Delight, the Function of Ornament

An Exploration of its Relevance
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The Netherlands
January 2009
1. Introduction

‘All architecture proposes an effect on the human mind, not merely a service to the human frame’

After the purge of almost everything related to ornament in our visual world, we have, according to art historian James Trilling (1), lost the ability to read decoration. This loss is due I suspect to neglect and a disinterest that stems from the rejection of ornament at the time of the emergence of the Modern Movement. A neglect that has passed, since that time, from generation upon generation of new architects with little questioning. However there is certainly, at this time, a new impulse to discover what ornament actually has to offer. It seems that a new generation, less weighed down by the dogmas of the past, are finding that the ever repeating of familiar concepts, like a dog chasing its tail, leads ultimately to stagnation. This combined with the enduring criticisms of the legacy of the Modern Movement has bit by bit started to loosen the tight clench of the fist of resistance to explicit ornament for ornament’s sake.

Initially a subdivision of classical rhetoric, ornament was then adopted by Renaissance theorists as a way to describe attributes of art and architecture. Within this artistic realm, ornament thrived for several centuries until its very success led to its banishment from modernist architectural theory and practice. However to see the present situation as a long awaited revival following the demise of ornament, is I believe a misnomer. For it has certainly remained a topic of much discussion and looking more closely at the work of architects subsequent to its ‘banishment’ reveals to me that the essence of what ornament represents has remained throughout and it is only the expression that has changed. Ornament used explicitly for ornament’s sake has indeed been confined but the requirement for delight that was expressed in what was called true and appropriate ornament has been transformed in to other ways of expression. Our ideas of ornament have continually changed, but our impulse, our desire, even our apparent need for ornament has not changed. It is, I believe, a part of the creative nature of us, a part of who we are and is part of the on-going discovery of who we are. The desire to celebrate, communicate and interact and be playful that is what is at the heart of ornament. Ornament is an expression of the play that is all of creation.

![Figure 1. Escher's 'Hol en Bol' 1955, is I feel an example of this playfulness, that creates wonder and delight in the observer](image)

Despite all of the discussions and theories surrounding ornament; about what it is and about whether it is appropriate, the essential impulse to delight, and the ever changing means to achieve this, has been always present. Ornament has been a part of human development from earliest times, and throughout that development we have reflected on what has been created and formed ideas and concepts around this. The ideas we have about it have been changing and evolving which then in turn determines and shapes the material expression. These ideas are essentially born of a desire to share in experience and delight in ourselves, collectively, and architecture is a very public pursuit and inherently provides a platform for this.
The intention of this research is to shed light on ornament and try to understand why it was targeted as a problem and whether these apparent problems remain an obstacle to its use in the 21st century. My research is predominately concentrated on ornament found in Western Europe; not with the intention of excluding other cultures, but out of a requirement to limit the scale of the research due to the limited time available. Also ornament at the fundamental level is universal in its nature, as will be explored later, and so it is possibly not necessary to compare expressions. I'm writing about how ornament works, and how it has been used by architects. I'm going to be drawing on examples to demonstrate how its absence has led to a generalised poverty and deadness in much contemporary architecture and at the same time consider examples of contemporary architecture that I see as alive and vital, and explore the reasons for this apparent vitality.

Is delight the function of ornament? This is my hypothesis. There has been a lot of confusion and mystification surrounding ornament, and it is my intention to highlight this. Ornament in architecture has seen both evolutionary and sometimes revolutionary change and the reporting of this has often been confused; there has been much commentary, and part of this research is to look critically at this. It is important to know how ornament has been used throughout history and how it has changed over time. Also to explore what were the motivations and context that resulted in not only the rejection of the forms of ornament but also a disdain for it. There are the beginnings of the proliferation of ornament in contemporary architecture and what could result in a new visual world as James Trilling has suggested. I will show some of these recent developments and try to come to any conclusions as to whether delight is the function of ornament and whether ornament is relevant to architecture in the 21st century. However in order to investigate any of this it is first necessary, before anything else, to try to define as precisely as possible what I'm suggesting ornament is and what it is not. So that is the first topic of investigation.

2. What is Ornament and what is it not

Throughout history commentators have given insights into what constitutes ornament. The fifteenth century Florentine architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti, and much later, architect Robert Venturi, for example writes;

‘ornament may be defined as a form of auxiliary light and complement to beauty. From this it follows, I believe, that beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused through all the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.’ Leon Battista. On the Art of Building In Ten Books. Trans. Leach, N. Rywert, J. & Tavenor, R. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988. Bk.6.2.

‘When Modern architects righteously abandoned ornament on buildings, they unconsciously designed buildings that were ornaments. In promoting Space and Articulation over symbolism and ornament, they distorted the whole building into a duck. They substituted for the innocent and inexpensive practice of applied decoration on a conventional shed the rather cynical and expensive distortion of program and structure to promote a duck….It is time to re-evaluate the once-horrifying statement of John Ruskin that architecture is the decoration of construction, but we should append the warning of Pugin: It is all right to decorate construction but never construct decoration.’ Learning From Las Vegas, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Revised Edition, The MIT Press 1977. p.163

It is important to define exactly what ornament is in architecture. Trying to make a clear definition is not so straightforward. There are many definitions but they all seem to offer slightly different meanings. Firstly just checking a couple of standard dictionary definitions gives a small clue but they also reveal differences. Beginning with the definition in the Concise Oxford dictionary (1). This definition in relation to architecture is concise indeed. All that can be gleaned is that it is something applied to a building to enhance it. A little more is to be found in the Merriam-Webster definition (2), which indicates that the word appeared for the first time in the 13th century, and its archaic meaning is given as ‘a useful accessory’, and the few other definitions provided do not necessarily relate specifically to buildings; only generally they suggest that ornament is; ‘something that lends grace and beauty’. From these few definitions it is clear that it is something that if introduced to an object will have a positive, enhancing effect.
To continue this general conception of what ornament is, does not go anywhere near far enough in explaining what it is, that solitary idea cannot describe the complexity of ornament, especially in relation to architecture, both past and present. Therefore it is perhaps better to recognize a number of more or less distinct categories. To help determine these I have found the divisions made by the art historian James Trilling helpful and recognize them as the closest to my own interpretation. Ornament is “the art we add to art,” he defines, that which “makes people happy; it stands for everything that makes life worth living”. Trilling is clearly a passionate advocate of ornament, and in his book; Ornament, A Modern Perspective, he explores the vexed relation of ornament and modernism, showing how the conflict is rooted not only in the mechanization of ornament during and after the Industrial Revolution, but also in the scientific and social thought of the 18th century. In the book he makes a distinction between three aspects of what is taken to be ornament. These three distinctions are; **ornament, decoration and design.** Of course there are more subtle gradations between these, but for my purposes here, I will work with these three categories.

Before looking in detail at these three categories I would like to first look at the classic distinction of structure and ornament. Structural elements of a building provide its utility, and decorative elements are that which are intended to delight. Blondel divided architecture into “distribution”, “decoration” and “construction”, a division which roughly corresponded to the Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness and delight.” (Adrian Forty *Words and Buildings* p.280) The essential, might be for instance a brick wall or a stone arch, and that which is applied to this essential structure; the non-essential, those elements like ornament, either applied or inscribed;

‘the work ought to be constructed naked, and clothed later; let the ornament come last, only then will you have the occasion and opportunity to do it conveniently without any form of hindrance.’ Leon Battista. *On the Art of Building in Ten Books. Trans. Leach, N. Rywert, J.& Tavenor, R. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988.* ibid. Bk.9.8.

Later, in addition to this, there developed the idea between the **structure** and the **skin** of a building. The skin can be seen as clothing the structure. Ornament in architecture is much like fashion in clothing. Clothing is a necessity and a simple T-shirt and jeans might suffice, however there are much nicer options, long dresses, or a bespoke hat to wear and to look at. Clothing serves not only to protect the body, but also 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. One recent theory of decoration expounded by Mark Wigley (4) is that buildings have much in common with dressing. He states that ‘Buildings are worn rather than simply occupied.’ Writing about ornament, he advises; ‘The classical relationship between structure and ornament, always understood as that between a body and its clothes’ ( Wigley, Mark. Prosthetic Theory). Clothes are worn, they are applied. He goes further to explain;

But architecture does not follow or resemble clothing. On the contrary, clothing follows architecture. The definition of domestic interiority precedes the definition of the interiority of the body. The clothing of the individual follows the clothing of the family. The body is only defined by being covered in the face of language, the surrogate skin of the building. The evolution of skin, the surface with which spatiality is produced, is the evolution of the social. The social subject, like the body with which it is associated, is a product of decorative surfaces.

He goes on; ‘Repeatedly identifying architecture with clothing, Loos follows Semper's arguments closely. This is nowhere more explicit than when he formulates the "Law of Dressing" in his 1898 essay "Das Prinzip der Bekleidung" (The principle of dressing) in which architecture emerges from textiles and structure is but the scaffolding added to hold them up:

The architect's general task is to provide a warm and liveable space. Carpets are warm and liveable. He decides for this reason to spread out one carpet on the floor and to hang up four to form the four walls. But you cannot build a house out of carpets. Both the carpet on the floor and the tapestry on the wall require a structural frame to hold them in the correct place. To invent this frame is the architect's second task.

This is the correct and logical path to be followed in architecture. It was in this sequence that mankind learned how to build. In the beginning was dressing.
It is important to see this distinction as it helps explain the nature of ornament and decoration as being applied and very much part of the desire to delight. To dress up is to delight in expressing oneself. Now to return to Trilling’s definitions; firstly that of ornament, he puts it like this:

’I have said that ornament is the art that is added to art. That is a beginning, but not a working definition….ornament is separable from the functional shape of the object. If you want to know whether a particular feature of an object is ornament, try imagining it away. If the object remains structurally intact, and recognizable, and can still perform its function, the feature is decoration, and may well be ornament. If not, it is design.’

He uses the example of the cabinet to demonstrate this, see figure 2

Fig. 2. French cabinet, late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, attributed to André-Charles Boulle. Armoire. Ebony, with gilt bronze, brass, and tortoise-shell. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Secondly decoration, that which is also applied; 'All ornament is decoration, but not all decoration is ornament. Decoration is the most general term for the art we add to art.' (Trilling, James). Decoration is mostly ornament however. For instance, when it is paint in a single colour applied to a surface, that can be defined as ornament because it has the qualities of universality that ornament has and can delight the observer. You decorate with ornament. Decoration is in fact the act of applying ornament; these two terms seem easily confused. However it is not ornament in the following sense described by Trilling;

Ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content. Ornament can and often does have representational, narrative, and symbolic content, but visual pleasure must be paramount. If a piece of decoration seems to demand more information than the forms themselves convey - if, in effect, one cannot enjoy it without knowing the story - is is probably not ornament.

The painter Pierce Rice also makes the distinction between decoration and ornament. The latter he defines as pattern; the former as pictorial imagery. "Rinceaux are ornament; a figure relief is decoration. A teaspoon is ornamental (this is not absolutely clear to me though, it might well be the third of Trilling's definitions; design), not decorative. A church fresco is decorative, not ornamental".

Oliver Domeisen's research at London's Architectural Association into the history and contemporary application of ornament in architecture has identified a further definition between decoration and ornament. He defines each as follows; The distribution of 'real' (true) objects for aesthetic purposes is decoration - following the rules of "Decorum" (fashion, propriety) rather than those of ornament "Ornamentum". He goes on defining ornament by saying 'ornament is abstract, a transformation. Ornament is not truth.'

The last of Trilling's three distinctions; design, is neither structure or skin but both at the same time. The teapot, figure 3, is the example Trilling provides, where the object is seen as an homogenous complete entity with nothing additional, except for the stepped handle detail of the teapot lid, which might be ornament.

**Fig. 3. Yuan Fen (signature). Teapot. Stoneware, Chinese (Yixing) c.1980. Private collection. Photo; James Trilling.**
It seems 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. In contrast to ornament that need not be based on real requirements or any meaning.

So these are the three broad distinctions to be made, and will be referred to throughout the thesis. There has been much confusion and mystification of ornament in the past, and the difficulty of trying to define what it is, demonstrated above, is testimony to the potential for confusion. I will explore the various commentaries on ornament in the past in the next part of the thesis but to conclude its definition I will, with the help of Trilling, describe the other properties that are a part of what ornament is and what it can do.

Elements of a building that are required by structural necessity can be transformed by considering not only their utility but the ability to decorate, for instance the blind arch, *figure 4*, has the function of taking an element of structural utility and by overlaying one with the other transforms utility into a wonderful ornamental element. Trilling describes:

> These transformations affirm a pervasive, age-old dissatisfaction with structural necessity as the sole determinant of artistic form. The primary function of ornament - and it is a function, make no mistake - is to remedy this dissatisfaction by introducing free choice and variation into even those parts of a work that appear most strictly shaped by structural or functional needs.

*Figure 4. Blind arch arcade. Christchurch, Dorset, England*
Some of the earliest examples of decoration can be found in Egypt. From objectively represented images of nature to inscribed hieroglyphs telling a story, see figure 5. The hieroglyphics surrounding the opening, as per Trilling’s definition, is decoration whereas the relief of two entwined cobras above the opening with beautifully carved diagonal lines radiating from a central point behind them and meeting a pattern of vertical lines at the perimeter is both an example of decoration (the cobras) and ornament (the background), all necessary to help enhance and define the entranceway.

Describing the temple at Karnak, Sir Banister Fletcher, speculates on the probable origin of much later examples of decoration;

‘Incised inscriptions in colour, which cover the walls, column shafts and architraves, give the origin and history of the temple, the names of the gods whom it was dedicated, and of the royal personages who contributed to its grandeur. In these ancient hieroglyphics we find the germ of the idea which, centuries later, led in Christian churches to the employment of coloured mosaics and frescoes, stained glass windows, and sculptured statues to record the incidents of Bible history and the lives of saints and heroes. Thus have the exponents of successive and diverse religions had recourse to an appeal to the eye for the manifesting their authority and for setting their religious tenets before the common people.’ (Sir Banister Fletcher. *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. p.31)
3. Properties of Ornament

Anthropologist Alfred Gell has suggested that pattern, decoration, ornament, attaches people to things. Gell called this the ‘Technology of Enchantment’. He talks of how reluctant children are induced to bed by covers and pillows festooned with spaceships and soft toys. Pattern links us in more intimate ways to our surroundings, in a way that undecorated surfaces do not. If ornamentation is a fundamental element in world artistic traditions, and a fundamental aspect of human visual cultures, it is because at root it is linked to questions of identity, both individual identity, and collective or social identity.

The often heard phrase ‘merely decoration’ implies that it is optional and subservient to form. But all the cultures around the world which engage in decoration are not doing so because it is an afterthought. Unless decoration has a function, it can only be described in terms of primal urges, and arguments about primal urges are fruitless. Even so primal urges do not survive unless they are useful in some way. However you cut the cake, you come back to decoration. Even those deliberately undecorated spaces in contemporary architecture acknowledge the personalizing, socializing nature of ornamentation.

Ornament has had a turbulent past. For a considerable part of the past two centuries, ornament has been the subject of debate in design in relation to buildings and their interiors; ‘Ornament is always changing. For art historians this change has been many things: a reflection of large-scale social and cultural change, a sign of foreign influence, a measure of the passage of time, and an artistic phenomenon worth studying for its own sake.’ (Trilling) In the mid-nineteenth century, discussion focused on the meaning of decoration, its classification and its most appropriate uses and sources. The roles of nature, history and sources from outside Europe were all hotly contested. The development of machine-made decorative detail further complicated the debate. It seems ornament was looked at increasingly in specific terms when its greatest strength is the possibility of its universality.

Fig. 7. Beautifully non-specific ceiling decoration. Protestant church in Wiesbaden, 1910 in what has been described as Art Nouveau.
All of manifestation, in its essence, is made up of geometric shapes; circles, squares and triangles, this is often made overt in ornament. These geometric shapes are of course universal in nature which is also a characteristic of ornament. Such universality is made possible by the relatively small generative syntax of ornament. These syntactical elements are all paraphrases of nature; stripe, hatching, dot and the whole treasury of primal signs are all present in nature. This essence is the visual grammar of the ornament and has priority over any reference it encodes.

Ornament is a universal language that is transmitted by contact, trade and knowledge: its essence is universally understood even when its sources of symbolism have become arcane. Another universal quality derives from its nonspecificity:

Holiness, self-aggrandisement, and in a different vein the refusal of structural necessity are ideas that ornament can convey by its very presence, regardless of the choice of motifs. This kind of communication is less precise and less versatile than communications by symbols, but has one overwhelming advantage: it is almost completely independent of cultural conditioning. Standards of luxury vary with time and place, but the equation of luxurious display with both temporal and spiritual power appears to be constant. this should be the full extent of universal or near-universal meaning in ornament.

Also 'Bilateral symmetry is a good example. Since it is a feature of ornament worldwide, it must be attractive in a way that transcends cultural differences'. (Trilling, James)

Ornament has been used as a means to elaborate and cover the underlying structure, in essence, a disguising of the base medium; 'Elaborating an object beyond a certain point means disguising its original character. This is one of ornament's basic functions'. (Trilling, James)
The appropriateness use of ornament was of concern to writers from the earliest time. The ornament must reflect its intentions appropriately and manifest in appropriate materials;

“Architecture being founded on necessity, it follows: 1° that its beauty must borrow its character from this same necessity: 2° that the ornaments must derive from the very nature of the edifice, and result from the need it may have for them. Nothing should be seen in a building which has not its use there, and which is not an integral part of it” (quote taken from the French edition of Milizia’s books, L’Arte di Vedere in Adrian Forty Words and Buildings p.296)

In the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, ornament was not at this time considered superfluous. It was still very much a part of the integrity of a work of architecture. The concern at this time was more that the ornament was appropriate; no-doubt a concern that was being increasingly aired because of the rising mass production of ornament and a reduction in the demand for established crafts;

Nevertheless, even in cases like these, much depend on the accomplishment of the great ends of decoration. If the ornament does its duty - if it is ornament, and its points of shade and light tell in the general effect ... But if the ornament does not answer its purpose, if it have no distant, no truly decorative power; if, generally seen, it be a mere incrustation and meaningless roughness. (John Ruskin The Seven Lamps of Architecture p.26)

At the very beginning of The True Principles Pugin set out two rules: “1st, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety; 2nd, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building”. He then went on to add two supplementary principles: “In pure architecture the smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose; and even the construction itself should vary with the material employed, and the designs should be adapted to the material in which they are executed”. (Adrian Forty Words and Buildings p.297)

There were attempts to tame and codify decoration. The most famous and enduring of these was carried out by the architect Owen Jones’s didactic Grammar of Ornament, published in 1856, which laid out 37 propositions relating to the appropriate uses of decoration and pattern and showcased in brilliant colour (made possible by the recent introduction of chromolithography, some examples included in the appendix) thousands of examples of ornament from around the world. Owens believed that, ‘All ornament should be based on geometrical construction,’ and gave very detailed instructions concerning the use and placement of colours and hues. He forbade the use of ‘flowers or other natural objects’ unless they were ‘conventional representations............sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended images to the mind, without destroying the unity of the object they are employed to decorate.’ Such passionate commitment to the cause of using ornamentation correctly was not uncommon in this mid-nineteenth century period of design reform.

The appearance of ornament can be that of a motif and a pattern is made up of a series of motifs. Motifs can stand alone. They can have a living quality - since we the observer are alive, there is a resonance. 'Two major properties of ornament are intricacy and ambiguity. Intricacy is formal complexity. An intricate pattern is intrinsically hard to read because the sheer density of elements keeps us from seeing how the pattern is organised. Ambiguity is the tendency of some patterns to send mixed signals, they can be read in two or more ways at once'. (Trilling, James) In order to create this ambiguity ornament should be designed so that the background itself forms a pattern. A simple colour scheme is best, see figure 9, your eye moves continually between dark and light with the result of the pattern being simultaneously elusive and dynamic. 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 a balance between monotony and complexity.

Fig. 9. Single motif repeated in two colours, producing the elusive and dynamic effect that Trilling describes.
Ornament knows no absolute of scale. The same devices and systems may be found simultaneously on a palace and on the earring of a woman passing that palace. Ornament is most commonly found in between things, and at the margins or perimeter. It is often found in parts that require attention or in order to disguise, for instance a joint. It is associated with key locations like a column capital or the keystone of an arch where it defines the transfer of structural forces. It serves to conceal, where major elements come together, for instance a cornice is used to cover the joint between wall and ceiling. It is can be very effective when used in mass to completely cover.

Ornament can delight whether expressed in three dimensions as an egg and dart moulding of a cornice, figure 10, that makes up a part of a classical pediment or a simple two dimensional pattern in a brick wall of a vernacular farm building, figure 11. The whole recipe of ornament made up of form, line, tonality, material, disposition, colour. Colour is of itself ornament. Cultures have sought nature's brightest hues of mineral, dye, feather or beetle carapace for use in ornament: others have restricted the range of colour to serve sobriety or to retreat from excess.

Ornament was used in some instances as a means of communication. Using ornament to communicate an attribute - wealth for instance; 'Inigo Jones's Banqueting Hall reminded citizens of the power of the monarch, as well as conveying more complex ideological and aesthetic messages.' (Olsen, David. The City as a Work of Art). Communication by association has been the legacy of the classical orders, the orders have been used to this day to project the values of the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations;

Although modernism dealt an all but mortal blow to the classical orders as a serious vehicle of expression, we have no difficulty in recognising classicism when we see it. More to the point, we have no trouble recognising that in certain contexts it has a point to make. The prevalence of classical forms in government buildings, courthouses, libraries, and schools in an attempt to forge a link with the classical past as the presumed origin of all that is admirable in our civic and intellectual lives. The origin is the message, and the message is classicism itself. (Trilling)

Certain forms and shapes of what has been termed mimetic ornament were prevalent in religious architecture. Through long association with religious rites they became sacred and were preserved and reproduced for their symbolic value. These forms continued to be understood even though they were often stylised into abstract or geometric patterns, unrecognisably removed from their naturalistic models.

However it need not function to communicate in any literal or symbolic way. Any communicative intention is often long forgotten by posterity. Ornament can be for enjoyment only, that can be the only justification for it. A joy and liveliness that can be effectively instilled in a work by means or ornament and it need not be in conflict with other ideals of space or form. Seen in this light ornament is not a phenomenon to be sidelined, but one to be utilised to good effect. Ornament has remained relevant to all of the arts.
The evolution of ornament, of course to a great extent, is rooted in the material used. ‘From Lodoli comes the notion that for architecture to be truthful, its ornaments must be consistent with the materials in which they are made’. Developments in techniques and the application of new materials radically changed the possibilities for new forms of ornament. For instance the invention of cast iron brought with it the wonderful development of large spanning elegant Railway shed structures with ornament pre-cast to beautifully detailed gratings, railings. Ornament tends to advertise the materials it uses: their characteristic hardness, malleability, transparency, each of which commands a relevant technique. More recently glass has been experimented with in increasingly decorative ways.

Fig. 12. Cast and wrought iron used to great effect at the Oxford Museum of Natural history, England.

It is the tendency of mankind to reproduce in new materials and techniques, shapes and qualities familiar from past usage, regardless of appropriateness. Decorative motifs derived from earlier structural and symbolic forms are innumerable and universal. In ancient Egypt, architectural details continued to preserve faithfully the appearance of bundled papyrus shafts and similar early building forms. The carved stone entablatures of the Greek and Roman orders reflect the earlier details of wooden construction. This was also true much later when cast iron was first used. Techniques for constructing timber buildings were utilised, with some adaptations, for the new material.
4. Confusion and mystification

‘Adolf Loos condemned ornament yet applied beautiful patterns in his own designs and would have erected the most magnificent, if ironic, symbol in the history of skyscrapers if he had won the Chicago Tribune competition.’ (Loos’ competition proposal was for a twenty-story ‘hollow’ Doric column.) Learning From Las Vegas, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour; Revised Edition, The MIT Press 1977. p.137

The quote above makes startlingly clear how contradictory the notions of ornament can be. Having defined what ornament is and is not, it is worth looking to the many alternative definitions and interpretations that have been made in the past and see how they compare to the definition that I have presented in order to investigate the confusion.

The word applied, to this day has negative connotations, it means of course that something is added and therefore following from this is implied that it can be dispensed with. The reality of ornament I believe is very different. Ornament is much more fundamental to architecture than we have come to believe. Ornament in architecture is something additional, an add-on. That which is not strictly necessary and that which can easily be taken away. And of course that which is precisely James Trilling’s test of whether it is ornament or not; if it can be taken away but the structural integrity remains then that confirms in his sense that this is ornament. However this way of thinking suggests that because it is additional, it is not essential. It is this sort of language that I believe has diminished the importance of ornament.

The wave of criticism that led to ornaments rejection had such momentum that any doubts, if there were any, about the purge, were quietly swept aside. The Modern Movement in architecture had scarcely succeeded in abolishing ornament before people began to speculate about how and when it would return. In Britain, the historian Sir John Summerson, as a young journalist, found it hard to believe that architecture would be able to communicate without it beyond the initial period of purification which he and many others believed was a necessary transitional phase.

Ornament has always been relevant and cannot be that readily omitted if a work is to be regarded as architecture. In this regard Ruskin made a clear distinction between building and architecture. Ornament is best understood in relation to architecture and not in relation to building. This distinction is important and is well defined by Ruskin in his ‘The Seven Lamps of Architecture’. He contends that ‘To build, - literally, to confirm, - is by common understanding to put together and adjust the several pieces of any edifice or receptacle of a considerable size,… but building does not become architecture merely by the stability of what it erects’. He further clarifies this distinction by suggesting that with architecture ‘It is the addition of the mental - in the sense in which Plato uses that word in the “Laws” - which separates architecture from a wasp’s nest, a rat hole, or a railway station.’ It is interesting to record here Ruskin’s advice relating directly to ornament when he proposes ‘Thus, I suppose, no one would call the laws architectural which determine the height of a breastwork or the position of a bastion. But if to the stone facing of that bastion be added an unnecessary feature, as a cable moulding, that is Architecture.’ He concludes by saying ‘Architecture concerns itself only with those characters of an edifice which are above and beyond its common use.’ John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, Dover edition 1989 (first published 1880) p.8,9.
Ornament has been seen, quite wrongly, as necessarily being based on historic precedent. The nature of ornament is often seen, as a representation of 'traditional' motifs that are familiar within a particular society and so ornament was therefore necessarily based on established patterns, 'Venturi explained that people are perfectly entitled to have in their buildings the sort of familiar and explicit symbols that applied decoration can provide.' (Wolfe, Tom) However this, although very much evident and there is nothing wrong in this, does relegate ornament to the past. When the possibility is that ornament can be a contemporary work that need not refer to conventional precedents. Once the principles of ornament are grasped, new forms can come out of those principles. An image of a second century Roman floor shown in Trilling's book, reproduced here, figure 13, which demonstrates the hypnotic power of even a simple pattern that is not referring to anything, not communicating anything, not imitating anything. It is just a delightful play.

Fig. 13. Drawing of floor mosaic. Roman, Second century. Ostia
Despite this relevance it was dropped during the birth of what became the International Style in architecture. This dropping of ornament whilst other priorities were explored led to a steady increased poverty of much of the building that followed. Much of the early work was inspired and revelled in the new freedoms, wonderful examples of the new freedoms include Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, 1928, and Ludwig Mies van de Rohe’s German pavilion in the International exhibition of 1929 in Barcelona.

The relationship between architecture and building as clearly defined by Ruskin is directly related to ornament. With the work of Gaudi it is difficult to separate ornament from structure, one blends with the other to create an homogeneous whole. There is no distinction between ornament and structure. They are one, in effect his buildings might be described as one large ornament. This is at the one extreme. The opposite extreme would be a utilitarian building with absolutely no ornament. Everything else then falls between these two extremes. The applied ornament is to try to instil, in a building, some of the effect that the Gaudi’s extreme represents without going to extremes. The problem then is that it becomes a compromise.
Ornament has sometimes been seen as a gimmick, something contrived. Problem of gimmick. That is in the realms of decoration. Many gimmicks were part of Post Modernism. The Guild House TV aerial was above all an example of Venturi's gift for the modernist prank. The aerial was a piece of applied ornament and, moreover, a crown, a finial, every bit as much as the “fantastic mooring mast” atop the Empire State Building - i.e., an obvious violation of the International Style. (Tom Wolfe)

The familiar image of modern architecture as white turns out to be the effect of a historiographical tradition that has worked hard to suppress the colour of the surfaces of the buildings that it describes. The sanatorium in Hilversum, The Netherlands is a good example. The original colour scheme comprised an intense pale blue for the fine steel window casements, intended to merge with the sky. The intention of gaining as much daylight as possible required large expanses of glass. The walls externally were white, but internally the linoleum floor finish was a deep mottled brown. A colour scheme that the black and white photography could hide.

The difference between ornament and art that is applied to buildings is that art is something that begs interpretation whereas ornament requires no interpretation. In the Netherlands, soon after the Second World War, a percentage of the building's budget was devoted to applying art to the reconstructions. There are many wonderful examples but these are not to be confused with ornament. They are what Trilling refers to as *decoration*.

Fig. 16. Berend Hendriks, Brickwork mosaic, 1960. Amsterdam.
5. Rejection and Disdain
*The demise of the excess and indulgence of ornament from the mid 1800’s - 1940’s*

Much effort was expended to oust ornament and all that it represented and it is necessary to explore the valid criticisms levelled at ornament. 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.

Beginning with the Baroque. This was the pinnacle, a high point of ornaments popularity from which the fall from grace began. Ornament in the form that was to become known as Rococo was the beginning of the end; 'The Baroque.....sometimes called the Rococo style, and arose in 17th century, when the true renaissance had exhausted its energy and succumbed to the formal rules and monotonous regulations of schoolmen and classicists, notably Palladio and Vignola' (Banister Fletcher)

Italian architectural writer Francesco Milizia in 1768, 'The ills of architecture arise out of over-abundance. Therefore in order to perfect architecture, one must rid it of those superfluities, and tear off those trimmings with which stupidity and caprice have disfigured it. The simpler architecture is, the more beautiful it is' (1768,66)

Rococo has been called the most extreme ornament; 'the rococo, the whimsical and demanding style of eighteenth century Europe, which seems at first glance to defy analysis. What makes the rococo almost unique is the combination of clarity and fluidity in the parts, and apparent chaos in the composition as a whole.' (Trilling) But the chaos was not to last and such extremes were not tolerated for long;
With ornament in retreat, there were architects who have had a sense of the correct balance of ornament, for instance, John Nash and Sir John Soane are two clear examples of architects in the nineteenth century avoiding excesses in ornament. Restrained ornament was known before this time. The sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio experimented with a very restrained decoration but he was quite exceptional at that time.

Laugier's criticism of rococo differed from that of his contemporaries was that rather than merely complain about its lack of simplicity, Laugier made the 'simple' into a positive quality, rooted in nature, that a skilful architect could manipulate to effect;

Laugier's idea that “simplicity” was a positive quality that a skilful architect might handle to great effect was taken up and reiterated by other eighteenth-century writers. This, for example, is J.-F. Blondel in his Cours:

A simple architecture should be the most esteemed of all; simplicity is the property of the works of great masters; it bears a character that art cannot define, and that the most able professor cannot teach; it alone can enchant the spirit and the eyes; it leads to the sublime, and it is always preferable, whatever may be said, to those forced compositions that betray the art and to that multitude of ornaments with which unprincipled men overload their productions, because it is easier to please the crowd by the confusion of elements and the prodigality of sculpture than by the simplicity of which we speak. There is only a very small number of connoisseurs who know how to feel it and to appreciate it.
The idea of form was also applied as an antidote to ornament as Forty demonstrates;

*Form as resistance to ornament.* This is the first and probably most familiar use of ‘form’ within modernism, as a means of describing, and validating, that aspect of architecture which is *not* ornament. This sense is made clear for example by the German critic Adolf Behne, writing in the 1920s: ‘The concept of “form” does not deal with accessories, decoration, taste or style… but with the consequences arising from a building’s ability to be an enduring structure’. The main source of the anti-decoration concept of form lay in the polemics against Secession artists and designers in Vienna in the 1890s, evolved most famously by Adolf Loos. (Adrian Forty *Words and Buildings* p.161)

At the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851 (staged in the Crystal Palace, said to be the first modern building) an event where the objects on display were, according to architectural historian Brent C. Brolin, ‘covered with clouds of putti, acres of acanthus, and cornucopiate harvests from the vegetable kingdom’ - ornament was in disgrace.

The thinking was very much to do with utopian ideals, and a future world. The rejection of the past and a moving towards future ideals was very much a fundamental attitude at this time. The moral tone of the critiques was further honed in the early twentieth century by the belief among avant-garde circles that products that disguised their modes of construction with ornament were dishonest and, therefore, fundamentally flawed.

The moral resistance to ornamentation found its most vehement spokesperson in Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who in 1908 published a diatribe against decoration, titled ‘Ornament and Crime’. In this text Loos uses stirring rhetoric to argue that cultural evolution and human progress was being hampered by ornament. In his view, ornament was a waste of manpower, health, materials and capital. ‘In a highly productive nation,’ he wrote, ‘ornament is no longer a natural product of its culture, and therefore represents backwardness or even a degenerative tendency.’

![Fig. 20. Adolf Loos. facade of the Goldman and Salatsch Building (“Looshaus”). Austrian, 1909-11. Vienna.](image)
The evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament from useful objects ... Behold the true greatness of our age, that it can no longer bring forth ornament. We have vanquished decoration and broken through into an ornament less world.' Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', 1908.

'But in economic respects it (ornament) is a crime, in that it leads to the waste of human labour, money, and materials. (Loos, Adolf)

Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our culture, but a symptom of backwardness or degeneracy, the craftsman producing the ornament is not fairly rewarded for his labour. The conditions among wood carvers and turners, the criminally low rates paid to embroiderers and lace makers are well-known. (Loos, Adolf)

This is his main point in relation to crime. However it was widely misinterpreted that ornamentation itself was the crime. It is certainly the case that Loos was saying that the ornament he saw around him was no longer necessary and was advocating a move away from the status quo. Figure 20 above, demonstrates that in his own work, Loos employed beautiful marbles to delightful effect. It can be confirmed from this that it was not ornament itself that he was against but the existing forms of ornament being used at that time.

The loss of craftsmanship and the inferior quality of machine made ornament led in part to what became known as the Art and Crafts Movement 1880 - 1910. This was a reactionary group who tried to counteract what they saw as a catastrophic loss of craft in the arts. In 1899 the economist Thorstein Veblen gives an idea of the debates taking place at that time, he; 'pointed out that our appreciation of handwork is inseparable from its "honorific value"- its value as a status symbol. Handwork is much more expensive than machine work; therefore it confers status that machine work does not.' (Trilling)

Economic factors were very influential in the move away from applied decorations. The relatively high cost of labour compared to newly available mass produced materials at the time of the Arts and Crafts Movement led to a diminishing relevance of the traditional crafts, but at the same time a rejection of machine made ornament as being of little quality having what was seen as little skill in its making as compared to a hand crafted object; 'The conviction that making ornament by machine was a betrayal, not of the machine, but of ornament.' (Trilling)

The craft had been compromised by mass production. Qualities of craft in its uniqueness were gone the sheer quantity of 'craft' now available by means of mechanisation led to an inevitable deterioration in its value. Too much of something, whatever it is, results in not only a devaluation of the object but also a resistance too it. Like on consuming a luxurious three course meal your appetite is satisfied. You go back again and the satisfaction returns, but repeating this will soon lead to a rejection of more and a return to simpler fare. The architect Philip Webb looked to a simpler architecture because of the detrimental impact of the arrival of machine made ornament;

At the same time as he rejected all revivals of past styles, Webb, being unlike most of his peers in rejecting Ruskin's contention that ornament is an essential element of architecture, decided to avoid the use of carved ornament almost completely. Webb found the ornament of his day deplorable on two counts. Firstly, instead of being used as ' enrichment of the essential construction' as Pugin had urged in his True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture (1841), all too often it was being used to conceal poor structural work.... Secondly, because commercialism had atrophied the craftsmen's creative powers, contemporary ornament was lifeless: it had "no sign of inspiration in it, no reward for the labour, which is always visible in a real work of art." Philip Webb, Pioneer of Arts & Crafts Architecture, Sheila Kirk, 2005. p90.

The American architect Louis Sullivan marks an important transition phase. He was one of the last to use ornament in such an overt way. Despite having to work with new building types and construction methods, he managed to apply ornament appropriately. The highrise was introduced with the advent of the steel frame construction. Even with his invention and successful application of ornament to these buildings, a reprieve of ornament was not forthcoming.
Louis Sullivan’s “A System of Architectural Ornament” (1922), is his interpretation of the philosophical principles of ornament and its relationship to architecture and the natural world. Through the use of ornament, Sullivan believed, the architect could establish an organic connection linking the practical and rational aspects of building design and demonstrating the underlying similarities between the simple geometries of science and the curvilinear configurations of nature. He is much influenced by Owen Jones’s “The Grammar of Ornament” (1856), and it is like his motivating for writing such a book was to defend the role of ornament, that he felt was required at that time.

6. After Ornament

Ornament had apparently transformed itself. Gone finally where all the despised non-essentials and purity prevailed. A sophisticated theory of the surface, modernizing architecture by transforming the status of the surface, is presented by art historian Mark Wigley. He proposed that ornamentation had in fact survived the modernist purge and took the form of a thin surface coating that is paint, and more importantly the paint decoration was only satisfactory if white. He argues that the white wall exemplified the stripping away of the decorative masquerade costumes worn by nineteenth-century buildings and that modern buildings are not naked. The white wall is itself a form of clothing.

The rejection of decoration in favour of the cultivated eye is explicitly understood as a form of purification. The argument culminates with the chapter entitled “A Coat of Whitewash: The law of Ripolin,” which advocates replacing the degenerate layer of decoartion that lines buildings with a coat of whitewash. Whitewash liberates visuality. It is a form of architectural hygiene to be carried out in the name of truth: “His home is made clean. There are no more dirty corners. Everything is shown as it is.” The true status of the object is exposed. Cleansed of its representational masks, it is simply present in its pure state.…….The look of modernity is that of utility perfected, function without excess, the smooth object cleansed of all representational texture. (Wigley)
However the new pristine clothes were not as comfortable as first thought around 1930 – 1940 there was a reaction to the dogmas of the modern movement. There was an increasing dissatisfaction with dogmatic slogans and the dogmatic rejection of ornament. The giants of the architectural world were for too long not questioned. The giants had the skill and understanding to make their progressive architecture significant. What followed however is an adoption of the dogma’s by the majority of the architectural profession but without the same dexterity. Buildings became bare abstractions, expressions of the dogmas without the individual attention appropriate to individual users. Also there was an abandonment of personal vision and originality, exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright, in favour of the force of a professional elite. A turning point came in 1959 over discussions of the Seagram building, where Mies van der Rohe, applied ‘ornament’ in the form of non-structural I-beams to the façade. Referring to Mies’ Seagram Building and the application of wide flange beams to the façade ‘But sticking things on the outside of buildings.....Wasn’t that exactly what was known, in another era, as applied decoration?’ (Tom Wolfe);

By the 1960s it was becoming a commonly voiced complaint against architectural modernism that it had drained architecture of meaning. While the first generation of modern architects had done this with the best intentions - so as to remove from architecture the insignia of social class which it had traditionally borne - the results had been to produce what, in the 1960s, was to become known as “the crisis of meaning”. (Adrian Forty Words and Buildings p.309)

However ornament continued its long fall out of favour in architecture for the better part of the twentieth century. With post modernism's revivification of complexity, lent legitimacy by architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown's writings in the 1960s and 1970s, ornament was granted a reprieve among a growing number of architects; 'in 1978 Venturi announced his new definition of architecture as “shelter with decoration on it” and said that he knew this would be “shocking”’. (Wolfe,Tom) Even so, ornament was finding it hard to play its role;

"Robert Venturi’s appeal for an architecture of complexity and contradiction. Venturi’s argument is set out in chapter 2 of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966), where he characterised the simplification of modernism as a tendency to suppress the complications and contradictions. This was essentially an argument against the kind of compositional simplification which excluded awkward or irreconcilable architecture: ‘Blatant simplification means bland architecture. Less is a bore’ " . (Adrian Forty)

To replace ornament and explicit symbolism, Modern architects indulge in distortion and over articulation. Strident distortion at large scale and “sensitive” articulation at small scale result in an expressionism that is, to us, meaningless and irrelevant, an architectural soap opera in which to be progressive is to look outlandish. Learning From Las Vegas, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Revised Edition, The MIT Press 1977. p.139

Post Modern architecture was a sort of kick start, a knee jerk reaction, that was temporary in its nature but would mark the beginning of a new looking at ornament. Bold use of references from the past were adopted, it seems such boldness was a way of announcing that ornament was back. It was a liberating time where the strict rules of modernist dogma were broken. However the sheer exuberance, a product perhaps of the pent up frustrations of the restrictions imposed by modernism, soon was seen to be exaggerated and have no lasting substance. In a design climate that, for the larger part of a century, has been famously hostile to the generation, application or even mention of ornament, it is surprising that Post Modernism got started at all.

What has happened to allow for this legitimising of ornament discernible in today’s design practice and thinking? And, beyond the palpable trendiness of these recent reinvestigations, what is its deeper significance?
7. Recent Developments in Ornament

'Yet however much the twentieth century learned to disdain ornament, ornament has survived.' (Trilling, James)

The current renaissance of ornament in contemporary architecture is a small beginning, but how can the term *ornament* be defined and articulated for the 21st century?

Ornament I believe is a key part of architecture despite modernism and its legacy having no place for it other than the decorative effects provided by the material itself. In recent years, however, it has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance. The days when ornament was considered anathema to any kind of intellectual progress have long disappeared. While fashion, product and interior designers have spent the last decade embracing ornament in all its forms, architecture has been slow to catch up.

As we have seen that the development of ornament has undergone various transformations, and the means of its material expression have continually changed and in these times material and manufacturing methods have opened up many, many possibilities. For instance the work of Caruso St. John where ornament now plays a key role in their design. Their new extension at The Museum of Childhood in London, as described in the following article by the architecture critic, Hugh Pearman, is an attempt at introducing ornament for ornaments sake, *figures 22 & 23*;

![Fig. 22 & 23. Caruso St. John's Museum of Childhood. London](image1)

![Fig. 23. Detail.](image2)

...an interesting thing has started to happen to Caruso St. John’s architecture. Put crudely, they have rediscovered ornament, something very apparent in their polychromatic-masonry designs for an extension to the V&A's Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, exhibited in the British pavilion at the last Venice architecture biennial. Of course this was no Damascene conversion - the historic and textural interest has always been there - and of course they were and are not alone. Everyone from Herzog and de Meuron to Foreign Office Architects by way of Future Systems and FAT seem to have been playing around with the idea of ornament. What sets Caruso St. John apart, perhaps, is the way they openly acknowledge their debts to their forbears.

So: it’s tradition all the way. “We’re trying to start to express more formally the idea that interpretation is a very powerful thing. Interpretation of tradition has always been how you make art and architecture,” he says. “It’s only really since the 1950s that this idea of pure invention intruded. And it’s only got really silly in the last 20 years or so. If you make pure invention, how can it possibly have any density, compared with something that has hundreds or thousands of years feeding into it? So in a way we are trying to celebrate the eclecticism of our current work, but we’re also trying to make explicit connections.

Ornament plays a key role in their design for the Centre for Contemporary Art in Nottingham’s Lacemarket area........Nottingham’s lace was largely machine-made, and this replicability forms the basis of a “textile façade”. A sample of lace will be scanned, turned into a 3D computer model, and moulded into the pigmented precast concrete panels forming the elevations of the centre. “With this technology,” observes Caruso, “you can do very intricate ornament again.” Sullivan and Wright live on. As does Berlage - his Holland House, right behind Foster’s Gherkin in the City of London is “a constant reference”. Caruso St. John regard this kind of thing as real ornament.

I would agree that this is 'real' ornament and adds another dimension to their projects, but that it is not necessary to repeat familiar patterns of ornament.
It is a mistake to think that purity of form need result in an absence of ornament. For instance Peter Zumthor’s Kollumba museum in Cologne. The simple purity of the form of the brick massing is enhanced by the fretwork of gaps left in the brickwork can be described as ornament. I do recognise however they are also in effect small windows providing ventilation, light and a hint of what might lie within the building, and therefore cannot be placed strictly within the definition of ornament that I have adopted. Take it away and the purity of the form remains but the sumptuousness that the patterns of perforations give is delightful, figure 24. Is Zumthor’s work an example of the surviving forms of ornamentation that have slipped through without notice? Another example of his work is the small chapel, figure 25.

The projects of ‘Ricola’ (Mulhouse) and ‘CaixaForum’ (Madrid) from Herzog and de Meuron, as well as the musicians house in Scharans from Valero Olgiati, demonstrate the growing popularity of the ornament in contemporary architecture; shown below;
Delight, the Function of Ornament

Fig. 27. Herzog and de Meuron, CaixaForum, Madrid. 2008

Fig. 28. Valero Olgiati, musician's house, Zurich. 2007
The sometimes innovative contemporary ornament being made by Ken Bloomer is a mix of approaches as he tries different techniques; some I feel more successful than others, figures 29 & 30;

The irony today is that advances in technology is allowing a viable come back for ornament. Whilst the ideological rigor of Modernism once rejected the supposed decadence and wastefulness associated with the mass production of ornament, it is undeniable that over recent years entirely new construction and manufacturing processes have made the return of ornament economically viable. Computer modelling can now direct mass-customisation processes from CNC milling to laser cutting. In contrast to traditional ornaments, today we rarely see additive applications, rather patterns that are directly integrated into the surface. The variety of materials seems to be limitless, ranging from plaster, concrete, metal and wood, to glass and plastics. The processes are becoming ever more refined: CNC milling, laser cutting, print techniques, photo concrete, relief concrete, matrix formwork technology, etc.

Fig. 29. Ken Bloomer’s addition of what he calls ‘ornamental panels’ to the Nashville Public Library in 2003, does not in my view enhance the existing building.

Fig. 30. Ken Bloomer’s new entrance in New York, commissioned 1972; delighting in ornament.

Fig. 31. Allmann Sattler and Wappner, architect’s multi-layered facade for the Church of the Sacred Heart, Munich. 1996 - 2000
Ornament is the home of metamorphosis uniting and transforming conflicting worldly elements. It is a method to subsume almost anything into the architectural idiom: animal and human figures, plants, geometric patterns, microscopic patterns, fantastical beasts - it is the realm of monsters and hybrids. Ornament is transgressive. It sits comfortably between realism and abstraction, antiquity and modernity, mechanical objectivity and artistic subjectivity, convention and expression, and the real and the ideal. In these times of conspicuous consumption, brand culture also becomes a welcome resource for the architecture of ornament in all its opulence. The icons of our age are perhaps the logos that define the corporate world that surrounds us; the manufacturers of desire. The architects featured as defining new styles and languages to accommodate this iconography are distinguished by the elegance with which they resolve the dilemma of representation in unique ways - uniting ornament with a pertinent commentary on contemporary visual culture.

A recent exhibition of new developments in ornament at the Swiss Architecture Museum entitled “Re-sampling Ornament” was introduced with the following, speaking of ornament; ' (the exhibition) seeks to reassess its importance and show how contemporary architects are once again using its potential to create buildings that invite multiple meanings.'

8. Conclusion

Is there really a renaissance of ornament today and can ornament be reconciled with Modernism? Ornament need not be in conflict with contemporary architecture. It can instead be incorporated to give a positive, enhancing effect, as it has done historically, when applied correctly. A meaningful piece of architecture can only be produced however if it is based on a profound understanding of its historical and cultural context. Environmental factors and other quantitative parameters, while constituent aspects of every project (much like static loads or economic variables), on their own will never produce architecture, only buildings, as Ruskin would put it. The addition of ornament, which demonstrates direct intervention of the human, adds The mental that Ruskin speaks of and can reflect attributes of the character of a place in which the building is to be built, or the character of the user, or both.
Ornament has survived, even if unnamed or unrecognised in its current forms. Yet in theory, our understanding of ornament has not progressed beyond the modernist, polarized debates. Therefore it is our understanding that will remain a barrier to its re-emergence in a multitude of forms. The loss of the knowledge of ornament claimed by Trilling I can testify to, and having researched the subject I personally have a much better understanding of the potential of ornament.

There will not be an overnight switch to the adoption of ornament. A typical pattern will perhaps emerge with a number of pioneering architects establishing themselves, creating a wave of influence that will inspire new generations of architects. These architects will then establish dogmas on the 'new' vision that will solidify and ultimately lead to resistance and an over throwing, and on to the next 'new' vision. However this not a pessimistic view. This is the pattern that is inherent in all human endeavour. The exploration of the new can only take place with the death of the old. The eternal cycle of life and death. The point is to enjoy it, the process. All the commentary that is our collective recorded history is of a struggle and how one established order is succeeded by another and so on, and so on. That is the nature of life. Birth, vitality, maturing and death, followed by life, birth and so on. Once a regime is established, that actually marks the end of its life. The end of life marks a new birth. In what form the new birth takes place, that is the excitement, and once taken up the rigid dogmas of the old order are soon forgotten and later reflected upon as an innocent play. Life is fluid, dogmas are not, and conflict is the inevitable consequence of attaching to dogma. The outward manifestations of ornament will continually change despite dogma, that is the play.

All of the efforts of the Modern Movement were not just about the rejection of the past. They were about the liberation of the tyranny of formal principles. It was a wonderful liberating period that has had a profound and beneficial impact. The positive aspects of this legacy are to be celebrated.

It is interesting to me how quickly what was once the cutting edge of the new becomes confined to an archaic has-been. Looking around the Science museum in London recently, at the spacecraft on display that at one time carried astronauts to space. They were once the absolute outer limits of advanced engineering but now seem clunky and archaic and it is with disbelief that these craft could once have been the means to early space exploration. So it goes on. What is the height of modernity today is a novel relic of the past all too soon. Life is about life, process, being and not about getting anywhere. It is all a play and in acting out that play it can be enjoyed joyously once it is seen to be a play. The universality and non specificity that ornament can be has a timeless quality, the example of the second century Roman floor pattern cannot be dated.

Fig. 34. Escher’s Kleiner en Kleiner, 1956
Ornament has the property of being something that can delight generations owing to its universality. The significance of Ruskin’s argument was to stress that like poetry, architecture belonged not to anyone in particular, or just to the present, but to all time; the present has only a life interest in it, and its obligation is to protect it for posterity.’ (Adrian Forty)

Ornament can confer delight and identity and provide a celebration of this play. Decoration in a geometric pattern as seen in the work of M.C. Escher is a wonderful play with our fascination with perception. Also an example given by Trilling of the second century Roman flooring, figure 13, of two colours of tiles of differing shape laid in a geometric pattern plays with your vision. The pattern is in constant flux as we try to perceive one pattern in it and then another appears, and then another, endlessly, because the eye and can’t rest. This effect gives an aliveness that is delight. Delight in our being there to witness this.

For ornament to delight and fulfil its function it is necessary for ornament to be neutral in its language but playful in its form, Oliver Domeisen sums up the ‘Re-sampling Ornament’ exhibition as follows;

Re-sampling Ornament reinstates ornament in contemporary architecture with an abundance of new conceptual and aesthetic possibilities. Ornament operates trans-historically and trans-culturally. It is constant dynamic movement and expansion. Ornament is not truth - it is mimesis, material transubstantiation, deception, artifice, pleasure and beauty that render utility acceptable.
Notes

1. Introduction

1. James Trilling was trained at Harvard University, specializing in Byzantine art. Trilling has been a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study and Brown University, and has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and the University of Vienna. In the spring of 2006 he will be a Visiting Professor of Art History at Amherst College. He has lectured at Princeton University, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Villa Spelman in Florence, Dumbarton Oaks, Brown University, the Japan Society, the Institute for the Study of Classical Architecture, the Bard Graduate Centre for the Study of Decorative Art, the Worcester Museum of Art, and the Newport Museum of Art.

2. What is ornament.

1. Definition included in the Concise Oxford Dictionary:

   Ornament n. & v. –n. 1a a thing used or serving to adorn, esp. a small trinket, vase, figure, etc. (a mantelpiece crowded with ornaments; her only ornament was a brooch). 1b a quality or person conferring adornment, grace, or honour (an ornament to her profession). 2 decoration added to embellish esp. a building (a tower rich in ornament). 3 (in pl.) Mus. embellishments and decorations made to a melody. 4 (usu. in pl.) the accessories of worship, e.g. the altar, chalice, sacred vessels, etc. –vtr. adorn; beautify.

   Ornamentation

2. Definition included in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

   Merriam-Webster definition – Ornament   Etymology: Middle English, from Anglo-French  
   ornemen  t, ornemen t, from Latin ornamento  n  m, from ornare , Date: 13th century. 1 archaic:  a useful accessory, 2 a: something that lends grace or beauty, b: a manner or quality that adorns, 3: one whose virtues or graces add lustre to a place or society, 4: the act of adorning or being adorned, 5: an embellishing note not belonging to the essential harmony or melody —called also embellishment floritura

3. The architectural historian Adrian Forty in his book Words and Buildings, A vocabulary of Modern Architecture, perhaps unsurprisingly did not include a chapter on either ornamentation or decoration, since it is charting words used to help define the what is modern. However given the impact of the subject of ornament in the arts throughout the development of human intellect. It is given surprisingly little attention.

4. Mark Wigley is Professor of Architecture at Columbia University.
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Appendix

• A selection of plates from Owens Jones’s book ‘Grammar of Ornament’, published in 1856