

History of Architectural Ornamentation

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Abstract

This essay briefly traces the history of architectural ornamentation in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Modern architecture. It argues against the lavish use of ornamentation that proliferated in the Roman Empire and rather for a masterful use of ornamentation that is truthful and faithful to the expression of function and structure. The essay concludes by admonishing architects of the next generations to integrate ornamentation in architectural design that is, by definition, a combination of various arts intimately related together.

Keywords: *interior and exterior ornamentation, horizontal and vertical moldings, classic orders*

Imitation of Nature

Egyptian architecture derived its ornamentation from primitive methods of construction. When stone buildings later on took the place of much structures, the ornamentation of the columns and lintels borrowed forms from the vegetable kingdom, while the walls remained even or covered with paintings and sunk carvings. These sunk carvings, which belong especially to Egypt, are an evidence of the means of construction primitively employed.

It is evidently quite illogical to give a stone column, a monolithic piece, the form of a bundle of reeds. This is nevertheless what the Egyptians did from an early period. Imitating bundles of reeds, which are moreover represented in painting or engraving in their actual shapes on the buildings themselves, they perpetuated this kind of ornamentation in stone which was the material of their architecture for many centuries. Thus they hewed sarcophagi of granite or basalt, giving their sides the appearance of a piece of carpentry. This use of ornamentation is explicable among a people who seek to preserve certain traditional forms hallowed by religious association and maintained by a powerful theocracy; but it has been inadmissible in the Western civilization ever since the supervention of Greek genius. And in fact, while the Ionians of Asia believed they ought to continue this transmission of forms, the Dorians did not proceed in the same manner. Even their earliest buildings display forms that are appropriate to the nature of the material employed. The shape of the capital and the moldings of the cornice have no analogy whatsoever with shapes derived from the fashioning of wood.

The primitive Egyptian capital is evidently an imitation of the lotus-flower, or of a cluster of lotus buds; but the Doric capital is not an imitation of any vegetable form; and it would be very difficult to find such a shape in a piece of wood-work. Its graceful outline displays the form that rightly belongs to a stone support. This is evident to the least experienced. In the triglyphs again, we are asked to see the ends of beams; but besides the fact that the ends of beams could not show on the four sides of a building, how can we account for the wood being fluted at the ends? It is easy to flute wood in the direction of

its grain, but across the grain this would not be an easy or rational process. We see in the triglyphs uprights of stone between which are placed the metopes, these being merely a filling in.

This seems much more in accordance with common sense and since the Greeks fluted their columns to express distinctly their function as vertical supports, it was natural to flute the uprights of the architrave, whose function is similar. Here, wood has nothing to do with the origin of the forms given to the triglyphs. But in buildings erected by the Dorian Greeks, painting was always employed as a means of ornamentation, internal and external. In the best period of Classic Art, the Greeks did not use colored marbles in their large buildings. They built them of stone or white marble, coating the monochrome stone with a selected white, and colored its entire surface. Color, therefore, was one of the most effective means of ornamentation; it served to distinguish the architectural members, and to give the several planes of the structure their due relief. But, and in this particular the delicacy of Greek genius is manifest, as it is necessary, especially in such a climate as theirs, to consider the effect of the sun's light, the Greek artists felt that in a building whose dimensions were never very considerable, greater relative importance should be given either to the vertical or to the horizontal lines; all their moldings therefore are made in the horizontal members; here they are strongly marked; they are even deeply sunk, in order to obtain sharp shades like strong ink-lines in a drawing; while the vertical members are left bare, or only very slightly molded. The shafts of the columns are but faintly streaked with shallow flutings, whose only effect is to render their cylindrical surface more distinctly apparent. If we examine a Doric Greek temple of the best period, we shall not find a single vertical molding; all the moldings are horizontal and very sharply cut. The result of this system was that the surfaces were distinguished by different shades, and that in the general effect the building was banded with strongly marked horizontal shadows, quieting to the eye, and clearly separating the various tones of color. In these temples there is very little sculpture; it only appears in the metopes and the tympanums, of the pediments; moreover, it is not ornamental sculpture, but represents independent subjects. For the most part, ornamentation, properly so called, consisted of painting. Sometimes the horizontal moldings are finely loaded in the most careful and effective manner.

It was only about the time of Pericles, in Attica, that ornamentation became a feature in buildings. As a general rule the ornamentation of the best Greek architecture consisted entirely of horizontal moldings, with due regard to the effects of light and shade, and tones of color, whose harmonious arrangement was excellent.

Lavish use of ornamentation

In Roman buildings ornamentation is lavished without sufficient judgment, and aims rather at richness of effect than fitness and clearness. The Greeks of the Classic period, however, made only a very moderate use of sculptured ornamentation, and confined their statuary to specially determined places. They covered the surfaces of their buildings with a coloring which, when required, gave relief to the supports while subordinating the parts that did not support but served only as enclosures. The Romans of the Empire, on the contrary, made it their chief objective to employ if possible, all together, every decorative appliance granite; they used all these with more profession than discernment. For them,

to charm meant to dazzle, to astonish; they appreciated but slightly the refinements of Greek genius. Besides, it was a matter of no concern to them whether the ornamentation belonged to the first or second of those two modes between which it has been established a marked distinction, or borrowed at the same time from both. Every kind of decoration pleased them, provided it was rich.

The chief defect in the architectural decoration of the Empire is the want of repose when compared to the architecture of the classic period in Greece where ornamentation occupies only well-defined positions. The architectural members are so carefully considered, proportioned, and shaped that they themselves constitute the principal decoration. To put it more clearly, when the structure of the architectural features constitutes the ornamentation, that sculpture necessitates parts presenting greater resistance, parts of greater strength, which limit the sculptured ornamentation to the less perfectly evident that the only parts fitted to receive carving or sculpture are the metopes, the friezes, and the tympanums of the gables. Everywhere else it is the actual members of the structure which assume a decorative shape resulting from faithfully expressing their function. But if we replace the Doric capital, which perfectly indicate its function of support, by the Corinthian capital – an architectural member which, to the eye is wanting in expression as a support – which seems as if it must be crushed beneath the weight it is intended to carry, hence the Greeks were slow to adopt the Corinthian capital, and at first used it only in buildings of very small size. The Ionian capital though richly ornamented, does not lose its expression as a support, its wide volutes curve round beyond the diameter of the column shaft, which is carried up to the abacus; they do not conceal the support, but only gracefully terminate it.

Generally, however, the architect is content to produce satisfactory effects on paper and then discovers that when carried out, his attractive designs produce but a poor result. Much expense could be avoided by taking the trouble to realize beforehand the exact effect of perspective and light on buildings. Further, the more that it is been able to avoid such useless expenditure, the more one adds to the value of a work of art. The main consideration is to put things in their proper place. Ornamentation lavished in a façade till it becomes wearisome to the spectator would be pleasing were it confined to a few points in which it would find its appropriate position. In this respect the Orientals excelled the Europeans. In their buildings, however ornate the decoration, it never injures the effect of the composition of masses; it invariably leaves points of repose; points that are dictated by the structure; so, far from wearying the eye, this decorations engages it, because it is put where it tells to advantage.

Subordination of ornament to design idea

However richly ornate a building may be, the ornamentation must be subordinated to the conception, in order not to weaken, disturb, or obscure its expression. The more lavish the ornamentation, the more vigorously should the idea be expressed. A design idea can be more easily manifested in a building which is simple than in one that is loaded with ornament. But it is plain that where an idea is wanting, the temptation is strong to conceal feebleness of conception beneath a parasitical embellishment.

Orientals are superiors in architectural ornamentation that never obscures the dominant conception but powerfully aids its expression, and its natural manifestation. It must

indeed be observed at the outset that, among them, such dominant conception is never wanting. The fact is: idea in art has an imperious aspect; its manifestations not infrequently a savor of freedom or a willingness to make concessions; characteristics that are displeasing to those corporate bodies in whose esteem self-obliteration is the highest excellence.

Architectural ornamentation is, however, attractive only as far as it expresses an idea with great clearness. In certain classical buildings, the idea is indicated by the work. But it is not often that the opportunity is given of expressing an idea so simple. It is nonetheless evident that, however complicated the program maybe, there is a dominant idea.

Meanwhile, Western architecture before the period of Renaissance is more frank in its decorative features. The relations of ornamentation to structure are harmonious and artistic to the point that ornamentation cannot be divorced from the structure. True richness is that which, beneath an appearance of simplicity, exhibits elegancies that are not to be imitated by cheap means but by a manner marked by good sense, discretion, and unaffected simplicity which is natural.

One of the charms of good architecture consists in a close relationship between the external and internal ornamentation. The external ornamentation should prepare the spectator for, and prefigure to him, that which he will find within. It is not the role of architecture to surprise. Besides, the architect should not give promise on the outside of more than he can perform. When he has lavished every species of ornamentation in the front, what will he have remaining to show inside? Exteriorly our buildings affect great relative simplicity and the architecture becomes richer and more elegant the farther we penetrate into the interior. The Egyptians are skillful in making transitions, in gradually leading the spectator's gaze to the culminating splendor, so that one never feels a desire to go back.

In ornamentation, nothing is more fatal to effect than a too pompous prelude, an over-presumptuous promise. It is of the same order and leads to a similar unfortunate result as the bombastic prologue of the poet. To give more than one seemed to promise is the true way to engage and retain the attention of the listener and the gazer. At the same time the prelude should be indirect in accordance with the body of discourse. It should prepare for and lead up to the chief point of interest. The best means for attaining this end is to be truthful, to adapt the ornamentation to the requirements of the case. There is in every edifice one part that is of special interest; this would not be on the outside for it is not supposed that buildings are erected only to be seen from the street. From the outside to the interior of a building, therefore, the introduction should be gradual, and there should be nothing to make people inclined to stay in a lobby or on a flight of stairs. It is not much to the architectural credit of a building that the reception rooms should be accounted dull or bare-looking, but the staircases magnificent; probably those interior rooms appear uninteresting in great measure because those staircases promised too much.

Two modes of ornamentation

It must be acknowledged that in most of our modern buildings the ornamentation is redundant when it should be scanty, and scanty when it should abound. The fronts are overlaid with decorations; surprising ornamental effects are sought for in the designs of

lobbies and staircases; and all this display by way of introduction to rooms that are comparatively mean of aspect. The visitor sees fronts embellished by lofty columns, passes beneath stately peristyles, ascends flights of stairs of magical effect covered by domes enriched with carvings; and after this imposing introduction, which gives promise of halls rivaling those of the hotels, what do you in reality find? Rooms that are commonplace in the general design, but overloaded with gilded stucco-work, sham wood-carving, mean paper hangings and vulgar upholstery. Less pompous display on the outside, and more dignity and real richness within would appear more rational - more in conformity with the principles of true ornamentation.

What shall we say of those classic orders, overspreading throughout our shop-fronts or in the entrances of the new villas in our new cities? How ridiculous this inappropriate decoration will appear, when, sooner or later, the public taste shall revert to simpler and more sensible forms after so much profuse extravagance; when the time shall arrive for restoring harmony between the character of our architecture and the manners of the times. What sense is there in ornamenting the exteriors of mere residential houses more richly than the mansions of the great nobles in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century? It is not the most egregious vanity covering walls and windows with ornament while the closely-packed families within are suffering every kind of discomfort in rooms whose scanty dimensions scarcely afford room for a bed and a chair?

In the style of architecture adopted in the public edifices and mansions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a certain harmony with the manners of the times. At that time all the great in particular sacrificed the comforts of life to outward grandeur. Without were spacious courts and grandly ornamented facades; within, magnificent vestibules, noble staircases, and vast saloons; but this imposing display was obtained at the expense of comfort. The bedrooms were generally small and close, and the passages and back staircases narrow and steep. Except in the state-rooms, there was nothing like convenience or comfort. This was in conformity with the habits of the times, and no one complained. In private dwellings the arrangements were dictated by necessity with the decorative display of the street front.

We have then one design for the passerby (the facades), another for the occupant; and if an architect should ever have occasion to draw the plans and elevations of one of these dwellings, he will have a difficult task to make them agree. This window which he has sketched in the elevation will have nothing in the interior to correspond with it. What to the passerby appears a square window will be an arched one to the occupant; in effect, he will find a double case in the building: one for outward show, the other to suit the interior arrangements. Like the structure, it is double; that of the exterior having no kind of relation to that of the interior. Are they acceptable to a public which sooner or later asks the purpose for which this or that building was erected?

Architecture: a combination of various arts

The very fact that architecture is a combination of various arts causes an accumulation of difficulties when we have to compose, and proceed to the execution of this complex whole, so as to satisfy all requirements. We should not therefore be astonished, nor should we blame the architects alone, if most of our buildings present only agglomerations of art products, not works of art.

In regions where the plastic arts were subjected to hieratic formulas, as in Egypt for example, these arts moved only within certain narrow limits which it was forbidden them to transgress. The harmony established between their relations could not be disturbed by the innovations of a man of genius. The functions of architecture, sculpture, and painting, defined from the very commencement, were exercised under a kind of rigorous archaic control, and the pre-established harmony was such that it is difficult to say, on seeing an Egyptian building of the best period, where the expressions of these three arts, which are so intimately associated, severally begin and end.

How and by what efforts of genius had this intimate union been first established? The consequence is evident even in the view of the least intelligent observer that the monuments of Egypt are not only distinguished from all others, but exhibit a stamp of unity so complete that architecture of any other order, even the most perfect in its kind, seems to want cohesion when compared with that of Egypt. Roman buildings themselves, however concrete, solidly built, and well-balanced, seem to be wanting in vigor and unity by the side of the least important of the Egyptian monuments of the best period. The reason is that the Egyptian building gives the idea of stability and strength. It is suggested by a principle which is the simplest and the most easily conceived: the intimate union of the arts of sculpture and painting with the form adopted by the architect concentrates the attention of the spectator on the absolute unity of the whole, instead of turning it away. Do we then recommend an imitation of the monuments of Egypt along our streets? Certainly not.

The Greeks also considered decoration as forming an essential part of architecture. The metopes, the tympanums, and friezes of the Parthenon are panels or tapestries having no influence on the structure lines. Whole walls were covered with bas-reliefs from top to bottom. The Romans did not concern themselves with iconography. Their architects used to prepare niches and raise pedestals here and there, and then go to Greece for statues fitted to occupy them.

Conclusion

That buildings should be splendid is all very well; but at least let them be sensible and not designed chiefly for mere external show; for that public which is good-natured sometimes, and which for a long time has accepted. Our young architects will do well to anticipate this change of feeling, and may rely upon it that it is not taste based on reason that provokes reaction, but as temptations, luxury, obtrusive wealth, that makes a useless parade of itself. The architecture suited to our times is not an art that is mere luxury, for the delectation of a few amateurs, a select portion of society; it must be an art which belongs to all, since in the case of public buildings it is paid for by all. It should therefore conform to the manners and habits not of a public, but of the public, in order to gain respect by a display of taste, thought and good sense rather than by an unjustifiable abuse of wealth.

To bring the ornamentation of our buildings into accord with the sterling qualities of our national character, which is opposed to exaggeration and want of proportion, is a noble problem to the working out of which the rising generation of architects should devote their best powers. It is by the careful thinking-out of the problem that can solely give birth to the architecture of the future; not the servile imitation and undigested mingling of

features borrowed from previous times and previous styles of architecture. The ironic question to be posed is: Why reproduce on a new building erected all at one time, of a front which is the production of different periods and various requirements? Why two campaniles and two clock faces appear on the same front of a building?