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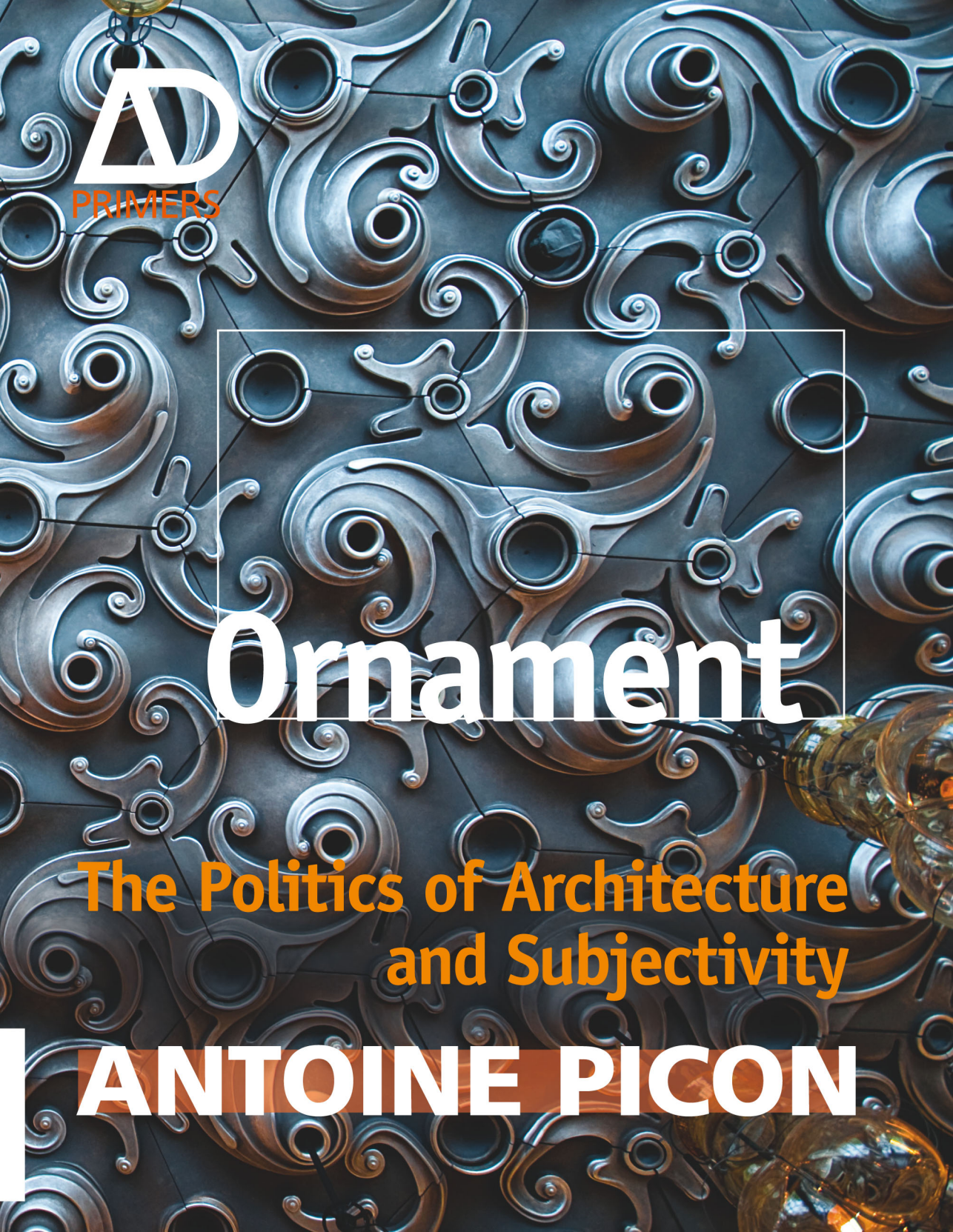

Ornament

The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity

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Introduction
Architecture as Ornament?

What if architecture were ultimately about ornament? Even décor. In *The Mediation of Ornament*, Islamic art specialist Oleg Grabar proposes to interpret it from this very perspective. 'Good architecture is always meant to be an invitation to behave in certain ways; it always adorns life, and, some exceptions notwithstanding, does not require the emotions surrounding whatever one does in a building, including looking at works of art,' states Grabar, concluding that 'architecture is a true ornament (...). Without it, life loses its quality. Architecture makes life complete, but it is neither life nor art.'[1]

For a designer, there is something profoundly disturbing in the thought that architecture corresponds to neither life nor art, but rather is an ornament for both. The nagging feeling that there might be some truth in this could be partly responsible for the early 20th-century demise of traditional décor, as if the conception of the discipline that it hinted at had become, after centuries of tolerance, all of a sudden unbearable. We will return to Grabar's assertion about architecture, life and art later. Let us begin by acknowledging the return of ornament in contemporary architecture. This return constitutes the subject of the present book.

From professional journals to scholarly texts, it has become commonplace to evoke this reappearance, as if the reluctance of Modernism to recognise the crucial character of adornment were finally about to be overcome. The role played by the computer has likewise been acknowledged. Design

Herzog & de Meuron, Eberswalde Technical School Library, 1997. The building is emblematic of the return of ornament. The basis for the facade prints is photos discovered by the artist Thomas Ruff. The repetition of the pictures plays on the frontier between representative and abstract, images and patterns. Revealingly, the pictorial character of the facade is not detrimental to the strong impression of materiality conveyed by the building, to the contrary.

software has enabled architects to play with textures, colours, patterns and topologies in highly decorative ways. However, beyond its evident links with the diffusion of digital tools and culture, the meaning of this evolution remains unclear. What are its long-term implications for architecture? Should one consider that the future of the discipline lies in the design of decorated sheds? Is the reduction of architecture to envelope desirable? One thing is certain: ornament represents a delicate issue.

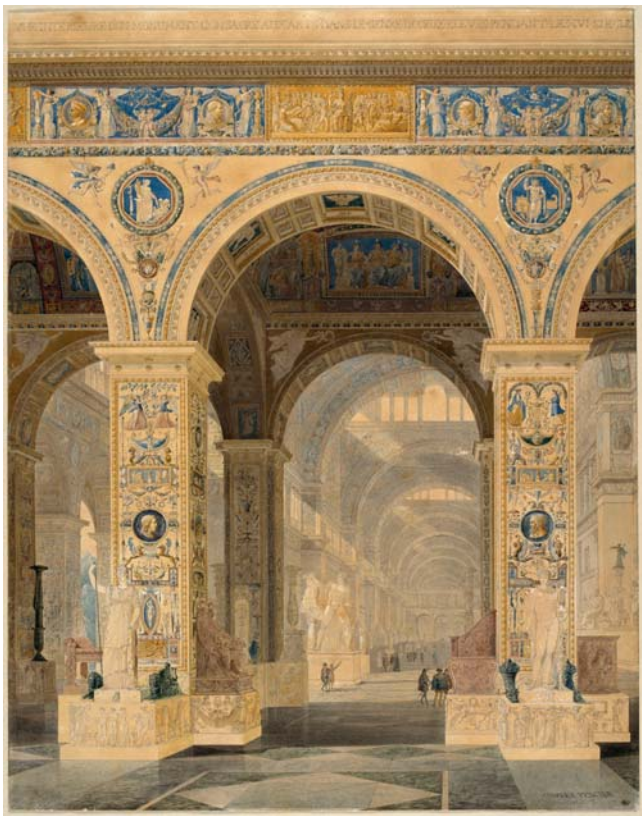
Today's debates echo problems that have a long history in Western architectural tradition. On the one hand, since the Renaissance, architects have periodically insisted on the need to subordinate ornamentation to the overall organisation of buildings. The Modernist demise of ornament can be interpreted as an extreme form of this desire to keep it in check. On the other hand, ornament has often been seen as holding the key to the foundations of architecture. Again, the Modernist ban may appear a desperate attempt to counteract the disturbing feeling that the discipline could be revolving around the question of décor. This feeling has returned today, accompanied by a mix of apprehension and excitement.

Despite these historical resonances, what we call ornament reveals itself as quite different from what it represented in former times. These differences are analysed in detail in the first chapter of this book. Such a gap could lead

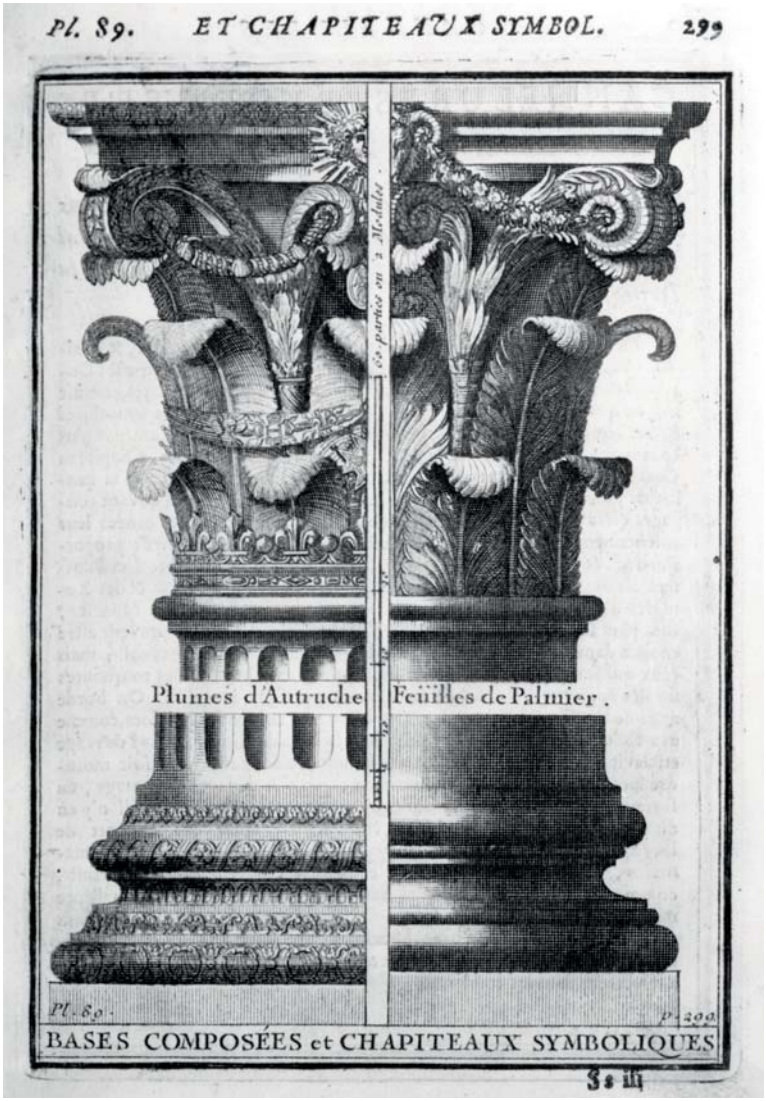
to the rejection of the very notion of a return. Nevertheless, elements of continuity between past and present can be found in two threads: the first encompasses subjectivity, the second, politics.

Ornament is designed and fabricated by various individuals, architects, artists and craftsmen. It is meant for another series of individuals, from clients to simple passers-by. Ornamentation cannot be understood without taking into account the various subjects engaged in its production and reception. In chapter 2, we will evoke their respective roles in shaping architectural décor from the Renaissance on, as well as the ambiguities which have accompanied their interventions.

Politics constitutes the other possible link between yesterday and today. Contrary to the message conveyed by the founding fathers of modern architecture, from Adolf Loos to Le Corbusier, traditional ornament was not meant solely for pleasure. It conveyed vital information about the purpose of buildings as well as about the rank of the owners. As such, it participated in the expression of social values, hierarchies and order. In chapter 3, the various aspects of the relations between ornament and politics from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century will be explored. Despite the fact that this role no longer seems evident in contemporary ornamentation, the question of its relation to the expression of collective values has not disappeared, far from it. As argued in the last chapter of the book, the return of ornament is both about the new type of subjectivity characteristic of the digital age and about the possible contribution of architecture to emerging collective meanings and values. Thus, through the ornamental dimension,



Charles Percier, interior view of a museum, circa 1810.
The drawings of Charles Percier (1764–1838) display remarkable ornamental skills. In his work, there is no clear-cut distinction between décor and architecture. With his associate Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, Charles Percier was one of the main creators of the Empire style, this variant of neo-classicism characteristic of the reign of Napoleon I.

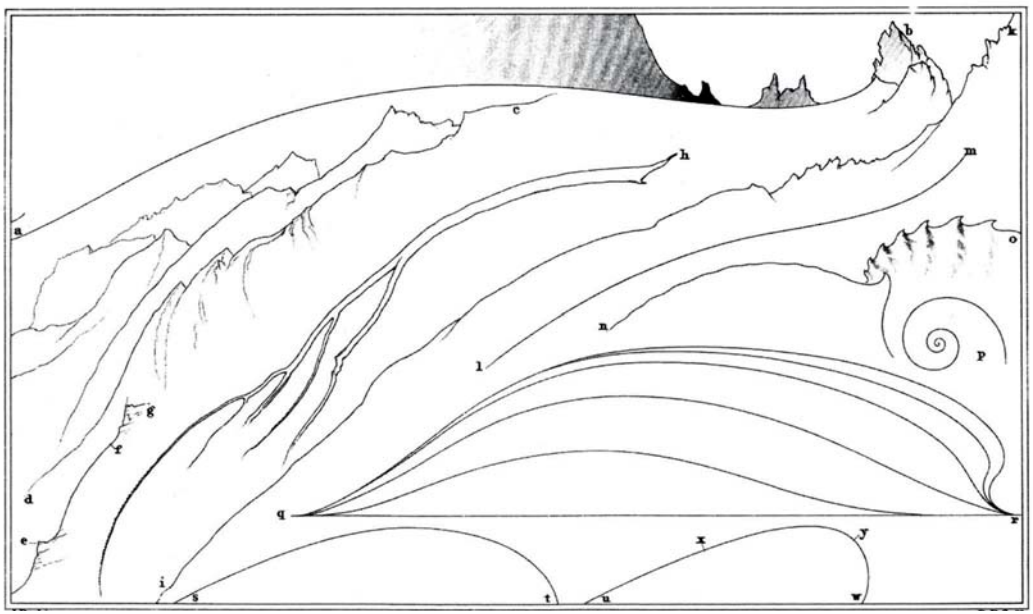


Bases and capitals of the French order designed by Claude Perrault and of the order used for the Temple of Jerusalem, after Augustin-Charles d'Aviler, *Cours d'Architecture*, 1691. A revealing example of the connection between ornament and politics. On the left, the attempt by French 17th-century architectural theorist Claude Perrault to invent a French order for the Louvre Palace; on the right, the capital of the order used at the Temple of Jerusalem, according to a 16th-century reconstitution. In a variation on the Composite order, Perrault uses ostrich feathers instead of acanthus leaves to express the lightness of his proposed order.

we propose here a reflection on the political and social agency of the architectural discipline beyond its much-discussed contribution to issues such as sustainability. Because we still bear the imprint of Modernist prejudices, we display a tendency to consider the performativity of décor as less important than structural or energetic behaviour. But as French poet Paul Valéry

famously noted, nothing is actually deeper than the surface, the skin.[2] Once again, ornament could well hold the key to core architectural issues.

Although the very notion of return seems to imply a strong historical dimension, it has not always been studied from this perspective. Beyond superficial references to John Ruskin or Gottfried Semper, its interpreters have almost exclusively focused on what is happening today with the aid of digital tools, without paying much attention to the genealogies linking past and present. In sharp contrast with the enrolment of history by Postmodernism, this presentist attitude is actually a general feature of today's architectural debate. Published in 1978, Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York* was, in fact, one of the last major theoretical contributions based on an innovative mobilisation of architectural and urban history.[3] Until recently, the historical dimension was also quite limited in the study of the digital revolution, even if scholars such as Mario Carpo or Reinhold Martin had explored its connection to former episodes ranging from the invention of the printing press during the Renaissance to the cybernetic turn of the 1950s and '60s.[4] Presentism still reigns supreme in sustainability studies, despite the vernacular precedents to the quest for energy-efficient behaviour.



John Ruskin, Abstract Lines, plate from *The Stones of Venice*, vol 1, 1851.
For Ruskin, abstract lines, derived from nature, are the first constituents of ornament. The plate shows various lines at very different scales, from the profile of a glacier in the Alps (ab) to the curve of a branch of spruce (h). His sensitivity to the dynamic behaviour of natural elements seems to announce the contemporary interest in flows, variations and modulations, one of the sources of the return of ornament.

The time has come to break with this attitude, and ornament provides perhaps one of the best opportunities to do so. The opportunity comes not so much from a straightforward continuity between past and present as from an intricate, almost labyrinthine set of similarities and dissimilarities between what was once called ornament and the type of décor that now lies before our eyes. Contrary to what one might imagine, history reveals itself more productive when the present does not appear as a mere extension of the past but seems, rather, to stem from a complex reinterpretation of some of its elements, a reinterpretation in which continuities and discontinuities need to be carefully sorted and weighted. The co-founder in the 1930s of the renowned group of French historians – the Annales School – Marc Bloch once declared that history must convey an 'imperious sense of change', and the complexity of the relations between past and present is one of the preconditions to fulfil this mission.[5] Simultaneously, the realisation that things have indeed changed must come with an impression of déjà-vu, which suggests underlying threads relating former historical moments to present-day issues. It is only when it explores this mix of change and permanence that history carries lessons. This is what we have attempted here when grappling with the return of architectural ornament. This book is as much about the operativity of history as about the agency of architecture.

Architectural agency and historical operativity are actually interconnected. To put it in simpler terms, the practice of architecture needs the lessons of history, even if the need is felt less acutely at certain periods than at others. Again, the ties between architecture and history have been at a low ebb for the past two decades. Why this enduring though fluctuating link? The answer probably lies in the strong self-referential character of the architectural discipline. At the time when the doctrine of imitation still prevailed in the arts, that is until the mid-18th century, theorists often remarked that whereas painting and sculpture imitated nature, architecture had a propensity to imitate itself. Architecture is partly based on the meditation of its former achievements as well as shortcomings. Modernism did not break with this self-reflexive stance, and now modern architecture itself has become a legacy that must be reinvested with new meaning.

One could also suggest that architecture is perhaps more accurately described as a tradition than as a discipline. A tradition, a living tradition that is, is not something static. At each stage, it implies handing down but also loss, the price paid for moving forward. Sometimes a dimension considered as constitutive of the theory and practice can become rapidly obsolete while

others are maintained and even accentuated. At other times, long-forsaken or at least neglected aspects can be retrieved or reinvented. Both scenarios have applied to ornament. It almost disappeared during the first decades of the 20th century. It is now making a surprising comeback.

History plays a fundamentally critical role when exploring this mix of loss and transmission. Part of its task consists in deconstructing the disciplinary illusion of an architecture which would have steadfastly pursued the same objectives throughout its evolution. The goals of the discipline have changed, just like some of its key dimensions and notions. For instance, before the advent of Modernism, ornament represented a fundamental dimension of architectural design, while space was not considered as such. We are currently observing a dramatic reversal of this situation, with the return of ornament and the simultaneous decline of the Modernist obsession with space.

There is no disillusionment without the attempt to re-create simultaneously new enchantment. When some myths are dispelled, others almost immediately replace them, so strong is the desire to believe, hence Walter Benjamin's famous characterisation of 19th-century capitalism, despite its desire to be eminently rational, as 'a reactivation of mythical forces'.[6] Behind the critical assessment of transmission and loss, and despite the conscious attempt to deconstruct some of the grand claims of the architectural discipline, history reveals itself deeply permeated by the desire to identify or at least catch a glimpse of what could remain untouched by the flow of historic conditions. This is where its agenda meets with the ambition of theory. Part of the magic of architecture lies in the suggestion that an unmovable core exists beneath its ever-changing theories and modes of practice. The role of history is to serve this magic by touching on it lightly, instead of producing normative statements, which usually belong to the category of disciplinary illusions. At the same time, many buildings remain foreign to architecture – in that they are not designed by architects and have little relation to architectural ideals – as if architecture were something added to construction, like a garment, make-up or even perfume, the most volatile of all body adornments. This troubling fact hints at another feature of the discipline: a gratuity and instability in sharp contrast with the overt striving of architecture for permanence. Gratuity and instability are also essential for architectural magic to operate. The ornamental dimension lies on the very border that separates enchantment and disillusion, magic and rationality. It makes architecture vibrate, hence the recurring analogy made with music. On the one hand, ornament points towards permanence by helping to outline

the overall organisation of a building. On the other hand, it displays disruptive tendencies leading to the blurring of this organisation. To put it in slightly different terms, ornamentation always marks a threshold; it appears as a structure of exchange rather than as a static entity. This is where the nagging feeling that we mentioned earlier re-emerges: could adornment, décor, tell us something absolutely essential about architecture, despite the Modernist attempt to make us believe the contrary? This feeling ultimately represents what this book is about.

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5 Marc Bloch, 'Que Demander à l'Histoire', ***X-Crise***, no 35, February 1937, pp 15–22, p 16 in particular.
6 Walter Benjamin, ***The Arcades Project*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p 391.