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**Re-thinking the Concept of “Ornament” in Architectural
Design**

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Abstract

The concept of ornament has emerged as a result of the existence of the human being and its relation to its environment. Ornament of objects, which aim at adding qualitative features to objects alongside their quantitative states, is a practice that is as old as humanity. Within this process of the individual's efforts in thinking, designing, creating, and communicating, one comes across ornament in every field of design, from little objects to urban planning. Discussions especially on architectural ornament has been popular in every age. Since the time of Vitruvius who set the stage for conceptual discussion of architecture, ornament, due to its social and psychological functions, has almost uninterruptedly been a major topic for discussion. This can be seen as the language's (that is used to perceive and narrate architecture as a spatial art) benefitting from formal-physical elements (which are mostly rather found on a more superficial and easily understood level) of artistic communication. Ornament, whose function-meaning and/or form go through changes according to ages, within the context of architecture, where it belongs to the highest level of artistic communication language, has been at the core of these discussions. The aim of this paper is to re-evaluate architecture-ornament relation within history and to re-discuss it in a rather popular way by drawing attention to the most controversial climaxes in new architectural perspective.

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Introduction

If it is possible to argue today a sustainable argument about the concept of “ornament”, it signals to and verifies a continuous evolution and change depending on the given data about personal, societal, industrial and technological issues. In terms of production, until the Industrial Revolution, an artisan had invigorated as result of expression of the moral and physical duties that the universe and his guild had offered him with. Revolutionary developments in the fields of industrialization, transportation, communication and production have led to heavy criticisms about social functionality being replaced by the figural-meaningless repetition of the visual-fanciful.¹

Historically speaking, the relationship of architecture and ornament has taken quite an interesting course. It was revealed sometimes in the form of mere expression and sometimes as show of power. During its course of development, the concept of ornamentation has evolved from cave carvings to technical perfection and

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photomounting of new constructions. Today's advantageous techniques and the facilities introduced by computers point to a stronger relationship between ornament and architecture. Architecture constructs its spatial expression through the language and communicative power of its materials. The materials used in a work of architecture have been the sole element for expression of a symbolic-allegorical picture until the rise of arguments about expressing the shaping of the physical characteristics of the materials inside a certain location as a necessity required by architectural ethics.² In his "*Ten Books on Architecture*", Vitruvius argues that for test of good knowledge of history necessary for the education of an architect, there lies his ability to "explain the truth beneath ornamentation."³ From antiquity, when a symbolic layer covered the surface of buildings independent of its functionality and load-bearing construction, to the high Gothic architectural times, when architecture meant cosmos expressed in monolith, ornament comes in the foreground as the sole shape and functionality of the stone material. The Gothic architecture, upon which modern architecture has based its ethical infrastructure, not only has united its predecessors but also proved itself an unchanging point of reference for future generations. The interesting point is that the representation of the symbolic union of the universe in Gothic architecture which has brought together all the architectural elements and ornament as a unit, had tended to dissemble again during the late Gothic period. Back then, it was possible to mention the designing of new architectural sites⁴ as part of some intellectual activity on one hand, and the re-discovery of ornament as a "pleasant" contribution to this activity on the other.

The basis of the arguments which have come down to us today about the relationship of architecture with that of ornament has been formulated into a theoretical problem since the times of Leon Battista Alberti. He has related ornament with religious constructions as well as common and private property. And in doing this, he has considered architecture completely as a "beautiful art" and a "body".⁵ In his analysis of the Renaissance period, he has explained ornament as an element separately attached on surface of buildings. He has explained that, "ornament can be defined as an auxiliary light and that it also defines beauty. Beauty is an internal characteristic. Ornament is rather a characteristic attached or applied later externally. Moreover, ornament is an intermediary agent between pure nature (material) and the architect's creative composition and it carries the visual to perfection with its final touch."⁶ Almost a hundred years later than Alberti, Wendel Dietterlin⁷ asserts that ornament is not an element subsequently attached to the building but is an actual architectural element.

According to Dietterlin, ornament is an architectural component filled with richness and imagination and it has evolved logically from "Classical Orders". Christopher Wren has been a leading figure who clearly explained the social and psychological context of the relationship between architecture and ornament. According to him, "Architecture has a political function. Public buildings are a country's 'ornament'. And it is these buildings which make people love their country."⁸ As can be seen clearly here, Wren takes the building as "ornament". For him, buildings should be taken individually as ornaments that are special for those countries.

² See Eugene Emmanuel Viollet-Le-Duc. "Discourses on Architecture" (trans.) Henry Van Brunt,; James R. Osgood And Company. Boston 1875.

³ "A wide knowledge of history is requisite because, among the ornamental parts of an architect's design for a work, there are many underlying idea of whose employment he should be able to explain to Greek inquires. For instance, suppose him to set up the marble status of women in long robes, called Caryatides, to take the place of columns, with the mutules and coronas placed directly above their heads, he will give the following explanation to his questioners." see. Vitruvius. "Mimarlık Üzerine On Kitap". Şevki Vanlı Yayınları .1993. p.4

⁴ See. Alberti, *The Ten Books on Architecture*" The Leoni edition appeared in 1726, 1739 and 1755. The present is a complete reprint of the Ten Books on Architecture from the 1755 edition.

⁵ "Architectural Theory from The Renaissance to The Present". Taschen ed. Thierry Nebois. 2006. p.12

⁶ *Architectural Theory Volume I An Anthology from Vitruvius to 1870* (2006), (ed.) Harry Francis Mallgrave, UK, USA, Australia: Blackwell Publishing

⁷ See. Wendel Dietterlin , "Architecture of Division Symmetry and Proportion of the Five Columns" 1598. From. *Architectural Theory from The Renaissance to The Present*". Taschen ed. Thierry Nebois. 2006. pp.520-529.

⁸ From, Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Architectural Theory Volume I An Anthology from Vitruvius to 1870* (2006), p.93.

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