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“THE HYBRID NATURE OF ORNAMENT”

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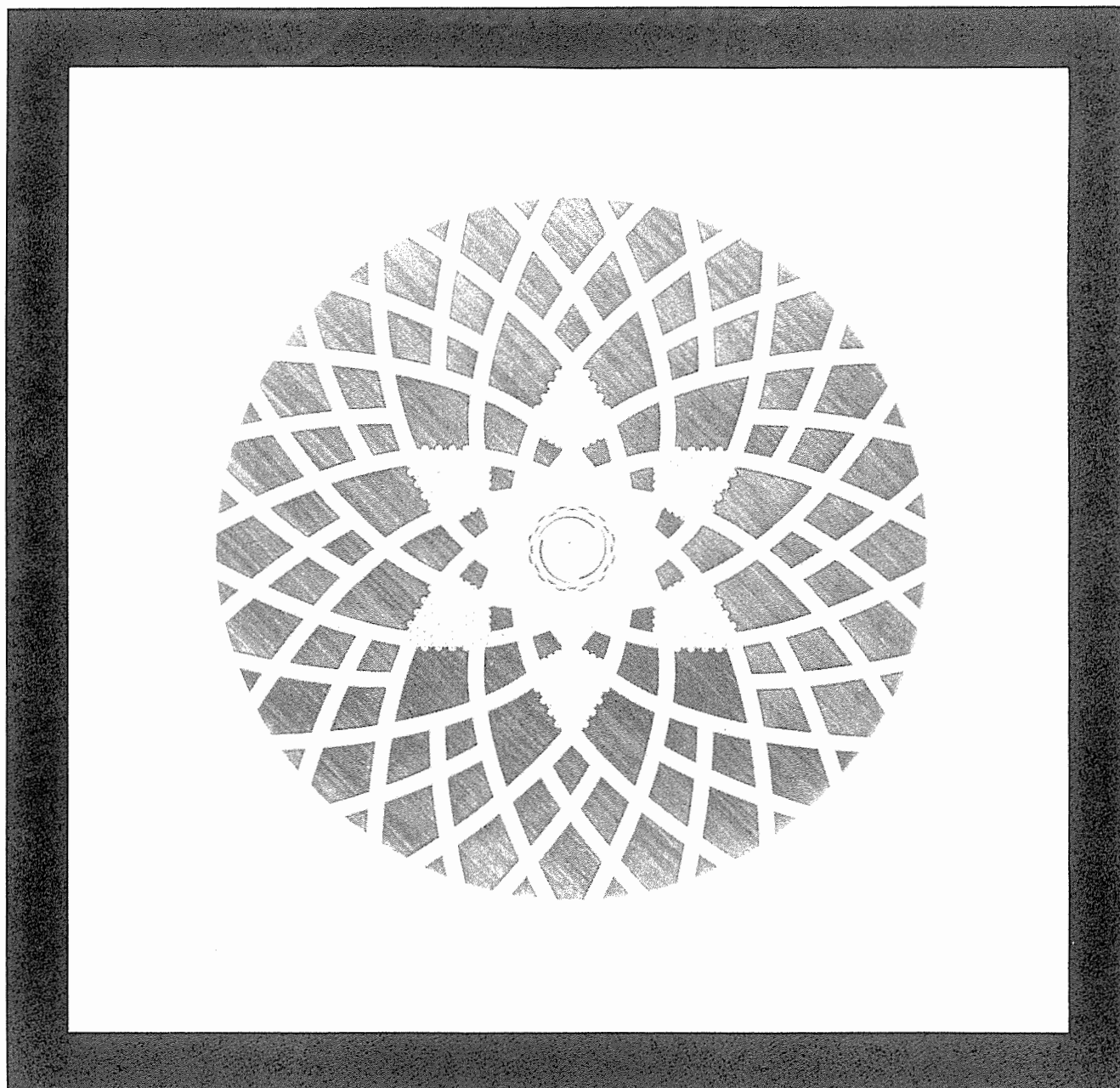
The Hybrid Nature of Ornament

by Kent Cress Bloomer

There has been an ongoing assumption among many within the schools of architecture today that the ornament of buildings ought to originate exclusively from within the forms of basic building construction. There has also been the corollary assumption that "added" or "applied" ornament is superficial and wrongminded. However, a purely mechanical object cannot ornament *itself* any more than the pure form of the physical human body an ornament itself without the addition of certain impressed figuration, dress, or markings. That does not mean that the physical body cannot *be* an ornament, or that the body cannot provide some of the elements of ornaments. In the course of dramatically articulating certain gestures, such as the movements found in dance, the human body has the capacity to ornament the place in which it is performing. But that is not the same as the purely physical body ornamenting itself.

The composition of ornament has forever employed the visual principle of placing figures-upon-ground. In light of that principle, figures may ornament the body-as-ground, or the body, performing figuratively, may ornament the space-as-ground. In the world of architecture, figures may ornament a "pure" building as ground, or a pure building might ornament a plaza as ground. The "pure" plaza cannot ornament itself, but in certain cases (such as the New England Green) the plaza (Fig. 1) could ornament the town or the city in which it is situated.

Perhaps the clearest way to think about and analyze ornament in architecture is to begin by using the word *ornaments* rather than ornament. The fundamental shift from verb to noun enforces the notion that ornaments are first of all "figurative things" (and that may include patterns) which are generally regarded as possessing a power, a beauty, or a meaning of their own apart from



Plan for an Ideal City, 1982,
Roger Ferri

the facts of construction or the practical space generated by that construction. Indeed, the figural actions found in ornaments must be seen to originate, at least in part, from circumstances external or extrinsic to the practical properties of the object being ornamented. I believe it is necessary to understand that ornaments adventitiously pervade buildings from without, like spirits descending from another domain. How else could they be awarded that very special designation “ORNAMENT”?

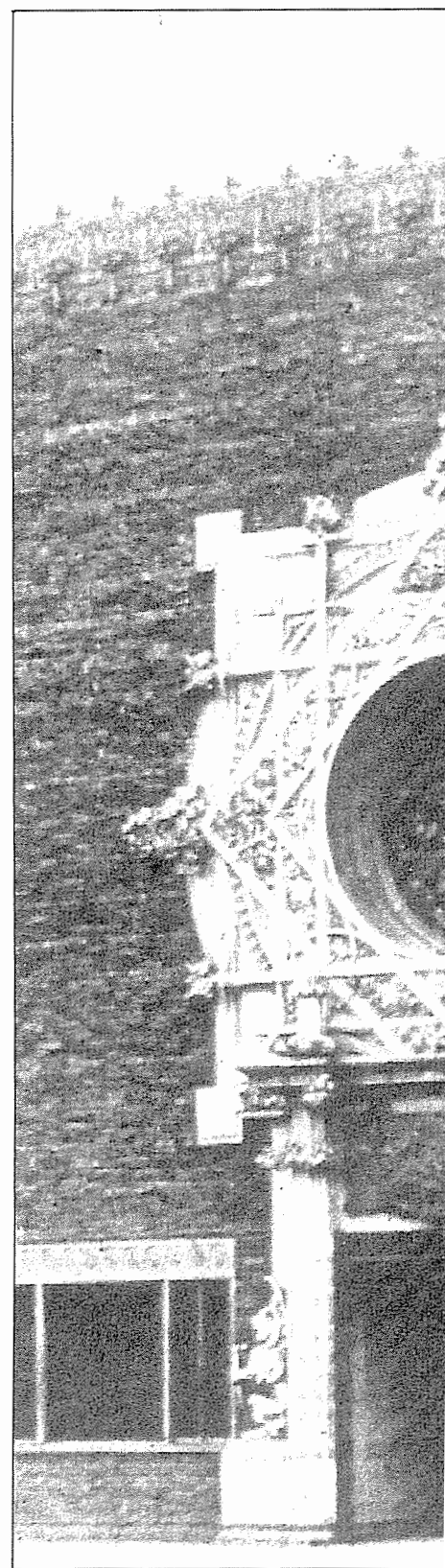
Nevertheless it is equally critical to understand that ornaments cannot perform their function of *ornamenting* without forcefully uniting with the object-of-ornament. In this respect the act of ornament necessarily requires a convergence between figures originally conceived in distinctly separate realms. It is precisely the bonding of those originally distinct figures that constitutes the essentially *hybrid-nature of ornament*. But in what realms have those traditionally distinct figures originated, and

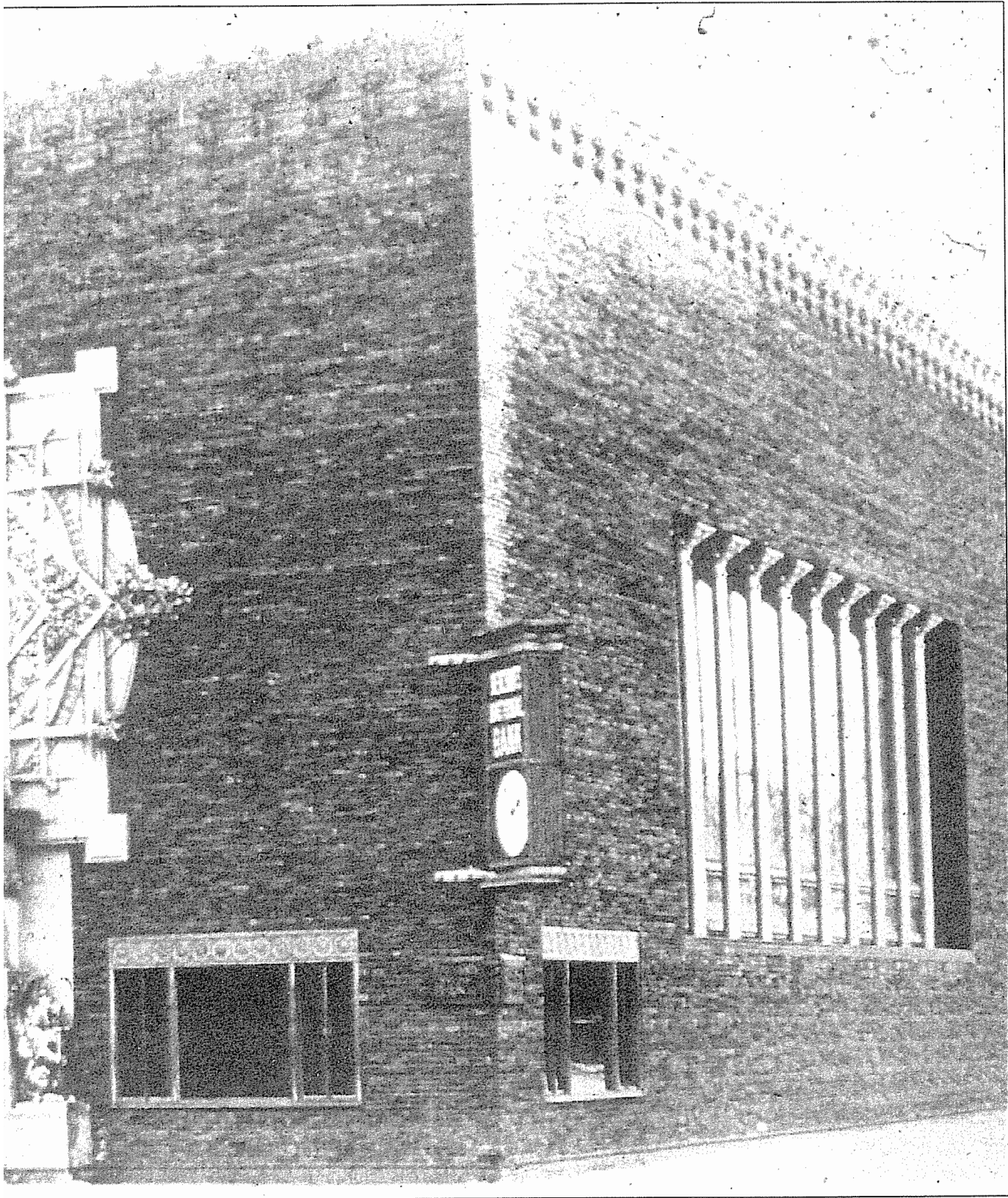
Merchants' National Bank,
Grinnell, Iowa, 1914. Louis
Sullivan

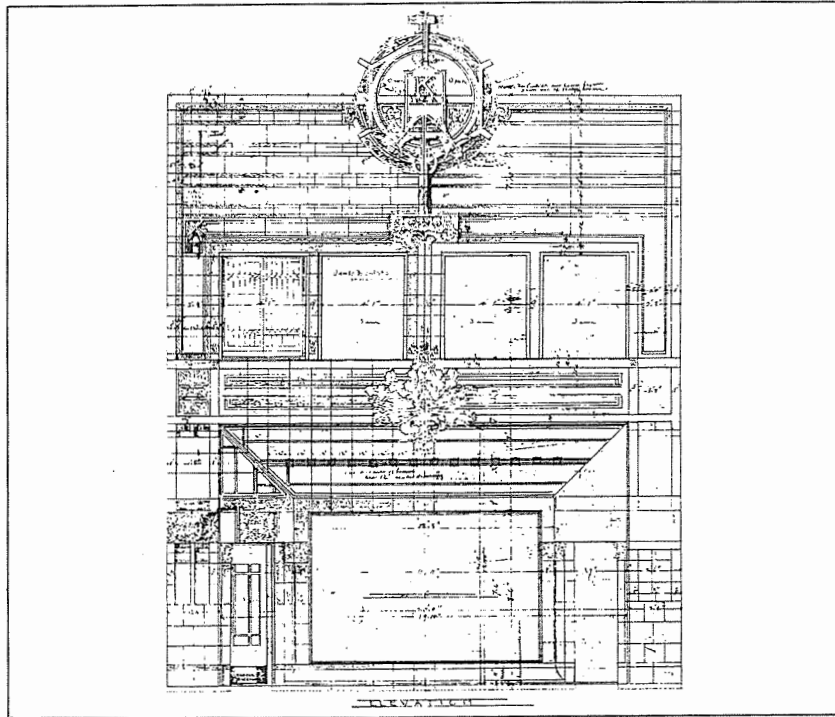
how, especially in the architecture of
buildings, do they converge?

The Realm of Elaboration

Let us assume that practical construction and the development of manageable space resides at the very core of building/design, an assumption that seems to be reasonable and certainly one that is generally accepted. Let us then recall how the myriad bits and pieces of practical construction and manageable space are semantically grouped into the figurally articulate elements of architecture. By architecturally "articulate" I mean those figures that we have come to identify as elements of architecture rather than elements of "construction." For example, the figure "Arcade" articulates an architectural element more succinctly than a more detailed mechanical description that might otherwise merely describe a row of posts underneath arches. An "Entablature" articulates a different figural condition than an elevated wall. A "Courtyard" describes an element that is immediately more urbane than merely a "space surrounded by walls;" a "Hall" suggests a room that is more edificial than an interior shelter for purposes of traffic or assembly. An "Oculus" (Fig. 2) suggests an architectural eye and not just a window; and a "Steeple" is a more sacred thing than a "slender and pointed tower projecting from a roof." By naming and typifying those conventional elements of architecture, the act of building is provided with an elementary architectural vocabulary. Indeed, those elements of architecture give to building a visual language capable of making certain statements (as do the words in a sentence) which might proclaim shades of grandeur, propriety, institution, and place. We know that in the classical language of architecture a higher "column" represented more than a post because it was conventionally employed by a more important civic person or institution. We know in the ecclesiastic language of the West that a steeple atop a building proclaims a particular location charged with meaning. In our modern vocabulary governing







public building an arcade is generally understood to frame and even ennoble a public outdoor space, while a hall suggests a particularly large and ceremonious room suited to general gathering or meeting. We also know that each of those traditional elements is an elaboration and a refinement over time of forms that originated within the practical ordering of construction and space. Yet those original forms had to be elaborated upon and reiterated before they could acquire figural meanings that transcend their practical beginnings. And once the figures, i.e. Column, Colonnade, Entablature, Arcade, Courtyard, Mezzanine, Hall, Steeple, Marquee, Canopy, Aedicule, Facade (Fig. 3) or architectural "frontispiece" became conventionally employed, architecture was provided with the grammatical capacity to differentiate very basic functions, places and hierarchies in its own *intrinsic* terms without the assistance of any other language or system of signs.

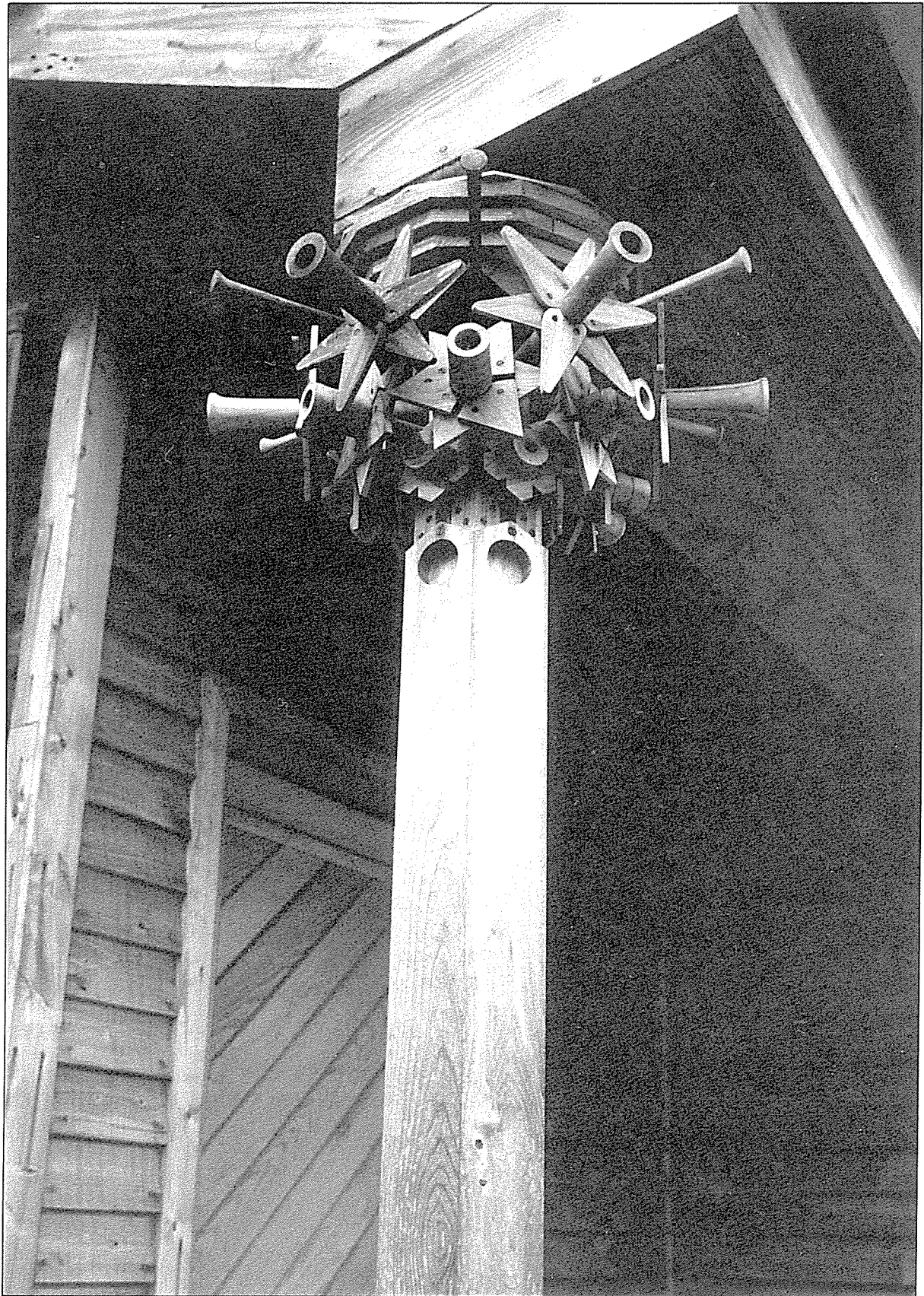
The Realm of Embellishment

To elaborate, however, is not the same as to embellish. If architectural

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elaboration develops from within the elements of construction, architectural embellishment develops from without. Embellishing is descended from the pre-Enlightenment concept of *empowering* an object with beauty, *bel*, when beauty was thought to include the terrifying, the authoritative, the memorial, and the scientific along with the pleasing, the sensual, and the graceful. To embellish is to incorporate figures into objects (or poems or songs) that develop from within the beliefs and myths dedicated to the powers of beauty common to all of the arts which belong to the culture at large. In the Pythagorean world view of 15th-cen-

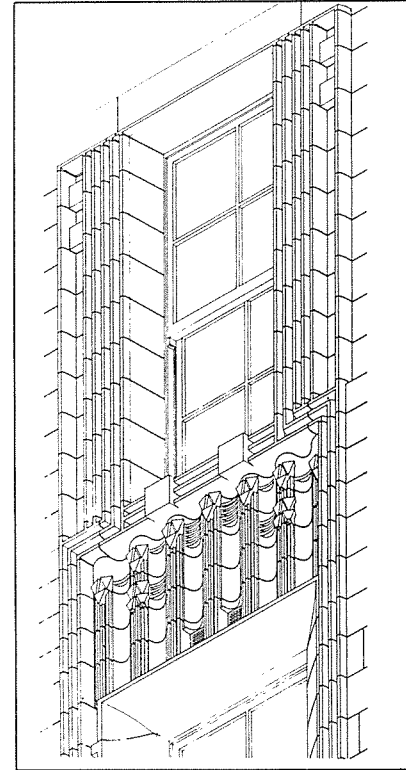
Platt House column capital, 1982, Kent Bloomer, Paul Lytel and David Conger



ture Rome, a cosmic geometry provided the repertoire of magic embellishments, while in 19th-century England, the leaf and the tree were often chosen by poets, painters and architects alike to symbolize the order of nature. The presence of snakes in ancient Mexican ornament, sunrises in ancient Japanese ornament or stars and stripes in modern American ornament illustrate the power of specific visual figures to combine the energies of the collective imagination with the peculiar energies and visible actions of animals, geometric shapes, and stars. Indeed, the capacity of those geometric, celestial, botanic and zoomorphic figures to pervade the imagination with animus is so great that they have been known to converge with almost any kind of object, from cooking utensils to warships, and if they do so in a systematic and elegant manner they can produce discernably terrifying, memorable, or delightful statements. We must ask, however, how they manage to converge with those objects without appearing to remain apart or disconnected.

The Convergence of Figures in Architecture

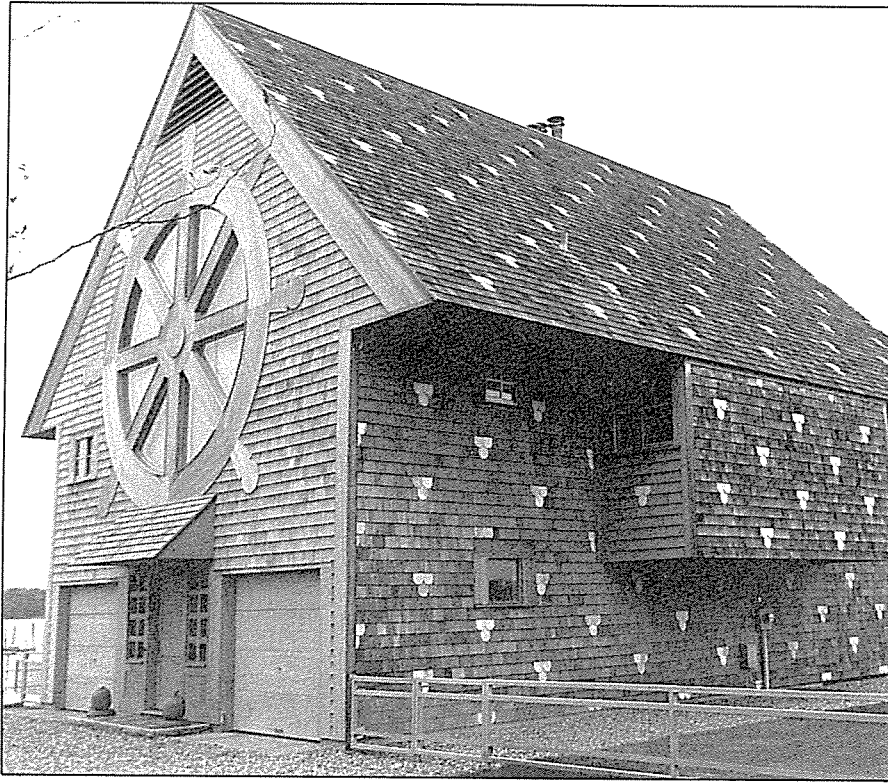
In the matter of architectural ornament, the figures of embellishment must converge with the figures of elaboration rather than merely attach to the underlying elements of pure construction such as unarticulated posts, boards and beams (Fig. 4). In other words, embellishments must converge with figures that have already acquired architectural meanings, rather than those which are subordinate to basic architectural language. For example, a post must become an architectural “Column” before it can grammatically admit an ornament (Fig. 5). In the same way it is the Steeple, the Oculus and the Frontispiece that possess the grammatical authority to invite ornaments into their realm. That is what Christopher Dresser meant in the 19th century when he declared that ornament was that which “super-added to utility renders the object more acceptable through bestowing upon it an amount of beauty which it would



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not otherwise possess.” In the fabric of building he treats basic utility as the most economic use of materials and space required to achieve a practical form to which the architect must *add* something, i.e. the concerted and articulated figures of elaboration, before the design may be understood as an architectural design rather than as a merely utilitarian design. In Dresser’s model the ornaments are characterized as super-added figures which originate

Steven Izenhour House,
Stoney Creek, Connecticut,
1983



outside of utility but have the linguistic capacity to unite with the most basic visual language of architecture (also a form of picture language) by sharing a common grammar rooted in the dynamics of visual composition. Indeed, we might dramatize this characterization by declaring that a fundamental difference between hieroglyphics and the architectural languages of elaboration (added) and embellishment (super-added) is that hieroglyphics is constituted in one dimension while the latter are constituted in fields of two and three dimensions.

Henry Focillon, in *The Life of Forms in Art*, stated that “ornamental art, perhaps the first alphabet of our human thought to come into close contact with space, is capable of immediate translation into various different techniques”, and in doing so “defines space, and even creates such space as may be necessary to it”. I would add that ornament is not only a language which provides architecture with greater dimensions of psychological and spiritual space, it is also the ideal visual language which de-

livers to architecture a body of information that belongs to the culture at large precisely because it is capable of translation into spatial settings. By becoming the property of spatial settings, ornaments provide architecture with a measure of literacy that would otherwise be confined to the *limited* repertoire of architectural figures derived from the forms of basic construction.

Architectural ornament as a phenomenon is quintessentially hybridistic and establishes a terrain located between and amidst the bedrock of practical forms and the more temporal figures of life (Fig. 6). To the disappointment of some, that process seems to ignore the elegant specializations of distinct realms; but to the admiration of others it manages, perhaps more than any language, to establish yet another realm that at once abhors autonomy and yet curiously manages to display the outlines of an utterly unique grammar.

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