

Transcendental Ornament

How The Meaning of Ornament Has Evolved Through Time

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Throughout history, architecture has primarily embodied ornament and in some cases, such as in the Rococo design, over elaboration. However, the technological advances of the Renaissance as well as a “fundamental shift in the nature of human consciousness”, led to the emergence of Neo-Classicism which forged the search for a true style of architecture where the aesthetic space was ultimately desired. In Europe, Adolf Loos’ Ornament and Crime became an instrument for explaining his contempt for the use of ornament in design. The pursuit of a true style of architecture became prominent in America and the vision of “the transformation of industrial technique through art” thus became the adopted vision of Frank Lloyd Wright, which ultimately succeeded in influencing many future architectural styles. Kahn’s continuous search for the “thoughtful making of space” stems from Wright’s initial balance struggle, but the evident progression from physical embellishment to inspiring spaces is proof that what architecture means, is being redefined.

Although in the past, ornament was an inseparable aspect of architecture, and to many a dated aspect as well, I believe that if done well, it is quintessential for the construction of a memorable architectural experience. Today, we strive to reinvent ornament by abstracting the physical over elaboration that is usually associated with it. However, much like in the progression of the fine arts from Renaissance icons to post-contemporary exhibitions, ornament in architecture has evolved—it is about creating a series of meaningful and unique experiences through spaces, rather than literal adornment within spaces.



Figure 1: My sketch of a Carlo Scarpa detail from Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy.

To begin with, one extreme proponent for the eradication of all ornament in architecture was the influential European theorist of modern architecture, Adolf Loos. Loos favored the nakedness of smooth surfaces because they are the true essence of architecture. In his mind, the crime of ornament lies upon the fact that it poses an unnecessary and irresponsible cost to our society and our national economy, because it is a waste of human labor, money and material. Although ornament was once utilized as a means for representation of the style of a particular age, it is no longer necessary because we have art. Today, design with ornament is selfish, because it is superfluous and will eventually become obsolete when that “style” is no longer desired. Since ornament is no longer organically linked to our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture¹. Loos’ European background as well as his experiences in the United States, truly impacted his perception of architecture, so the distinction he makes is not merely between complex and simple, but rather between superfluous and organic.

Additionally, much like in Europe, a refinement of architectural style and the idea of ornament was underway, and became characterized by Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright’s style is

¹ Adolf Loos. *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998. 22.

expressed by constantly oscillating between two poles—one asymmetric and modern, and the other classic and symbolic—seamlessly merged to embody nature as well as the idea of sacrament. His career is defined by his constant fluctuation between classic symbolic ornament and modern aesthetic of space. His first architectural works, classified in the Prairie Style, depict his initial experimentation within the two styles of building. His transition to Usonian architecture exemplify the maturity and extensive thoughtfulness that vitally influence architecture today. Falling Water was Wright’s breakthrough, and it has been designated as his “ultimate romantic statement,” because of its inimitable, intimate relationship with nature.

Meanwhile, the Guggenheim Museum and the Walter Davidson Model Farm are characterized at the climax of Wright’s later career because they epitomize organic architecture. Essentially, Wright’s experiences throughout his career led to the birth of organic architecture, or “the economic creation of built form and space in accordance with the latent principles of nature,” which has in turn significantly shaped fundamental principles of modern architecture.

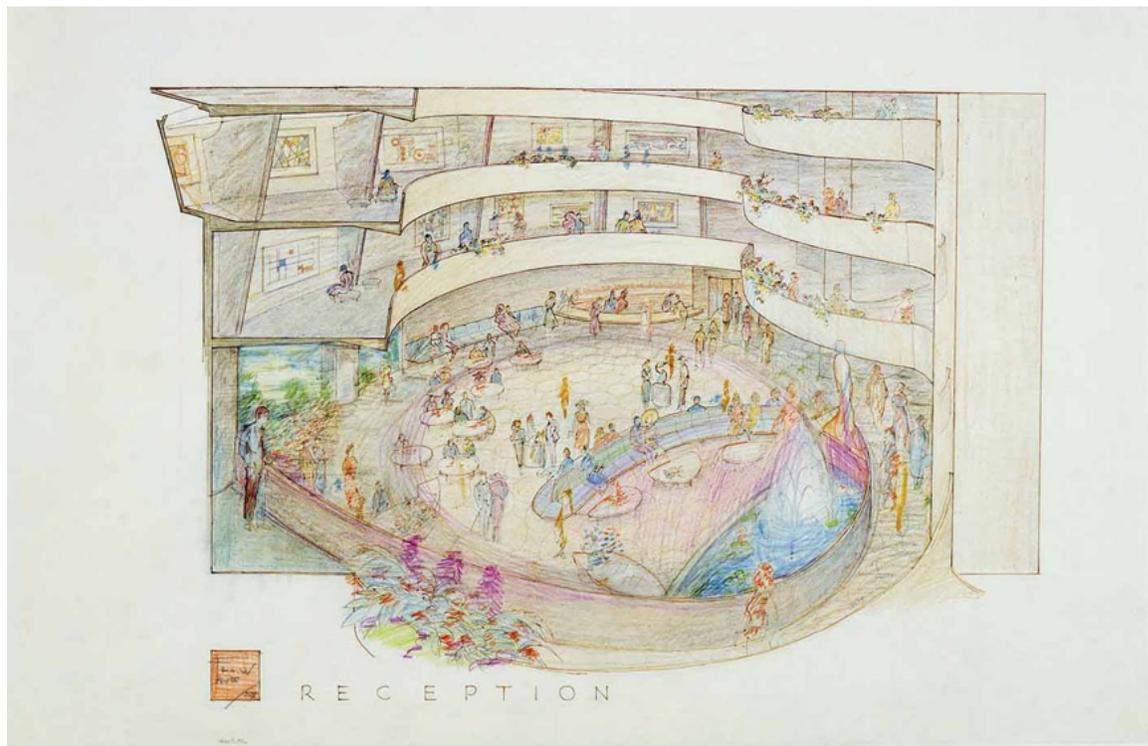


Figure 2: Frank Lloyd Wright interior sketch of the Guggenheim Museum, 1943. Wright's approach to this design became revolutionary because of the uninterrupted, centrality of the space, compared to traditionally compartmentalized museums. Additionally, since it is in New York City, the feeling of openness also dramatically contrasts with the density of the city.

Louis Kahn's career would be shaped by Fuller's evoking geodesic structural systems through their universal geometry and an attitude to both form and life that is fundamentally mystical.² Kahn's profound philosophy of architecture comes from the idea of explicitly integrating mechanical systems with the structure and the important corollary that the universal ordering principle (what the building wants to be) could only make itself manifest through the revelation of the constructional process.³ Thus, Kahn's method of design matured, and became about the function adjusting to the form as long as the form was originated through an in-depth understanding of the overall program. His best work is evident in religious and honorific structures, because building was a mystical process. He engrossed himself in the "concept" and adapted the form to fit the constraints of the task.

The quintessence of Kahn's career can be seen in his design for the Salk Laboratories in La Jolla, California. His separation of spaces into, living, working and meeting areas projected him out of a habitual need to "reduce the laboratory space to an ideal form". His establishment of a full height service floor under each laboratory is a provision which has become fully utilized to this day. Kahn's rejection of a simple-minded if socially committed functionalism in favor of an architecture capable of transcending utility led him to postulate a parallel approach to urban form.⁴

² Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture a Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980) 243.

³ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture a Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980) 244.

⁴ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture a Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980) 246.



Figure 3: A mystical perspective from the strip of water that cuts across the plaza and extends the edge of the Salk Institute. The water creates a symmetry, a sense of overwhelming, and embraces the “thoughtful making of space” that is so exemplary of Kahn. Photograph by Liao Yusheng

When our architecture careers began, we were implored to think about the smoothness and clarity of spaces in the same way that Loos wanted the world to look at architecture. This over simplification was merely a stepping stone in order for us to comprehend a bare-bone, composition of spaces. In order to be able to make thoughtful spaces that addressed even the smallest details, we needed to strip away many pre-conceived notions about what we thought architecture was. However, we have been so immersed in the belief that ornament is our nemesis, that we have forgotten that the true architectural idea of ornament today is more than crown molding on the ceiling and built-ins in the living room. Ornament in architecture has evolved—from ostentatious adornments meant to parade wealth and power to meaningful details that amalgamate to an overall inspiring and unparalleled experience. My very own experience in Vicenza, Italy, has in a way, taken me through my own path of rejection of physical ornament, to appreciation of an ornament that forges a mystical experience.

Our exploration of European architecture and its historical focus on ornament has significantly impacted my studio work. Although it can be portrayed as old-fashioned, the importance of preservation makes Europe rather unique, especially compared to architecture in

the United States. My analysis of Europe, through sketching different places, people and buildings, led me to develop a project that responded and preserved the Italian values, yet also pushed the boundaries to instill a sense of wonder and novelty in the small town of Vicenza.



Figure 4
(left): My sketch of a Carlo Scarpa detail of the Brion Cemetery in San Vito d'Altivole near Treviso, Italy.

Figure 5
(right): My exploratory sketch of material and lighting condition at the Piazza dei Signori in Vicenza, Italy.

VICENZA
DRAWING DOWN



The region of Veneto is characterized by its Venetian architecture, composed of the primary building material, brick. One of the most notable aspects of Italian construction in the Veneto region is the extensive use of the material as a main structural element. The incessant masking of this brick framework in an effort to recreate stone façades, combined with the stereotomic quality of the architecture, imbues a sense of mystery as to what the quintessential Italian lifestyle truly means. In an attempt to stay true to the spirit of Venetian Italy, I wanted my design to transform the way brick is used and expose its beauty in a delicate way. The façade of the intervention would be a diagonal brick fabric with varying degrees of concentration that directly relate to the public and private spaces of the building. There would be less concentration

(or more openings) in areas that pertain to the living and dining room of the apartment, and the desks in the offices. Additionally, the façade would also pierce through in specific interior areas in order to create shelf space and thus direct interaction with people. The function of the space would correlate to the form, but my goal is to highlight a key aspect of Venetian construction that has been largely overlooked because of tradition and perhaps, lack of aesthetic appeal.

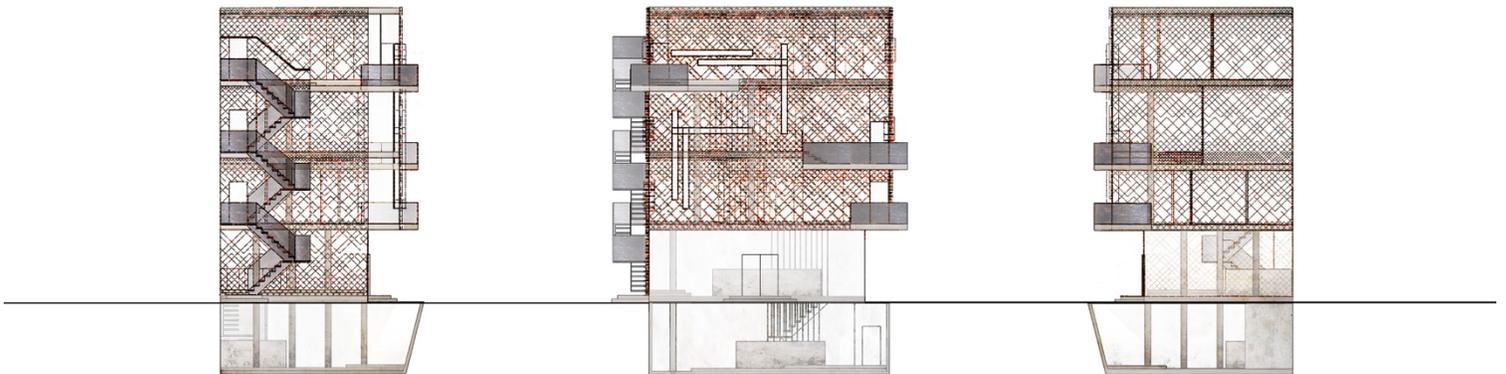


Figure 6: Façade elevations showing brick fabric concentration

Ultimately, my undergraduate architecture career has progressed similarly to the way the architectural notion of ornament has evolved from Adolf Loos' time to Wright's and Kahn's. From a clean exploration of spaces to a desire to instill profound inspiration and beauty in my design, there have been accomplishments, as well as setbacks. Although, Loos is correct when he states that ornament is an expression of style of that era, the actual definition of ornament has also grown tremendously since he first rejected it. We are constantly redeveloping and abstracting architecture, in the same way we are doing so with art. Architecture is no longer about being in a beautifully embellished space, but rather about experiencing a space and being

stimulated by it. The feeling itself is the ornament, and without that transcendence, it would not be architecture.



Figure 7: Exterior Perspective with site

References:

Loos, Adolf. *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998.
(selection)

Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture a Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1980.