

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2008, Number 28. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher: hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu.

Contemporary Ornament

The Return of the Symbolic Repressed
by Robert Levit

Ornament has returned — again¹ — from exile. This is a claim that will turn out to be more complicated than at first it might seem. The terms under which it has been able to return raise questions about the very nature of ornament. What is it? What is its role in the constitution of architecture? So what is back? Pattern is back — pattern, one of ornament’s chief incarnations: patterned colors, patterned materials, and pattern-making structures and assemblies. Other kinds of pattern too: information as pattern (surfaces of data, flickering letters and numbers and ads) creating ornamental effect rather than communicative surface. Why should this resurgent pattern-making be referred to, forcibly, as “ornament?”

Where do we find this pattern-making phenomenon and how has it been described? Some of it presents itself in publications on morphogenetic form, on parametrically controlled patterns (deriving from Generative Components or CA-

TIA, or already dated animated transformations of Maya), or on the structural variety of the *informe* that has been engineered, named, and promoted by Cecil Balmond.²

But even where work is not grouped in these categories, pattern-making is to be found in large swaths of contemporary practice: Sauerbruch and Hutton (*Pharmacological Research Laboratories*, Biberach), OMA (*Jeddah International Airport*), Herzog & de Meuron (*IMKZ Library*, Cottbus), Cero 9 Architects (*The Magic Mountain [Ecosystem Mask for Ames Thermal Power Station]*), SOM (*North Mosque*, Manama, Bahrain), and Office dA (*Obzee Fashion Headquarters*, Seoul, Korea), to name a handful of characteristic projects. Most of the time no claim is being made about ornament. But however tacit it has been, the sense that this wave of patterning is ornamental broke into print in Farshid Moussavi’s introduction to the book she edited with Michael Kubo, *The*

On Design

Function of Ornament.³ Other publications have indirectly touched on the question of ornament: Joseph Rosa's *Glamour*, the *AD* titled "Elegance" by Ali Rahim, and more directly, the *Sign as Surface* catalog and exhibition at *Artists Space*, curated by Peter Zellner in fall 2003.

If one may take *The Function of Ornament* as an indicator of an important vein of sentiment in the architectural community, it names ornament, welcomes it back, as it were, but only on condition: ornament must function. Ornament may be back, but only by putting behind what gave it its past notoriety: its position outside of instrumental need, which is to say, its openly symbolic nature.

Whence this notoriety? Where to begin? With the 17th-century discovery that the orders (source of classical ornament) were inconsistent and therefore arbitrary (Claude Perrault)? With the subsequent search for a "natural" language (in the elemental geometries of Ledoux and Boullée) that could leap over the declining faith in the orders? With the 19th-century proto-Modernist reaction to "debased" industrial imitations of the crafts — an argument that follows an arc from William Morris's Arts and Crafts reforms of ornament to the final and apparent exclusion of ornament by the high Modernist generation of the 1920s, a reaction that continues to shape the mores of contemporary architects? Or with Loos's notions of the proprieties of privacy and publicness appropriate to the bourgeois citizen of the modern metropolis, proprieties that required the suppression of outward (ornamental) expression?

While many historical threads are tied into contemporary reservations about ornament, Moussavi invokes the more recent events of architectural Postmodernism to act as foil in her reframing of ornament. Two issues figure prominently in her objection to the ornamental practices of Postmodernist architecture. First is the applied nature of the ornament — lying as an unmotivated and arbitrary graphic addition on the surface of the building (while recognizing the challenge faced by the large, featureless, windowless volumes characteristic of many

contemporary building programs).⁴ Second is what she deems to be ornament's communicative goals. (I think neither characterization sufficient to grasp what happened to ornament in the architecture of Postmodernism, at least not in the work of many of its significant advocates and practitioners. It is clear neither that this architecture, whatever claims some of its protagonists made, was primarily driven by the goal of popular communication nor that its interest in surface ornament was disconnected from fundamental transformations in the technical and material culture of architecture).⁵ Whether or not she reduces Postmodernism to a straw man, Moussavi is clear that her goal is to rescue ornament from its association with the mere decoration of surface on the one hand, and from its association with an impracticable symbolic practice on the other.

As Moussavi and Kubo make evident in their title, they will resurrect ornament on a functional foundation. The control of light and the assembly of walls, structural skeletons, light-diffusing walls and ceilings, are instrumental bases for exercises in pattern-making. Now rooted in function, questions of a purely symbolic or formal motivation can be put aside. With this move, a foundational polarity in Modernist architecture seems to dissolve — its distinction between substantive categories of material, structure, and space on the one hand, and ornament on the other.

Moussavi expresses concern about the communicative goals of Postmodernist architecture with its applied ornament. Citing the pluralist nature of contemporary society, she doubts that a coherent system of signs capable of communicating with architecture's varied publics can be made. Function thus appeals as a new basis for ornament to the extent that might possess the kind of universal legibility that ornament (prior to her redefinition) does not. The language of the form becomes a key to understanding the functional determination of form. In fact, if she were not interested in this communicative / symbolic effect but rather in the simple functionality of form, she could have dispensed with the category of or-

nement altogether.

Moussavi adds another category to her analysis of the ornament-experiencing subject: affect. The impression made on the senses through the effects of material, light, color, reflection, and presumably pattern is a category in itself. Invoking affect, she substitutes an immersion in the stream of sensation for ornament's historical invitation to recognize symbolic forms. Light and color wash over the subject, creating an impact not requiring judgment or understanding. While Moussavi has certainly understood the powerful charge she gets out of an unaccustomed (even radical) pairing of function and ornament, I believe she has given short shrift to the freighted paradox she has construed.

We must, however, enter into matters of definition. Let us look first at an old but key debate in the interpretation of ornament by some of its chief theorists not long before its exile. The evolution of Gottfried Semper's seminal views on ornament arrived at some thorny contradictions. While from his standpoint ornament's forms were bound up with the working of materials (the zigzag pattern deriving from the accident of tooling patterns), these same patterns retained a life of their own beyond their origins (in technique and material) as ornamental convention. Semper, in fact, advocated use of such patterns, regardless of their detachment from their material origins. For him, they were desirably freighted with significance accumulated through the vicissitudes of a history occurring subsequent to their technical-material origins. The seemingly unresolved relationship between the origins of ornament and its evolution into symbolic convention gave rise to conflicting interpretations of Semper's work. Materialists adopted Semper's materialist views on the origins of ornament, making them definitive for the correct derivation of ornament, and stopped there. Alois Riegl "corrected" the materialist view and by contrast asserted that Semper's (though more clearly his own) view was that ornament was finally independent of material and technique, an autonomous invention of the mind wrought in matter.⁶

The question here (and really Semper's own conclusion) does not depend upon the varying degrees of relationship and autonomy between ornament and material at different historical moments and in different architectural practices. It depends, rather, on the observation that finally ornament emerges as a category through the *recognition* of form as symbolic. Whatever the material limits, whatever the functional goals, symbolic motivations are formative and read into matter shaped by men. Ornament can never be reduced to a question of function and is incompatible as a category with that which simply functions or is the product of the technical logic of construction or craftsmanship.

If this is so and what is at stake here is whether we decide to carry forward one of the foundational debates of Modernism, what are we to make of Moussavi's argument? Is it a willful recasting of the debate or an aporia in her argument that allows her to safeguard ornament from critical rejection by defining it as something that it has never been: a functional instrument? It would be better to say that ornament *may* function, but, in my view, the motivations for its forms can never be reduced to functional or material foundations. And hence, while ornament is back, its troubling status is at the very heart of architecture's definition.

Ornament does *not* pose a problem for our moment because it is superficial, added to the surface of buildings (as if after more important matters). It is a problem because, more explicitly than questions of type, structure, building arrangement, room distribution, and volume (all more readily seen as producing our sheltering environments), ornament remains more stubbornly a symbolic substance. Since it can never be fully motivated by "substantive" purposes, its invention must be meaningful in other ways. To my mind, these other ways are nothing less than ornament's symbolic status.

So what is wrong with symbolic form? In Moussavi's view, it cannot speak to today's plural publics for whom the symbolic can only be opaque. But this one reason is the tip of an iceberg. The

reservations regarding symbolic practices in architecture would make a long list.

Here are just a few:

- Symbolic form substitutes phantasmal values for useful things (a view reaching back to Marx's distinction between exchange and use values). This view made possible the classic analyses of commodity fetishism and provided the basis for a more general rejection of symbolic form in Modernist architecture's functionalist ethics.
- Symbolic form requires levels of cultural familiarity (an erudition of sorts). Its limited legibility makes it undemocratic. (This is implicit in Moussavi's argument.)
- Our attention to symbolic form (representations) stands in the way of our immersion in life itself. Consider the rejection of representation articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. Machinic coupling and animalic drives suggest an immersion in biological function, in appetites, in activity. The alienated contemplation of forms necessary for the reading of representations, for the apprehension or concern with symbols, is excluded from this vitalist view that exercised influence (directly and indirectly) over architects in the 1990s. The notion of performative architecture and architecture as setting for life-action that grew out of Deleuze's and Guattari's influence gave new life to what was by then the remote moralism of 1920s functionalism. Yet, the conception of an architecture as framework for human action rather than symbolic form is shared by these two theoretical / ethical frameworks.
- The autonomy of ornamental / symbolic forms from the material / craft basis of their production has permitted "debased" imitations of poor material quality — what came to be known as kitsch. This is the 19th-century and Modernist critique of modern industrially fabricated imitations of historically crafted forms. Clement Greenberg's 1939 definition in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* distilled long-standing views on this.
- Symbolic forms persist as anachro-

nisms. Their socially recognized significance and the world that gave rise to them have passed into history. The forms persist through empty habits or dry academicism.

- A corollary: Symbolic forms are foisted upon publics without their consent or recognition. Such has been the case under authoritarian governments, most egregiously those of fascists, although it is possible to feel that all kinds of institutional and particularly state symbolism occur without consent and therefore present themselves as alienating forms with which social subjects fail to identify or do so only accompanied by a sense of coercion.
- An admission that all forms operate symbolically would undo Modernist and neo-Modernist illusions that there are formal motivations more durable than those produced by the vicissitudes of taste and, worse, of fashion. (Mark Wigley, in "White-out: Fashioning the Modern [Part 2]," describes the manner in which a white blank architecture was able to stand for the overcoming of fashion while obscuring its own operation as fashion, which is to say, the historically contingent form — white-walled, minimalist, and cubic — that its anti-fashion statement presented.⁷)

Given the multifarious objections to symbolic practices in architecture (and there are many more), the problem with ornament cannot be resolved by a fiat of redefinition: Ornament is neither function nor ahistorical affect, or not only and not even primarily. Function provides inadequate motivational bases to give rise to one form versus another, particularly in those cases that distinguish one ornamental regime from another. And the arguments about affect reproduce a characteristic theory of the picturesque, begun in the 18th century by such figures as Roger de Piles,⁸ who described an immersive environment of sensation provided by the eventful and unexpected forms of the picturesque landscape. As in the case of the picturesque, Moussavi's affective ornament is meant to provide an immediacy of experience, freeing the individual from socially constructed regimes

of the symbol. But just as the arrangement of sensation through the landscape ultimately appealed to something more complex, more symbolically articulate, than innocent immersion in the senses suggests, so too do the particular choices of materials, of colors, of patterns, that give rise to affect in today's architecture also appeal to judgment through socially and historically structured circuits of understanding. Affect, properly understood, is a socially constructed symbolic practice that is meaningful rather than simply stimulating.

If the pattern-making of today cannot be adequately understood either through the rubrics of function or through affect, what is at stake in ornament's resurgence?

Moussavi and Kubo's book includes a broad and eclectic array of examples. This eclecticism serves the purpose of diffusing any attempt to read a unifying program other than the ornaments' putative bases in function. Thus, Mies van der Rohe's *Seagram Building* and Ito's *Serpentine Pavilion* are included in the same category of structure, while Eero Saarinen's *IBM Manufacturing and Training Facility* is grouped with Herzog and de Meuron's *Eberswalde Library* under "Cladding." Each of these examples has its own subcategory: vertical and random for "Construction" and alternating and serial for "Cladding."

While Moussavi sees the *Seagram Building* as ornamentally clad, in limiting her understanding of this ornament to categories of function she bypasses its symbolic motivations. The image of repeating bronze-surfaced steel members gave symbolic form not just to the underlying steel skeleton, but to an entire world of mass production and bureaucratic / business organization. Is Ito's collaboration with Cecil Balmond (advocate of the *informe*) in the making of the crisscrossing structure of his *Serpentine Pavilion* to be understood through functional or technical innovations? Certainly Balmond's engineering genius permits new formal possibilities. And Moussavi and Kubo identify the formal category — "random" — to which the pavilion belongs. But what of this category and this formal difference?

As varied as the use of ornament is in contemporary work, distinctive themes emerge. The randomness of Ito's *Serpentine Pavilion* is one of them. But alongside this are some of the broader and to my mind more characteristic practices giving rise to the question of ornament, and these are marked by the use of flexible or variable geometries. The term *morphogenesis*, drawn from the life sciences,⁹ transposes into architecture the notion of nimble and responsive systems of the sort associated with biology. The flexible geometries that provide order without absolute repetition (such as the Voronoi) have gained importance, as have the parametric modeling systems that permit the "population" of geometrically flexible frameworks with cellular assemblies that modify themselves to fit ever-changing frames. Consider such works as LTW's *Beijing Water Cube*, and Lab architecture studio's *Federation Square*, and *Obzee Fashion Headquarters* and the *Issam Fares Institute* by Office dA, as well as the work of younger architects such as Ali Rahim and Tom Wiscombe.

Are these formal inventions to be understood through the categories of affect and function? If these are distinctive and characteristic patterns making a major contribution to the architecture of ornamental patterning today, the drive toward such forms stems, I think, from the powerful symbolic import they harbor, even while explanations for the work, like Moussavi's, disavow this symbolic dimension.

These forms appeal on a variety of symbolic levels. In contradistinction to the regularities of Modernist or classical paradigms, they offer an image of individuation that does not position the individual element in a subordinate relationship to a whole. The varied cellular patterns produce a teeming accumulation (as in some of Wiscombe's projects) rather than a definite figure; they reside within arbitrary bounding figures that do not relate in any necessary way back to the parts (but within which the parts are fine enough in grain to fit together without resistance to the overall building shape) — here we might consider such projects as 3deluxe's *Bruckner Pavilion*. In

Koolhaas's *TVCC* Beijing project, individual cells appear in undulating forms beneath a blanket-like wall. The figure — an overall form cannot be named — does not correspond to any a priori geometrical figure, and the flexible hive of cells beneath are a kind of accumulation that does not relate to the figure. Notwithstanding the rationality of its constructional economy (made up of a finite number of cell shapes), the *Beijing Water Cube* produces an impression of great teeming, of effervescent variety, while permitting a manageably limited number of variations (from the point of view of manufacture and assembly).¹⁰

In the same way that Mies's *Seagram Building* referred to a constructive regime, an organization of techniques, and a corollary and consistent organization of internal spaces, so too the formal arrangements of works like *TVCC* and the *Water Cube* operate as social parables. The classical and Modernist relationship of part to whole parallels a social imaginary that relates the individual to larger figures of social organization. Now variation substitutes for uniformity. The variable cell, with its looser affiliation to a whole, suggests an analogy to the social world: a world of endlessly diverse individuation marked by a declining willingness or ability of diverse individuals to imagine themselves in relationship to a social whole except through through sheer arbitrary assembly.

We might think here of Paolo Virno's distinction between the "multitude" and "people."¹¹ The latter positions individuals in relationship to larger shared identities in which individuals recognize themselves and with which they see shared experience, while multitude (which Virno characterizes as the dominant tendency of the present) describes subjects incapable of recognizing themselves in social groupings or of imagining shared experiences. The individuals of the multitude are bound together as multitude by the recognition in one another of the shared experiences of alienation. What Virno describes with some trepidation has been viewed more optimistically as an (albeit imagined) liberation from hierarchical orders of social organization.

Whether this experience of liberation ever corresponds to an individual's actual relationship to social organization is less relevant than the fact that a picture of monadological organization appeals strongly to the self-understanding of contemporary social subjects.¹²

The symbolic regime of Mies's *Seagram's Building* produced an ornamental idealization of the social and technical order of the day (which nonetheless depended on the denial of its status as ornament). Now the productive regime that may be symbolized by the variable cell is one of mass customization. This makes sense if mass customization is understood as giving rise to a flexibility within limits — a parametric flexibility that will operate always within some limit set by manufacturing machinery / software interactions — the paradoxes of mass customization (writ into its name) notwithstanding.

If one way to read the symbolic dimension of new pattern-making is through the social, another is through naturalizing metaphors. The preoccupation with sustainability has bred representational regimes in architecture (beside actual technical innovations that reduce energy consumption), regimes that in effect align architecture with nature, as if to make, through representation, a built world compatible with the natural one.

The ubiquitous greening of buildings, whatever their actual effects on sustainability, provide a symbolic environment in which the urban world of architecture is reconciled with nature, the devastation of which has fixed itself in the social imaginary. Along-side greening, though, are the naturalistic forms of flexible patterns. These patterns carry something of a biological order (compare the variable truss form of Junger Meyer's *Mensa* in Karlsruhe or the Voronoi patterns in Wiscombe's work to the hollow bone structure in d'Arcy Thompson's illustration of a section through a bird wing, or consider the tellingly named [through popular consensus] Beijing *Bird's Nest* by Herzog & de Meuron.) Ornamental patterns that resemble natural forms produce an image of architecture that imagines itself *part of* a taxonomy of nature.

To the extent that social order is projected onto these forms, it is thus made a natural order. In other words, the ordinary experience — in which social subjects abstract themselves from the natural world through thought and through the experience of that world as susceptible to human exploitation — is reversed. Our own social arrangements, our selves, and our architecture are made natural again. Our sense of individual self is changed. The individual is treated as a variable member of a larger field. Variation of elements produces not unique and distinct parts but slight differences, the difference according to which individuals are seen from the perspective of species.

Given the influence, direct or not, of Deleuze's positions on the evolution of formal practices in architecture, the following observations should be illuminating: Alain Badiou, colleague and antagonist of Deleuze, makes a point about what he considers the misuse and misunderstanding of Deleuze.¹³ In his view, Deleuze has mistakenly been seen to support individual autonomy and liberation; somehow the vitalist terms of *Anti-Oedipus* have been taken to describe the freedom with which individuals give themselves over to their drives, to desire. Badiou objects and sees in Deleuze's description of an immersive vitalism an image of the individual completely given up to "the One" of species life.

As unappealing as Badiou's view of Deleuze may be to those who sought in his work a model of individual liberation, perhaps Deleuze's view has unexpected appeal. The picture of the individual as species member immersed in a world of "natural" actions, drives, desires, and so forth is a picture of the social as an extension of nature. It is not political, and it does not require the exercise of judgment, but it is a view that heals, as it were, the divisions that would separate the human social world that exploits nature from nature itself. Thus the teeming cellular forms of the present might hold an appeal as a "natural" image of society.

Science-fiction images offer a curious insight into the lure and repulsion incited by the recall of natural form in teeming

flexible geometries. The convergence of the machinic and urban forms of alien or future civilizations with life forms (their biomorphism) produces uncanny experiences, frightening and seductive. The metaphor of biomorphic objects becomes literal in science fiction: machinery is made of organic systems; cities grow and appear in lifelike biological form; the inanimate is animate; the animate is a machine (inanimate).

One might think of the sentient organic ship in the "Tin Man" episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The ship, a misshapen, spongy-looking cone, thinks and lives. It telepathically communicates with one of *Voyager's* "empath" guests, Tam. While the "Tin Man" is perceived as a "higher" degree of technical and spiritual civilization (machine and man, both sentient, both living, entering into living communion), in "Babylon 5," the threatening ships (Battlecrabs) of a mysterious and enemy civilization, the Shadows, appear creaturely and frightening. The "matrix"-controlled pods in which humans are kept dreaming in *The Matrix* presents an imagery of the machinic series and the organic row (of corn, for instance) and of the animate and the dead. The Arcadian images of green cities of harmonized naturalistic forms in *Star Wars* present pastoral versions of utopian harmony.

The coupling of utopian and fearful images in the uncanny of these science-fiction images has its corollaries in such already historical works as Frederick Kiesler's endless house and again in the recent creepy, organ-like form of Greg Lynn's *Ark of the World Museum*. In the new pattern architecture, cellularity and stranded versions of this organicism appear in such works as Ali Rahim's *Residential Housing Tower* in Dubai (like the people in pod rows of *The Matrix*), Hernán Díaz Alonso's *Landmark Tower / U2 Studio*, Dublin (a gooey monster with exposed veins), and numerous projects by Lars Spuybroek. The introduction of the flexible cell accentuates organism-like qualities.

What of this convergence of the utopian and dystopian? Freud's theory of the death drive proposes the subject's

longing for dissipation. The cessation of self-constituting desire, of the active and forever urgent sustenance of the individual, gives way to a longing for an entropic dissolution of the self back into the elements of undifferentiated nature. Thus the appeal of convergence of the man-made world with nature correlates to this longing for cessation, for dissipation of the organism. The unnerving uncanniness arises in forms that seem to combine the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead. They make unsettlingly visible inchoate fantasies of disintegration and the dissolution of the boundary that distinguishes the fragile constitution of the individual.

Thus, what is perhaps most exotic in the forms of a new organicism is the manner in which it combines a picture of futuristic evolutions of technical progress with an image akin to the Romantic's of overgrown ruins — an image of Enlightenment mastery over a fearful and dangerous nature is succeeded by a now-technologized vision of subsiding into a deathly organic totality.

These are, of course, speculations on the symbolic content of one category of today's pattern-making ornament. What is interesting, to my mind, is that the extent to which this new ornament is capable of mollifying (or exorcising) anxieties about a threatened (or threatening) nature depends on its symbolic operations remaining unrecognized. Otherwise the appeal would be undone by the recognition that these regimes were simply representations of wish fulfillment. After all, in reviving a discussion of symbolic form, I do not mean to suggest that our relationship to symbols has lost any of its disenchantment. Rather, the overt recognition of these forms as symbolic would dispel their magic effects on the imagination. Thus, while the resort to functionalist explanations seems to reflect a properly disenchanting view of architecture and of the operations of symbolic form, such occlusions of the symbolic simply permit it to continue to operate at its most magical levels of wish fulfillment.

Some ornamental practices today — practices that I would like to call discursive—do, however, invite our engage-

ment with the terms of the representations they produce. Old as it is, OMA's unexecuted proposal for *Parc de la Villette* established an important paradigm. Its collection of landscapes prevented the experience of any of them as natural. Nature is absorbed into the taxonomic artifice of the collection as oddments in the *Wunderkammer* of old (or as in the varied environments of the *New York Athletic Club*). Throughout much of OMA's work, the collection of inconsistent systems (the diverse floor plans of the Bordeaux house or the diverse column grids and column types of the *Kunsthal*) not harmonized but juxtaposed, emptied each system of its claims to authority. The juxtaposition of inconsistent and sometimes conflicting options makes visible the ordering act, just as the famous Chinese encyclopedia Foucault used to begin *The Order of Things* revealed the artifice of the taxonomic act exacting a symbolic system from the meaningless fact of existence (and doing so at times through an aggressive act of violating normative categories of arrangement and normative notions of unity). Thus, even where OMA utilizes pattern-making operations, as in the *Seattle Public Library*, the structural fact of the dihedral grid, structuring a form shaped by program and organized with the deadpan literalness of the bubble-diagram, by virtue of its contrast to the "appointments" of interior décor, is made to *stand* for engineering in its relationship to the more overtly pop symbolic fashioning of interior finishes. Similar calculated clashes between "the facts" of structure, the overtly arbitrary figure of building, and semiotic surfaces are visible in *Casa da Musica* in Oporto as well.

In two projects by Herzog & de Meuron a particular relationship of construction, image, and nature is posed. The library at Eberswalde intertwines reproducible images (the various photographs, etched in series into stone and glass), superimposing the reproducible photograph upon the reproducible series of the building component (glass and concrete panels). What is remarkable in this superimposition is not, or not principally, the apparent identification of two

reproducible artifacts — image and building element. More startling is the relationship made between the very different natures of these reproducible things. That the photograph is mechanically reproducible is clearly old news, yet, while its reproduction makes of the image an immaterial artifact (indifferent to its medium — even if its very reproduction is the product of a machine working in or on some medium), the modularity of building materials does not in and of itself empty these materials of our sense of their material substantiality. The etching of the images into the very materials of the library wall binds the immaterial series of images to the material series of the building parts. This operation lends characteristically opposite qualities to each. Here two principal categories of ornament — the first as symbolic substance added to the surface of building and the second as something worked up from the substance of building — are recast. The building parts are made inseparable from the ornament. But these very parts now seem as insubstantial as the images etched into them; while, conversely, the immaterial and potentially infinite series of the reproducible photograph is bound to the very physical material of building.

The *Dominus Winery* disrupts categories of symbolic material and substance as well, but in this case perhaps with a particular poignancy as regards the semantics of the organic and nature. The walls of loose stone contained within a steel cage reproduce a characteristic arrangement of Robert Smithson's sculptures. The gathering together of a collected inorganic material (salt, limestone rubble, chunks of coal) and its placement in regular piles or in geometrically formed and arranged containers had the particular effect in Smithson's work of creating a startling abrupt relationship between, on the one hand, an utterly arbitrary and inhospitably inorganic element of the inanimate and non-human world and, on the other, utterly human arrangements of order.

In one of Smithson's *Nonsite* works, limestone rubble is sorted by size and arranged in boxes shaped according to a

forced perspective. The work presents a fragment of material taken from an inorganic mineral world sublime in its indifference to human order (unformed and infinite). And though this material is submitted to a principle of human-constructed order, it retains its inhospitable mineral indifference to its ordered arrangement: sorted but unchanged, betraying no intrinsic relationship to how it is gathered. Likewise with Herzog & de Meuron's caged rocks. The stones are not carefully laid up as if by a mason (the more so when working with un-dressed stone). The indifference of the mineral world is simply collected into steel cages. Pattern is made, light effects are achieved through the diffusing effects of the loose contained aggregate, but a taxonomy of elements is made through selection and arrangement that establishes an inorganic and arbitrary relationship between substance and form. The arbitrary relationship of form to mute substance is made here more explicit than in the arrangement of established symbolic materials in the case of the collection of purposefully conventional landscape patterns in *Parc de la Villette*.

What is at stake in these examples is the demonstrable absence of a natural relationship between the parts or materials on the one hand, and the larger order of the building on the other. This absence of what one might now think of as morphogenetic logic organizing the work at all scales and lending it organic coherence—an artificial and arbitrary relationship of parts—inscribes into the building and exacts from the apprehending subject a recognition of will acting upon matter, arranging it in a system of signs. What it does not suggest is a convergence of the manmade world and the natural world through the isomorphism of nature and building.

How does this differ from the organic models that I have described? In the former, the flexible and consistent relationships that move across the scales, the tractability of the cellular patterns to larger wholes, their coordination, the natural fit, as it were, invite a perception of the naturalness of the order of the building.

Now, what of affect? Does affective atmosphere appeal directly to the senses? Affective atmosphere created through color, pattern, and material effects — of shiny metals, light-regulating lattice screens, and variously treated and / or shaped glass — is produced and apprehended by historically constituted subjects, plural as they may be. The recollection of the lattices of the 1960s (of, among others, Erwin Hauer — whose work has now received a second volume to the still-recent monographic collection of his 1950s work), of color schemes, of pop patterns, of even a certain psychedelia, are no less relevant. The recollection, even if through rose-colored glasses, of the years of the Pax Americana, the image of postwar affluence, of Modern design uncoupled from social projects and made available as pleasurable commodity by establishment institutions and producers, has lent a seductive aura to our casual recollection — its allure abetted by the time's association with the early stages of sexual revolution. Even the images of psychedelia, the visual correlatives in design to the hallucinogenic “trip,” provide the historically constituted formal vocabulary associated with the pleasurable “schizophrenic” drug-induced abandonment that provided a general access to the vitalist experience described at the start of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* of more recent appeal.

Putting aside the labyrinths of semiotic significance associated with form, Moussavi participates in a long Modernist tradition that would like to uncouple building from symbolic practices — to make buildings simply real. Yet these practices are stubbornly the product of minds that arrange things in meaningful ways, which is not the same as useful ways. Those practices of ornament and architecture that bring attention to the construction of the symbolic and technical artifact of buildings, that do so by calling attention to the interaction between material and symbolic forms, are works that point most clearly to the actual conditions of dwelling. They occur in discursive forms of ornament rather than through fictions of function.¹⁴

One last thought. I think it likely that ornament is axiomatically symbolic. To the extent that form is not representation, ornament is absent — though given Wigley's observations on white walls and Koolhaas on minimalism as the new ornament, it is clear that for some thinkers there is no such thing as an unornamented architecture, and this ornament is never not symbolic and never merely functional.¹⁵ Ornament, in other words, if it is to be redefined, is not some sort of added doodad, but the condition of architecture itself.

The disavowal of ornament in architecture repudiates what I think are the very motivations behind current models of organicist form. The lure of the extraordinary virtuosity present in many current formal inventions is indisputable, while the uncanny approximations between architecture and the forms of nature provide a phantasmal image that allows mastery over nature to dissimulate a reconciliation with it. □

NOTES

Four colleagues at the University of Toronto—George Baird, Rodolphe El-Khoury, Evonne Levy, and Andrew Payne—have been invaluable interlocutors for me on many of the central themes of this article. I would like to thank them for their generosity in discussing ideas with me and for the illuminating insights they have offered.

1. The last major return being during the heyday of Postmodernism. Before that, the late Modernism of the postwar 1950s and '60s produced a more kindred body of ornament, abstract and sometimes three-dimensional. The interest in this earlier phase of ornamental practice is apparent in the many publications and exhibitions on design from these decades, including Joseph Rosa's *Glamour: Fashion + Industrial Design + Architecture* (New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Fine Art in association with Yale University Press, 2004) and the two volumes on the screen designer Erwin Hauer.

2. *AD* has produced a number of relevant issues: *Techniques and Technologies in Morphogenetic Design* and *Emergence: Morphogenetic Design Strategies*, both edited by Michael Hensel, et al. See also *Patterns in Design, Art and Architecture*, Petra Schmidt, Annette Tietenberg, and Ralf Wollheim, eds. (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005). On *informe* there is also Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), which elaborates on questions of the *informe* in art. However, Cecil Balmond's activity as a producer of the engineered solutions gathered under the rubric of *informe* has had more obviously direct impact on form strategies in architecture, and this is what interests me here.

3. Moussavi and Kubo are listed as editors. Barcelona: Actar, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2006.

4. An insight they treat as a fresh challenge without noting that it was a central observation of Postmodernist architecture's progenitor, Robert Venturi, made in his work with Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

5. To name but two exemplars of very different cast but who nevertheless fit Moussavi's claims poorly: Michael Graves's Poussin-influenced work is hard to conceive of as populist, and *allusion* seems a more relevant term to describe its symbolic operations than *communication*. Venturi and Scott Brown's work, regardless of its study of "The Strip," is still freighted with the mannerist erudition on display in *Complexity and Contradiction*. Graves's work is no more pop than Pop art, in which it would be silly to confuse its pop subject matter with its intent to be a mass or popular art form. In Venturi's work, the conflict between figurative traditions and modern techniques of construction was often purposely exploited to throw into relief the conflicted relationships between historical form and modern fabrication and building processes.

6. Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 46 – 48.

7. "White Out: Fashioning the Modern (Part 2)." *Assemblage* 22, December 1993, 6 – 49.

8. From Robin Middleton's introduction to Nicolas LeCamus de Mezieres, *The Genius of Architecture; or, The Analogy of That Art with Our Sensations* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), 48 – 49.

9. The scientific use of morphogenesis relates specifically to the dynamic development of the embryo. Morphogenesis describes this development from simple three-layered cellular sheath to tube to increasingly differentiated parts that come into being during gestation. The importance of the idea in its application outside of architecture lies in the fact that a latent "intelligence" or code is present within the DNA of the cells that propels them toward their later form. See Keith L. Moore and T. V. N. Persaud, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*, 7th edition, (Orlando, FL: W. B. Saunders Publishing, 2002). Algorithmically determined or parametrically constrained behavior reproduces in architecture qualities associated with morphogenesis.

10. Stan Allen has written on this topic of figure versus field in his important "Field Conditions," republished in his book *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 91 – 103.

11. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext (e), 2004).

12. The reading of political parable into forms that I have followed has been informed by Evonne Levy's work on Gurlitt and Wolfflin. Levy reads Wolfflin's famous characterizations of Renaissance and Baroque architecture (particularly with regard to indistinction and distinction of forms) in light of the political figurations of the late 19th century.

13. *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

14. The exhibit and catalogs of Joseph Rosa, Phil Patton, Virginia Postrel, and Valerie Steele's *Glamour: Fashion + Industrial Design + Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) have explored the evolution of current tastes from a different perspective, but without the question of ornament as such being consistently raised. *Sign as Surface*, the 2003 exhibit at Artist's Space Gallery in New York, touches on some

of the issues of my discussion, while allowing more than I would technical and formalist arguments to stand on their own ground.

15. Rem Koolhaas, "junkspace," in AMOMA, *Content*, Rem Koolhaas, editor-in-chief, Brendon McGetrick, editor (Köln: Taschen, 2004).