitude can lead. In such extreme projects, ornament is

definitely heavier than the feather evoked by Le Corbusier, but it is certainly no less gratuitous. Moussavi and Kubo's decision to attribute a 'function' to ornament must be understood in this perspective. Without a function, they believe, ornament would be a mere addition referring itself to a sphere of significations exterior to architecture.

There is an additional factor contributing to the demise of the logic of supplementarity at stake here. For the refusal of any reference that would involve elements located outside the realm of architecture proper, that is architecture understood as a manipulation of spatial and constructive elements, also owes something to the legacy of the 'autonomy project' of the architecture of the 1960s and '70s. From Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman to John Hejduk and Bernard Tschumi, the ambition of the architects involved in this project was to construct architecture as a system of knowledge based, there again, on its internal resources rather than on external references borrowed from other fields. As theorist K Michael Hays has argued, this approach led to the

production of effects and above all affects, the power of which is currently explored by architects, especially in relation to the use of digital tools.<sup>32</sup>

The current architectural discourse on the importance of affects is rooted in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy and its attempt to shift attention from the traditional interest taken in rhetoric and semiotics to the physical dimension of the artistic experience.<sup>33</sup> In our last chapter, we will return to what this shift implies concretely for architecture. Let us insist for now on the importance of the break with a Western ornamental tradition that possessed a strong figurative and symbolic dimension. The story would, of course, be different if one were to consider the abstract patterns of Islamic ornament.

Greco-Roman architecture already used figurative elements such as plant arabesques, fruit festoons, bucrania, trophies and statues. Renaissance and Baroque architecture continued with a practice that was all the more inseparable from symbolic content in that the orders themselves were imparted with content. After all, the Doric order was supposed to possess

Panel from the Ara Pacis Augustae, Altar of Augustan Peace, Rome, 9 BC.

The lower part of the décor of the Ara Pacis Augustae comprises a frieze with scrolling acanthus tendrils, a vivid evocation of nature's fertility.





Francesco di Giorgio, Ionic column, after Codice Ashburnham, 361, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Italian Renaissance engineer and architect Francesco di Giorgio gives a striking illustration of the traditional analogy between the Classical orders and the male, female and adolescent bodies. Whereas the Doric order is supposed to possess a male character, the Ionic is usually associated with the 'more graceful' female proportions.

a male character, while the Ionic and Corinthian orders were associated respectively with the female and maiden characters. Many ornaments referred themselves to the reign of nature or to the world of human society and culture. Architectural décor often mixed the two to suggest the passage from one to another. During the last decades of the 18th century, such passage would become a favourite theme of architects such as Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Beyond the immediate allusion to the function of his saltworks of Arc-et-Senans (1779), Ledoux's ornamental motive of horizontal vases protruding from the wall, from which water petrified by salt hangs like ice on the edge of a roof, conveys this very notion of the transition from nature to civilisation, from rock salt and brines as a natural resource to the realisation of its use for humans. This ornamental motive echoes the statement made at the gate of the saltworks through the contrast between irregular blocks of stone symbolising raw nature and the regular columns of the portico that refer to the sophistication of an enlightened century.

The philosophical theme of the transition from nature to civilisation remained present throughout the 19th century, through the frequent juxtaposition of plants,

animals and products of human industry. For instance, on the portal of the architecture school accommodated in Schinkel's Bauakademie, the two vertical series of panels evoking the invention of the architectural orders begin by the representation of blooming plants in order to suggest that human arts may appear as an extension of the spontaneous fecundity of nature. The panels with geniuses rising from plants that decorate the arch of the same portal reinforce this idea.

Somewhere between the immediate representation of natural or artificial objects and general philosophical statements like those made by Ledoux or Schinkel, ornaments could also function at an allegorical level. As such, they conveyed messages often permeated by ideology, from the importance of the arts and sciences for the advancement of civilisation to the benevolent nature of a given political regime or religion. The 19th century proved

especially fond of allegories and tended to make excessive use of them, at least according to our taste, which is still, in that respect, influenced by the Modernist condemnation of ornamental abuse. Despite French sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's talent (he is the author of the bombastic group called *The Dance* that adorns the facade of the Opéra Garnier), it is difficult not to feel a little perplexed in front of his *Imperial France Bringing Light to the World and Protecting Agriculture and Science* that he designed for the Flore Pavilion of the New Louvre of Napoleon III in the 1860s.

Many 19th-century theorists and practitioners already felt this kind of unease in front of the proliferation of allegories outside and inside the buildings of their time. Their unease stemmed from an impression of imbalance between the visual pleasure that ornament was supposed to arouse and its strong ideological load. Whereas general philosophical statements, or rather suggestions, like the continuity between nature's spontaneous fecundity and man's artistic inspiration were conveyed in such a manner that they did not interfere immediately with visual perception and pleasure, the allegorical message often disrupted it. Above all, it transformed the tension between architectural order and ornament into a highly problematic divorce. If ornament became a 'crime' at the end of the century, it is also because of the way it had been enrolled in the various ideologies of the time.

Until the end of the 19th century, the connection between ornament and questions of meaning and symbols also expressed itself through the intimate relation ornament had with writing. From the Greco-Roman times on, inscriptions had been generally considered as a type of ornament.<sup>34</sup> Baroque Rome was full of inscriptions such as the dedication to Pope Urban VIII Barberini, which adorned the clam-like structure of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's



**Ledoux, saltworks of Arc-et-Senans, 1779.**

The vases that adorn the walls of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's saltworks of Arc-et-Senans in the east of France are typical of the ambition of late-18th-century architecture to 'speak' through its general disposition as well as through highly symbolic ornaments.

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, plaster model of *Imperial France Bringing Light to the World and Protecting Agriculture and Science*, 1863.

This model of the sculpture that adorns the Louvre's Flore Pavilion offers a good example of the almost immoderate taste of 19th-century official architecture for symbols and allegories. Imperial France is in the centre of the composition seated on an eagle. On the right, Agriculture leaning against a bull; on the left, Science, measuring the earth with a pair of compasses.



Fountain of the Bees (1644). Writing retained an ornamental character until the dawn of modernity as renowned examples such as Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (1851) or McKim, Mead & White's Boston Public Library (1895) make clear. On the facades of both libraries, the lists of great philosophers, writers and artists are part of the décor, just like the friezes, medallions and garlands that contribute to their animation. Despite a few exceptions, inscriptions were included in the Modernist ban on anything that could even remotely be considered as supplementary to architecture.

## The Subjective and the Political

If what we call ornament today differs so profoundly from what the term used to mean until the end of the 19th century, why then use the same word and above all speak of a return? It would perhaps be more accurate to evoke the rediscovery of a long-repressed ornamental trend based on different premises than Vitruvian décor.

Despite the gap between traditional and contemporary forms of ornamentation, this essay will explore two intertwined threads that link them

and actually constitute a sufficient motive to cling to the notion of return. The first of these threads is the subjective dimension: incorporating both the expression of the architect/designer and the perceptions or responses of the viewer/user. From the Renaissance on, architectural ornament possessed a strongly subjective dimension. First, it was supposed to say something about the artist that had conceived it. Theoretically, this artist was the architect himself, although in many cases sculptors or painters intervened in its conception and realisation. The possibility and even need for personal expression often conflicted with the respect of rules, hence the recurring debates on the extent of the permissible 'licences' that artists could take in order to convey the singularity of their inspiration.

Sculpted, carved, moulded or painted, ornament was generally realised by specialised craftsmen who also left their mark in the process. This mark did not really interest Vitruvian theory, which concentrated mainly on how to limit it to ensure that the architect's intentions were carried into effect with the utmost possible faithfulness. With the possibility to mass-produce ornament with machines and the impersonal character it conferred upon ornament, the trace of the hand began to appear in a more positive light. Ruskin based his entire theory of ornamentation on this trace in which he saw the precondition for imparting matter with true spiritual content.

Finally, ornament was meant to be seen and appreciated. It was also supposed to say something about the social rank and personal achievements of the client who had ordered its realisation. There again, tensions periodically arose between the coercive rules of the art of architecture and individual aspirations. Towards the end of the 18th century, to the dismay of guardians of the Vitruvian tradition such as French theorist Jacques-François Blondel, the power of rules began to wane under the pressure of these individual aspirations. The time was ripe for all kinds of experiments regarding the possibility for owners to see their subjectivity mirrored in the architectural décor that they had chosen for themselves. Nouveau-riche ostentation and bourgeois bad taste became possible, thus paving the way for Loos's condemnation of all that was untamed and vulgar in the abuse of ornamentation.

These various themes and questions will be reviewed in more detail in the next chapter. They all relate to the importance of the subjective dimension throughout the history of Western ornamental theories and practices. It is worth noting that Loos's condemnation of ornament as crime based itself on this subjective character. For the Viennese architect, ornament represented

a crime in that it contradicted the essential values of modern individuality. Today, ornament relates again to the question of the subject, although in a way that differs from the past. Part of the difference comes from a new understanding of the relation between buildings and their viewers, a relation interpreted as an affective continuum instead of being founded on distant appreciation. In the last chapter of this book, the full extent of this shift in connection to the rise of digital culture and its various implications for the architectural discipline will be discussed. Politics, or rather the political relevance of ornament, constitutes another possible thread linking past and present. Although this dimension appears at first less evident than the subjective one, it used to be present on three grounds at least. First, ornament was generally associated with capital and labour expense. Thus, ornament had to do with ostentatious wealth and power. The Roman Empire had perfectly understood this function of ornament. Rome and the major cities of the Empire were adorned with rare marbles and precious statues, which expressed the strength of the regime through its capacity to spend lavishly. The Roman Catholic Church, which claimed part of its heritage, emulated this taste for magnificence. In both cases, ornament was enrolled in a project of domination. From Louis XIV's Versailles and its various copies in late 17th- and 18th-century Europe, to the Soviet attempt to create an architectural décor celebrating the triumph of the masses and its American counterpart that shaped places like Washington, many other politics of ornament can be identified throughout history.

This first function of ornament as a display of political power reveals itself inseparable from a second role as a medium carrying politically significant messages. Until the end of the 19th century, as we have seen, ornament conveyed philosophical and ideological notions. Above all, it constituted an indicator of the relative importance of the institutions and people associated with the construction of a building. Traditional ornament was as much hierarchical as symbolic. Whereas numerous studies have been devoted to its symbolic content, its role as an index of social rank has been less thoroughly investigated.

Last but not least, ornament was also instrumental in the quest for an immersive decorative order that possessed a strong political character. In the eyes of Renaissance and Baroque theorists and practitioners of architecture, ornament was part of the process that transformed inhospitable settings into habitations for mankind. This contribution proved especially crucial in cities that were, almost by definition, adorned places.

The lesson of Imperial Rome had never been forgotten. Through their repetition and modulation, architectural ornaments were constitutive of this place-making that was in essence political.

The third chapter of this book will evoke more precisely the political dimension of traditional ornament. Now, contrary to subjectivity, the political has not yet fully returned with contemporary architectural ornamentation, if only because of the refusal to deal frontally with meaning and symbols, a refusal all the more paradoxical that the accent is put simultaneously on the role of architecture as a medium. How can architecture be a medium without carrying any clear message? This does not prevent the political dimension from haunting today's ornamental practice through concerns ranging from the quest for a certain degree of lavishness to the desire to create immersive environments, which goes hand in hand with the accent placed on affect. Politics is also very much present in the debates regarding sustainability. Is this enough? As argued in the final chapter, a true politics of ornament might actually require us to re-engage with architectural meaning. How can this be done without falling again into the Postmodern traps of pastiche and collage? The task is among the most daunting that await contemporary designers.

In the history of Western ornament, until the end of the 19th century, subjectivity and politics had been connected through a triadic structure: pleasure and beauty, social rank and prestige, communication and knowledge. With regards to ornament, these three concerns functioned in a manner strangely reminiscent of how the famous Vitruvian triad – beauty, commodity and solidity – defined the object of architecture. They corresponded to the most fundamental purposes of ornamentation. Simultaneously, they bridged the gap between the individual and the collective, thus contributing to the articulation of the subjective and the political.

The quest for pleasure and beauty constituted one of the fundamental roles of ornament in the Vitruvian tradition. Ornament emphasised but also softened and made more vibrant the overall composition. The pleasure derived from its perception was both experienced at an individual level and invested with civic value. With the exception of Sparta, it was the ambition of every Greek city to adorn the public monuments of its acropolis. One should not underestimate this collective relevance. Ornament appeared as a fundamental component of a shared sense of aesthetic. As Oleg Grabar has argued, the manner in which a society approaches the question of adornment and derives pleasure from it, from clothing to buildings, is

**Gian Lorenzo Bernini,  
Fountain of the Bees,  
Rome, 1644.**

The papal city remained faithful to Ancient Rome's use of inscriptions as ornaments. The fountain designed by Bernini is dedicated to Pope Urban VIII Barberini. The bees situated on the bottom of the clam, which give their name to the monument, were the symbol of the Barberini family.



inseparable from the way it relates more generally to its visible environment, to the world of objects and forms.<sup>35</sup> This relation is in its turn inseparable from the way it conceives the place of man on the earth, between the realm of nature and the kingdom of the gods.

Rank and prestige appeared as another common concern when using architectural ornaments, since décor was supposed to say something about the social condition of the patron of the adorned building. But this function extended there again beyond individual identity for it referred as much to the overall hierarchical organisation of society as to the position occupied by a given person in that hierarchy. As an indicator of social status, ornament was part of a system of social distinction, to use Bourdieu's concept,<sup>36</sup> a role well conveyed by the term 'decorum' that designates both the dignity appropriate



**Henri Labrouste, Sainte Geneviève library in Paris, 1851.**

The facade of Labrouste's celebrated library bears the names of 810 religious leaders, literary authors, philosophers and scientists, from Moses to 19th-century Swedish chemist Jöns Jacob Berzelius. With these lists, the building becomes analogous to the books it houses.

to a specific occasion or function and the way artistic expression may serve this purpose. Until the end of the 19th century, ornament was very much about decorum, even if it regularly challenged social conventions. It lost this role with modernity. Modern architecture proved perhaps more revolutionary in its rejection of any form of association between décor and social hierarchy than in the severe restrictions it brought to the use of ornaments. The

difficulty that it experienced in defining new codes of monumentality was directly related to this drastic departure from what had been one of the most enduring features of Western architecture since the Renaissance.

In many situations, architectural ornament also related to the pursuit of communication and knowledge and to the old ideal of a building that would offer easily accessible lessons to individuals as well as to society as a whole through its tectonic organisation and décor. In this perspective, ornament was supposed to possess a pedagogical value directly linked to its meaning. This relation to knowledge is perhaps a specificity of architectural ornament. Eighteenth-century *'architecture parlante'*, speaking architecture, marked the climax of the belief in the pedagogical value of public monuments.<sup>37</sup> Many ornaments used by Boullée and Ledoux conveyed moral lessons to the viewer. The vases protruding from the walls of the Arc-et-Senans saltworks were one instance of them.

Despite Victor Hugo's famous statement in *Notre-Dame de Paris* that *'ceci tuera cela'*, that writing and printing had replaced public buildings, cathedrals in particular, as the privileged instrument of collective memory and instruction, 19th-century architects still believed that their discipline had a special relation to knowledge, and ornamentation contributed to its expression.<sup>38</sup> In Labrousse and McKim, Mead & White's, but also Pugin and Jones's compositions, the pedagogical dimension of ornamentation represented a further motive to integrate inscriptions in architectural décor.<sup>39</sup> The connection between ornamentation and knowledge was there again lost with Modernism, which preferred to concentrate on the expressive potential of the tectonic.

Pleasure and beauty, rank and prestige, communication and knowledge: this triadic structure has not yet fully returned with contemporary architecture, and this incompleteness may allow us to understand better what remains to be achieved to foster the re-emergence of a true politics of ornament. Pleasure is back for sure, even if beauty remains a somewhat unclear issue. In many cases, the ugly appears as the new form taken by beauty; for some of his projects, Hernan Diaz Alonzo goes as far as to claim the grotesque and the horrific as relevant aesthetic categories.<sup>40</sup> In addition to pleasure, social ranking and prestige have also begun to reappear. From cultural programmes to high-end retail shops and restaurants, the use of ornament is often related to a renewed quest for distinction. Still missing are, of course, the gradations that led to more modest programmes, but their return is not impossible to imagine. Intelligible content related to knowledge remains, however,

utterly absent. Contemporary ornament has not yet been willing or able to reconnect with the cognitive dimension of the ornamental tradition, as if affective experience were incompatible with knowledge. Are we destined to float in a state of bliss in the new sensorium designed for us like goldfish in a bowl? Architectural ornament was not only meant to arouse pleasure; it was supposed to stimulate the reflexive faculties of the spectator. One of the most common ways it achieved this goal was through the confrontation between tradition and novelty, rules and exception. Ornament was connected to enduring visual codes that were interpreted in a singular manner, thus provoking, at least in certain situations, a mix of recognition and surprise. Beyond mere delight, this mix introduced the spectator to one of the most fundamental dimensions of architecture: that of a reflection on time, past, present and future, and on the fate of human institutions. Codes have been lost and rules remain uncertain. By the same token, we tend to live in an overextended present, oblivious to the past and impervious to the demands of a future that would look truly different from what lies before our eyes.

In the end, why should we be concerned by the return of ornament? The answer is twofold. Ornament represents an intriguing phenomenon for theorists, critics and historians. As such it deserves their attention and needs to be accounted for. But it constitutes above all an opportunity for contemporary architecture to overcome some of its shortcomings and avoid serious pitfalls. The ornamental dimension is all the more important today in that it coexists with the renewed desire to interpret architecture in the mere light of usefulness, as a tool providing infrastructural support for sustainable life. To the reader of Manfredo Tafuri, this desire to be useful strangely echoes the Modernist ambition to transform architecture into the very instrument of political, economic and social rationalisation. In *Architecture and Utopia*, the preminent Italian historian denounced the illusory character of such an ambition.<sup>41</sup> We may be confronted sometimes with a similar illusion when we are told that architecture's mission is to save the world, now that engineering has shown its limits as a potential saviour.

The suggestion here is not that the architectural discipline should remain indifferent to the pressing issues of the time, far from it. But its way to address them shouldn't be detrimental to its core values like the quest for the pleasurable, and yes, let us make use of the word, beauty. Ornament has always had to do with pleasure and beauty. It is also related to the pursuit of a certain type of knowledge in which visual pleasure leads to a reflection on the resources that make architecture expressive. For architects especially,

ornament represents a means to reconnect with the reflexive dimension of their discipline. After all, architecture has always been based on a reasoned examination of itself.

This reflexive stance could very well constitute the precondition for the architectural discipline to engage in a truly productive manner with the major challenges of its time – like sustainability – without trying to emulate engineering or planning. It may be worth remembering in passing that 19th-century architecture, with all its ornaments that made it different from engineering, was actually much more efficient in its negotiation with technology than modern architecture. Contrary to what Sigfried Giedion tried to make us believe, architectural modernity was never able easily to enter into dialogue with engineering because of architecture's attempt to subsume it.

To this day, architecture has remained distinct from engineering and more generally from construction, like an irreducible supplement. What if the best way to think about this uncanny situation were to imagine it as a form of ornament?

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