

The Journal of Architecture

ISSN: 1360-2365 (Print) 1466-4410 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjar20

Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity

Deniz Balık

To cite this article: Deniz Balık (2016) Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity, The Journal of Architecture, 21:8, 1336-1339, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2016.1257277

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2016.1257277

Published online: 02 Dec 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 444

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rjar20

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 21
Number 8

Book, exhibition and film reviews

Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity
By Antoine Picon
West Sussex, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2013
ISBN 978-1-119-96595-4
pp. 168, 73 colour plates, 47 half-tones

The authoritative voice of the twentieth-century Modern architects, particularly Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, had manipulated the reception and use of ornament by strictly banishing it from the architectural domain and declaring it taboo. In the twenty-first century, a plethora of architectural design projects, books, articles, exhibitions, conferences and university courses indicate the triumphant return of ornament in architectural theory and practice. A valuable contribution to the current interest, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* by Antoine Picon, scrutinises ornament as it makes a comeback in contemporary architecture.

Picon is a contemporary architect and Professor of the History of Architecture and Technology at Harvard Graduate School of Design. Ornament has been a recurrent theme in his research field for a couple of years, including his past courses, articles and an earlier book, *Digital Culture in Architecture: An Introduction for the Design Professions* (2010): in that book Picon argued that contemporary architects attached great importance to surface, or envelope, resulting in the 'rediscovery of ornament'.[1] Pointing to the correlation between the re-emergence of ornament and the advance of digital technology, in both *Digital Culture in Architecture* and *Ornament*, he argues that what we understand as ornament today differs totally from what we discuss in architectural history. In 'From Tectonic to Ornament: Towards a Different Materiality', a chapter in *Digital Culture in Architecture*, he defines the topic of contemporary ornament as being 'the reinvention of ornament', rather than 'the return of ornament'.[2]

He asks in *Ornament*, 'why then use the same word and above all speak of a return?' (p. 47), similarly to Michel Foucault, who denotes the emergence of decoration and motifs in post-modernism as 'no such thing as a return', for one can only criticise the current phenomenon through historical analysis, rather than a process of 'bringing back'.[3] Today, ornament is undoubtedly related to the paradigm shift of the post-digital age, which makes it a novel issue to explore. Instead of being governed by an architectural style in the historical sense, the application of ornament in contemporary architecture is grounded on the masterly use of computer-aided design and manufacturing programs. In this sense, ornament today has become an innovative, rather than retrospective element which architects reinterpret, design and fabricate of their own volition.

Picon observes that although modern architects reduced the role of ornament to one of pleasure, it has always been intertwined with symbolism in the traditional sense. He speculates that we are still under the influence of modern doctrines, since we give primacy to structure, material and sustainability over ornament. Accordingly, in the second chapter, he examines those involved in the production and

© 2016 Deniz Balık
1360-2365 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2016.1257277

The Journal
of Architecture
Volume 21
Number 8

use of architecture from the Renaissance to twentieth-century modernism through the lens of ornament. In the third chapter, he maps out the notions of politics, political relevance and economics through the history of architectural ornament in order to support the essential argument of the book, which is that today ornament has lost its political and subjective aspects symbolising its owner's social rank, expressing an aristocrat's power or bearing the architect's personal signature. He explains that until the twentieth century, ornament was a subjective and political factor representing hierarchy, title, status and prestige. Giving examples from Foreign Office Architects, Sauerbruch Hutton, Office for Metropolitan Architecture and Herzog & de Meuron in both *Digital Culture in Architecture* and *Ornament*, Picon argues that contemporary global culture has erased the symbolic meaning of ornament.

On the other hand, one can speculate that from the Swanston Square Apartment Tower (2015) by ARM in Melbourne to VM Houses (2004–5) by BIG in Copenhagen, the ornamental façades of various contemporary buildings do present symbolic narratives of power, identity and memory. Being the contemporary versions of aristocrats or building owners in Picon's argument, giant portraits that adorn the façades of these buildings directly represent historical figures or building investors. Replacing Picon's conception of traditional symbolic ornaments with photographic and analogical façades, power and collective memory emerge as the epitome of ideological aesthetics. Furthermore, the ornamental elements of these buildings, which coincide with the cultural shift towards the image-oriented market of contemporary society, can be read as a design tool of self-display and self-advertisement in today's celebrity-driven culture. The ornamental aspects of these buildings are produced as an extension of identity and brand-image construction: as Picon states: 'When the budget allows for it, an architect will use the same type of texturing and patterning for social housing as for a museum.' [p. 142]

At first glance, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity* gives the impression of focussing merely on the popular issue of ornament in contemporary architecture, drawing references from the history of architecture. Yet digging deeper, the book's essential contribution to architectural literature manifests itself. Picon, as emphasised by the book's title, uses ornament as a means to investigate the political and social aspects of architecture. Deriving from within the architectural domain, Picon strongly emphasises the inextricable correlation between ornament and the cultural dimension. Moreover, he speculates that although there has been a continuous paradigm shift in the key notions of architecture throughout the centuries, the concept of 'ornament' may be of use to investigate the essential core of architecture that lies behind the ever-shifting paradigms and trends. In the last chapter, he reformulates the ornamental dimension in contemporary architecture, which coincides with the current understanding of subjectivity shaped by the novel investigations of materiality and the importance given to the senses.

He intends to delineate a big picture of the course of ornament with an attempt to explore its limits in contemporary architecture. However, there is a risk of being drowned in a sea of terms and concepts, as each paragraph introduces new phrases, such as

the Deleuzian notions of force, field, flow and fold, as well as network, post-human, morphogenesis and hyper-modernity. These terms deserve more space for elaboration in this chapter to establish more convincing connections with architectural ornament. A comprehensive elaboration could ease the understanding of ornament as a carrier of knowledge and conveyor of lessons. On the other hand, the wide range of new concepts proposed here can be regarded as a compilation of the contemporary understanding of ornament, giving readers specific keywords for further exploration and engagement in broader arguments.

The relationship of architectural ornament to cyber-culture and scientific notions is a significant aspect of the book, since this has the potential to position contemporary ornament in a fertile ground, rather than conditionally considering it as associated with the advent of CAD (computer-aided design) and CAM (computer-aided manufacturing) technology. Although Picon's intention is to show that today ornament exists in every aspect of our daily lives, not just in architecture, the reader may feel disoriented by the process of tracing sources for the current reception of ornament: ranging from the field of astrophysics and neuroscience to the concept of brain mapping, the world-wide web and dynamic urban maps, as well as Hebrew, Arabic or Chinese characters as ornament. Picon concludes the book by pointing to the increasing popularity of satellite imagery in the post-digital age, which produces ornament-like visualisations. He draws attention to starchitects' buildings, which resemble ornaments at the city scale. Similarly, the architectural critic Jonathan Glancey defines the aerial view of cities as 'gigantic carpets or textiles rolled across vast tracks of intensely used lands', whereas in one of the most recent books on ornament, the architect Michiel van Raaij evaluates the global trend for creating giant artificial island designs with ornamental forms when viewed from above.[4] In this sense, 'satellite view' as a new ornamental scale is introduced as a current research topic, which allows buildings to reveal different ornamental dimensions through various viewpoints and scales, ranging from a small architectural detail to the aerial view of an urban fabric.

Picon demonstrates that the scope of ornament has been broadened in contemporary architectural theory and practice. Unlike the accurate and exact definitions of ornamental styles in architectural history, ornament in contemporary architecture has an expanded and developing vocabulary, through which architects exuberantly experiment, theorists critically discuss and the public visually enjoys. The scope of ornament, which Picon unfolds, may become far too ambiguous at some point, evoking the question: 'What is not ornament?' However, this concern makes the reader rethink the provocative opening sentence of the book: 'What if architecture were ultimately about ornament?' [p. 9]. After all, Picon leaves for further speculation the idea that not only is architecture about ornament, but that the whole world *per se* is ornamental.

Deniz Balık
Faculty of Architecture
Dokuz Eylül University
Turkey
(Author's e-mail address: deniz.balik@deu.edu.tr)

Notes and references

1. Antoine Picon, *Digital Culture in Architecture: An Introduction for the Design Professions* (Basel, Birkhäuser, 2010), p. 86.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
3. Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power', in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Neil Leach, ed. (London, New York, Routledge, 1997; 2004), p. 353.
4. Jonathan Glancey, 'Farshid Moussavi, Unchained Architect = Farshid Moussavi, Architecte Affranchie', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 388 (2009), p. 38; Michiel van Raaij, *Building as Ornament: Iconography in Contemporary Architecture* (Rotterdam, Nai010 Publishers, 2014), pp. 160–165.