expanding on the elusive ornament

"Le Corbusier relates that one of his teachers used to preach that 'only Nature is inspiring and true' and that one must 'penetrate it,' 'make a synthesis of it, by creating ornamentation.' "
*– Oleg Grabar, **The Mediation of Ornament.***

Beyond the dictionary definitions just outlined, it's important to explore some of the framework other credible voices have proposed to explain ornament. While these proposals may overlap, each emphasizes a different quality of ornament, variously as **communicator**, as **scale-weaver**, as **knitter weaver** of public space, as **place-maker**, as **memory facilitator**, as **provider of "necessary equipment**," as the **mediator of boundary**, and as **tempering "tolerance**."

communicating

Were a poll were to be taken, the role of ornament as communicator would be paramount until the 20th century. If ornament ever enjoyed some sort of "Golden Age" before it became embroiled in controversy (beginning with the Enlightenment), it was then that ornament unself-consciously went about its work of communicating. "In most, if not all, pre-modern cultures, the concept of 'ornament' probably didn't exist," cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote in a letter:

> *What we consider "ornament," that is to say, what today we would say is something "added on," was, to the local people, integral to the artefact: it was needed to make it more effective and powerful. This was true even in pre-modern Europe. For instance, the cannon used during the Renaissance period was often molded with a lion's head. To us, the lion's head is ornament. To Renaissance military officers, it was integral to the function of the weapon: in those days, the roar of the cannon mattered as much, if not more, than the physical damage it was able to inflict.*[1]

Presumably cannons ornamented with lion's heads dispatched as many people as those cannons

1 Yi-Fu Tuan, letter to the author, 18 October 2004.

without. But the leonesque head adds a story as well as visual splendor to the weapon. The huge mouths of both cannon and beast bespeak a roar's terrifying power. Brandishing a lion's head aligns one's self and one's cause, with unquestioned dominion, a majesty of bearing, and the glory of the kill. To bring the cunning and might of a lion to the battlefield enhances both the act and the art of war. The lion's head, in this context, is both functional and necessary. Its function is to communicate, which it does effectively.

"What is the place of applied ornament in architecture? I understand this to be ornament that is stuck on. Applied ornament represented one means for people: to obtain satisfaction otherwise unobtainable, [for example]. Eyes painted on the front of the sampans in China's floating slums, which the owners feel will keep their boats from collision during storms on the rivers."

– Richard Neutra, Talk to students at the Architectural Association, London, 6 October 1948

Ornamenter, educator, and author Bloomer writes that we may characterize ornament as a type of language in which "visual thoughts, worldly ideas, communal ethos, and memories may be directly deposited and communicated within the substance of material objects and places. There are also, invariably, arrangements of repeating elements, gestures, direction, movement and patterns."[2] To Bloomer, ornament is figural, that is, figures that are abstracted and conventionalized for use and expresses "adherent things from the world," that is, "implicating life that originates in the world at large" and thus bringing something "other" to the architecture.[3]

In his own definition of ornament, writer James Trilling downplays ornament's role as communicator. "Ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of forms significantly outweighs the communicative value of content," he writes, where "visual pleasure of forms" refers to rhythm, repetition, pattern, figuration.[4] Yet if visual pleasure trumps communication, doesn't that conflate ornament and decoration? Decoration, after all, can easily perform the duties of providing "visual pleasure of forms." And isn't the "communicative value of content" and its rhetorical power an integral part of ornament's capacity to be a language and to convey part of that

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[2] Bloomer, op.cit., 36.
[3] Ibid., 42, 85.
[4] See Trilling's *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, 2002.

world beyond?

There are untold examples of how ornament communicates, seen in conventionalized one-, two-, and three-dimensional patterns from any culture in any period. But since my purpose is not to elaborate on those instantly familiar to us. I'd like to pose a more challenging example of how ornament communicates, which also raises the question of classifying an element as ornament or architecture: disturbing adaptation of the Orders in the foyer and entrance steps of his early 16th century masterpiece, the Biblioteca Laurentiana, aka the Laurentian Library, in Florence.[5] His work portrays a view of life perhaps cynical or anguished, but in any case intelligent, and radically powerful.

Michelangelo assumes Classical vocabulary—the column, the entablature and especially the corbel—but then disrupts these elements, bending them to his will in a singular vision that almost flattens the visitor with its force.[6] He accomplishes this by stripping them of their conventional representational roles; as beautified construction that celebrates gravity by gracefully displaying the natural transfer of loads, either to the ground, the work of the column, or to soften a transition between horizontal to vertical, demonstrated in the corbel. Michelangelo grimly places two oversized, almost engorged looking corbels *below* each pair of columns or engaged pilasters, a place that no corbel "should" be. But not content to merely undercut the traditional meaning of the load-bearing columns, he goes farther, also placing corbels directly beneath a cornice line—a feature that traditionally does not need structural supports—further exaggerating the corruption of their conventional status as well as undermining the typical decorum of the cornice line. In effect,

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[5] 1524 - 1534, completed in the 1550s by Vasari and Ammannati.
[6] This sensation is not contemporary: Vasari, who was a friend of Michelangelo and of course thoroughly familiar with the conventions of the Renaissance, wrote that the sculptor-architect "made so many strange breaks in the design of the steps, and he departed in so many details and so widely from natural practice that everyone was amazed." See Peter Murray, *Renaissance Architecture*, Milan, New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1978, p. 104.

he has taken the architecture of the Orders per Summerson, whom we recall spoke to the entire Order as architecture, and by imposing a new order by disrupting the old, turning the now isolated parts of the Order into a kind of daemonic ornament.

What distinguishes Michelangelo's scheme from the work of the Postmodernists of the 1960s and '70s, many of whom employed the Classical vocabulary, is the important element of human scale. Despite the awe-inspiring perversion here, the Laurentian Library's foyer respects that scale even as its designer violates our unexamined cultural assumptions.

In contrast, in some Postmodern designs, especially that peppered by some isolated gigantic element placed here or there on a facade, the effect is not to communicate but to alienate, and not with the intimate fury of Michelangelo, but through a kind of solitary gesture that doesn't connect urban or interior space that dehumanizes, something the Renaissance genius was incapable of doing. Michelangelo used architectural elements not to communicate irony to a small group of the architectural elite, but to convey to all (because Classicism was still everyman's language) a highly personal sense of the tragic, like Ginsberg's poem, "Howl," and Beethoven's late quartets. In my opinion, Michelangelo created ornament from Classicism's repertoire of architectural elements to communicate his response to existential incoherence and pain, and we are ennobled and humbled by witnessing it. Michelangelo's use of ornament disobeys, is in "bad" taste and decidedly does not follow decorum. But it was only with the existence of rules that Michelangelo's transgressions could be so electrifying.

subversive communicating

The 20th century philosopher Theodor Adorno conceived ornament (and the arts in general) as a small but potent roadblock to the subtle oppression of consumerism (aka the "culture industry"), advanced capitalism and even rationalism itself, which, for Adorno, served to mask unreason. He

argued that ornament has a role in maintaining a requisite "Otherness," that is, in resisting apparent order by claiming its place in fantasy beyond the reach of such apparent order.[7] In other words, ornament can be employed to resist those cultural mores and mechanisms that demand our allegiance to the apparently rational and the "functional," which in turn mask larger irrational and largely evil principles inherent in any authoritarian system, including capitalism and the branded environments we thoughtlessly occupy.

"I am inclined to think that the term 'ornament' doesn't mean anything. To me, sand-blasting a steel span, painting a door red or even choosing teak rather than thin strips of bamboo for a floor; or deciding on where to put doors and windows, already comes under the heading of decoration. When L. Mies van der Rohe put the sculpture of a nude woman beside a lake in his pavilion at the Barcelona international exhibition, I believe he was using ornamentation. As a general rule, everything that is not necessary to structure is decoration. This idea was of real interest in the early 20th century, but I think the issue now is to develop the 'necessity' of addition so as to broaden the perception and use of architectonic spaces, all the more since today I doubt whether anyone can give a rational, final, and pure definition of the existence of architecture.

When architecture exists, if it exists, it is always a magical apparition. "1 CITATION

Perhaps, ornament might suggest, people need not consider themselves bound to the narrow limits of a supposedly rational way of life because nothing of the sort exists, as Michelangelo made clear. Indeed, the paradigms we accept—to work, compete and succeed to support one particular way of life, as determined by ultimately incoherent historical systems—*that* is irrational.

In its origins, notes Ananda Coomaraswamy, the historian of Indian art, ornament is a verb. To ornament means to "endow the object or person with its or his 'necessary accidents'" so it may operate properly. The idea continued, he argues, that if something is operating or working properly, it is de facto giving pleasure to the user. That concept was then debased, he believes, when ornament was simplified solely into "something that can be added to give pleasure." Rather than considering something as unified, as in that golden pre-Modern age Tuan alluded to, we now began to think of ornament as "something like millinery or upholstery that covered a body …" or "as a

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work covered by ornament, as labor coated with art."[8]

However, earlier, ornament enjoyed "the privilege of a necessary radical and natural connection," Coomaraswamy says. In Sanskrit[9], as he and other Indian aestheticians point out, the roots of the word for ornament, *alam-kr*, *alamkara*, or *aramkara*) can be broken down into *alam* or *aram*, sufficient, or enough, and *kr*, to make. *Alam-kr* literally means "making sufficient."[10] In sacred Vedic texts, the word also has associations with "to fit together, to equip or to furnish," with the idea of satisfying. This concept of ornament, as that which is necessary, is very different from the usual use of the word, which implies something unnecessary, something added, and often too much of it at that. In poetical (not sacred) Sanskrit text, *alam-kr* also conveys the word "to adorn." This adornment is necessary to convey the fullness, the roundness of meaning: "The mind is adorned by learning, folly by vice, rivers by water, night by the moon, resolution by composure, kingship by leading." We do not really see or appreciate the silkiness of a night, in other words, without a moon. The moon completes, and is necessary, to communicate the night.

Coomaraswamy also points out that the noun *bhūsana* and the verb *bhūs* ("words that mean in Sanskrit "ornament") has the "causative nuance" of "making more," so that when the verb is translated incorrectly, the writer says, in a phrase such as "ornaments his days"; it really should read as "lengthens his life" or "makes more his life." He writes,

> *Whatever is unornamented is said to be "naked." God, "taken naked of all ornament" is "unconditioned" or "unqualified:" one, but inconceivable. Ornamented, he [God] is endowed with qualities which are manifold in their relations and intelligible. And however insignificant this qualification ...may be when contrasted with His unity and infinity, the*

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8 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Architectural Theory*, Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1995,, p. 56.
9 The liturgical language of Hinduism: a polished, formal, classical language for use in sacred texts. Sanskrit is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, the same family to which English belongs. It originated in northern India as a member of the linguistic subfamily known as Old Indo-Aryan.
10 Coomaraswamy, op. cit, pp. xviii and 56.

> *latter would be incomplete without them … Appropriate ornament is, then, essential to utility and beauty: in saying this, however, it must be remembered that ornament may be "in the subject" itself, or if not, must be something added to the subject in order that it may fulfil a given function.* [11]

(As we can see from the above quote, Coomaraswamy appears to be indifferent to whether ornament is part of the substrate a priori or added later.)

place-maker, memory facilitator, necessary equipment

Ornament as equipment equips a space for something special and flags it for a specific purpose; for example, the Catholic faith uses the term, the "ornaments of the church," such as the lectern, lamps, pulpits, desks, etc., as well as the "ornaments of the altar," which refer to all the "tools" for the act of worship such as reading the Bible and performing the Eucharist. "Tools" such as crewets, crosses, chalices, candlesticks (often made of gold, silver and precious gems), and decorated priestly vestments are equipment to deepen the worship experience. The ornament propels the ritual and helps to afford memory. They help to enforce the rhythm of a repetitively performed ritual that is rendered in time in a place that thus becomes meaningful and memorable.

The ornaments of the church also emphasize that we are in a sanctified place: *Civitas Dei*, the City of God, was sometimes embellished with a ceiling or chancel painted with white clouds and blue sky to represent heaven in some Western Christian churches, or with the giant, gaunt and stern face of an unblinking Jesus in Byzantine churches. This created a clear boundary between the sacred inside and the profane world beyond; however, once inside the worship space, such ornaments, whether they painted frescoes or icons, align the space as Godly space and signify the reconciliation between deity and human.

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[11] Ibid, p. 60.

One final ornament of the church cannot be forgotten. Scholar Gevork Hartoonian daringly suggests that "the body of Christ [hanging from the cross] may also be seen as an ornament added to the crucifix." Such a literal addition pointedly emphasizes the role of pain and suffering in the Catholic Christian journey, rarely found in other Christian denominations; never in Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic ornament does one find such a reference to the lead deity in a bloody death throe.[12]

ornament begins to lose its voice

After Gutenberg invented moveable type and printing was widely disseminated to an increasingly literate public in the mid 5th century, buildings lost their role as the principal vehicles for communicating cultural narratives. Victor Hugo's famous prediction, "The book will kill the building." makes the point concisely.[13] Some writers today predict that today, virtual buildings (or screens covering any public elevation) will kill the physical building as a second type of cultural shift in architecture. Writes Prem Chandavarkar:

> *with the use of the printed word, architecture liberated itself from the restrictions of a traditional craft into an autonomous, institutionalised discourse. This discourse has manifested itself in the form of formalized education, sophisticated magazines and publications, and an organized professional body. These institutions, especially in their contemporary forms, are undeniably predicated upon the printed word and their creation has made a fundamental difference to the nature of architectural knowledge.*[11]

So when buildings no longer served as the chief public vehicles for communication through standardized "speech," we moved from public rhetoric to individual declamation. The architect

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[12]Gevork Hartoonian, *Ontology of Constructio: On Nihilism of Technology in Theories of Modern Architecture*, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 8.
[13] Prem Chandavakar quotes Victor Hugo, '"The Hunchback of Notre Dame" in *The Works of Victor Hugo*, New York: Black Readers Service Company, 1928, p. 170. Retrieved August 2005
[11] Ibid.

becomes an artist, "liberated' from communicating in ordinary ways. Architects could now be "poetic," that is, speak a language that juxtaposes and mixes elements to heighten awareness of a statement peculiar to them and to one building. Once all buildings have something unique to say, Chandavarkar asserts, "the continued distortion of the ordinary would constitute an attempt to destroy the rules and conventions that legitimize a certain portion of the environment. Rather than sustaining cultural meaning, the architect will slowly destroy it."[14] Or, more charitably, at least change it.

This view in the shift of communication from the public to the personal in the West is almost eerily paralleled in music, as shown in *A Language of Its Own*. Music scholar Ruth Katz

> *shows how Western art music, over the centuries, evolved a kind of "grammar" that listeners grasped without overt instruction. Rules that had governed earlier music helped to form still later rules, conferring "meaning" on what is, after all, an abstract and otherwise contentless art form. This grammar, Ms. Katz notes, gave an internal coherence to music and allowed it to adapt to cultural and social change. It also created a "shared understanding" between musicians and audiences, propelling Western music's extraordinary ability to convey a variety of moods and feelings.*
>
> *In the late 19th century, however, music began to lose its broadly shared, centuries-old coherence; and its self-perpetuating qualities began to fall away. More and more, Ms. Katz chronicles, composers felt compelled to write for themselves and their peers rather than for the public, breaking rules (sometimes smashing them) on behalf of individual expression and causing a rupture with the past.*[15]

In architecture as well as in music, it is exactly that destruction of 'sustained cultural meaning,' with each building having a unique poetical voice that proponents of traditional and vernacular ornament oppose. And certainly, if the book kills the building, what happens to the city, as an aggregate of architectural language, if each and every building insists on its right to poetics as a "self-contained jewel"[16] or mounted with a series of huge LED billboard screens?, a question that

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[14] Ibid.
[15] James F. Penrose, "Making Sense of Sound," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 26, 2010. Book review of *A Language of Its Own* by Ruth Katz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.)
[16] Kasyz Varnelis, "Cathedrals of the Culture Industry,"Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, *forum Annual 2004*, p 38. This article first appeared in the August/September 2002 issue of Pasajes de Arquitectura y Critica (Madrid).

brings us to scale.

knitting, stitching and weaving: scale and stickiness

Scale confers a specific aesthetic condition to a place. It also, less predictably, plays a vital role in establishing an emotional connection between a building and its users, as sources both ancient and contemporary observe.

Leon Battista Alberti, 1404-1472, as interpreted by scholar Amir Ameri:

> *"The column," Alberti tell us, is "the principal ornament in all architecture." Yet, as a body subject to the laws of beauty, it itself can be dressed with different ornaments, e.g., different shafts, bases, capitals, etc. In turn, the building to the body of which the column is added as ornament, may serve as ornament to larger bodies. For instance: "a temple well built and handsomely adorned is the greatest and noblest ornament a city can have."[20] In short, "ornaments are in a manner infinite,"[21] whereby each dress can be considered a "nude body in want of a dress in an endless chain of ornamentation."*[17]

Yi-Fu Tuan:

> *We used to think of ornament as something small, added to something large. However, is not the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. itself an ornament? Tourist guides may well speak with pride that it is an ornament to the nation's capital. But, then, may we not say of the capital itself that it is an ornament to the nation? Ornaments are a nested affair. Thus, within Washington, there is the Lincoln Memorial, an ornament. But within the Memorial, the inscribed Gettysburg Address is a textual ornament, and of course, there are many other kinds of ornament as well: for instance, the chair on which Lincoln sits – isn't it ornament?*[18]

Architect Christopher Alexander:

> *Design must be premised on a process that has the creation of wholeness as its overriding purpose, and in which every increment of construction, no matter how small, is devoted to*

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[17] Amir H. Ameri, "Architecture," Art History, the International Journal of the Association of Art Historians, London, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1993, pp. 336-348. He quotes Leone Battista Alberti, Ten Books on Architecture, 1755 Leoni Edition, Transatlantic Arts Inc., 1966, p.130 (19), p. 136 (20), p. 136 (21). Retrieved 28 December 2004. http://web.pdx.edu/~ameri/folder/Publications/Writing/Writing.html.
[18] Yi–Fu Tuan, letter to the author, 18 October 2004.

this purpose.[19]

Environmental psychologist James Wise:

> *One needs ornament to complete the spatial hierarchy of building elements so that they fully engage the emotions, because for something to be 'real,' it must be experienced on a variety of scales. It is the reiteration of similar structures or proportions at different levels of scale that truly engage the senses on an emotional level … Now the interesting thing to me about ornament is how often in the past it seems to have come from deliberate symbolism, or 'top level' thinking. It was a means to imprint one's belief structure or social meaning into built form. Ornament had to 'mean something.' But now, considering a 21st century approach to ornament, it doesn't have to obey such rules. It can be there simply for the emotional connotation of the setting.*

Mathematician Nikos Salingaros:

> *1. Order on the smallest scale is established by paired contrasting elements, existing in a balanced visual tension.*
>
> *2. Large-scale order occurs when every element relates to every other element at a distance in a way that reduces entropy.*
>
> *3. The small scale is connected to the large scale through a linked hierarchy of intermediate scales …* [20]

As these writers point out, there are infinite orders of scale, depending on context. Although I am focusing on architectural ornament, which is confined to the narrow range of what people experience in their immediate environment, what is clear is that scale imbues places with coherence by breaking down large, complex images into pieces the brain can manage. Ornament especially is well suited to anneal visual "holes" in the environmental fabric by acting almost as a kind of bridge or environmental "glue." It knits, weaves, stitches. It is not an "intervention," that archi-speak term

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[19] Quote by Christopher Alexander in *A New Theory of Urban Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), in a paper by David Seamon, "Concretizing Heidegger's Notion of Dwelling: The Contributions of Thomas Thiis-Evensen and Christopher Alexander," Wolkenkuckucksheim, (Cloud-Cuckoo-Land), Vozdushnyj Zamok >http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theo/Wolke. Vol. 3, No. 2, June 1998. See also Alexander's "Fifteen Fundamental Properties of Wholeness and Life" in his book *The Nature of Order*. His first property addresses scale.

[20] Nikos Salingaros's essay, "The Laws of Architecture from a Physicist's Perspective" became part of a larger book, *A Theory of Architecture*, Solingen, Germany: Umbau-Verlag.. The essay also appeared in Physics Essays 8, 1995, pp. 638-643.

that implies a kind of move over, because I'm butting in.

Let us consider the issue of scale with regard to the large, stand-alone commercial building: the big box, whether Disney Concert Hall or Home Depot. Many writers, most famously the late Jane Jacobs, have observed that big boxes, with their gaping lack of transitions between one building and the next, ignite a cascade of negative consequences for the public realm. Architectural theorist and historian Kazys Varnelis identifies such a box that most cities of ambition covet: the museum, the 21st century's "object of desire." Its brief is to be a startling and "self-contained jewel," part of what he calls the "reconfiguration of the contemporary city as a field of isolated masterworks." What has been lost, he continues, "is the possibility of architecture as an agent of social change."[21] Varnelis is no champion of traditional ornament, but his critique of isolated boxes, whatever their facade treatment, echoes that of architectural traditionalists. What is missing is not the language of a particular style but a sense of connection made possible through a scaled distribution of ornament that permits a building to reach out so that the public might own it. A building with a range of scale in its detail makes it "sticky."

To be sure, big free-standing boxes are an ancient building type. An Islamic mosque or a Gothic church are big boxes, but with some important difference: urban stickiness. Such buildings are ornamented in ways that offer wonderful lessons in scale, from the coarser gradations of primary and secondary masses and courtyards to the finest detail. They are thus integrated into their surroundings rather than standing independent of them. Even when the Gothic church was the exception in scale as the area's largest building, it and perhaps merchant halls were typically the only such buildings. These more singular buildings imbued the smaller-scale urban composition around them with a sense of proportion and weight.

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[21] Varnelis, op.cit., 39.

Another example of the consequences of a string of isolated boxes is—and I know this may sound odd—is their impact on obesity, which is not simply a question of prefabricated food and hectic life styles but also one of lack of transitions in urban scale.[22] With regard to suburban schools, for example, if education were decentralized, smaller school buildings could serve a smaller population of students who walked or cycled to school rather than relying on buses or parent-chauffeurs. Of course, ornament, in its role of helping to distribute scale, is only one factor in the issue of community sustainability and individual health. But it does improve the journey between one box and the next. And while of course it is a stretch to link obesity to ornament, my point is to illuminate how the power of scale or lack of it affects our lives.

rescuing public space through ornament

Ornament, however, is not solely a question of well-scaled elements. Throughout history, the great systems of ornament are, in Bloomer's words, "the fundamental organizational shaping of visual thought belonging to a basic level of expression." Contrasting a world devoid of three-dimensional ornament with two-dimensional signs, he writes:

> *"Observe what has actually taken place in many public settings in the United States that are particularly devoid of ornament. Rather than remaining politically uncommitted voids or becoming undifferentiated space in the egalitarian sense, public space has become visually privatised by virtue of a spectacle of corporate and commercial logos and signage … In the late nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, American cities were a riot of both eclectic and experimental ornament. The Chrysler Building, for example, belonged to a corporation, but it gave New York City a majestic spire …*[23]

He points out that the typical American city, with its blank, smooth surfaces, combined with a lack of what he terms "conventionalized distributions of ornament" in the visual makeup of the city

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[23] Bloomer, 224-5.

ultimately leaves urban dwellers clueless in either way-finding or place-making. "And if architecture can't do the job," he writes, then "a profusion of numbers, letters and documented information has become a substitute for seeing or feeling our way architecturally." Amen to that.

These impoverished substitutes also fatally weaken our sense of a city's individuality. It robs us not only of the exhilaration we feel when experiencing the signature of a place but of the possibility for authentic citizenhood, however tentative, beyond being defined solely and crudely as consumers. Today, however, the diminishment of a good environmental experience goes well beyond screaming signage to include the subtler branded environment, whose distinctive spaces transport us to a predictable and finely calibrated environment, which could be anywhere but must be the same everywhere. "Brands started filling a gap that citizens, not just consumers, used to get elsewhere, whether from religion, whether from a sense of belonging in their community … And they [branded environments and their owners] have privatized that idea in a way, and that's really what is behind a lot of these brand meanings: a privatized concept of what used to be public," notes cultural critic Naomi Klein.[24] In Klein's scenario of branded communities as self-contained, closed containers, its ornament, like its architecture and signage, has no independent and certainly no subversive role in Adorno's sense. Ornament, instead, is subsumed in a larger marketing effort.

One can argue that branding, like the big box, has been around a long time. After all, one important agenda item for the Gothic cathedral was to visually distinguish the emerging power of the new French kings in the 12th century based in Paris from Papal power centered in Rome, where Romanesque and Classical architecture then held sway—branding indeed, with a Catholic peasant as a "consumer" of religion. But physically demonstrating that break was only part of the cathedral's role. It also called its followers to participate in ideals of what it could mean to be

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[24] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/interviews/klein.html

human with a potential for change that far transcended consumption.

helping to create place

Space and place are two words that differ in status in the world of architecture, analogous to the difference between "architecture" and "building." In the architecture world *space* and *architecture* are the patricians, beloved by the academy, while *place* and *building* are the plebeians, mere hoi polloi, the popular. ("Building," as opposed to "architecture," has enjoyed some reverse snobbery since the late 19th century, when the word "architecture" was discredited as associated with inauthenticity. The *Bau*haus was the house of bauen, building.)

…The first definition of *space* listed in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)[25] is that of a "continuous extension viewed with or without reference to the existence of objects within it." However, in the more comprehensive Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,[26] we learn that with time the meaning of the word itself has extended. While Middle English (about 1350-1450) meanings stay within the range of the specific, such as "an area sufficient for some purpose;…a certain stretch, extent, or area of ground, sea, sky, etc., an expanse;" "the place where one sets up a position, a residence, such as living space,' by the 17th century *space* took on a more abstract connotation. The word attained a metaphysical definition: a "continuous, unbounded, or unlimited extension in every direction, regarded as void of, or without reference to, matter."

This younger definition sounds most like the way contemporary architects use the word *space*. It no longer only refers to a method of locating an object in three dimensions, a mathematical idea critical to the development of perspective in the Renaissance, nor is it limited to mere inert containers for holding objects, as it had primarily been used in the 19th century. In the hands of

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[25] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), Seventh edition.
[26] *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Fourth (Thumb Index) Edition

architects such as Los Angeles-based Modernist R.M. Schindler (1887-1953), space (not spaces) was now a physical medium, a raw material to sculpt and to be acted upon. In Wright's "broken box" and Modernism's open plan, space "flowed," and, therefore, could be "interrupted." While we might speak today of the flowing horizontal space in Katsura Imperial Villa mediated by shoji screens, or flowing vertical space of Wright's 1923 Millard House, it is not likely that such language would have expressed that quality before the 20th century. Not surprisingly, *space* is a formidable theoretical component of contemporary architectural theory.

Place is an altogether more homey word. In COD, its first meaning is that of "a particular part of space." In design circles, *place* refers to a memorable environment with some kind of boundary, permeable or not, that afford us opportunities to occupy it in ways that satisfy us psychologically and physiologically. Critically, "places" are for being in, not for moving through, according to Richard Sennett in his brilliant analysis of contemporary culture, *The Fall of Public Man*. *Space*, he writes, has become primarily contingent upon motion. With that emphasis on motion, public spaces tend to be shaped by movement rather than sitting or standing still. "The technology of modern motion replaces being in the street with a desire to erase the constraints of geography," he observes. Such designed pressure to move rather than to be generates the kind of restless, anxious feelings that Tati captured so accurately in *Playtime*. While a single monumental work of architecture, hugged by its requisite field of empty space, may be memorable and valuable to the urban environment, several of them together are incapable at "making place," which relies both on elements that create memory and distribute scale. Such unchecked monumentality also diminishes our innate navigational ability to negotiate a space comfortably and at our own speed.

Novelist William Gibson, author of the futuristic thriller *Neuromancer*, defines a well-scaled city with places as "the Internet built in stone." Like the Web, a well-designed urban place allows us to access it in any number of ways, like the Web. We assume as much identity, or as little, as we choose. By and large, urban planning today fervently embraces the making of place, of walkable

nodes of live-work settings near transit stations, mixed zoning, a cognizance of historic preservation's value in serving both memory and the local economy. Ornament plays an important role in that conversation.

Ruskin specifically links the notion of *place*, both as noun and verb, to ornament, in words that beautifully anchor ornament to materiality, to the physical world we inhabit, and the human body as both witness and participant: "The especial condition of ornament is, that it be beautiful in its place, and nowhere else, and that it aid the effect of every portion of the building over which it has influence…."[27] The placement of ornament is of paramount importance, he argues, not only in contributing to an immediate architectural element but to the beauty of the larger environment. In this way, ornament has an essential and positive role in place making. As Gertrude Stein might put it, ornament can help make a place only by being placed in its own proper specific place and not another place.

Historian Grabar alludes to the place-making power of ornament when he writes, "ornament is that aspect of decoration which appears not to have another purpose but to enhance its carrier."[28] By strengthening that "carrier," we strengthen its potential to create memory and its ability to create place: as critic Roger Scruton notes, a "spatial" effect depends on significant detail.[29]

Jacques Tati's film 1967 *Playtime* is a razor-edged critique of the endless waiting and isolated shuffling through the anonymous space of many modern buildings and airports. The film renders the impact of this empty, incoherent "non-space" upon a group of American female tourists who arrive in Paris for the first time and are shunted, murmuring and cooing, through a succession of smooth, shiny, neutral-grey, and reflective spaces. Using these buildings and the spaces between

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[27] John Ruskin, quoted by Amir Ameri from *The Stones of Venice*, New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1885, 214.
[28] Grabar, The Mediation of Ornament, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5. Later in his text, he moves from the purpose of ornament to enhance a carrier to actually transforming it. See p. 41.
[29] See *The Aesthetics of Architecture* by Roger Scruton.

them as his comic vehicle, Tati explores the nature of the real vs. the fake. Except for one hilarious evening in which humans erupt in sloppy humanity, despite the banality they inhabit, the gaggle of pliable ladies in cloth coats (one wonders how a group of heterosexual male tourists would handle the same situation, and indeed, one cannot imagine such a group on tour) never gets much closer to the real and the city's famed qualities of romance and passion, than a skewed reflection of a cathedral spire in their shiny bus window as they return to the airport. They have moved through *space* without ever encountering *place*.

The Longevity of a Motif: Important archaeological discoveries of Mayan ruins published in 2005 and 2006 reveal that the quatrefoil ornament*, a four-sided, clover-like shape (shown here mediating an opening of a cave doorway) has operated as a powerful symbolic vehicle for Mayan culture for almost 1,800 years.*

This doorway, discovered in Chalcatzingo, Mexico, dates from as early as 700 B.C., according to Drs. Michael Love, Julia Guernsey and others involved in this research. Previously, archaeologists had underestimated the longevity and potency of the motif, which was invoked, it is surmised, to alternatively convey power, authority and the supernatural. It may have been used in rain ceremonies and symbolized fertility. For example, crossing the threshold between the natural and supernatural worlds was possible only for a leader with the power to intercede with the gods, and thus would be a motif suitable for a doorway.

The graphic was employed for many situations and at many scales. Previously, the quatrefoil was associated with the high Classic period of Mayan culture, from 250 b.c.e. to 900 A.D.,, when the culture mysteriously collapsed. Now it represents a remarkable continuity of culture. – John Noble Wilford, "On Ancient Walls: A New Mayan Epoch," The New York Times, May 16, 2006.

facilitating memory

Ornament is that "which in material and form is more than material and form … This 'more' was the stored-up history and stored-up spirit, which could alone be awakened through the fantasy of the ornament."[30] Ornament assumes that we want to participate in memory. Its work is to help us do so.

The idea that ornament participates in memory is not unique to the West. One of the most powerful works in architectural history is the Shinto Shrine at Ise in southwest Japan. But before we Westerners point out the shrine's (apparent) "unornamented purity," "… it would not be right to

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[30] Helene Furjan, *Lounge Core*, Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, *forum ANNUAL 2004*, p 42.

interpret the beauty of Ise in terms like 'freedom from ornamentation' or 'unity of structure and style,' as is often done. The *chigi*[31] and *katsuogi*[32] are embellished structure, and the *munamochi-bashira*[33], which appear to be supporting the roof so sturdily, are structurally unnecessary and are ornament.[34] Nor do the wooden verandas encircling the main sanctuaries serve any practical purpose in, for example, religious ceremonies: if they did, how inconvenient would be the thick *munamochi-bashira* penetrating the middle of the verandas on both sides."[35]

So what to Western eyes looks unornamented may be deeply ornamented in other traditions. What is necessary equipment for ritual and memory changes from culture to culture as long as memory is embedded in a visual language that is recognized as a collective inheritance.

mediating boundaries

Ornament is the ultimate "edgy" word, quite literally.

One of ornament's primary roles is to mediate. "As discreet mediators between user and object, ornaments are agents that occupy interstices and borders. They weave what [19th century Austrian art historian Aloïs] Riegl called an 'eternal relationship,' a link between people and the built object."[36] Ornament acts as a blurry line that borders, integrates and delineates two worlds.

Boundaries are dynamic. They define the location of action and the interplay— or friction—among different building materials. Architect/theorist Christopher Alexander describes boundaries as playing an important role in creating a "good" center, that is, one with weight, presence and the

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[31] "The continuation of crossed gable-end boards forming V-shaped projections above the ridge of Shinto shrine buildings." Selected Glossary, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture*, 208. Defined in the book that is also the source of the quote. Kenzo Tange, Yoshio Watanabe and Noboru Kawazoe. Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965.
[32] "Tapered wood cylinders set crosswise along the ridges of Shinto shrine buildings." Ibid.
[33] "The posts on the gable ends of most Ise Shrine buildings, supporting the ridgepole." Ibid.
[34] Thus Tange and Kawazoe belong in the camp of those who divorce structure from ornament.
[35] Tange et al., op. cit., 169.
36 Axel Sowa, *l'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, March-April 2001, 39.

ability to influence the environment beyond itself:

> *Boundaries, and especially thick boundaries with substance, can play a role in helping the goodness of a center, or in strengthening a center. This happens because, if two systems are interacting, the boundary condition is often turbulent or a source of possible confusion. When the boundary zone itself has dimension, it can then take on an "in-between" structure, which mitigates or smoothes out the potential interacting processes in the inner and outer zones. Familiar examples are to be seen in the very thick boundary around a living cell (which contains so much vital functionality), in the edge ecology between a forest and a lake, or in the corona of the sun which mitigates the interactions of the sun's interior and the processes taking place further out in the near vacuum beyond.*[37]

As Bloomer points out, the idea of two worlds mediated by ornament in this most profound and powerful role concerns the ancient metaphysical concepts of Kosmos and Chaos.[38] Indeed, he writes, beyond its etymological roots in Latin, the word "kosmos," ranged from meaning something like "universe," "order," and "ornament." Ornament has always been "implicated in concepts so vast that at first it may seem impossible to disentangle it from an inventory of all things." Chaos, in contrast, was the "intransigent, the unconquerable, wandering … strife and conflict."[39] Eros, or Love, was strong enough an organizing force as to control Chaos to achieve union. These forces of kosmos and chaos, serenity and strife, earth and sky, Bloomer writes, "came to be understood as everlasting cycles that like life, death and the seasons were to be manifested by visual figures that evoked rhythm and temporality. This vibrant world picture of order gained from desire, union, and rhythm was implicated with the earliest concepts of ornament."[40] The work of traditional ornament recalls the kind of work most humans once engaged in or were near to, on farms and fields, work dependent on natural cycles and seasons whose rhythm reconciles and

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[37] Christopher Alexander, "New Concepts in Complexity Theory," May 2003, p. 10. Published as an overview of the four books comprising The Nature of Order. Retrieved September 2005 http://www.natureoforder.com/library/scientific-introduction.pdf
[38] Kent Bloomer. The Nature of Ornament: Rhythm and Metamorphosis in Architecture, New York, London: W.W.Norton & Co., 2000, p. 15.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 16.

reveals Eros and Chaos. "Repetition recognizes time even as it refuses to recognize death," observes historian Karsten Harries in his book *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, which characterizes ornament as carrying the promise of an integrated life, that is, a life reconciled and attentive to the seasons and cycles of life and death.[41] Ornament that repeats itself both invites us and appropriates us into natural cycles. It inserts us, or reinstates us, into our natural place within the natural order of things, even if for many of us the closest we get to a farm is the vegetables we buy at a farmer's market. We all participate in the seasons, in any case, no matter where we are.

Architecture and ornament have different relationships to chaos and kosmos, as though they were different actors on the same stage. The idea that the architect used geometry to create a rational world from primordial matter held a common place in antiquity. "Architecture disclosed truth by revealing the order of the cosmos in the sublunar world."[42] In conrast, ornament's role in this revelation is subtler: it divides even as it reconciles. It both participates in architecture's task of conferring order even as it imposes a kind of opposition to the inertia of this larger, more stable identity by embodying the "Other," where disorder and chaos rule. Like Janus, it draws attention to itself even as it pulls from the world beyond and in turn proffers some added extra to the world. Although he was speaking with regard to fine art, architect and educator Robert M. Baron promotes this role for ornament in his essay *Ornament and Drawing*: "Ornament performs a two sided mediation; 'namely to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to

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[41] See *Journal of Architectural Historians*, 57:2, June 1998, p. 212, where Mitchell Schwartzer reviews *The Ethical Function of Architecture* by Karsten Harries, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
[42] Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Hermeneutics as Architectural Discourse," http://www.tu-cottbus.de/BTU/Fak2/TheoArch/Wolke/eng/Subjects/972/Perez-Gomez/perez-gomez_t.html. Retrieved 080805.

redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies.' "[43]

Nonetheless, this is an opposition that cannot survive without kosmos. Ornament, in this primal world of pre-Socratic definitions, came to be defined as

> *a force that unites and transforms conflicting worldly elements. Indeed, ornament seems to be a form of visual figuration that discloses cycles and tend to be located in the margin between different kinds of things.*[44]

Thus, ornament-as-mediator delights in dialectic, frisson, ambivalence, tension, multivalence, and duality. With its embrace of the daemonic—lack of order, sexuality, the proclivity to wanderlust, and disregard for the stern and earnest injunction—ornament has always been an uneasy fit with Modernism as clean, hygienic, rid of disease, modular, ordered, non Adornian.

Philosopher Jacques Soulillou writes that the primary purpose of ornament is its "ordering function." He does not mean ordering in any superficial sense but in the sense of "allowing the order [of a building] to appear," a more subtle concept than ordering as mere arrangement. Echoing Ruskin, Soulillou recognizes that wherever ornament is found, disorder is not far away: "If order requires ornament in order to appear, this ally may just as well turn out to be its most dangerous enemy. For ornament is essentially chaos that threatens to subvert order if the latter does not pay attention." This duality, he suggests, is expressed in opposing polarities: primarily male and female, superior and inferior.

Ornament participates in revealing the order between these types of pairings, and in this way is intensely social, an observation which sounds deeply accurate to me. "Kant was justified in saying that a man abandoned on a desert island would not enjoy the pleasures of ornamentation." There

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[43] Robert M. Baron quotes (in the single quotes) first Karsten Harries and then H.G. Gadamer in his essay, *Ornament and Drawing*. Retrieved January 2005.
http://www.utsa.edu/architecture%5Cpeople%5Cbaronwork%5CDrawing%20and%20Ornament2.pdf.
[44] Ibid., 16-17.

would be no point: no opposition, no Other, no conversation, no need to assert identity through difference. "Ornament is born under the gaze of another, as a flower blossoms under the light …with the purpose of assigning a place in a social or cosmic order."[45]

To be a mediator is not an easy role: one must communicate intelligibly to two opposing or disparate parties and provide them means of effecting a resolution that is not necessarily a synthesis. As an adjective, it means "acting through or dependent on an intervening agency; being neither at the beginning nor at the end in a series." As a verb, it means "to act between parties with a view to reconciling differences or to occupy an intermediate or middle position or form a connecting link or stage between two others" such as the old and the new.

The Great Mosque of Heart, Afghanistan (1200, rebuilt 1498). Islamic architecture may have captured the imagination of architect Louis Sullivan, according to historian Grabar.

Ornament can create boundaries; it can as easily be employed to eliminate them. If we consider a "generic" Islamic mosque, a place that is rich with ornament, it is sometimes almost impossible to tell what is structure and what is wall, or where things begin and end.

On the exterior, a mosque may be covered with geometric decoration that coats the entire building in many intricate patterns, an organization that implies that revealing structure is virtually of no concern at all in Islamic architecture. On the interior, other devices serve the same visual purpose. The *muqarna* is a construction technique that fuses a mosque's ceiling and wall into a honeycombed "stalactite" surface. This conflation of planes may be enacted in other ways: in the Great Mosque of Cordoba, for example, a seemingly

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[45] Jacques Soulillou, "Ornament and Order," Crime and Ornament: The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos (Toronto: XYZ Books, 2002),

endless series of double-vaulted arches appear to spread out to infinity. While these arches may be individually polychromed and individually discrete, as an entire visual field, they conspire to dissolve space and distance. Depending on the mosque, geometric patterns and calligraphy on the inside and outside of buildings also help to dissolve, confuse, or articulate boundaries. Such calligraphic wall-writings also serve to encode knowledge about religion and the Koran, just as much as Classical detailing encodes another kind of Western "knowledge," a kind of knowing most of us appropriate when we enter a "codified" space: the ornament cues us and helps us to shape our actions and behavior.

In the mosque, this intentional dissolution of boundaries and the ambiguity achieved through architecture and ornament has a specific purpose. Allah's house must never be an expression of individual ego, but rather of transcendent love. Submission to Allah's will requires the dissolution of ego boundaries, and it is through its interpretation of ornament that a mosque can bear tangible witness to that dissolution. The mosque builders use ornament to heighten the presence of Allah's will, using the "positive," (here meaning the making of a tactile, physical environment) as the means to reveal the "negative," the unknowable, the hidden and the spiritual.

It is well known that in Islamic worship spaces, images of humans or even animals are not admitted, as these indicate a personal interpretation by an individual of a conscious being. Such an image would be doubly implicated in ego, first by the portrayer and second by the portrayed. This image, if allowed, would deflect our attention from a close attendance to prayer, to Allah's mysteries, and to the words of the Koran adorning the walls like a frieze, in themselves two-dimensional ornament. In the light of such motives and objectives, Western anxieties about structural frankness or honesty of materials are irrelevant.

The concept of negotiating boundaries arises in Middle Eastern residential architecture as well. In many such traditional houses, *mashrabiyyas*, exquisitely ornamented wooden screens, create a physical boundary between the house and the street or within the house itself. Perforations in the

mashrabiyyas create a diaphanous transition between public and private or between spaces assigned to one or the other gender. Inside the house, the device permits women to see into courtyards and to enjoy cooling breezes without being clearly seen either by men inside the house or by passers-by in the street. (This veil-like, ethereal device, when applicable to only women, may be interpreted as a kind of architectural sexism by spatially and materially enforcing gendered roles.)

master and servant: controlling the chaos of ornament

Those who wade into the turbulent waters of ornament usually draw upon the analogy of master and servant to illustrate the place of ornamentation in the larger scheme. Given the history of construction, this analogy made sense, as ornament had to depend on its substrate whether integrated or applied. Today, contemporary building materials and methods that merge structure and surface render this "either-or" dilemma obsolete.

A servant is secondary to the master and of a lower caste. Ameri notes that "ornament is commonly said to offer the dispensable, hence permissible, services of a subordinate 'servant' to a superior that ultimately can make do without the service." If a servant, ornament requires management, if not domination. When it is called upon, Ruskin advises us to observe extreme caution lest the servant become unruly. He writes:

> *Lose your authority over it, let it command you, or lead you, or dictate to you in any wise, and it is an offence, an encumbrance, and a dishonour. And it is always ready to do this; wild to get the bit in its teeth, and rush forth on its own device.*[46]

Ruskin rightly feared losing control over ornament, and any designer knows that part of his/her task is to determine when "enough is enough." However, if we consider ornament a mediator, or, to

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[46] John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice, London, 1851-53, pp. 256-257. Quoted by Amir H. Ameri in "Writing on, the Margins of Architecture," Art History, the International Journal of the Association of Art Historians, London, Vol. 16, no. 2, 1993, pp. 336-348.

use Bloomer's phrase, as a " habitat for metamorphoses," or as an independent yet "intermediary art," as Grabar puts it, the word "servant" and the distinction of "primary" and "secondary" no longer apply.

mediation and tolerance

> *"The classical problems with tolerance in building assemblies tends, as I understand it, to emerge at the points where different cultures of construction have to meet."*[47]

When a train rolls into the station of the London underground, a recorded voice intones, "Mind the gap!" The recording warns passengers of the space between the newly arrived train and the concrete platform, a space that must be successfully negotiated should one want to board the train. "Minding the gap" applies to buildings and specifically to ornament as well. In this realm, ornament does not serve as memory-maker, place-enhancer, necessary equipment, scale-weaver, or philosophical boundary mediator. Rather, this is ornament in yet another, yet far more pragmatic role, as reconciler of materials in construction.

"Tolerance is the acknowledgement of difference as acceptable," notes architect and historian Tim Anstey. In the field of construction, he says, it would be "defined technically as the amount by which the measure of a value can vary from the amount intended without causing difficulties …" It reflects "the conventions and limitations of construction, and what you are willing to pay for: to reduce tolerance may mean either or both changing materials and increasing labour time and skill."[48]

The practice of "minding the gap"—regulating acceptable tolerances by resolving how disparate

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[47] Tim Anstey, Ornament and Tolerance, Royal Institute of Technology, Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan, KTH. Retrieved January 2005:
http://216.239.57.104/search?q=cache:hEYCT0MEoxgJ:www.arkitekturskolan.se/pdf/5_yta_Anstey.pdf+%
[48] Ibid.

materials meet or resolve changes in the direction or orientation of materials, (in this case the space between the London tube car and the train platform a few inches away) is one of architecture's most important tasks. The design of the "gap reconciliation" reveals how a designer elects to communicate certain values. Often these gaps and tolerances are addressed by ornament, as Axel Sowa points out, because ornamental motifs "hide and reveal breaks and discontinuities in a piece of work."[49] The embellished piece (i.e., the ornamented casework or details addressing a transition in materials) draws our eye away from the discontinuity between materials, a discontinuity that could be visually jarring and draws the eye to the mediating event that articulates the transition between two distinct materials.

For example, consider a traditional or vernacular interior door opening in a wood-framed house. Usually the opening is defined by a doorframe surrounding it. Around the frame, casework covers the areas where the frame meets the surrounding material, such as gypsum board or plaster. The casework covering the edges of the two materials is a tacit acknowledgement of the possible lack of perfection where these edges meet/fail to meet because of the different nature of the two materials. In fact, we may not want these two materials to ever meet, so that they may individually respond to changes in temperature and humidity. Such casework also allows builders to use less craft and labor-intensive construction techniques at this meeting/not-meeting because casework permits greater tolerances between these elements.

But what if I want to suppress both this "mediator" as well as the sense of change between two individual spaces? One could, of course, detail the wall and door frame without casework to negate the sense of boundary, increase the flowing quality of space and thus unify space, a time-honored goal in Modernism. One such method employs one stud to do two jobs, structurally supporting the header for the opening and also acting aesthetically as the finish piece. So I might buy a higher

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[49] Axel Sowa, *l'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, March-April 2001, 38.

grade of structural lumber, such as clear vertical grain Douglas Fir, knowing I will have to resolve how the stud interacts with the drywall or plaster cladding the wall, perhaps with an aluminum channel that holds the end of the cladding back from the stud.

But as anyone who has worked in construction knows, the craftsmanship necessary to achieve this effect is of a high order and requires more time than the customary door frame with conventional casework. To make this a successful detail, one has to know the behavior of the grain of Douglas fir at its finished corner; will it snag and become a daily irritant even if sanded effectively? At this point, I have now combined "rough" framing with finish carpentry, muddying the roles usually assigned to separate trades. In contrast, traditional casing is more forgiving in acknowledging that most walls may be quite structurally sound but rarely free of a blemish of some kind. That kind of knowing, itself an art, negates the question of "perfection," preferring to deal with materials on their own terms, the Western version of *wabi sabi*. Even Adolf Loos, the craftsman and mason's son, used window moldings, casings in his interiors.

Can my Modern detail, which certainly conveys a different sense of the world and one's values than a traditional door jamb detail, be defined as ornament? Probably not, although it might be on the road to ornament, depending on whether and how I elect to further embellish the piece, which begs the question, at what point on ornament's vast spectrum does a detail turn into ornament?

Going back for help to the roles of ornament, the detail I just illustrated communicates something (my desire to make one element perform two functions, that of load-bearing and the desire to share my visual pleasure in the wood's character), a desire probably far too subtle to the unobservant or uninitiated in either Arts and Crafts or Modernism. I certainly am embellishing a stud's inherent beauty. The detail certainly mediates a boundary between two rooms, and depending on how I have detailed, in turn, their boundaries to adjacent spaces beyond, may have subtly distinguished these two rooms as one unified space, and could even deny boundary and suppress form altogether by painting everything the same color.

However, in this domestic and private realm of residential architecture, my detail alone does not knit and weave scales together. I have not introduced new patterns, textures, rhythms, figuration, nor especially enhanced the "carrier" of the wood or wall. I have not introduced the voice of the larger world. The detail also does not add something that is necessary, as in necessary equipment: there is no particular ritual I have to perform here. Does this detail transform? Well, rather feebly, if judged alone, even in a private house and not in a public building, and even when it is judged in the overall composition, as it must be because ornament is not independent of its greater fabric.

So, while it may illuminate the beauty of material, and thus participate in making this space memorable, it does not qualify as ornament, a multivalent multitasker. On the other hand, the question of whether something is ornament or a detail always occurs on a sliding scale, relative to the activity of surrounding components, and thus still simmers as a problem for me.

"Detailing was born when craftsmanship died."[50] Before the Modern era, craftspeople trained to think artistically, and who understood materials and the tools required to work them depended on tradition to hone their craft. When technology industrialized building beginning in the 19th century, old crafts and methods virtually disappeared (although it is also the case that new craft schools are reviving traditional crafts such as stone cutting and carving, furniture making, terra cotta tile manufacturing, etc.). Materials, finishes and their accompanying techniques have also changed drastically, a constant challenge to craftspeople and architectural conservators. Architectural detailing thus grew out of a different kind of tolerance, an unacceptable tolerance between the growing gap between the designer in the office and the builder in the field.

In *Details of Modern Architecture*, Edward Ford reiterates these familiar questions regarding ornament, asking whether in the past ornament served as "the exterior expression of internal

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[50] Edward R. Ford, *Details of Modern Architecture* Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990, p. 7.

structural forces, or was it simply a language independent of its structural base?" After all, he notes, the ornament of Louis Sullivan, the 20th century's ornamenter extraordinaire, is "independent of both moldings and joints," which earned some carping from a contemporary critic of Sullivan's, who tellingly scolded that such exceptional treatment meant a "lapse" in structural logic.[51] Ford also questions the nature of craftsmanship's relationship to ornament: "Was the purpose of ornament to hide poor craftsmanship, or to display good craftsmanship? In an era when craftsmanship seemed to be disappearing, should ornament disappear as well?"[52]

Whether ornament or not, details have to communicate: show the path, delineate form, act in unison with other details. Details are part of the language of architecture. Critic Scruton complains that one of the principal failures in some contemporary architecture is what he describes as "the fault of misunderstanding composition because one has failed to observe that details have implications, and cannot be combined in just any way without producing nonsense." He argues that the rejection of ornament by Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius was a "stylistic principal, a form of ornament, and had little to do with the ungrammatical anti-architecture which has claimed descent" from Gropius and his peers. In other words, and analogous to artists facile in literal representation who choose to work abstractly, Gropius et al. was deeply versed in ornament, and further, understood the relationship of the part to the whole. It is that interaction which Scruton calls a "mutual dependence" and the "single most language-like feature of architecture."

Further examining the relationship between tolerance and ornament, Anstey notes that both traditional and Modernist schools of thinking are concerned with surfaces: "Classical ornament read as ways of articulating points where actual constructional elements – beam ends, joints in stone – meet the surface of the building." At the same time, he suggests that ornament is also "a

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[51] Ford, op.cit., p. 11.
[52] Ibid. p. 13.

deeply modernist trait, precisely because of the modernist championing both of the surface of the building construction as a whole and of the building element as an expressive, articulated, separate entity. It predicates the arrival of a magic substance to fill the gaps – for the Romans, cement or lime mortar; for Norman Foster rubber gaskets or silicon mastic or glue."[53]

That said, it seems that virtually any architectural style is going to be concerned with surface because it is the surface we see that communicates an idea. Easily the most famous example of Modernist ornament is Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, New York, 1958, in which a layer of burnished bronze articulated members creating a rhythm of lines and relationships is attached to the unfinished structural steel behind it. The top layer is a "veil" of ornament that expresses an ideal of perfection, while the unseen layer of working structure underneath deals with the other work of load-bearing. (Note I said "other wok" and not "real work": both are necessary equipment and both perform a vital function, one of structure, one of communication.)

I agree with Anstey's thinking, that this "veil that hangs about the building" is no different in the Seagram's Building in what it accomplishes from that "veil" of the articulated stone façade of Alberti's 15th century Palazzo Rucellai in Florence. This veil is comprised of the architect's ideas, ideas of the mind, manifest in the "lines, features, outlines," in contrast to "structura," or structure, construction and "material," or material, derived from nature and dependent on the skill of the craftsman.[54] Anstey notes:

> *The building, including its surface articulation, is all made of* ***structura*** *which fills up the* ***lineamenta*** *which defines its surfaces. So the structura–ornamenta opposition … is absent. Ornament is made of material, structure, just as the rest of the structure is. But, on the other hand, according to Alberti's system, ornament is definitely about surface articulation, and how the building communicates. It is in this sense defined by lineamenta, by the lines and angles that define the surface. What makes ornament special, though, is that it engages with the problem of how the building is going to appear in its place, given the limitations of material, site, organisation and budget. Ornament is then about the*

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[53] Ibid.
[54] See Patrick George, DOE Lecture, "Building Parts and Walls,"http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/george/elevation.html

> *meeting, in some way, of the idea of building – that perfect construction in the architect's mind – and the reality – the limitations.*[55]

applied or integrated?

Alberti via Anstey seems to be saying here that it does not matter whether ornament is applied or integrated in the question of whether ornament is part of structure. But it is integral in that it is vital in how and what that building communicates. *That is, ornament needs to be integrated compositionally, not structurally*.

In Part III, looking chronologically at the history of debates about ornament, Frank Lloyd Wright conceived ornament as being both *integrated into structure*, rising out of the material, as well as *integrated compositionally*, to communicate the position of "modern man" and modernity.[56] And as we know, as in much contemporary architecture, what is structure and what is skin may be difficult to distinguish. Nonetheless, one of the long-standing gauntlets in "proving" whether something is ornament, as Ford raises it again above, is determining whether it is applied to an underlying material or integrated into its substrate.

Let us consider the Christmas tree as the ultimate example of applied ornament. In this very Western tradition, the tree does not possess an identity as a Christmas tree until we begin a beloved process; hunting down a suitable conifer, bringing it home, clipping the end and placing it in a special location. Note that there is a Christmas tree once a year but every year, meaning it is a temporary event but a permanent annual ritual.[57]

Lights and ornaments are lifted out of their boxes and bags from wherever we stored them the year before. We then adorn the tree (unless we are minimalists making our little statements about

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[55] See also Part III's discussion on *kern* vs. *hüse*. Ibid.
[56] The different meanings of the word 'integrated' is a warning to all of us when reading architectural texts. Something can integrated structurally without having furthered an integrated composition at all.
[57] In any case, the emergence of cutting-edge building materials and methods, which merge structure and surface, may render this "either-or" dilemma obsolete.

unfettered Nature or crass commercialism). The ornaments with which we ornament it give the tree scale: most Christmas ornaments are no more than the size of a hand. We fuss over the spacing of the ornaments, sensitive to the impact of the hierarchy, depth and rhythm of placement in this fragrant three-dimensional setting. Each ornament symbolizes something of family and friends present and past, and communicates the heritage of kin and moments across time. We may say we "decorate" the tree but the adornment runs deeper than that. We are inserting an individual narrative into a larger collective ritual of memory, the world at large. We graft ourselves onto the conifer in order to transform it into a Christmas tree. This is an example of applied ornament.

A very different, Modern view of ornament dictates that it is not only not applied but also so intrinsic to structure it cannot be removed without damaging or extinguishing the essential identity of the underlying substrate. Louis Kahn exemplifies this way of thinking with his famous statement, "The joint is the beginning of ornament." And he goes on to say that the joint "must be distinguished from decoration, which is simply applied. Ornament is the adoration of the joint." Note that Kahn here is giving ornament a much nobler and more important role than decoration, even as he up-ends most definitions of ornament.

Does it really matter, then, whether ornament is applied or integrated? It didn't matter in mid 16thth century Venice, where not the method but the deed of ornamenting the face of a house was critical because the façade married individual prestige to the degree of an owner's artistic discernment (seen in the owner's choice of artist), and lastly to a civic intent to publicize social congress and comity. "Just as the citizens are to be all of one mind in the ideal republic, the facades of all the buildings should so harmonize according to one grand plan."[58] Wealthy owners of houses

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[58] Monika Schmitter, "Odoni's Façade: The House as Portrait in Renaissance Venice," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 66, No. 3, September 2007, p. 400. Ms. Schmitter includes the quote that was a summary of Morosini's treatise by Margaret L. King in *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance* (Princeton, 1986), p. 148. According to Venetian mythology, the city's early settlers fixed by law that all houses should be "equal, alike, of similar size and ornamentation." Footnote p. 312, No. 61.

commanding prominent sites along the canals chose between ornate marble (more costly and potentially too daringly sumptuous for civic decorum) and figurative frescoes done in brilliant colors of paint that in turn would be reflected in the water of the canal (apparently more modest because of its lower cost, but also flashier and "more socially aggressive.") Both treatments required a delicate balance in how one faced the city; in the case of a painted domestic façade, it also relied on Renaissance art theory: since the house was a work of art, its design ought to be based on the study of nature per Alberti and Serlio, as historian Monika Schmitter has pointed out. "It is in this sense that the house is a portrait, a built body that imitates *the natural body*." [emphasis added]. Thus, it was extremely important that the built body accurately represent the owner. So in the case of one up-and-coming merchant, images of abundance—grapes and grains, Bacchus flanked by Apollo and Minerva—not only depict the owner as a prosperous "sophisticated bon vivant," but the flourishing city of Venice as well, she observes.[59]

ornament as other

If ornament is added to a building after its conception and execution, as it was in the above example, it transforms the building into something beyond the architect's control. That loss of control means the building can speak with more than one voice, undermining the architect's work as that of a singular heroic figure authoring a signature Gesamtwerk. But ornament organized by the architect as part of the overall scheme can also admit other voices that celebrate a building's purpose, the site, or some attribute of the community it serves.

summing up

While his vast output is often contradictory, an admission Ruskin himself made with great humor, he was consistent, at least, in his great themes, among which were both observing and "reading"

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[59] Ibid., Footnote 6, p. 308; text p. 305.

buildings carefully.[60] One example of his consistency is his discussion of the ordering of form. Ornament, he writes

> *... must consist of such studious arrangements of form as are imitative or suggestive of those which are commonest among natural existences, that being of course the noblest ornament which represents the highest orders of existence. Imitated flowers are nobler than imitated stones; imitated animals, than flowers; imitated human form of all animal forms the noblest.*[61]

It is this act of thoughtful arrangement, I believe, that Ruskin means when he says "Ornamentation is the principal part of architecture," not as someone who cannot apprehend the beauty of structure and engineering, or who only looks at buildings two-dimensionally, but as someone who considers the articulation of a surface in the same way that Anstey does.

At this point, we might be tempted to delve into all the ways those arrangements of form occur. That work, however, is beyond the scope of this book, and indeed has formed the life's work of scholars who have examined the range of forms, symmetries and order-making in ornament from the mathematical to the sociological. To the reader who wants to inquire further into form per se, I recommend the bibliography at the end of this book.

As these writers have shown, ornament can assume roles either pungent or everyday and humdrum. Bloomer speaks of the figurative and transformative nature of ornament and in its ability to help architecture do its work of place-making and way-finding. Adorno speaks of ornament's ability to resist those irrational systems posing as rational. Alberti, Yu-Fu Tuan, Alexander, Wise and Salingaros speak to ornament's role in creating scale and to the need for an emotional connection to our environment. Coomaraswamy emphasizes ornament as "necessary equipment" in a larger

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[60]John Dixon Hunt reviewed *Looking at Architecture with Ruskin* by John Unrau in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1980, p. 324.
[61] John Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1885, p. 43.

scheme. I speak of it as a device to resist non-space and branded space. Pérez-Gómez and Bloomer understand ornament as a "force" uniting and transforming potentially conflicting elements; Bloomer further includes figuration, in addition to rhythm and repetition, as necessary to and part of ornament. Anstey talks of ornament in terms of materials tolerance and how ornament regulates surface. Ford connects the loss of craftsmanship and a commonly shared vocabulary of architecture and ornament to the rise of the newly needed and spelled-out architectural detail. Scruton decries what he sees as the mistaken idea of post-Bauhaus architects who equate the rejection of ornament to the abandonment of understanding of how different elements of a building need to fit together. Soulillou unpacks the dangerous border of order and disorder that ornament inhabits, a place Ruskin knows intimately.

I do not pretend that the foregoing discussion exhausts what these writers have to say about the roles of ornament, let alone others who have also considered it. My particular tip of the iceberg can only suggest the range of identities that ornament may assume as part of its inherent nature. At this point, it seems useful to trace (and only trace) the history of the debates that ultimately led to the withering of ornament's rich stature and the identification of its nature. I hope to show in Parts III that the pioneering theories of critics John Ruskin and Adolf Loos actually honored ornament by demanding that it be used with discrimination. The questions remain: where might we find the path to an ornament that suits us today? Do we return to the time-proven traditional styles? If not, is it conceivable to create a foundation for universal languages for 21st century ornament? Or if every designer invents her own ornament, can we even call it ornament?