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ORNAMENT: The Chosen Home of Metamorphosis

Architecture provides shelter and frames human activities. It also extends man's bodily experience and feelings of habitation. Its ornament invites and produces visual signs of man's unconscious desires and dreams as it becomes involuted within the project of building. Yet in the twentieth century, especially in the world of design, the term "ornament" has been trivialized and debased. As a consequence the ornamenting of building has been largely rejected in modern architectural practice. I will propose that the difficulty and even the resistance to understanding ornament in architecture in recent years may be evidence of a pervasive condition or cognitive style governing the very way we think about ourselves, our objects, and the places we seek to create. I will suggest that the cancellation of ornament from the discipline of architectural thought and criticism in recent times may be diminishing our personal and collective potential to experience important formations of the imagination and thus to enjoy the vitality, indeed the mythology of the places in which we live and work. I will further propose that the repression of ornament in architecture (and I will call its academic cancellation an instance of repression) has effectively obfuscated an entire domain, a mental place that we might enter and exit to our benefit. Henri Focillon, the founder of Yale's History of Art Dept, called that place the chosen home of metamorphosis.

I invite this audience to consider my claim that the pejorative treatment of architectural ornament in modern times does indicate the existence of a repressive code of thought.

But what do I mean by the term ornament? What are some of the features that identify ornament and distinguish it from other properties of art, architecture and thought. And how can we call it a place or a domain?

The terms "Ornament" and "decoration" are so frequently substituted for one another in contemporary parlance that current dictionaries acknowledge, at one level of definition, their interchangeability in common speech. However, their etymologies, as well as their historic treatments in western theories and practice of architecture reveal some critical distinctions.

Ornament in very early usage was considered to be a useful accessory or adjunct to a ceremony. Later on, in the fifteenth century, Alberti pointed to the figure of the ancient Roman column located upon a wall as the "principal ornament" for an important building. Ornament has always been treated as being somewhat adjunctive or adventive in nature, whether in the archaic sense of being an accessory or in the nineteenth century sense of bestowing an amount of "beauty" upon an object. The most frequently employed synonym for the term "ornament" in modern times is "embellishment" which means that an additional amount of some thing has come to another thing from elsewhere.

The term "decoration", on the other hand, is descended from decorum and the decorous which is a more general condition marked by propriety, good taste, good conduct, and good appearance. To decorate is to arrange things in a manner that provides a pleasing and "esthetic" effect. In comparison

to ornament, decoration is treated more frequently as a system of arrangement while ornament brings to mind the presence of elements pervading or altering an arrangement. In this respect, we can say that a tasteful distribution of ornament may be decoration; but we cannot so easily say that a horrific distribution of ornament is necessarily decorative. Ornament is licensed to be terrifying as well as gracious. The fact that ornament has some intrusive properties is evidenced by the attitude of those who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries moved to condemn architectural ornament by declaring it to be impure and excessive. How could they assign those attributes to the decorous articles of good taste and good manners? It is telling that the practice of the decorator, especially the interior decorator, ascended during the last one hundred and fifty years while no equivalent profession of "ornamenter" came into being. It also seems that "ornamenting" rather than "decorating" became more threatening to the practice of architecture in recent times.

The notion that ornament brings some otherness into an object or place proposes a means of informing which, like speech, may communicate, suggest, or manifest ideas although, unlike speech, it must inform by directly depositing ideas within the material substance or bodies of objects and places.

Pursuing the "speech" analogy I will propose that the "vocabulary" units and the phrases of architectural ornament are the intelligible figures like spirals, stars, and foliations that imply or suggest the presence of forces, events, and things that are extrinsic to the most economic forms of the object. Because the content of those figures must partially originate outside the intrinsic structural details of the object of ornament the intrinsic details innate to that object cannot merely be elaborated or puffed up to become the ornament for that object. Indeed ornaments are often mistakenly characterized as elaborations of the intrinsic structure such as a repetitive row of bolts or the intricate joinery governing brickwork. Yet, it would be equally mistaken to suggest that ornament can merely represent the forces, events and things which originate exclusively outside the necessary elements of construction. In the matter of architecture Ornaments are intermediate figures that simultaneously allude to things originating both inside and outside the facts of construction. In this respect ornament depends upon a merger or a convention between two or more formations or things of distinct ancestry.

Consider the way words are organized into a system of communication. In spoken language the vocabulary consists of words; the grammar/syntax is the way of organizing those words into meaningful relationships with one another capable of producing statements; and the means of transmission consists of communicating those statements from one person to another by speaking aloud or writing letters on a flat surface. In the "language" of ornament the vocabulary consists of a repertoire of suggestive, allusive, and evocative figures like the spirals, stars, and foliations. The grammar/syntax depends upon the inter-active arrangement between those figures as well as the ways that their arrangements are distributed upon and relate to the terrain of the objects of ornament. The means of transmission exists in their visibly belonging to the object of ornamentation be it a utensil, a hat, or a building. In other words, while spoken words can fly through the air the visual "words" of ornament must be transmitted by the body of a useful object.

This body-dependency was underscored when Henri Focillon suggested that "ornamental art [was] perhaps the first alphabet of human thought to come into close contact with [physical] space". Yet it is precisely in the necessity to make close contact with something or some place that an elegant correspondence between ornament and speech ends and an important distinction begins. Speech is a thoroughly portable means of informing. Because the vocabulary of ornament is connected to and

motivated by the particularities of the object or place being ornamented it belongs to an alphabet that cannot evolve into self-contained letters, words, and phrases. Modern speech, experiences a virtual freedom from place, whereas ornament benefits from a dependency upon all functional, material, symbolic, and esthetic properties of a particular location. Separated from their objects or places of ornamentation ornaments cease to be ornaments as they become autonomous symbols or artifacts.

Systems of ornament seek the edges, openings, and districts of the places in which they might constellate their repertoire of figures. (1) Compare, for example, how words and ornaments are differently located on a page; the former occupying a tier of parallel slots whereas the latter often run around the edges. Words are confined by channels into graphic units of common size Upon a page. The overall shape of the page does not affect the significance of the words, its form being only as important as the empty screen of a modern word processor. On the other hand, if we were to place flat ornaments on a page, the shape of the page would be of critical importance. How could the vitality of radiant leafage, a fleur-de-lis, or a rosette, be confined to a stack of horizontal lines? Those figures would more likely be distributed along the outer edge of a page, within the cells of a grid or intensively within a concentric zone at the center of the page. Ornament is fueled by forms that might enfold and unfold its adventing actions. Those actions seek places that exist on a page or an object which are sensitive to its themes, and thus the shape of a page or an object participate directly in the articulation of ornament.

For thousands of years it has been commonplace to combine the elements of visual and verbal systems of expression within a single graphic and architectural framework, one explaining or enriching the other. The juxtaposition of ornaments and words may inform each other with the words more capable of describing the facts or logical stages and the "ornaments" able to signify certain visual attributes of beauty, memory, power, fantasticality and ethos. Thus an ornament may embellish the elements of a verbal text as well as the features of an object. That condition is brilliantly manifested in the ninth century Book of Kells, written in a moment of extraordinary refinement with respect to the ornamenting of letters and pages. In that book, "The strong tendency of the different ornaments to combine together, forming in some cases a continuous ever-shifting pattern, is also the mark of a time when all the motifs have been accepted and absorbed to a point where they come together like the letters of a word or the words of a sentence".

I shall propose the following as axiomatic to an understanding of ornament. A figure of ornament must legibly display some of the adventive actions or things from which it is partially descended while simultaneously expressing a certain measure of the intrinsic material, structural, and spatial characteristics of the place or the object that it is ornamenting. A quatrefoil (2) within the tracery of a gothic window is an example of this simultaneous condition. The quatrefoil suggests a fourfold of leaves about a centerpoint. Although the abstract outlines of leafage remain legible the organic character of real leaves has been abbreviated, frozen, and rendered as the structural mullions of stone construction. The symmetrical and rationalized form of the ornament is carefully aligned with the dead center and head of the opening as a supreme location commanding the greatest attention and uprightness analogous to the spatial position in which we experience our own bodies, a solar event, or a rising flower. The importance of the quatrefoil is fueled by its location.

A fleur-de-lis (3) distributed across a surface of a wall has a more refined genealogy. The white iris, from which the ornament is principally descended, is conventionalized into a flat graphic shape with a center leaf sometimes elongated and sharpened into the profile of dagger as a reference to the military power of royalty. When distributed over a flat surface it might be placed in the regular geometry of a

grid or a wallpaper pattern. The all-pervading figure suggests an all-pervading authority over the entirety of the place or surface of ornamentation.

Because architectural Ornaments must allude to several formations at once while at the same time appearing to be unified figures they necessarily become hybrid or composite figures. While suggesting astronomical or botanical things their existence is dependent upon their being a property of the building they are ornamenting. Indeed, architectural ornament is always implicated with construction and practical space. It is enforced by the mundane.

But how does ornament, which is admittedly imaginary in many respects, become involved with the realm of practicality? Christopher Dresser, writing in the mid 19th century addressed this question by declaring that ornament was that which "super-added to utility renders the object more acceptable through bestowing an amount of beauty [power, life, memory, etc.] which it would not otherwise possess." This statement declares that ornament further adds significance to utilitarian objects to which some basic signification has already been added. That infers that ornament cannot be added immediately to a purely utilitarian object. This triad may be illustrated by comparing three columns (4) illustrating pure utility, the addition to utility and the super-addition to utility.

The first sketch presumes to be the most economic physical form of a column. Regardless of the material from which it is fabricated, its form would most likely be cylindrical to resist the tendency to buckle in any one direction.

The second column, cartooned in the manner of the ancient Doric, may be understood as an elaboration of the first to the extent that it consists of roughly the same assembly of a cylindrical shaft pressing on the floor below and pushing upon the beam overhead. The upper plate has been enlarged to become a climax or a headpiece which also registers harmonic proportions expressing the physical transition from a cylinder upward to a rectangular beam. It also articulates the feelings of the human body. It is emphatic in the shaping of the column.

The third column is a more slender, more configured and more narrative version of the first and second. It departs from merely elaborating upon or fleshing out the elements of utility by supervening the figures of leaves and spirals. As this column moves to admit figures and actions from the world of nature originating beyond the basic forms of utility. The body of the second column remains inherent.

It is important to note that the super-added figures were not added directly to utility but rather to a poetic expression of utility. This is critical to our understanding of the way that ornament remains a property of utility and utility becomes a property of ornament. By realizing that the second column is already an article of expression, i.e. a visual dramatization of a utilitarian fact, and by realizing that the spirals and leaves are further articles which express things outside of utility we can go on to say that it is within the grammar/syntax of architectural "language" rather than the logic of building construction that ornament becomes an integral property of architecture. The third column is a fully articulated element of architecture into which the idea of utility is put in the same sentence, so to say, with a greater range of ideas.

By analyzing some examples of architectural ornament that evolved in Western culture we may see how superadded figures relate directly to added expressions rather than merely to the bare facts of utility. Let us look at great achievements from European architectural history, the advent of tracery in 12th & 13th century anglo-french Gothic and the explosion of Rococo motifs in the walls and ceilings of 18th century Bavarian architecture; as well as the extraordinary process of designing

ornament by the architect, Louis Sullivan in his commercial architecture around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in America.

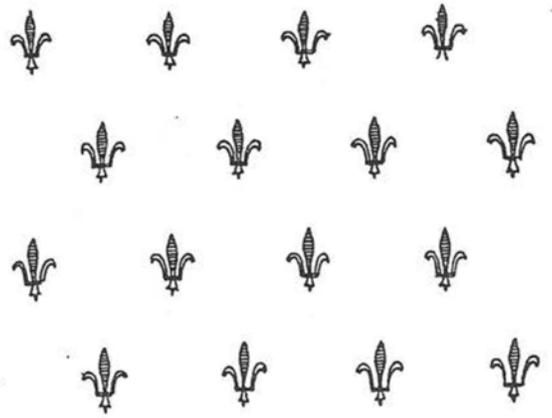
### Gothic

The classical Gothic method was to build massive stone piers and buttresses rising upwards and finally turning inwards to a culmination. Within those feats of engineering medieval architects literally added or inserted the rigid manifestation of an ideal temple held delicately erect with highly ordered clusters of slender vertical shafts (5) connected to slender arched ribs that are located upon the groins of the vaulted stone ceiling. The shafts and ribs acted in geometric unison to form a rhythmic network of lines that transcend the crudeness of the massive piers to which they are attached. Their perfected geometric form presents a transcendent vestibule to the heavens. Thus by distinguishing the lineaments of an heavenly abode from the practical reality of the massive supports we can understand that a level of Gothic achievement was to add an expression of ideal construction over the crude body of building.

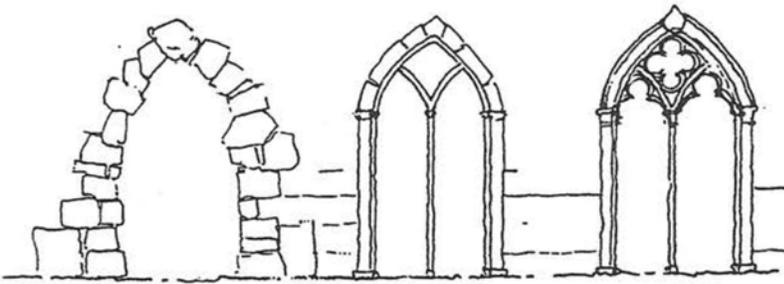
In the words of Joan Evans. "The Gothic style itself was passing out of its first stage of architectural grammar and logic into a further stage when its architects had mastered the art of rhetoric as well. Individual shafts surrounding piers and other linear elements became multiplied and set into more elaborate rhythmic patterns. Note the use of the term "rhythm" in this case. The ribs of vaulting were repeated many times and the archivolts were multiplied around openings as they interwove into the space of arches. "The tendency in England was to multiply colonettes, ribs and mouldings like the monorhymed tirades of Anglo-Norman verse." They produced an added layer of architecture to utility that became energized and enlivened with the kind of rhythm that fuels poetry and music. The basic elements of building were being infused, so to say, with psychological impulses or drives. The architecture became more complex as it absorbed and expressed those rhythmic drives.

In the early years of Gothic construction circular openings in a wall were "foiled" by situating semi-circles about the perimeter of openings like those in the clerestory at Chartres. The shape of the space within arched openings became polylobed to create the trefoils, quatrefoils, hexafoils, and octafoils that I illustrated earlier as elements of Gothic window construction. The English word "foil" comes from the middle-French word "feuille" meaning a plant leaf and thus the foiling may be associated with leafage. Eventually, as in the bay of the triforium of Lincoln Cathedral, the linear mouldings at the outer edge of the foiled openings began to pull away from their frames to which they were attached to become a form of liberated linework aspiring to move in its own space. That originally small mutation provided a new species of linework that was to embellish the 13th century Gothic bays and windows. As linear tracery evolved it became marginally responsible to its origins in basic construction and was able to manifest a powerful vision of the natural world existing beyond the boundaries of a building as it delivered images of trees and leaves that appear to grow within the east window of Carlisle Cathedral or within the Bishop's Eye (6) at Lincoln Cathedral. The exquisite tension between the added expressions of transcendent architecture and the super-added images of botanical nature constitutes a spatial allegory that envelopes an assembly of people gathered in a place thought to exist between the turbulence of earthly forms and the celestial world beyond.

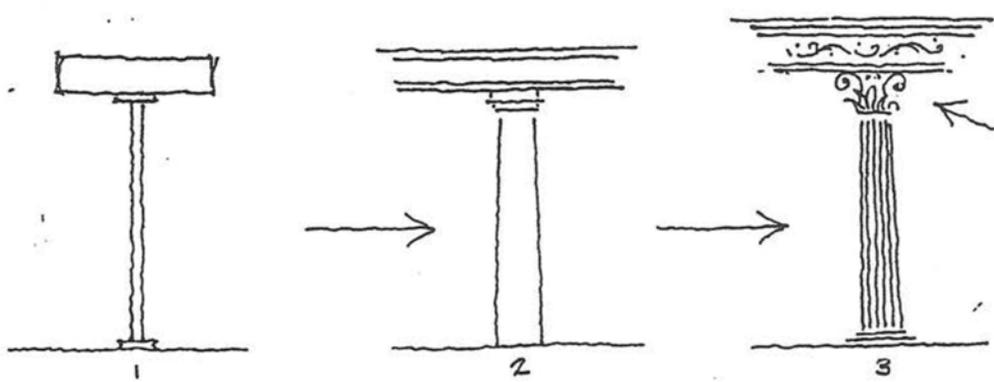
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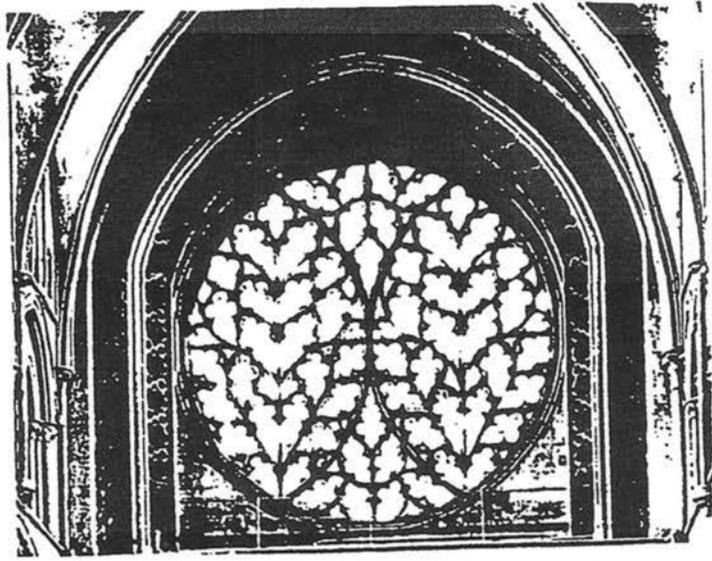


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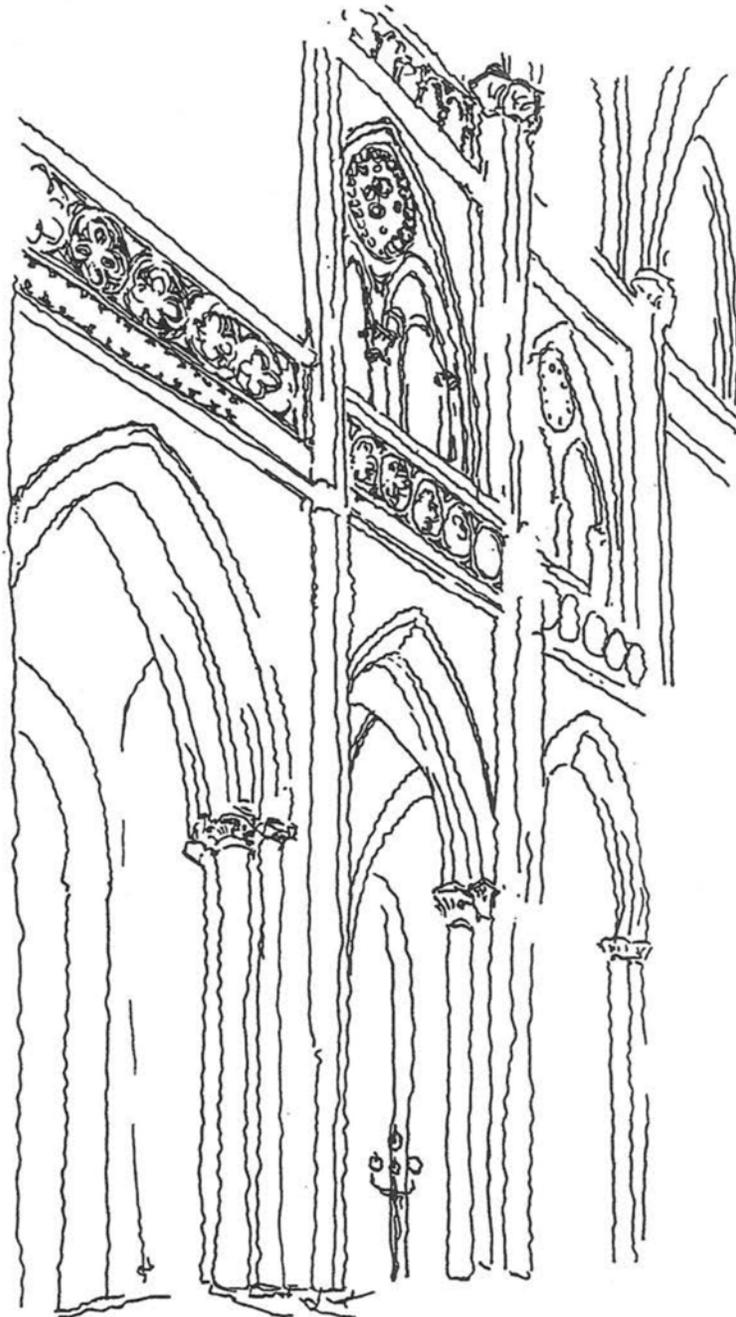


(1)





(6)



(5)

## Rococo

In the shorter more capricious life of Bavarian Rococo Architecture in the 18th century a new species of ornament originated with little direct assistance or impulse from the basic supporting elements of building construction. Rococo originated in the space of fantastical drawings or small french engravings (7) of imaginary fragments of architecture. Prior to the 18th century cartouches were the shaped borders of frames that often surrounded pictures or maps, whereas the cartouches in the French illustrations were themselves engravings of imaginary cartouches that were located inside the space of the picture.

The figures running along those imaginary cartouches performed like a chorus of waves, shells, and scrolls which created and absorbed into their action the paraphernalia associated with the primary subject of the picture. The rhythms and turbulence of the figures within those engravings may be understood as distant relatives of the ancient greek foliated scrollwork often distributed along the boundaries of sacred precincts. It probably would have been difficult for the engravers to have imagined such fantastical shapes if they had to obey the formal conventions governing the design of buildings at the same time that they were creating their pictures. The curious structures were composed in the autonomy of their shops and the engravings provided a portable vehicle for the distribution of their ethereal visions to the patrons of art and architecture in the Bavarian courts and churches.

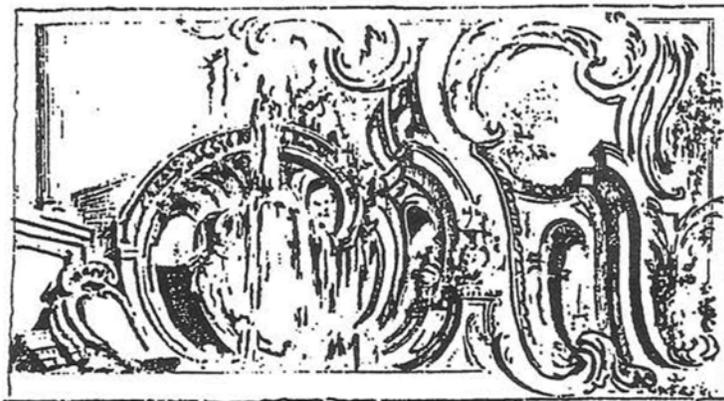
The transfer of the rococo cartouche from the pictorial space of an engraving to the commanding surfaces upon and within an actual building was not difficult because the great rooms of that period routinely employed picture frames and wall panels that were embellished with classical leaf motifs. The rococo cartouches had only to be introduced as exuberant variations of conventional motifs.

The subordinate framing elements to which the Rococo ornaments were super-added were not as fundamentally structural as the shafting and window mullions that fueled the Gothic tracery and while the tracery appears to grow upward from the structural bedrock of the cathedral, the figures of nature bursting from the cartouches appear to grow out of the structural geometry of the wall. In this respect tracery was super-added to practical construction while rocaille was super-added to practical space. The Gothic ornaments were born within the elaborations of stone structures beckoning upward to the heavens, whereas the fantastic rococo ornaments or rocaille originated in imaginary space of an engraving. In the development of Rococo ornament the process of congealing or convening figures of nature with utility occurred the other way around from the Gothic because the rococo cartouches incubated in the engravings had to find their way into rather than grow out of the substance of buildings.

The Ahnengalerie (8) in the Munich residence of 1726-30 is a geometrically simple hall or enfilade along the edge of a typical deep masonry wall. The portraits that were hung in regular patterns upon the walls provided only a static pattern of composition. The departure of branches, leaves, and life forms from the limits of the picture frames and the upper wall mouldings transformed the gallery from what otherwise would have remained mundane architectural space into a florid world picture.



(8)



(7)



In the Spiegelsaal at Amalienburg the animation of the mirror frames occupy and dissolve the mass of the entire wall as the room is transformed into an exuberant and arcadian setting. The stucco ornament denies the larger simplicity of the wall as it actively subdivides its plaster surface into smaller labyrinthian spaces from which a landscape of subordinate domains emerge to provide ethereal habitats for mythical life forms.

Within the pilgrimage church of Die Weis (9) built by Johann Zimmerman in 1753-54, the authority of the rococo ornaments completes the gradation from their earlier location in the space of an engraving to an immense architectural interior where they could marshal the crowning moulding or horizon of a sanctuary established to proclaim the contact between heaven and earth. There are traditional expressions of construction at the base of the sanctuary. In an architecture constituted to express both heaven and earth, the articulation of the practical and terrestrial world below is as important as the depiction of heaven above, and therefore the architectural language of the bases and the columns at the bottom of the walls is mundane and limited to the earthly forms of practical building. As the levels of the interior wall progress upward, the elements of architecture become more decorated to confer special importance upon the loftier but still "earthbound" level of the church. At the highest level, where the gallery arcade makes contact with the sky-ceiling above, the physical laws governing the earth are cancelled as the arches turn upside down and explode into the fantastic forms of an enormous cartouche mediating with the heavens. On the ceiling above there is a fresco depicting the gates of heaven and the throne of the Last Judgement with a commanding figure gesturing downward to the damned on earth which is the assembly of people on the ground below.

In the more sophisticated, and less sacred space of the festsaal in the Schazler Palace in Augsburg, we are also the direct participants an architecture transformed by cartouches. Each door, window, mirror, portrait, spandrel, wall horizon and ceiling fresco is separately enshrined with rocaille.

Thus rococo ornament in architecture grew from small to large framing elements and proceeded to create an intermediate realm between worlds of reality and worlds of fantasticality. By contacting and absorbing expressions from the worlds on either side of the frame the ornament proposed yet another place like the one occupied by the angels in Christianity held in tension between the earth and heaven. Even when situated only upon a picture frame mounted on a wall, rocaille ornaments more than the illusionary content of the picture by elaborating upon the material wall itself.

### Louis Sullivan

Louis Sullivan, the great American architect-ornamenter designing from 1880-1920, stated quite clearly that the significance of his ornaments derived from seminal figures and actions that originated in botanical nature. He also believed that the industrial forms of architecture were becoming too rigid and unable to present a healthy vision of life. His procedure was to primarily express the combined facts of construction and space as large blocks of plane and cubic geometry.

His process of generating the flowering figure was then to subdivide and alter those basic forms of geometry with expansions, subdivisions, elaborations, and complications until they congealed into a dynamic expression. In his words, he would "awaken" a rigid form of geometry in the direction of willful energy, as shown in his drawing entitled "The Awakening of the Pentagon".

(10) The authority of the primary geometry becomes subdued in the light of an emergent expression of life.

### Conclusion

I shall summarize all of this by reiterating that "Architectural Ornament invites man's unconscious desires and dreams" and I might add the signs of nature's energy into the fabric of building. I have illustrated how ornament manifests fantastic visions concretized in Gothic tracery, Rocaille, and Sullivanian figures of efflorescence acting in alliance with elements of utility.

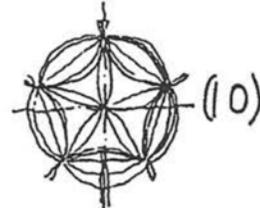
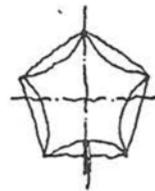
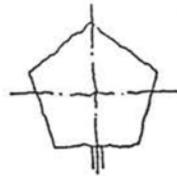
I hope it has been evident in the preceding examples that ornament requires the creation of subordinate places, districts, and subdivisions, within the overall geometry of the building. These are almost always intermediate places such as those located between inside and outside, wall and ceiling, column and beam. These are "homes" where ornament may flourish and be perceived without obfuscating the more primary and conventional expressions of construction and space.

Because ornaments must appear in part to be originating from both within and without construction, they become distinct figures in their own right apart from pure expressions of construction or pure representations of forces or things extrinsic to construction. Thus it is inevitable that ornament produces figures of metamorphosis (11) in which one state-of-being seems to be involuted into or emerging out of another state-of-being.

Figures of metamorphosis are heterogeneous as they manifest and thematize the heterogeneity of our internal and external lifeworlds. In architecture they combine the actual with the imaginary and memorable features of the places in which we dwell, have dwelled and wish to dwell. Ornament articulates the fact that we live in dimensions that are heterogeneous to one another. It proclaims the possibility that, in our minds, we may simultaneously move in different magnitudes of space. In architecture we are brought up against the hard physical edges of a material building that at once controls us and holds us apart from other places while its ornament may partially dissolve those walls and allude to our belonging to other places beyond the confines and facts of the material building. While the basic building encloses, its ornament suggest mutation, temporality, and expanse.

If ornament allows so mutable, expansive, and pliable a view of the world then why has it become so trivialized and its production declared to be impure, redundant, and even dishonest in the dominant academic view of modern architecture? It must be true that we have acquired ways of thinking that have rendered an understanding and even the perception of the metamorphic figures of ornament uncomfortable and unsettling. It seems that many architectural theorists today have come to accept a rather limited vocabulary. Architecture has become more or less defined as being in charge, so to say, of a rather simple kit of parts such as the plans and spatial forms governed by doors, windows, roofs and walls. Those core elements taken alone provide a smaller working vocabulary than the profession not only once possessed but in fact created such as the Conventionalized Leaves and scrolls, the fantastical figures found in rocaille, and the griffins that have flourished from antiquity to this century. If the production of metamorphic figures belong to any disciplines today they would most likely be located within the Fine Arts of drawing, painting, or sculpture.

But let us look briefly at the modern treatment of those disciplines. The imaginative escapades nourished by the fine arts of drawing, painting, and sculpture have acquired much of their academic prestige and pretenses of freedom and creativity by distancing themselves from the mundane articles



(10)



(11)

of practicality. While architecture has tended to limit its themes to expressions of utility and functionality the Fine Arts has moved to divorce itself from the constraints of utility. We might say the modern visual expressions wrought from the elements of practical necessity and those wrought from the seemingly unshackled paraphernalia of the imagination have become locked into separate realms of thought. This indicates that we have built barriers between different potentials of our adult mental lives. Of course we have not prohibited ourselves from moving from one potential to another; but rather we have allowed the distinct contents to become functionally disconnected. It is a modern way-of-thinking that seems to condition the nature of the modern personality as it promotes the authority vested in the clarity of hyper-specialization. In so specialized a view expressions of work exist in moments other than play, and expressions of reality are discouraged from directly engaging fantasy. The metamorphic figures of ornament would, within their realm, combine all of those distinctions into single essences made up of connective tissues which act against the repression of any segment of the continuum from practicality to fantasticality. The homes of ornament, viewed in this light, nourish combination and fluidity of thought as they discourage the splitting apart of things within their ordained borders.

### POSTSCRIPT

It may be relevant to the notion of repression to point out that the development of ornament reveals a style of thinking that is not valued in modern times. The venerable procedures of super-addition required a lively measure of excessiveness added to the basics of building. The metamorphic figures of Gothic tracery emerged after the ribs of construction became multiplied and the openings polylobed. Rococo frames had to grow outward and upward in strength, scale, and number. Sullivan subdivided, expanded, and complicated his basic forms of geometry until, as he said, they awakened by evidencing the life forms of growth itself. The emergence of ornament out of practical levels of architecture benefits from a stridently additive and superadditive process that seeks the moment of metamorphosis. In this process the most basic kit of parts governing architecture has to be exceeded and nearly disrupted so that the limitations inherent to the fundamental expressions of practicality may be both proclaimed and transcended. This sort of behavior in design is resisted by admonitions that promote thrift and simplicity.

Indeed architectural ornament has been criticized precisely for being too excessive, and introducing visual figures into the material of objects that are impure because they do not issue exclusively from the intrinsic facts of construction or functional space. Those criticisms are of course quite true. But why is it so difficult in today's world to understand that those excesses and imaginings, certainly when confined to their limited territory within the greater fabric of architecture, cannot by themselves threaten either the importance or the basic features of building? In other words how can the structural and spatial integrity of the buildings in which we live be diminished in any way by shielding them from the integral presence of explicit expressions that exceed their practical origins? It seems to me that the most structurally intrinsic properties of an object such as a building can be further respected as they are embellished.