KENT BLOOMER LECTURE

THE OMISSION OF THE STUDY OF ORNAMENT

Notre Dame University

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Let me begin by declaring my puzzlement at the omission of the study of ornament from the conventional curriculum of education in architecture in the second half of the twentieth century. Keep in mind that ornament had been a property within architecture for thousands of years.

Not only was the study omitted, most discussion of ornament was clouded or avoided by a stridently pejorative attitude as though a taboo existed. There was a contempt and fear of ornament. I began years ago to suspect there must be an explanation, perhaps a malaise, that lurked behind the academic discourse or the warping of discourse in both Art and Architecture. That suspicion was fueled by the absence of a single credible explanation (rational, poetic, or pragmatic) for effectively banishing the study and practice of such an enormous legacy. Let me mention some of the explanations nicely assembled by Mark Wigley in his work *White Walls and Designer Dresses*.

- Ornament was unclean, an uncleanliness that fouled clean design.
- In fact, it was a prostitution, a sexual lure and seduction. It was effeminate and deviant.
- Performing as inessential surplus it masked the truth and thus it was a lie, a coverup.
- And then there was Laos's intentional (or accidental) criminalization of ornament: "CRIMINALIZATION"!

Samir's mention of mimetic rivalry struck a chord. Reading Girard's notions of rivalry, sacrifice, and victim seemed to provide clues …, perhaps even the explanation. Could it be that the study and practice of ornament was sacrificed? Could it be that the ornamenter was the victim in the effort to resolve some sort of rivalry? But if so, between whom and for what?

My thesis for this conference will assume, therefore, that the practice of ornament was indeed sacrificed because it was capable of addressing (perhaps even resolving) one of the most vexing problems of the twentieth century, a problem that the Academy did not want to resolve

The unwanted problem was how can we connect (or re-connect) the disparate pieces of an increasingly shattered vision of the world and of ourselves that appears to have been intact in the design of the great buildings to which the ideal of architecture owes its profound original identity.

The treasured models of seminal Western architecture such as the Greek Temple, the Roman Forum and Pantheon, the thirteenth-century Cathedral, the ideal Renaissance Villa, even the nineteenth-century Railroad Stations and Libraries sought to express, if

only momentarily, a vision of an ordered cosmos. An ordered cosmos was the SUBJECT of civic architecture. All my life it was evident that ornament was a critical player in achieving such visions.

But how am I employing the term "ornament?

Originally the Latin term 'ornamentum' meant equipment as accessory to a useful thing such as a bowl, a ceremony, a temple. Alberti, in his sixth book *On Ornament*, declared "ornament may be defined as a form of auxiliary light and complement to beauty. From this it follows, I believe, that beauty is some inherent property to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional."

Leaping from the fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century Christopher Dresser makes a similar statement. "Ornament is that which super-added to utility renders the object more acceptable through bestowing upon it an amount of [beauty, sublimity, memory] which it would not otherwise possess." Here Dresser suggests that an amount of beauty is first added to utility before ornament was super-added to complete the project. In respect to both statements, we must grant that both ornament and the practical thing being ornamented, when combined, constitute a heterogeneous system of two-or more formal agendas, i.e., the inherent utilitarian agenda and the adherent auxiliaries or super-additions.

If the thing being ornamented has a unique economic form (the bowl, the chair, the building) then the forms of the ornament must at least partially arise from other formal circumstances and economies. An understanding that Ornament is auxiliary prohibits it from merely being an elaboration of the inherent form. It is more like the acanthus form arising from the idea of a fractal or the idea of growth which is more plant-like than the static geometry of a bowl arising from the need to contain. The combination that results is a consonance in which the distinct inherent and adherent forms remain visibly different, albeit associated in the light of the world-at-large.

It is clear that a visual purée, a synthesis in the scientific sense of two compounds, when mixed, creating an entirely new compound such as H_2O is not the product. Indeed, the visible manifestation of different tiers appears to be critical to the function and performance of ornament.

We know that during the Enlightenment specialization evolved from the progressive compartmentalizing of disciplines registered in the Western Academies of higher learning. That specialization was intensified by the growth of scientific studies.

In the eighteenth-century different kinds of national schools were founded. Engineering schools emerged as independent institutions around 1740 in France and 1754 in Germany, while medical academies asserted their independence from scientific societies throughout the eighteenth century. Like industry itself, this specialization created a complex division of purposeful labor. The refinement of classical architecture had benefited when it was centered around a sacred body, but with the Enlightenment a

process of disembodiment evolved; palaces and churches had to compete for architectural eminence with a range of secular building types and functions" (*Body, Memory, and Architecture,* p.17)

"While the Royal Academy of Architecture in France emphasized the scientific approach to architecture, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, founded shortly after the French Revolution, treated architecture as an art. It started with a concern for human experience, personal identity, and a carefully developed sense of compositional order and beauty. These qualities defied (as they still do) precise quantification." (*Body, Memory, and Architecture,* p.18)

While a schism of sorts was founded by the two trajectories of engineering and art, both claiming to teach the fundamentals of architecture, the Academies of Fine Art seemed at least to have a coherent mission founded upon a commitment to beauty. That commitment was enjoyed by a variety of visual "thinkers" (as we might say today) including painters, sculptors, and architects. Although they could work separately and possessed different skills they also worked together under the muse of the fine arts, especially in the production of buildings. In Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture,* it was taken for granted that painters, sculptors, and artisans worked within the project of architecture. The notion of architecture as the mother of the arts meant, in the late nineteenth century, that architecture held a maternal responsibility towards the other visual practices and their different ways of imagining.

However, some cracks eventually appeared in the community of the fine arts that were to erupt in the twentieth century.

"Between 1750 and 1758, within the same academic climate that led to the founding of schools of art, engineering, and applied science, the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten wrote two volumes called *Aesthetika* in which he attempted to establish aesthetics as a scientific study. His was the first systematic effort to employ rational principles and scientific rules for the treatment of the beautiful, and to elevate the study of that which depends on feelings and the sense of beauty to the status of a science with an independent body of knowledge. By recognizing that feelings dealt with sensitive knowing as compared to rational knowing, Baumgarten proposed that sensing the beautiful was *real* knowledge. (His conclusions, however, had the effect of taking with his left hand what he had given with his right, for he emphasized the difference between the nonrational knowledge derived from the senses and the pure knowledge derived rationally from logic, and he continued to declare that while sensible knowledge was also real knowledge, it was nevertheless inferior to the clear and distinct knowledge developed logically by the mind. Thus, the science of aesthetics was dubbed by its founder to be a science of lower knowledge; art, it was implied, was inferior to science.)" (*Body, Memory, and Architecture,* pp. 17-18)

As the academies of art were set apart from the scientific mainstream of knowledge, they were increasingly toughing it out with the ascending scientists to gain their share of respect.

They responded by declaring that individual works of art were complete and definite carriers of truth in their own way. Indeed, a great work of art should be granted self-sufficiency and recognized as an autonomous work like an elegant equation in physics that could stand alone and not require theoretical justification.

In his preface to *Mademoiselle de* Maupin, published in 1835, the French critic and writer, Théophile Gautier, articulated the earliest expression of "art for art's sake" as he attacked and degraded the 'bourgeois' valuation of usefulness and useful work. "There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever." (Gautier xxv) His ideas were further developed in his poem "Art," published in 1857, in which he opposed the idea of art as imitation, claiming that the artist's creative imagination or 'inner vision' should be the source of inspiration.

The critic, writer, and Oxford don, Walter Pater, became the leading proponent of the Art for Art's Sake movement in England with the publication of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873. Because music was immaterial and independent of subject matter, unlike art in which matter (subject), and form (execution), could be distinguished, Pater made his famous proclamation: "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."* (his italics) He further claimed, "this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself … this is what all art constantly strives after.…" (Pater, 111) "Art, then, is always striving to be independent of mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material…. [a] perfect identification of matter and form." (Ibid. 114).

In his concluding chapter, which is considered a manifesto of the Art for Art's Sake movement in England, he emphasized the priority of experience. "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end…. To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Experience had priority over theory. Life, he argued, was a continuum of fleeting impressions, every moment passing even as it was being reflected upon, hence "we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever testing new opinions and courting new impressions, [here we have a call for *innovation*] never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy."(Ibid. 197) The old is moribund and dull. [Here we have *aversion to the past*]. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments sake." (Ibid. 198) [Here we have a reverence for the temporary and *the hyper-present*.]

Pater believed in a historical relativity in which personal impressions, rather than objective standards, were operational. Here we have a call for *self-expression*. His theories led to decadent behavior and profoundly influenced Oscar Wilde.

The Art for Art's Sake movement propelled the arts to cut themselves off from the past and, like the sciences, to search instead for novelty, uniqueness, and the cutting edge. Tradition and imitation were becoming associated with contamination, with dangers to the process of creativity and newness. This jettisoning of contaminates that were partially pre-established and thus adherent to the act of creativity reinforced the search for uncorrupted essentials that could distinguish each of the disciplines belonging to the family of the arts. For example, what is the most private property belonging to painting, to sculpture, to architecture? Obviously if such properties could be found, then specific territories could be deeded to each member. The fine arts were being prepared for compartmentalization.

All of this was coming together at the beginning of the twentieth century as notions of modernism and progress in design were being formulated. The fine artist's production of autonomous objects had a foothold in the great museums established to give their works individual locations and to sanctify their autonomy. The decorative arts around 1900 were automatically prohibited from exhibition in the museums of fine art because they allied themselves, indeed depended upon, specific locations (such as a bowl, or a building, or a wall). They were not autonomous; therefore they were not sufficiently "fine" to be elegant carriers of truth all by themselves. The distinction between fine art and applied art was stiffened. The fine arts had gained a tentative foothold of equality in spirit with the sciences, at least enough so they could claim to produce genius. But, like the status of superiority granted to the scientists and philosophers, they demoted those among them who were dependent upon an alliance with utilitarian form for their existence such as decorators and ornamenters.

All of this left the identity of architecture in a quandary regarding its status in the higher academics of knowledge. Already in a schism with engineering, it was now at odds with the fine arts for having a leg in both art and the practical sciences. It more desperately needed a modern identity of its own.

In 1962 the art historian Kenneth Clark wrote a provocative article titled *The Blot and the Diagram*. The Seagram Building had been completed in 1957 and Jackson Pollock's canvases typified the contemporary abstract expressionist movement in painting. Clark observed both a similarity and dissimilarity between the works of Mies and Pollock. Both the architect and the painter engaged in a type of fine-grained compositional repetition or isotropy, a homogeneity that filled to the boundaries of their projects. The profound difference between them was that "the architecture went off in one direction with the diagram and painting went in another with the blot." He also surmised they would go well together, a Pollock in a Miesian space, with the intuitively painted blots standing for "the embers of fire, or clouds, or mud," and intuition while the diagram stood for "a rational statement in a visible form involving measurements and done with an ulterior motive.

The physical manifestation of the diagram was the sort of essence the architects were seeking; no other modern art was better constituted to express the pure ordering of space than architecture. That was a clue to their province, their unique purpose, and their elusive essence. And who would want to dispute that?

In the second half of the twentieth century the academic establishment as a whole was shifting across the board from the liberal arts to professional studies. The federal government in the 1970s demanded that architectural schools provide "criterion for the criterion": for holding an exclusive claim on the use of the word "architect." Architects not only craved a stronger academic identity; they were now required to produce a professional one or they could not be recognized as a legal entity with all the attendant provisions. They had to specify what they were and indirectly what they were not.

And so they did. But to do that they had to continue cleaning house. They had to officially purge or sacrifice those elements and traditions in architecture that might compromise or contaminate their identity as a distinct practice performing rational tasks continuing what the fine arts had already begun in the nineteenth century. They declared that architecture had its own very special territory apart from other disciplines. To perform like architects, rather than artists, meant in a curious academically political way that they had to appear to take the practice of art out of architecture. They proceeded to do that by divorcing art even as they continued to mimic the behavior of artists, including artistic products such as 'cubist' shaping.

Consider that architecture was part of the fine arts academy in the nineteenth century and was implicated with the "Art for Art's Sake" movement. Its legacy included much of the histrionics generated within the fine arts academy even as it moved to segregate itself from the identity of art per se. An unconscious and undeclared rivalry between architecture and art eventually developed.

The schism with schools of engineering had become resolved by the mid-twentieth century. The licensed architect held the authority to do his own engineering as long as he carried the liability. In large projects he could sub-contract an engineer without losing his claim to be the architect of record.

The fickle affair between architecture and art became more complicated. Architecture, while mimicking certain ways of thinking associated with art, had to at least appear to cleanse itself of behaviors that originated outside of its commitment to a self-identity predicated on the rational concretized diagram. They had to promote what they said they were and indirectly demote what they were not.

And so they did. But to do that they had to continue cleaning their own house. They had to ideologically purge or sacrifice those elements and traditions in architecture that might compromise or contaminate their professional authority and its tectonic manifestations. They had to continue what had already begun in the nineteenth century. Thus, in an uncanny way the architecture of the late twentieth century silently replayed the nineteenth-century movement of "Art for Art's Sake," but this time it became

"Architecture for Architecture's Sake," with identical claims. We can almost quote Walter Pater. Modern architecture was to be innovative, to reject the work of the past, to operate in the hyper-present, and to strive for self-expression, i.e. the 'self' of the designer and the institutional 'self' of the profession.

How better to accomplish all these ends than to sacrifice ornament? Ornament, despite its brilliant surge in the early twentieth century (Sullivan, Wright, Horta …) is not only art-like, (albeit not "fine-art"-like), it is a tradition with arguably the longest history among all the visual arts. Yet its tradition and its art-likeness are not the most profound reasons for its condemnation. Consider that ornament was guaranteed full membership in the modern project as long as its forms and figures were wrought from the structural details and spatial metrics that were innate and essential to the governing diagram. Thus, the graining of stone (e.g. Looshaus or Mies's Tugendhat house) or arrays of bolts (Otto Wagner's post office) were acceptable substitutes. Ornament, in other words, would not have to be sacrificed as long as it did not behave like ornament and agreed to be only an elaboration, i.e. an homologous element of the essential object. Its greatest crime, therefore is impurity for harboring forms alien to the essential fabric of modern architecture, i.e. alien to the diagram and the tectonic mimetics.

Purity and its emblems of whiteness and cleanliness (sanitation) is an extreme condition because it conveys an abstract claim or wish for unblemished completeness. Impurity proposes a heterogeneity, a non-uniform condition containing multiple elements, some of which are intrinsic to the object and some of which are extrinsic, i.e. added auxiliary. A pure condition can be contaminated by the incorporation of foreign ingredients which is precisely what ornament negotiates to admit.

Ornament, particularly Western ornament, usually appears in thresholds and margins. It welcomes other species and activities in liminal spaces where the utilitarian and diagrammatic imperatives of design are naturally exhausted. It flourishes in the ambivalence between inside and outside, or joints of structural transition (as in a column cap or zones of intersection between wall and ceiling). It occupies the boundary between different kinds of worlds as it pries open their edges and thus ‘defines space and even creates such space that may be necessary to it’. It must have a space of its own in order to perform its dance with everything else.

To perform economically over thousand of years its practice came to be founded upon a core of governing symmetries made up of rhythmized zigzags, repeats, cycles, spirals, meanders, interlace and foliation descending into the microcosm or morphing outward into monsters. That kit-of-parts is why ornament looks like ornament and performs like ornament. Those energies can occasionally consume its objects, although by doing so ornament strangles itself. Because its contrary nature is dependent upon the vitality of the things it is ornamenting and because it is only one in a community of expressions, it ceases to function when it overwhelms the other voices.

Ornament, by its own laws, is a connector of disparate pieces. It requires the richness inherent to a chorus of voices in order to function. It can only be a detail. It is the quintessential unspecialized agent of illumination that thrives amongst a field of differences. It is telling that the twentieth century advocates of modernism particularly feared ornament as they moved so forcefully to privilege the sovereignty of their new identity. The project of essentializing the identity of architecture for the sake of architecture has become so complete, so far reaching, and so consummate that now, when we travel around the world, we perceive far less difference and much greater similarity between places.