BLUE ORANGES: A Seminar on Architecture’s Relentless Affair with Ornament

WEDNESDAY 2-4:50 HHN 204
15 Classes
Method of Assessment: 40% class participation / 60% Research Project

I. ABSTRACT

What is it about ornament that keeps arresting architecture? Did the modernists not eradicate such unnecessary and excessive tendencies? Why does so much contemporary architecture seem predisposed towards the production of a wider gap between the appearance of things and their reality?

This seminar will trace the long and often oblique relationship between ornament and architecture. We will explore the ways by which architecture has become implicated in the philosophical debate surrounding our ability to actualize a new world through design. We will read widely, crisscrossing the discursive landscape of metaphysics and aesthetic theory, to gain perspective on why ornament might be indispensable to a practice, such as architecture, which is based on the abstraction of reality. We will debate the intricacies of how changes in the meaning of ornament might embody historical shifts in what we think architecture can do or say.

We will start with the classics, move thematically through the philosophical debates surrounding architecture’s engagement with ornament and then follow the polemics defining the why and how of ornament. Our path will jump across time periods yet can be described as generally chronological.

As such, the seminar will be both a theoretical foray into architecture’s discursive past and a critical history of the use and abuse of ornament. Our theoretical journey will have us reading the likes of Benjamin, Loos, Kracauer, Gideon, Gadamer, Barthes, Jameson, Alberti, Vitruvius, Bataille, etc... In other words, it will be an eclectic serving of theorists, philosophers and critics. Alongside our readings, we will be taking a close look at buildings with the goal of learning how to read architecture through its many ornamental gaps. We will catalogue the different approaches to ornamentation and study the effects they create with the aim of apprehending what it is that this architectural operation does to our ability to see and practice architecture.

This is a theory seminar tailored for designers. In other words, after becoming better critics and more knowledgeable architects, our ambition is to develop a more nuanced understanding of what is at stake when we submit or reject our discipline’s impulse towards ornamentation.

The readings are plentiful and not easy. Class participation in each meeting is key. By 6pm, the evening before our class, everyone should email me TWO (2) questions or provocations regarding the readings. Our first nine classes will begin with a lecture—framing the readings and outlining the main themes—followed by a group discussion of the readings. The next four will be focused on student presentations.
II. SCHEDULE:

Breakdown of 14 week Seminar:
- 9 weeks - readings, discussion, & lecture
- 5 weeks - student-led presentations
- 1 week - concluding lecture

WEEK 1 - Classical Metaphysics & Its Relation To Ornament

Palladio, Andrea "The Four Books of Architecture" First book: Chapter XII: Of the five orders made use by the ancients, Chapter XIII: Of the dwelling and diminution of columns, and of the intercolumniation and pilasters, 1570.
Plato, “Aesthetics”
Deleuze, Gilles “What is Philosophy?” 1991.
Architects: Parthenon, Rome, Palladian Villas, Corbusier, Loos, the Gothic, Wagner, Mies, Miralles, Nouvel, Gehry, Moneo, Venturi,

WEEK 2 - The Impulse Towards Excess: Industrialization, and the Ontological Debates


Architects, Schinkel, Gideon, Horta, Louis Sullivan, August Perret, Otto Wagner, Gaudi, Piranesi, Paul Rudolph, Edward Durell Stone, Greg Lynn, RUR, Scarpia

WEEK 3 - The criminalization of Ornament: Modernist Rage and Restraint

Le Corbusier, "Towards a New Architecture" Three Reminders to Architects, 1923.
Sola-Morales, Ignasi de "Mies van de Rowe and Minimalism," 1994

Architects: Mies, Corbusier, Gropius, Rudolf Schwartz, Schindler, Meier, Eisenman, Scott Cohen, Maltzan, Siza
WEEK 4 – Theorizing the City as Mass Ornament & the Emergence of Semiotics

Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Metropolisarchitecture and Selected Essays," 1922.
Simmel, Georg, "The Metropolis and Mental life," 1903.
Rappaport, Nina "Deep decoration" 2006.

Architects: Wagner, Koolhaas, Corbusier, Hilberseimer, Meis, Gehry, Tschumi, Ito, Roche, Harrison & Abramovitz

WEEK 5 – Postmodernism & The Big Tussle Surrounding Meaning

Colquhoum, Alan "Sign and Substance: Reflections on complexity, Las Vegas, and Oberlin" 1974.

Architects: Rossi, Venturi, Moore, Krier, Site, Graves, Stirling

WEEK 6 – Ornament As Revolutionary Politics & the Emergence of the Image

Smithson, Alison and Peter "The New Brutalism," 1957.

Architects: Archigram, Archizoom, Metabolist, Superstudio, Yona Friedman, Alison & Peter Smithson

WEEK 7 – Technology, Structure And A New Aesthetic Of Disclosure

Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Nature of Materials: A Philosophy," 1943.
Fuller, Buckminster R. "Designing a New Industry," 1946.
Schwarz, Rudolf "Concerning the Building Art," 1951.

Architects: Eiffel, Bruno Taut, Mies, Nervi, Wachsmann, Fuller, Bauhuas, Nuetra, Nouvel, Ito, Miralles
Week 8 – The Digital Generation: Data, Patterns, & A New Love Affair With Ornament

ACHIM MENGES, SEAN AHLQUIST “Computational Design Thinking: Computation Design Thinking (AD Reader),” 2011.
Turing, Alan “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” 1950.

Architects: RUR, Ito, SANAA, contemporary parametric design, Eisenman, FOA

WEEK 9 – A Reconsideration of the Skin: Theorizing Optics & the Dissolution of Reality

Martin, Reinhold. "Atrocities or the curtain wall as Mass Medium,” 2009.
Kipnis, Jeffrey "The Cunning of Cosmetics"

Architects: Koolhaas, Siza, Diller Scofidio, Herzog and de Meuron, Scharoun, Gehry,

III. STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECT

Each student will choose a research topic to develop as his or her final project. The topic can range from a historical episode in the story of ornament to a theoretical problem associated with the debates surrounding ornament. The research must be grounded by the criticism of built form. By this we mean, that the trajectory of the work must be framed by the close study of either a building; the work of an architect or a group of architects from a particular period; or a collection of architects/buildings across time. It is critical that students an area of interest a early on then work with their instructor to develop this into a thesis by the first submission on February 12.
The labor following this submission should be focused on refinement through a deeper reading of the structures and a closer reading of the selected texts. The goal of this research is to arrive at a tentative answer of what is at stake when we do architecture by zeroing in on a specific area of study pertaining to the problematic surrounding ornament.

The deliverables for this project consist of following THREE (3) items:
1. A one-Page abstract due on February 12
2. In-class presentation of on-going research during the last 5 weeks of class
3. 5-10 movie wherein each student describes their project using both a personal narrative and images of work and diagrams. Due May 13 @ 8am.