Exploring the Work of Edward S. Casey

Giving Voice to Place, Memory, and Imagination

Edited by

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Including interviews with Edward S. Casey

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Place(s) of Ornament

Kent Bloomer

Recognizing ornament as a valuable property of visual language is daunting today. The study of its legacy and function was eliminated from the curriculums of modernist art and architecture schools in the greater half of the twentieth century. In the first ten years of the twenty-first century, however, the subject is beginning to be reconsidered as an important missing link in the disciplines of design and architecture.

This short chapter reviews ways in which ornament performs and informs when its figures are situated within or upon the things being ornamented. A rigorous understanding of ornament's essential visual makeup, indeed its visual alphabet and grammar, is well beyond the scope of these pages, although some small sketches are included to illustrate ideas crafted in the text. Unfortunately, a widely held misunderstanding of ornament was set in motion by the beginning of the twentieth century when the subject became lexicographically defined as a minor decorative art,[1] that is, an "esthetic" detail meant to provide a superficial amount of pleasure and elaboration, rather than belonging to a powerful visual language.

A comprehensive procedure today would be to carefully analyze ornament's original and typical content throughout its own unique history, searching for its universal figuration and grammatical structure. This encyclopedic strategy is traceable to Owen Jones's seminal *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) in which detailed examples of world ornament were meticulously illustrated and presented as possessing a remarkably common alphabet with conventional systems of extension and distribution. However, the *Grammar* did not sufficiently explore the syntactic meanings derived from different ways of emplacing ornament within various structures and settings such as the gates, buildings, and bowls being ornamented. By examining ornament's visual performance within Edward Casey's discourse on the phenomenology of place, both its primal function and its grammar may be better understood. Casey's distinctions between the forms of "place" and "space" realize that a "place" requires the presence of at least two contingent regions while a "space" can be complete as a singular region. Thus while a place requires physical or temporal boundaries which necessarily address subordinate spaces, a space per se can be (indeed has largely been) imaginatively dislocated from place to become an immaterial void independent of physical contingency and capable of infinite extension.

Elements of ornament, distinguished from the greater panoply of decoration, can only perform when they are intimately combined with *instruments of practical use*. In Western culture and arguably in most cultures ornament is distributed along thresholds or between coherent parts of things, although occasionally, more likely in oriental cosmology, figures of ornament may appear at the center of things. Its primordial figures, identified by an exhaustive research of world ornament from antiquity to the present, are geometrically founded upon a remarkably small, yet recurring set of meandering, ambivalent, and repeatable shapes such as zigzags, scrolls, fractals, and interlacings. Those rudimentary figures, when further developed, often become implicated with forms of natural life such as the radiant lotus or the serpent.

Consider for example a picture frame encrusted with rocaille (a fantastic idiom of eighteenth-century European ornament) with its shell forms, splashes, scrolls, and foliations (Figure 8.1, left). The turbulence of the rocaille, distributed along the rigid linear axis of the physical frame, addresses the regions belonging to both the picture and a portion of the wall surrounding the frame. Coincident to addressing those regions the ornament is also addressed by them, its lively shapes appearing to be enforced by the bearing of its surroundings like the forms of a beach are impacted by the colliding substances of land and sea.

If the picture within is removed (Figure 8.1, center), the rococo frame continues, in a lesser way, to ornament both regions of the wall. It is activated by and reacts to the state of "differentiation," (i.e. the tension of differences between the sizes and shapes of the regions both inside and outside the empty frame).

By contrast, if the rocaille, while remaining on the wall, is removed from the structural frame and conflated to become a compacted cluster of its own convoluted shapes, it becomes less implicated with that wall (Figure 8.1, right). No longer performing as a

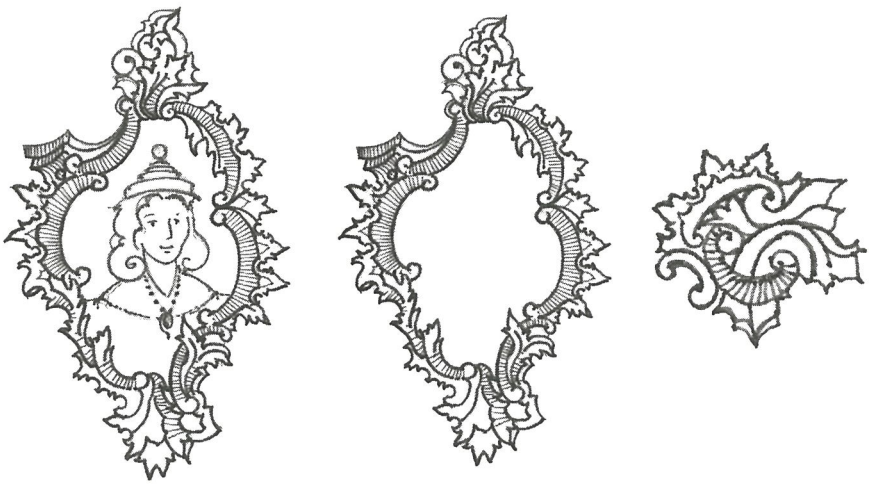

Figure 8.1 *Left to right*: rococo frame with head; rococo frame without head; rocaille cluster on wall. Sketches by Kent Bloomer.

mediator, the compacted rocaille assumes the autonomy of an isolated body centered within a singular and visually recessive background. It would most likely appear to be an independent, self-sufficient, and self-activating cluster of curious shapes. It is now a "center"-piece rather than a median strip. Removed from the physical frame, the rocaille has become an autonomous body to be (or not to be) ornamented in its own right.

Unfortunately (for the recent history of ornament) autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient works, when perfected, became an ideal aspiration of "fine art" and fine art's evolution into the modernist art and architecture of the twentieth century. In the same period critics and professionals, who classified ornament exclusively within the lexicon of art, declared it to be a minor art because it visually depended upon other things. Major modernist artworks privileged greater *self*-expression and freedom from place as they became more portable and appropriate for location in vacuous interiors like the monotonous white walls of exhibition spaces found in modern art galleries and contemporary art museums. The compacted rocaille, situated in emptiness, might be exalted as a "free" art object, an autonomous painting or sculpture capable of independent artistic expression by being liberated from its original reliance upon contiguous shapes and forces. By contrast, ornament's visual content is actually *empowered* by physically engaging its supports and useful containers.

How then can we explain the apparently "free" nature, (i.e. the meandering, multiplying, zigzagging, radiating, and spiraling that typify the activity of ornament's figuration) if it is so dependent upon the authority and firmness of immediately impinging things? Is ornament's visual exuberance merely the excessive product of a lively artistic elaboration of a mundane thing being ornamented? Or does its articulation of a lively and even turbulent condition of dependence per se manifest a much greater and pervasive reality in which the all-pervading and interdependent forces of nature are manifested?

The project of ornament is to visibly situate mundane things (like gates, buildings, bowls, and picture frames) within the world-at-large, (i.e. to orient their practical appearances further outward, or inward, and away from exclusive expressions of their local identity and common work). Such visual orientations are towards the forces that make up the environment, the macrocosm and microcosm. The world-at-large was considered in antiquity to be the cosmos. "But the Greeks adopted a term for world . . . derived from 'ornament,' on account of the diversity of elements and the beauty of the heavenly bodies. They call it κοσμος, which means 'ornament.'"[2] Their "world," their ornament, included "the sky, the sun, the moon, the air, the seas," which they thought to be in "eternal motion," an immensity in which all things are ordered, beautiful, circulating, interdependent, and situated together.[3]

Situating a practical thing such as a gate away from its location and into the cosmos, to make it cosmic in whole cloth, would be to make it unrecognizable as a particular gate. Its elements would be put in motion and its defining features would be dispersed. However, by *embedding* an amount of cosmos *into* the gate, and thus making cosmos a visible portion of the gate's ordinary constitution, the gate's local identity is both reinforced and expanded. Indeed, embedding cosmos-*qua*-ornament into a gate demands that the fundamental physical form of the gate remains visually explicit in order to pinpoint definite sites in which to admit and to hold an added amount of the

world. Without explicit sites of contact, incorporating ornament into something would be dysfunctional and chaotic.

Yet embedding an amount of cosmos into a concrete thing, an amount that is visibly absent, proposes importing an abundance of elements and fitting them into the limited terrain of, say, a bowl or a building. Such an abundance would be impossible to accommodate unless only summations, synopses, and evocative fragments are admitted. It is telling, therefore, that from its beginnings the content of ornament has been to express movements, transformations, and periodicity rather than portray the wholeness of any one thing (although whole entities like plants, portraits, and symbols are often incorporated as auxiliaries or icons). Consider that the ancients viewed the cosmos from an apparently stationary platform from which they could gaze at stars circulating overhead. The "here" stood still while the "there" moved and thus ornament visualizes an amount of motion *out there*.

Primordial figures

A small set of figures provides the preliminary geometric steps to generate cosmos in a particular site. They constitute its visual foundation by immediately registering and making visible the combined shape of multiple forces imagined to converge at the site.

It is telling that a simple zigzag, one of ornament's most powerful and recurring figures, can immediately articulate the meshing of actual and imagined forces occurring both inside and outside the border of a rug (Figure 8.2, left). To the beholder, the zigzagging line simultaneously visualizes an interlocking of two different regions on either side of its path.

The fractal, another primordial figure found in the ancient lotus, acanthus, and gothic tracery (Figure 8.2, center), traces the multiplication of forces undergoing a transition from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous and back to a homogeneous state.[4] The fractal traces the shapes and extents of dispersion of one thing, one substance, or

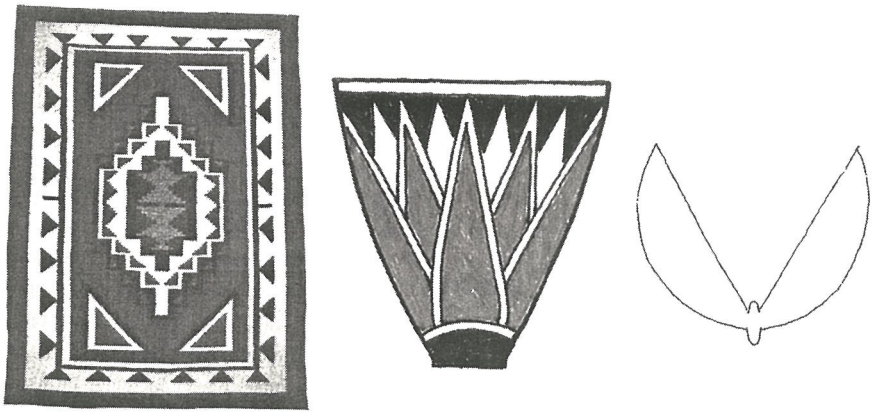

Figure 8.2 *Left to right*: Navajo rug; Egyptian vessel, following Owen Jones (1856); germ seed, following Louis Sullivan (1924). Sketches by Kent Bloomer.

one state transforming into another. With a fractal multiplication of lines medieval tracery displays life-on-earth transforming into life-in-heaven. Its multiplications manifest a process of metamorphosis.

Louis Sullivan's primordial figure is the Y-shape of the "germ seed" (Figure 8.2, right).[5] Like two cotyledon leaves, it provides a visual form for growth that develops into his figures of ornament immersed within the triangles, squares, and pentagons in which the Y-form is contained.

Ornament's limited taxonomy of basic figures, when situated in sites of juxtaposition, give visual shape to the phenomenon of transition between here-and-there, now-and-then, inside-and-outside, and a merger of the micro and macro-cosmos.

Consider the ancient keys, the basic classic figures of ornament that came into being during epic formations of three super cultures. One key was centered around ancient Greece, one around China, and one around Mesoamerica. All three keys (Figure 8.3) contain spirals describing rotation from edges to centers and back to edges.Their repetitions along pathways indicate the periodic recurrence of events such as the bud-blossom-bud sequence in ancient Egyptian ornament. Although the geometric formations of each key reveal a unique cultural vision of the cosmos, the astonishing similarity of each (granting that they originated independently from one another) is a reality that reinforces the notion that the most enduring figures of ornament are rooted in primordial forms. Their gestures (i.e. the trajectories of the line work in all three keys) are recognizable to all. They perform legibly like the visual tropes of facial expressions and the basic arm-hand-finger movements of sign language. Each of those visually powerful and meandering figures has phenomenally controlled many thousands years of design (*Das Nachleben der Antike*—the afterlife of the antique world)[6] without losing the grip of their original formations.

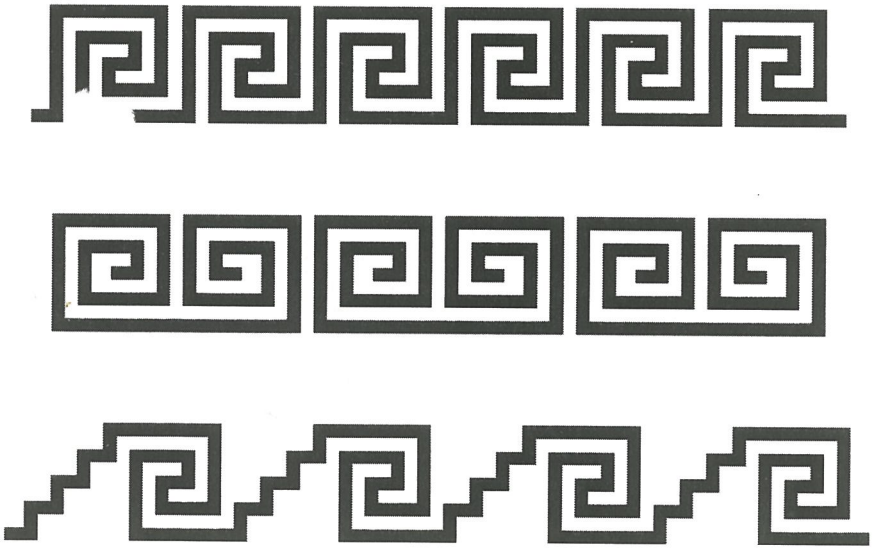

Figure 8.3 Greek, Chinese, and Mayan key bands. Sketches by Kent Bloomer.

Ornament's primordial figures are only compact matrices, visual catalysts that are particularly suited to diagramming the convoluted physics of motion. Like the numerical science of physics, the visual "science" of ornament attempts to express patterns of pushes, pulls, moments of change, and climax that govern things, producing a taxonomy of their distinct visible shapes. Its rhythms evoke the cycles of stars and nature.

An attraction to a complexity of forces is evident in the way the primordial figures converge with physical bodies. Initially contacting outer edges or joints between subordinate parts, they focus upon a body's dynamic constitution (i.e. the joinery that cannot be artificially added, subtracted, or perceived as being auxiliary to the body's basic formation).

They settle at places where the physical activity of components is concluded (Figure 8.4); sites that define what the body does as well as what the body is. They

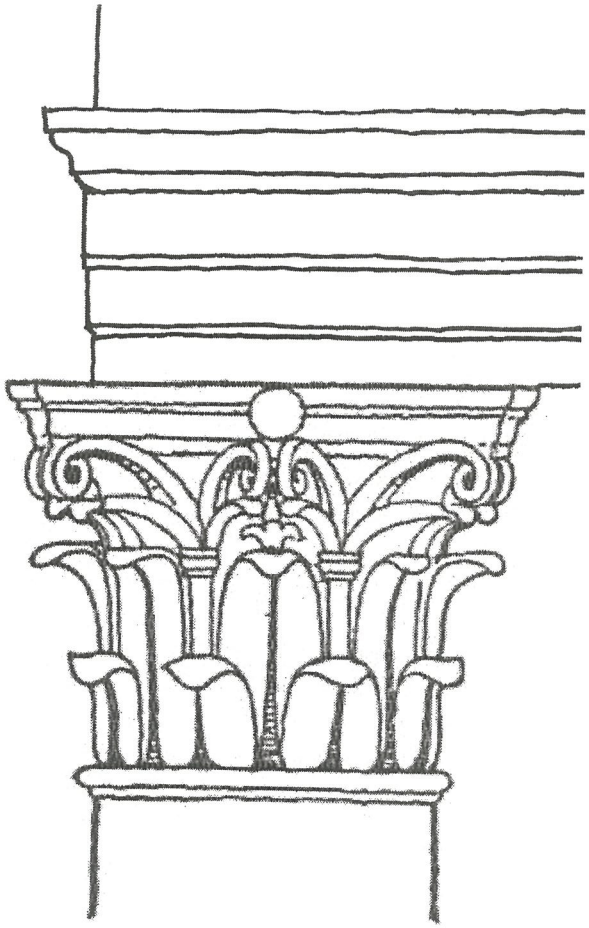

Figure 8.4 Corinthian capitol. Sketch by Kent Bloomer.

seek moments in which different kinds of work performed by a variety of forces are conjoined. Therein ornament's figuration imaginatively mimics a dance of forces which, performing in concert, is imagined to be at play.

Parts of things, conjoined side by side, contact one another along their edges away from their centers, along thresholds that in themselves are without weight, or thicknesses analogous to the immaterial lines drawn upon a map to locate the borders of regions. Actual borders can be excavated to become receptacles into which ornament's figuration "creates as much space as may be necessary to it,"[7] a created region that may evoke a greater distance from the centers of immediately adjacent things. Within such receptacles the most basic figures of ornament can change size (position and shape) to manifest the immanent confluence of binding and separating forces imagined to be immediately at work. The emerging figures can be enlarged, further developed, multiplied, and transformed (Figure 8.5); indeed they can be "awakened"[8] to become entangled with other forces imagined to exist in the world out there.

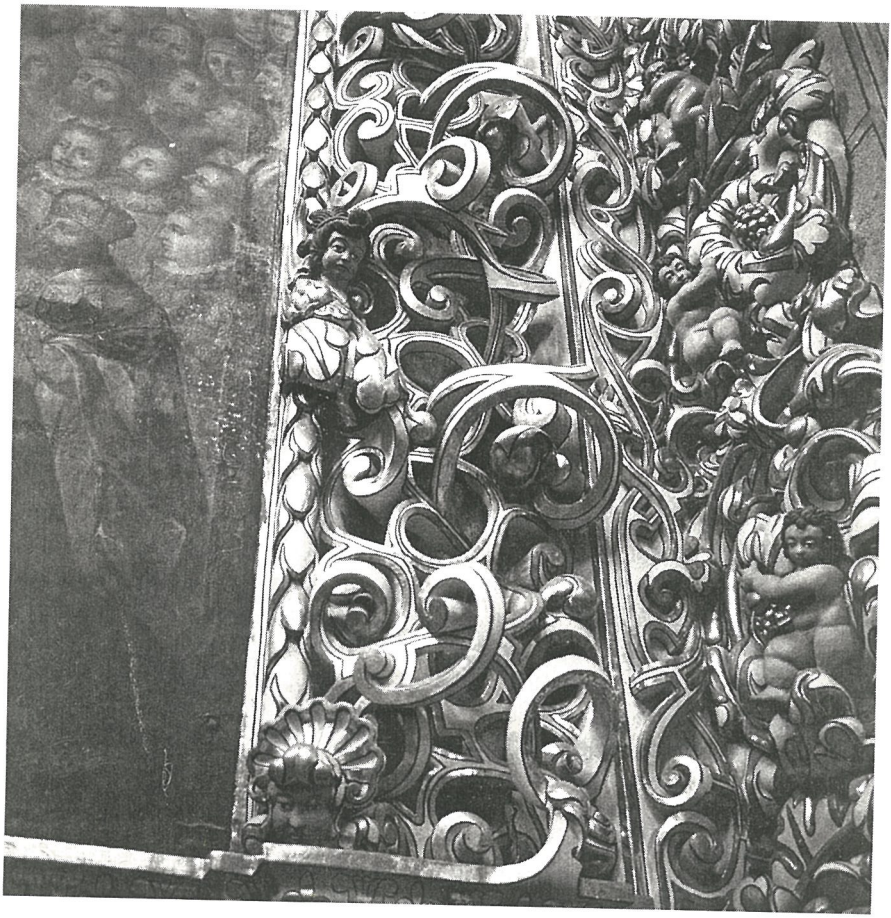

Figure 8.5 Frieze, Capilla del Rosario, Templo de Santo Domingo, Puebla, Mexico. Photo by Kent Bloomer.

Ornament's capacity to articulate the interplay of local and distant forces would be dampened if its basic figures made their inaugural contact at the static "dead" centers rather than the dynamic edges of a body's structural components. Settling into the undifferentiated and typically homogeneous centers of individual parts or regions would merely proclaim, reiterate, and elaborate upon innate and fixed local features. The product would be like that of a tattoo bestowing luster upon a forearm rather than a wrist, a sort of decorative idolatry, like a Nazi insignia, that would bolster the importance of a particular body part rather than the body "at work." Decorating the center of an individual component of construction, such as a brick apart from a brick wall, would be a declaration of the brick's independence from the life of the wall-world.

If a figure of ornament were posited in the dead center it would not function as ornament but be perceived as an autonomous sign, a symbol, a pretension, or a medallion. However, one exception to the solitude of the autonomous figure is in the appropriate wearing of it. Despite its portability and apparent self-sufficiency, an ornamented article of jewelry is capable of "adorning" a body when it is provisionally located in critical sites of juxtaposition such as a necklace situated around a neck. Adornment is add-ornament, an auxiliary and portable condition of ornament.

The gridded surface

Ornament may be distributed by grids located upon the flat surfaces of walls and ceilings. Understood as being "regions," walls may appear to contradict the proposition that ornament only occurs at edges of regions. Yet the architectural function of a wall as a divider actually reinforces the proposition. Walls provide potent moments of three-dimensional juxtaposition, albeit a juxtaposing of *volumes of space* rather than of *components of construction*. They are planar boundaries between the inside and outside of a building, or between rooms, and thus they are situated between contingent domains rather than between conjoined solids. A wall dividing a volume is analogous to a picture frame dividing a plane.

Consider that today's wall rarely draws attention to its internal supporting structure. Interior walls are usually silent and white, signifying a oneness of space rather than a two-ness of place. One of the ancient responses to the silence of crude walls was to overlay them with regularized shapes. In Isidore of Seville's seventh-century etymologies, "decoration is anything added to the [structural core of] buildings for the sake of ornament *and* embellishment such as ceiling panels set off in gold and wall panels of rich marbles and colorful paintings."[9] Decoration addresses the entire inventory of architectural minutiae, including the ordering of panels, moldings, materials, and ornament. It also arranges paintings, light figures, furniture, and other elements of décor. Unlike the cosmic project of ornament, decoration is primarily devoted to an overall social expression of "decorum" belonging to the manners and habits of a particular constituency. In procedures of design the locating of ornament must be subordinate to and entangled within decoration's fashionable authority.

The grid, in both the ancient and the modern age, may order the distribution of ornament. In antiquity, the regularities of the grid were known in the arts of weaving and agriculture and were materially formulated in Pythagorean tile patterns. The immaterial coordinates within a Cartesian grid also facilitate the generation and perception of symmetry operations (the dynamic patterns of translation, rotation, and reflection) critical to the development of complex figures. Whereas it was Descartes's project to mathematize geometry, it has been ornament's to colonize it (Figure 8.6)."The Cartesian grid is the basis for the 'decorative field' needing only the borders of a wall, floor, or ceiling which contain [its] expansion towards the infinite and which afford it its magnetic presence as a field."[10] In modern design Jespersen considers it to be the basic "utilitarian armature [to be] adorned with ornament in whole or in part."[11]

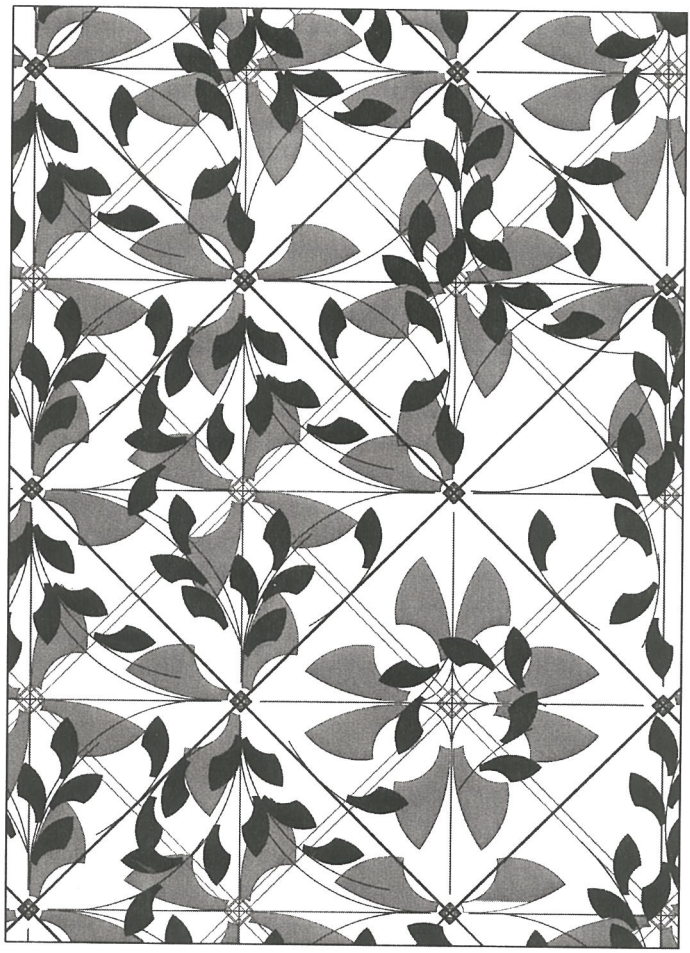

Figure 8.6 Ceiling ornament. Drawing by Ioana Barac, printed with permission.

But Cartesian geometry is neither a material substance nor a concrete place in which physical force is exerted. Can such an immaterial entity substantially emplace ornament? The grid is only a virtual armature, an evanescent subdivider that is positioned between the material surface of the wall and an amount of the cosmos. It performs more like one of ornament's basic figures rather than a material thing being ornamented. Often the visible coordinates and subdivisions of the grid, like the alternations within a zigzag, are overtaken by the sensuality of the emerging ornament. Yet ornament's rhythmic motions remain disciplined by the grid like songs and poems remain disciplined by meter. Performing as a virtual super-matrix its subdivisions provide "compact matrices," which give birth to an amount of cosmos. Indeed, as a foundation for ornament's figuration, the grid distributes ornament over material surfaces.

Still, after ornament is configured within the matrices of a virtual grid, which is an immaterial rather than a physical foundation, what can prevent it from becoming disassociated from the structural wall or prevent it from ultimately becoming perceived as an independent work of decoration or fine art, an autonomous entity liberated from a dependence upon the root physicality of the primary "thing" being ornamented?

Consider that a virtual grid may also serve as a rational measure of the material wall. Like Isidore's material panels, it can provide elementary steps "for the sake of ornament" to be located congruently upon the bedrock of raw construction. By respecting the actual forces, dimensions, volumes, sizes, and edges constituting a material place of juxtaposition, the grid only adds a layer of complexity capable of becoming systematically entangled with subordinate zigzags, fractals, keys, foliations, serpents, and radiations that fulfill the figurative project of ornament. It thus performs as an actual extension of the wall's physical form by initiating a transformation from a measure of the wall to an intricate veil between inside and outside. Understood as a "decorative field," the grid is particularly suited to displaying motion within the static forms of modern buildings. While its virtual geometry is not necessarily more powerful or eloquent than the geometry governing the components of construction, its severe regularity is more capable of becoming "entangled" with a plethora of actual and imaginary forces apart from construction. Figures of ornament within a grid appear to be more everywhere at once and less restrained by gravity, a release that may also appear to dissolve the material wall. However, in the work of great ornamenters like Owen Jones and Louis Sullivan, there is neither a disembodiment nor a loss of primal physicality. Instead, their work achieves a repose or a "dynamic equilibrium"[12] between things we may simultaneously touch and imagine.

Superposition

Great works of ornament, our necessary guides, are meant to orchestrate together the visibilities of here-and-there, we-and-they, movement-and-rest, ornament-and-its-holder, the intimate-and-the-immense. They do so by superpositioning those distinctions together within the same place at the same time, rather than by synthesizing, blending in, or otherwise obfuscating their differences. While the differences between "here" and

"there" can be initially mediated by basic figures (such as the zigzag and the grid), the final product of such a mediation is not meant to be the mediator per se. Ornament does not produce an alternate entity, a symbol, a work of art, or a resolution in the sense of reforming distinct un-likenesses by distilling them under the singular authority of a third nature. It serves to position the immediate and the immense together in the same place while keeping the spectacles of both domains essentially intact and interactive. As Casey writes, the "cosmologic deals with the elemental interpenetration of simultaneously present entities rather than [only] their succession from one stage to another" (*FP*, 5). Thus the purpose of visually situating cosmos in the matrices of earthly things is not to privilege vastness, mediation, or intimacy, but rather to temporarily emplace all of them together, that is, to "hold" an amount of cosmos nearby for the time being.

The history of Western architecture presents at least two ways to co-position ornament with the elements and facades of buildings. The classic procedure is found in triadic formations such as the vertical ordering of a base, a shaft, and a capital (and the subsets of that order) (Figure 8.7, left). The composition is a corporeal one in which the base is mundane, the shaft a force of ascension, and the capitals, pediments, or ogival tracery are the principal regions of ornament. It is a metaphor of the *upright* human body acting as a holder of cosmos. In classic architecture the whole is a harmonic kit of body parts and joinery organized by rigid systems of proportion with perfection in mind. As a consequence classical geometric organization tends to privilege stability over the celestial motions of cosmos. It is a resolution that has provoked periodic riots, escape

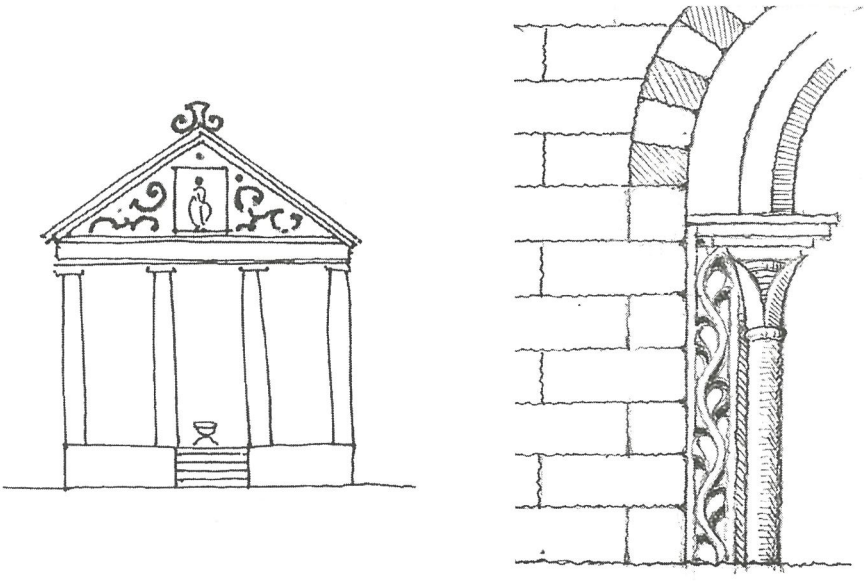

Figure 8.7 *Left to right*: Greek temple. Sketch by Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore; Detail, Oxford Museum of Natural History. Sketch by Kent Bloomer.

attempts, or takeovers such as the fiery tracery of flamboyant Gothic, monstrosities, the splashing of rococo, and the psychedelic polychrome of Victorian walls.

Ruskin, opposing the perfection and rigidity of classical harmonics, proposed a quasi-Gothic procedure that would privilege an "active rigidity"[13] between parts. Legible elements of fantastic ornament would be positioned *side by side* with bare elements of construction (Figure 8.7, right) so that "when the mind is informed beyond the possibility of mistake as to the true [the basic structural and material] nature of things, the affecting of it with a contrary impression, however distinct, is no dishonesty, but on the contrary, a legitimate appeal to the imagination."[14] Ruskin's procedure is more dyadic than triadic.

The utopian modernist designers of the twentieth century dismissed such "two-(or more)-ness" altogether in favor of a oneness wrought from a process of synthesizing differences into *homogenous expressions of sameness*. They foregrounded a formal and all-pervading continuity of "space" over the explicit heterogeneity of "place." The consequence of eliminating ornament's explicit *otherness* was to destroy legacies capable of simultaneously presenting a visual "equiprimordiality of primary terms" (*FP*, 337).

Discarding a capacity to simultaneously express both this-*and*-that plus now-*and*-then within the fabric of a single work of architecture has also fueled the schism between the imaginative functions of art as distinguished from the practical functions of architecture. In the twentieth century, individual works of art, whether major or minor, became expected to explore the imaginary while the practices of design, particularly architecture, became expected to make visible Ruskin's provisional "true [and immediate] nature of things."

The classical and Ruskinian grammars of architecture remain brilliantly able to express both states. Both grammars can still vividly manifest the spectacle of something on earth emplaced within a world of arboreal and celestial motions. Yet neither could deliver a *mechanistic* unity, the quaint scientific ideal that foreclosed locating two different states of being in the same place at the same time.

But the mechanistic world picture is losing its luster, its laws becoming suspect even in the modern science of physics traditionally endowed to speculate upon the complex workings of bodies and the cosmos. Aside from the physical sciences, how can we explain our psychological capacity to simultaneously imagine, analyze, and remember two (or more) places or activities at once? As Casey's work reminds us, the synthetics of modernism, with its avoidance of ornament's "heterotopology," has both standardized and diminished the millennial wonders of a cosmopolitan city (*FP*, 337).

We must ask therefore, what are today's elements of ornament and where can they be placed in the fabric of today's cities? The first answer is ready-made by allowing ornament's universal alphabet with its self-evident primordial figures, to be its first defining property. The scope and forms of its vocabulary are limited and have remained fundamentally unchanged for untold thousands of years. Its rhythmic cycles of extension, its periodicity, can visualize temporal phenomenon. Indeed, ornament's

typical and familiar appearance still remains publicly comprehensible as evocations of a larger world.

Finding the local place(s) to distribute ornament is more challenging in the conventional construction of modern buildings so radically transformed from the architecture of the millennium. Columns are now buried and solid walls are dissolved into glitter. The homogenizing of height and weight has diminished the architect's ability to express gravity. But we can still play by the old rules of ornament because there are always entryways, thresholds, sequences and potentially magnificent partitions between regions. Some of them are more eventful than others and thus more capable of holding ornament.

Buildings still touch the ground and the sky. Small useful things (furniture, gates, and pavilions) can hold and radiate cosmos. Decorative fields can be shaped or inscribed upon the hard materials of silent floors, walls, and ceilings to provide matrices capable of nourishing ornament in the most magnetic sites of human, natural, or mechanical interaction (Figure 8.8). It is within the firmness, indeed the resistance, of those material moments-of-juxtaposition that the imagined meanderings of cosmos, superpositioned and entangled with the physical facts of earthly substance, may ground the fleeting world-at-large and thereby reveal the primacy of place over space.

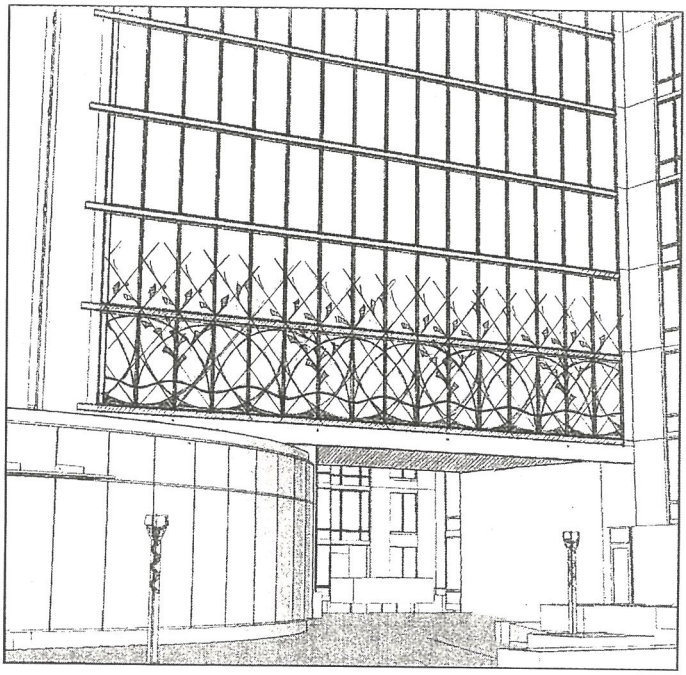

Figure 8.8 Public space, Bethesda, Maryland. Drawing by Kent Bloomer.

Notes

1 Kresten Jespersen, "The Owen Jones Yale Lecture" (lecture presented to Arch. 1216, the Yale School of Architecture, New Haven, CT, Fall Semester, 2012).
2 Saint Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 271.
3 Ibid.
4 Emer O'Daly, "The Art of Roughness" (unpublished essay, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 2010).
5 Louis H. Sullivan, *A System of Architectural Ornament* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1924), 9 and plates 1–4.
6 E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 181.
7 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 65.
8 Sullivan, *A System of Architectural Ornament*, plate 4.
9 Isidore, *The Etymologies*, 379.
10 Jespersen, "The Owen Jones Yale Lecture."
11 Ibid.
12 Louis H. Sullivan, "Emotional Architecture as Compared with Intellectual," in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings* (New York: Dover, 1979), 191–213.
13 John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981), 131.
14 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961), 41.