

NEXT AMERICAN CITY

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INTERVIEW

Kent Bloomer

By Sarah Rubinstein

Kent Bloomer, a Yale School of Architecture professor whose interests lie along the blurry line between art and architecture, is the rare academic who has influenced his subject as much through his practice as through his scholarship. In his studio, he hammers aluminum by hand, carves plaster and designs large and complex ornaments for buildings. His work surfaces in familiar urban places: he designed the luminaries in Central Park, he built a fanciful sculpture for the roof of the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago and he added a large leafy trellis to a curtain-wall at the Ronald Regan National Airport in Washington, D.C. Kent is a unique and often incisive spokesperson for art and architecture because he straddles both worlds: all of his sculptural pieces are inseparable from their context, and the buildings they adorn rely on his work for their own architectural integrity. Kent is the author of a new book entitled *The Nature of Ornament*, and he co-authored the classic volume, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* with Charles Moore.

I sat with Kent in a coffee shop across from the Yale campus in New Haven, Connecticut, where he kindly agreed to meet me for this interview. I worked in Kent's New Haven studio from 1999-2001, assisting him with creating ornament for new buildings in Maryland and Texas.

SR: I was hoping to discuss a fairly big topic today: the relevance of large-scale art and ornament to city design and urban life.

KB: I'd start with the question: Is there a city of merit, whether it's an ancient city or a nineteenth century city or a modern American city, that isn't distinguished by its monuments? You know monument has been a bad word. How about the Eiffel Tower? How about the Chrysler building? How about all the cathedral cities that were centered around the monument? And the New England town with its steeple — which was built to be higher than the treetops — so that you can see the city from a distance from its spires poking up. It seems to me that it's almost impossible to remember a city of importance without pinning yourself to one of its markers. The abstraction that the city is a socio-economic thing—in architecture, I don't think it is. If those markers weren't there, I don't think you'd even have a city.

I mean, if you go back, even the Hollywood version of the city, like *The Last Emperor* or *Gladiator*— they present Egyptian cities with their huge gates, they present the Forum.

Ruskin said once that you can't remember a place without architecture. So what all these markers do is that they establish a memorable and knowable locus for the city around which one rallies. The role of art in that is fairly obvious.

All of those places that you've listed — you're talking about steeples and gateways — all of those transitional spaces you've cited in your own work as being places of ornament. But I guess I'm also wondering, if you just have the architecture, and don't have the ornament to mark space — if it were merely functional buildings that happened to be tall.

Well, the biggest example of that, obviously, is the World Trade Center, and the World Trade Center did become a monument without ornament, but... Yeah, sure you can. Can you have markers that are just big functional objects like Mt. Fuji? Sure.

So you'd say that a place can have a clear identity without art and ornament, but it's helped along by having it.

But if you drive around, or even look at telephone book covers of American cities, there is a frightening vacuity to what has been built in the last thirty to forty years, in that they're sort of boxes — I mean we all know this, it's sort of cliché what I'm saying. But lately, starting in the 80s, they started to build sort of goofy things to replace that, you know, like Phillip Johnson's AT&T Chippendale building in NYC. There's a building in Nashville with two big antennas on top: it looks like a robot. And I think after a while, people saw them as silly, but the impulse to build them was not silly. I think there was a recognition that they had to be a little more specific about the particular place.

Of course, that argument gets played out. For example, in Bilbao, the kind of wiggly building that Gehry made — which is a very good wiggly building, but nevertheless basically a wiggly building — how many of those can you build? I mean if we had one of those in every city...

It wouldn't identify a city clearly, it would become generic.

And they're going to start putting them out in the countryside.... It's become more of an emblem of a museum.

Not that economic necessity should govern everything, but I'm going to ask the next question in those terms. What do your clients and the architects that hire you stand to gain from commissioning you to do these works? What do they look for from your practice?

The people I work with know that what I do implicates the buildings and the streets directly. It's not an autonomous artwork that's put there. Somehow, through ornament, very specific imagery and icons are admitted into the building directly, and I think that's the appeal. That the icon is not a piece of art that you put in front of the building, it's something that becomes a part of the building. So the developer, the building owner and the architect sense the need for the both the icon and incorporating it into the building directly.

I know you did an interesting set of projects recently at Kentlands and Lakelands that we could call suburban. What do you think of the future of suburban ornament and contextual art, and do you think it requires the density of a city?

I think that it has got a powerful place. If you think of the cities of the past that were built out of nowhere — like the Roman military outpost cities, like the Spanish colonial cities, or like the American main streets — all of them were distinguished by ornament. The Roman cities were built out of a square with a government, a palace, and so on. In the Spanish colonial cities, they were cities for the Gods, they had a cathedral, and a presidio, and all this sort of thing. In the American wild, woolly, western cities, they had false cornices that pushed out over the street to make the street into a room, to enclose it and wrap it.

I'll tell you a fantastic example: after the Chicago Fire when they rebuilt Chicago. The original Chicago was a typical American city. It had a green, and churches, and town halls on little square garden plazas, and the fire was so enormous, there was so much rubble, and they had to rebuild so quickly that they didn't have time to build any of those traditional things. So what became the defining feature of the city—and I'm quoting Tom Beeby to some extent on this one—was the street-level ornament, which you can still see along Michigan Avenue and Dearborn Street.

That is an example of something where ornament sprung up partially because it was accessible, it was fast and it was meaningful.

What they did was simply do the old Western Main street thing, which was that they built buildings which had twenty-foot high mezzanine levels, and they had these fantastic storefronts and doors and friezes and stuff, and then after the twenty-foot level, they would just throw in a lot of rooms, and went up as high as they could go, then they'd top it off with something. This is exactly what Sullivan did with the Wainwright Building in St. Louis.

So what you're describing is perfect even for newer developments. It's useful as long as people are walking around on the ground-or even driving.

And I'll go further, I'll say that a lot of the Neo-Traditional towns that pioneers like Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk have fostered, a lot of them have proceeded without urban ornament, and in a sense, that's what's wrong with them. There was a feeling that if you just put up a house, if the houses were typical houses, as they are in Kentlands, with their picket fences and their setbacks, and maybe one little community building, then you could create a community. But what was sacrificed in that attitude was a real sense of urbanity which is usually made up of either formal ornament, of the kind that we had on city halls and churches and storefronts, but also the kind of pizzazz that comes from commercial ornament, especially in the U.S. It's gone, it's not there.

It's seen as ugly or unsightly.

It is, and most architects today don't know how to use ornament, because they feel that you have to copy it directly from the past. But the copies are so thin, the copies are so weak: that's what happened in the 80s. They're so paper-thin that they're not that interesting! So I would propose new ornament or new art, something that is living.

What about things like landscape art or earthworks? Or other forms of freestanding art that have an effect on a place's built environment, but are not ornament built into a particular building.

Other forms of markers. I think they're all there. I think they have a future. One of my favorite comparisons is the difference between Segal's Love Story and Shakespeare's Hamlet, where there's one plot in Segal's Love Story and sixteen in Hamlet! I would make the argument that the reason Shakespeare is better than Segal is because Shakespeare was able to put a tremendous amount of stuff in his stories, right? So that you had everything from a kind of graveyard humor, to history, to mystery stories, to actual political narrative, all in one story. And I would suggest, even though you can't always do this, that a truly great work of literature tends to have that degree of intensity and density.

Now ornament was one of several art forms — there's landscape, there's freestanding autonomous art... There's nothing new about autonomous art: the Greeks, for example, had a statue of Athena, who was like a big plop art thing sitting in the middle of a temple. So they had all that. But they also had ornament, they also had landscape: if the Acropolis isn't a landscape what isn't!

So it's the Hamlet equivalent: if you have sixteen things going on, it's a helluva lot better.

A helluva lot better! And if you come in to a modern town and — I'm a big fan of Maya Lin, but I think if you just put like a wavy grass thing in there and you consider that you've done the job, I don't think you have! I think put it all in, and what's wonderful about putting it all in is that people will argue about it, and like and dislike it, and things will work itself out. The American skyscraper worked itself out — the first ones that were built were dogs! They were silly buildings: architects didn't quite know how to get them up in the air and put markers on them, but they figured it out after a while. And when they got to the end game, they had some real beauties out there.

I have two further questions. Because of the discussion of New Urbanism, there's this rediscovery of downtown heritage sites, and they're revisiting the downtown and refurbishing the ornament. Cities are using old architecture and ornament as their trump card now because it's preexisting, and where it doesn't exist, they're sort of pasting it on. What do you think is the future of these downtowns? Is this movement just the fad of the day, or something real that will make a lasting difference in downtowns?

Well, I think [downtowns] are back to normal.... Well, what's normal? I heard recently that preservation was a negative movement because they were protecting these old things because they were afraid that the new things wouldn't be interesting. That's one reason for extreme preservation. I would hope that extreme preservation would give way to "let's preserve the good stuff and get on with it." But I think that the fixing up of the old centers of these towns is great. That's why people travel. That's where tourism comes, when people go to see these ornaments. If you don't have them, who goes — who would want to go. I mean seriously, just think quickly of a number of box cities. Who would travel there? Who would want to wake up and look out the window? Who would be attracted to come two thousand miles? It's got to be the ornaments and the landscapes and the artworks, it's got to be, what else can it be? The food, maybe! If you're taking an architectural tour, you don't go for the food! It seems to me that's fairly obvious: if people go to China, they don't go and look at the new housing projects, they go to the Forbidden City! You know, face it!

This segues into my next question: in Connecticut they've recently built these gigantic gambling casinos, Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods. They're facsimile, fantasy wonderlands, but they're obviously a great marketing move because everyone visits them. That certainly is an embracing of ornament as entertainment. What do you think of it as the new entertainment industry?

That's a good question. I don't know for sure, but suppose that Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun didn't have any ornament. Suppose it was a Holiday Inn of some sort — I really wonder if they could advertise themselves even in an attractive way! I doubt it. I can almost hear the criticism, you know: "It's bland," or "It's not too interesting," or "Why go there?"

This is themed goofiness, but there's something to be said for that because it is entertaining. And it's amazing, even if it isn't all that substantive.

[It's not too different from] carnivals in the nineteenth century, if you think of Tivoli Gardens or you think of the Moulin Rouge — all of it's good. It's back to Shakespeare, we should have all the bawdy, fun stuff. Why not?

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