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Ornamental art and architectural decoration

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Abstract

Condemning ornament as a crime, modernism severed the symbiotic architecture/arts connection for nearly 80 years. Postmodernism reclaimed decoration as vital to composition, but the ornament/architecture relationship was practically reinvented. In contemporary architecture, this essential, complex and ambiguous rapport is defined by a multiplicity of trends, design directions and experimental forays into the sciences and arts. This paper investigates the reconfiguration of this relationship, assesses the impact of technology on this re-shaping, providing a possible answer to the following question: since the arts are becoming increasingly specialized, is a means of artistic expression specifically tailored to built objects still possible?

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1. Introduction

Over a hundred years have passed since Adolf Loos equated the use of ornament in architecture with a crime. This was the moment when architecture and the decorative arts parted ways for nearly 80 years. Up until that time, the link between the decorative arts and built space had been practically symbiotic, and no instance of the latter could be considered complete without the former. Decoration highlighted and enhanced the spatial attributes of any architectural composition. In turn, architecture provided the ideal material support to showcase the creativity and craftsmanship involved in ornamental artistic works.

At the beginning of the XXth century, modernism renounced the mentality, space-making principles and formal vocabulary of historical styles. The decorative arts were no longer an integral part of the design process, but were required, after construction was completed, to fill interior spaces with furniture and self-sufficient works of art. Given that the paper explores the relationship between the arts and architecture as concomitant components of the design process, the various modernist instances of art serving as a conceptual basis for architectural design (such as the neo-plasticist group De Stijl) do not make the object of discussion. By questioning and challenging the aridity of meaning and expression which had become the avatars of late International Style and the more commonplace version of functionalism, Postmodernism triggered a resurgence of ornamentation not only as means of embellishment, but most importantly as carrier and conveyor of meaning. Although seemingly restored, the relationship between architecture and the ornamental arts was a fundamentally new one. In other words, ornamentation – comprising quotes extracted from revoluted historical styles - had transcended its intended use,

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carrying an additional, encrypted connotation. The sources of inspiration, however, remained somewhat circumscribed to the field of pre-modernist architectural styles. During the past couple of decades, the notion of architectural decoration has once again expanded to include references and means of expression contributed by the decorative arts, although not in the same manner as pre-modernist architecture, and has ventured into the realm of scientific and technological discoveries in search of new imagery and ways to materialize concepts.

2. Contemporary architecture and ornament

Ornament, defined as an element added to a work of art in order to enhance its aesthetic attributes and the depth and legibility of its symbolic connotations, is an anthropological constant, used by practically all cultures as an intrinsic part of artistic works. The study of architectural ornamentation is an inexhaustible branch of architectural research, and debates over the nature, use and socio-cultural determination of ornament are still going strong. Despite this plurality of views, most authors seem to agree on one issue: decoration is irrevocably necessary to architectural expression, provided that it maintains at least one of its essential roles – the functional and the symbolic. Contemporary architecture is characterized by a great number of coexisting styles, a multiplicity of trends, design directions and experimental forays into the sciences and arts, which makes the relationship between architecture and the decorative arts more complex and ambiguous than it has ever been. Although the architectural expressions specific to each style differ greatly, when it comes to decoration, there can be discerned one general goal – an enthusiastic exploration of the character and application of ornament – and a few broad design directions.

2.1. *Decoration – art or architecture*

As previously stated, the use, typology and morphology of decoration are matters of choice and individual architectural sensibility. The gamut between the highly symbolic, ascetic minimalism (Zumthor, for instance) and architecture as the framework for decorative art displayed at an urban scale (T. Faulder's lacework façade) is extremely nuanced. At one extreme, decoration and architecture are one and the same. However, this stance is quite different from that of modernist architecture, whose intentional banishment of ornament was meant to reveal the rational purity of unadorned architectural form. Nowadays, the idea is for structure, shape, space, detail, light, material and their rapports to each other and the building's site to also be ornamental, at least in some degree. According to Ettore Sottsass, the term *decoration* has become redundant, since "sandblasting a steel plate, painting a door red or choosing tek over bamboo for flooring is already a decorative act... when architecture exists, and if it exists, it is always a magical apparition." At the other end of the spectrum, we see decorative art taken to a whole new range of expression and exposure, at a grander scale than ever before, making up the envelope of architectural objects, masking or revealing the inner workings of interior spaces, structural logic and functionality. There is a noticeable preoccupation with devising ornamental skins for basically any type of building, mostly using mosaic, pixilation, lacework, mouche-arabier, filigree, paper cut-outs and patterning techniques applied to glass, metal, plastic and textile materials. These ornamental skins, having a certain degree of visual, though selective transparency, are very adept at expressing the permeability and fluidity of the interior/exterior, and private/public limits. Moreover, the imagery associated with these techniques (reminiscent of the small-scale objects populating daily life) has strong symbolic connotations which add another layer of meaning to the perception of buildings in an urban setting.

2.2. *Technology – a chance for performativity in decoration*

Architectural decoration owes a lot to science and technology. While the aesthetics of high-tech and neo-industrial fall outside the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that technology has had a tremendous contribution to ornamental art being used "outside the box" and on an urban scale through the development of cutting edge materials: now, even large scale buildings can be clad in incredibly delicate paper cut-out patterns, using sheets of plotter-cut plywood or polycarbonate with steel substructures. Using the right combination of

technique, material and application, these ornamental skins can be iridescent, holographic, and even display a dynamic sort of chromatism. Moreover, technology has taken decorative art beyond the static, enabling façades to move, breathe, and perform. Façade-wide ornamental art is now kinetic, kaleidoscopic and reactive, either in response to external stimuli (sunlight, temperature, wind pressure or human presence), or according to carefully designed, computer controlled algorithms. In terms of architectural decoration, this is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of contemporary architecture - that technology has become more than a means to transpose artistic concept into reality; it has become art and architecture's equal partner in creating architectural expression, and has even propelled ornamental art into previously unexplored territory.

2.3. Economy and the construction market

Naturally, the construction market and mass production capitalized on this new take on the relationship between architecture and ornamental arts, and there soon developed entire façade systems with built-in decorative effects. Given that a scarce number of projects have the budget for an artist-signed ornamental façade, these systems fill a gap in the market, allowing modest to medium architectural endeavours access to a very versatile means of individual expression. In the right hands, exterior cladding panels with different patterns, textures and colours can be wrought into clever, playful and meaningful designs. But there are hidden pitfalls to this liberalization of ornamental-art-derived architectural decoration: the slightest of changes in shape, colour or proportion can turn the dial of associated aesthetic values from chic to kitsch, and there is always the possibility of decorative excess.

2.4. Globalization versus local culture

The issue of local, cultural specificity is an oft-debated one, especially considering the effects of globalization. Much like the postmodern recovery of ornament via historical style quote used with a hidden message and a touch of irony, critical regionalism referenced and reinterpreted local, traditional architectures. The reinterpretation of ornament was also based on traditional decoration, adding up to a kind of second degree derivation where the ornament was twice removed from its artistic source. A notable aspect of the reconfiguration of the decorative arts / architecture relationship is that the prevalence and success of ornamental building skins allows architecture to express local cultural attributes in a more accessible way than the re-working of the spatial characteristics specific to various national architectures, which can be difficult to reconcile with the configurations and demands of contemporary architectural programs. A motif selected from a folkloric ornamental repertoire, and reinterpreted as a design pattern for exterior cladding, can be just as effective in addressing people's needs for cultural identification as the built transposition of their spatial sensibilities.

3. Case studies – decoration, material and light

The following case studies were selected for their consistent approach to decoration, rather than the space of its application, and for their astute use of natural light as a design element.

3.1. Peter Zumthor – Bruder Klaus Field Chapel

“To me, buildings can have a beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as composure, self-evidence, durability, presence, and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well; a building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being.” Although not explicitly referring to decoration, Zumthor's words hint at the idea that, as states of being, can be inherently beautiful in a way that all things natural are – that is, in a way inextricably linked to their essence, structure and materiality. This take on the aesthetic pervades Zumthor's work, but is especially evident in one of his smallest, but most striking projects: the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel. Initiated at the request of the farming community in Mechernich, a village 50 kilometres south-west of Köln, who wanted to build a chapel to honour Bruder Klaus, a XVth century hermit and the patron saint of Switzerland, the

project was completed between 2005 and 2006. Zumthor based his design on the account of Bruder Klaus’ most striking vision – a star lighting up a world of darkness. The resulting building is unique in shape, structure, spatiality and even construction methods. On a concrete slab, 112 tree trunks were arranged in a shape reminiscent of a tepee, and encased in a 5 sided, 12m tall formwork into which were poured 24 successive layers of rammed concrete, each 50cm tall. After curing, the logs were set alight from inside and left to smoulder to ashes for three weeks, leaving behind scalloped indentations in the concrete. Zumthor used light as a construction material, achieving at the same time exquisite decorative effects. The interior of the chapel is exposed to natural light through a tear-shaped oculus which directs it along the charred, brown-black grooves in the concrete, and the channels of the shuttering ties, filled with plugs of mouth-blown glass, speckle the entire shell of the chapel with tiny dots of light. This is a truly remarkable example of how decoration can be created through the manipulation of structural (or space defining) architectural elements and materials, and the rest of the ornamental work is kept intentionally sparse: a lead floor, ladled by hand by a local art founder, two sculptural pieces (a bust of Bruder Klaus and a meditation wheel) and a



single bench, carved from linden wood.

Figure 1. Bruder Klaus Field Chapel

3.2. Total Ami Design (A & G Mitache) – Gherghel Street Residence

The Gherghel Street Residence is built in one of Bucharest's residential neighbourhoods, well-known for its colourful, eclectic mixture of architectural styles. In terms of volume, the house is an exercise in tectonics; in terms of decoration, it is an example of the middle ground between the two extremes of architecture as intrinsically decorative and architecture as a framework for the display of art. A double orientation towards natural light drives the entire composition. An L-shaped plan allows the house to be read as a juxtaposition of two volumes, one developed horizontally, in the direction of the garden, and the other unfurling vertically, around the staircase, but both defined in their directionality by the quality of the light they receive. The intersection of the two dominant axes, immediately apparent as soon as one sets foot in the vestibule, hints at the actual dimensions of the building, despite the fact that more intimate spaces, such as bedrooms, are secreted away from view.



Figure 2. Gherghel Street Residence

Michelucci used to stress the importance of the nature of materials, which he held to be fundamental for the language of architecture. He also argued that an architect should work with their inherent beauty, and not contrive arrangements which are foreign or opposed to that nature. Subscribing to this idea, the architectural decoration of the residence on Gherghel Street relies on evoked symbolic connections, using materials according to their nature and in simple spatial techniques derived from ornamental art: paper folding and decoupage. The whitewashed walls and ceilings seem folded along crisp lines from the same sheet of paper. In contrast, the soft beiges and browns of the wooden floorboards, stone tiles and discreet, minimal furniture, together with the wide expanse of single pane windows, collate into a mineral, and abstract interior microcosm in perfect counterpart to the organic landscape of the garden. Through collage, three-dimensional folding and the use of light, the project leans strongly on decorative art, orchestrating an interplay between materials and details according to rules extracted from the domain of ornamental art, and illustrating the most pervasive instance of the current architecture / decorative art relationship.

3.3. Jean Nouvel – Institut du Monde Arabe

One of the many notable achievements of Jean Nouvel, l'Institut du Monde Arabe, a cultural centre built in the heart of Paris on the bank of the Seine between 1987 and 1988, is one of the first instances of art meeting technology for the fabrication of a screen affixed to the architectural object. The Institut's southern façade, designed as an interface between built objects and public space, is a double homage to Arab architecture and art. Through the repetition of a patterned square – an abstract interpretation of the geometric motifs present in the arts of many Arab countries, the entire façade becomes a mouche-arabier, providing interior spaces with the filtered light specific to Arab architecture and acting as a climate control device. The delicate filigree design of the façade's 240 metallic squares integrates photo-sensitive mechanical devices which control the aperture of diaphragms, ensuring an optimum level of natural lighting and heat protection. While the style of the building falls within the high-tech range, perhaps with a touch of expressionist flair, the Institut was a milestone in the re-development of the architecture / art / technology relationship: it was, if not the first, then perhaps among the most famous projects to take small scale patterns and techniques from



ornamental arts and blow them up to the scale of a façade or a building. What is more, these patterns were not merely on urban display, but, due to technological progress, they were animated, mobile, and had other purposes in addition to pure aesthetic enhancement: they imprinted interior spaces with a strong cultural identity, and even their functionality was based on the climate control strategies specific to the cultural horizon they referenced.

Figure 3. Institut du Monde Arabe

4. Conclusions

The paper has investigated three distinct instances of the relationship between architecture and decorative art: the two extremes, where either architecture or art have the upper hand, and the middle ground, where aspects of the two are combined in a more balanced and subtle expression. The equilibrium between structural expression, materials and their preferred shapes, details and, most of all, light (binding them together) should be a key point in any architectural endeavour. Light enhances the expressive capabilities of each material and, in conjunction with details and techniques derived from the arts applied to built space, creates a new kind of decoration meant to augment the specificity of architectural spaces and enrich the sensations they can evoke.

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