

Transformation and Transcendence: From the Dwelling Hut to the Temple

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BEGINNING WITH THE BEGINNING

The notion of the original dwelling hut is perhaps as old as architectural theory itself; since Vitruvius' ten book treatise *De Architectura*, a tradition of stories have been told to explain and describe the first architectural construction.¹ Origin narratives are a highly formulaic genre and as such, they consistently contain certain key elements—the primitive's existence in pre-architectural nature, the moment of recognition of the need for shelter, and the subsequent construction of the first dwelling. Beyond these fundamental similarities however, intentionality plays a large part in molding the unique and specific aspects of each story. These carefully structured narratives often suggest dramatic architectural implications which are in no way accidental; they range from the purification and direction of architectural forms or motives to the legitimization of ideological positions through the timeless authority of myth or the sanction of a tangible, if idealistically fabricated, history.

For Vitruvius, and later Alberti, the idea of the primitive hut provided an etiological function for architecture, and a beginning for what they each intended to be all-encompassing treatises. By beginning with "the beginning", each suggested a sense of completeness, and therefore authority, in their broad accounts of architectural knowledge. Despite the significant presence of the narratives in their texts, neither proposed that the primitive hut embodied specific characteristics worthy of emulation. Instead, both held the first shelter as a distant relation to the formal principles and rules which governed later monumental architecture. The hut provided the ultimate foil—a rough and barbaric first construct which illuminated the high degree of refinement which had been reached by the architecture of their respective ages. By their accounts, the canonical perfection of orders and proportions had elevated architecture to the status of art.

Beginning with the beginning was important as well for Laugier who, in the eighteenth century, empowered the hut with far greater architectural significance. Rather than a mere evolutionary springboard for an ultimately dissociated

formal development, the minimal construction of the hut was the primordial foundation of architecture's most essential forms. Like Vitruvius and Alberti, Laugier weighed the architecture of his age against the primitive hut, but it was the brilliant simplicity of the hut which illuminated the dull,



Fig. 1 Illustrations proposed for Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *Architectura Libri Decem*, edited by Ryff, 1548.



Fig. 2 Illustrations proposed for Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *Architectura Libri Decem*, edited by Berardo Galiani, 1758.



Fig. 3 The Little Rustic Hut, Marc Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur L'architecture*, Frontispiece, 1753.

eclectic babble of the degenerating classical paradigms. Rather than tradition, culture, or habit, criteria which Laugier

considered to be artificial, the pure form of the hut was derived from nature through human reason. As such, the simple frame of four posts and spanning entablatures surmounted by a pediment provided untainted and natural, not to mention quantifiable, criteria by which all subsequent architecture could be measured.

A SYNTHETIC VISION

In the tradition of Vitruvius, Alberti and Laugier, the nineteenth-century architect and theorist Gottfried Semper reflected on the idea of a primordial dwelling, and while some of his motivations were apparently similar, the significance which he accorded the hut was a radical departure, even from Laugier. Rather than an unrefined foil or conversely a pure formal model for architecture, Semper's view of the hut moved toward a synthetic vision of the first act of building as simultaneously social, spiritual, functional, artistic, and symbolic—a vision inevitably colored by the changing architectural context of the nineteenth century. The increasing specialization of separate architectural and engineering professions polarizing structural from spatial and ornamental concerns, as well as the radical division of labor in industrial production and its devastating effect on the arts, were distinct threats to the role of the architect as master of a synthetic artistic process.

Semper's reflections on the primitive are embedded within a more general critique of the architecture of his age. Beginning in his earliest theoretical writing of the 1830's², he condemned the "bankrupt" state of architecture for heading down two divergent but equally detrimental paths—one, a severe and mechanical rationalism, and the other, potentially more dangerous due to its implications for industry and the arts, an increasingly popular and most often incoherent eclecticism. This early writing reveals the roots of Semper's search for essential architectural principles, manifest from its foundation, which might continue to guide architects in their pursuit of an appropriate expression in the nineteenth-

century. In later writings, to counter what he perceived as an ongoing lack of direction in both architecture and the industrial arts, Semper formulated an all encompassing “theory of style” which described the fundamental relationships between all essential formative factors which shaped architecture and the practical arts during all periods of history, and provided a course for their future development.³

In the “Theory of Style”, the most significant factor affecting the character of an artistic work was its motive—literally its purpose—which should pervade the work of art like a theme in a piece of music.⁴ In the artistic atrocities produced by industry, the motives underlying works had become indiscernible amid a barrage of inappropriate and inconsequential ornament which effaced any sense of its purpose or significance. Motives were essential and changed very little over time; the results were in artistic works throughout history which shared fundamental similarities, thus establishing them as types. Semper argued that the motives underlying a work were most clearly evident and comprehensible in the simplest expressions of a type which possessed style naturally. Returning to the hut—the Urformen and simplest expression of architecture—Semper sought to understand architecture’s *urmotiven*—primordial motives—which were so fundamental as to exist from its very origin in the initial urge to build.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURE

For Semper, the hut represented a symbolic as well as a formal origin for architecture. As in all works of art, its significance was rooted in its underlying motives; in his formulation of the hut these motives were simultaneously spiritual as the protector of the sacred hearth, social as the germ of community dwelling, functional as a shelter for its inhabitants, artistic through the alliance of various technical arts of making, and symbolic as a microcosm for representing the cosmic order of the natural world. They were manifest in four distinct elements which constituted an essential and original type for architecture.

The social significance of Semper’s dwelling hut is immediately apparent from the priority which he gives to the non-architectural, moral element of the hearth whose role is more communal and spiritual than spatial. Most origin narratives cited the early builder’s desire for protection as the incentive for construction, but Semper’s primitive began with a fundamental motive for protecting the sacred center of the community—the hearth. Community gathering began around the hearth for cooking and warmth, and through time, it became the focus of the spiritual activities surrounding birth, death, marriage, worship and celebration as well. These activities converged at the hearth whose presence gave social significance to the site itself. By protecting the hearth, architecture became the center of all sacred and essential aspects of community life which were both protected and commemorated through building.⁵

Around the hearth, which later became the altar in sacred

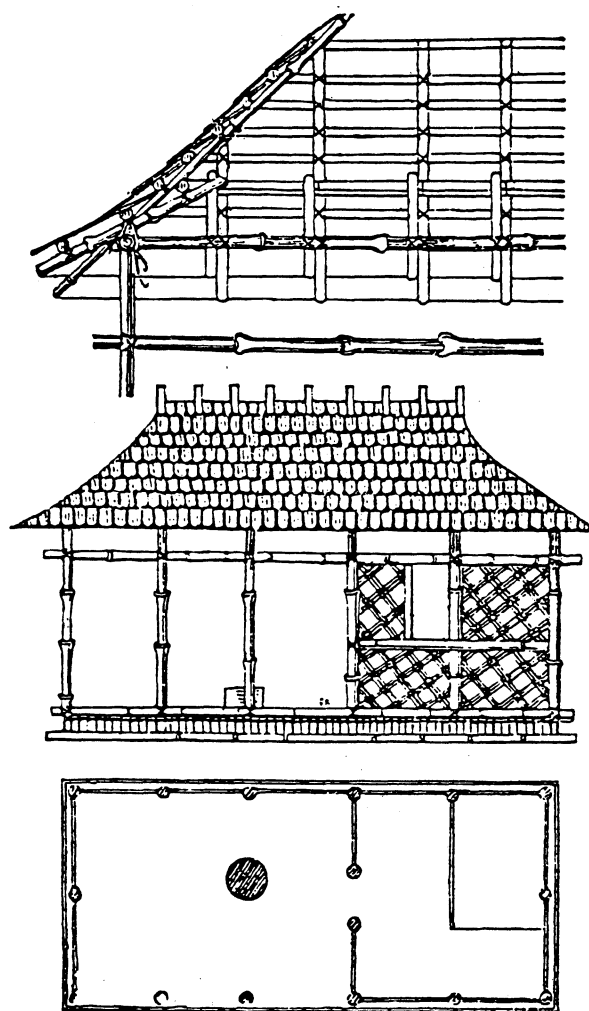


Fig. 4 The Caribbean Hut, Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, 1860.

structures, three other distinct but closely related “natural elements” were ordered to protect the hearth and the community. A mound was raised to protect the fire from foul weather, floods, and wild animals, and to provide a stable base for an enclosing structure above. A wall and roof frame were constructed to support hanging enclosures which gave spatial definition to a protected interior realm. Together the motives for community dwelling, protection, and spatial definition gave rise to a primary archetypal structure of four elements—the hearth, mound, enclosures, and frame. In the Great Exhibition of 1851, housed in the Crystal Palace, Semper identified a traditional Caribbean hut as an ordered expression of these four distinct elements which corresponded in Semper’s theory as well to four technical skills and materials derived from the practical arts. The hearth was associated with ceramics and later metal work, relating to the forging and firing processes. The raised mound was formed using stone-carving techniques. The roof and wall structures were associated with wood working. And the spatial enclosure was realized through the most important technical and ornamental art of textiles.⁶

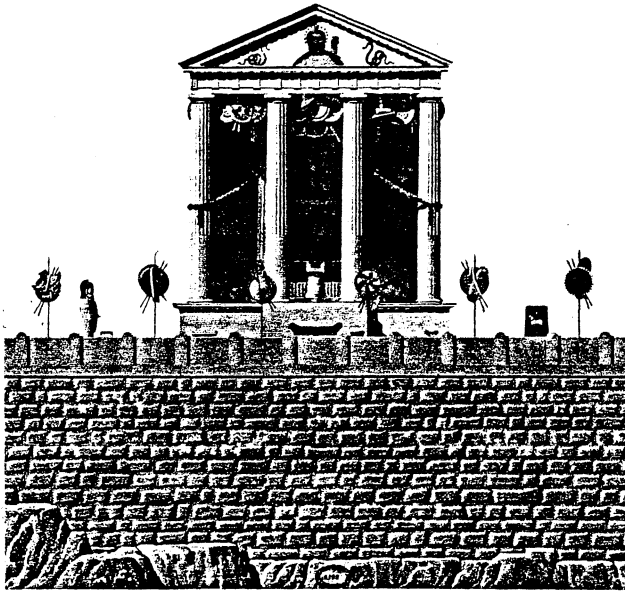


Fig. 5 Theodore Labrouste, Reconstruction of the Temple of Hercules at Cora, 1831.

MOTIVES FOR ORNAMENT

The textile enclosure was the most significant of the physical elements, due both to its functional role in defining and delimiting interior space as well as providing a locus for artistic expression in building. From the first human creations, the primitive was impelled to ornament by a primordial artistic instinct for “adornment” and “play”. This instinct was manifest in the earliest civilizations in bodily adornment through decorative dress, jewelry, and skin marking, and as cultures advanced, in the ornamentation of useful objects such as weapons, tools and vessels. Later, the same artistic instinct led the primitive to ornament the first dwellings. Semper’s vision of the ornamented dwelling hut differed fundamentally from the prevalent view of primitive architecture which posited a gradual development from functional primitive simplicity, to monumental riches, and eventually to superfluous form.⁷ Conversely, Semper argued that architecture was “glittering from the start”—a profusion of unpretentious ornament which artistically expressed the

youthful primitive spirit. Some ornaments arose naturally through tectonics of making, while others were brought from outside the realm of building for adornment. Particularly with the beginnings of religion, sacrifices and offerings were brought to “dress” structures for worship and celebration. Ceremonial wreathes, flower garlands, festoons of boughs and branches, weapons, sacrificial remains, and other mystical symbols were hung on structures like monumental, decorated “scaffolding” to be seen by those who gathered around.⁸

The primitive found a natural mode of expression through the textile arts whose tectonic order was high degree of development long before the construction of the first shelter realized their most vibrant expression and highest synthesis when simultaneously unified in the “concert” of architecture. The decorative characteristics of textiles were naturally suited to both abstract and representational artistic expression. Variations in the natural colors of materials, later augmented by brilliant dyed materials, led to the plaiting and weaving of complex geometric patterns and embroidery of pictorial images. Even the technical connections—the knots and seams—used to join textiles to each other or to a supporting structure were treated ornamentally and later became the most important technical symbols in architecture.

The primitive found a natural mode of expression through the textile arts whose tectonic order was inherently amenable to ornament. Tectonics, like music and dance, was a cosmic art which did not imitate but rather signified the order evident in nature. Harmony, symmetry, eurhythmy, proportion, analogy, and direction were ordering principles which were naturally suited to the tectonic character of the technical arts, particularly textiles. Semper’s primitive was instinctually compelled to signify these ordering principles in the microcosm of art, thus giving their works a quality of “inevitability” akin to the works of nature itself.⁹

Thus by Semper’s account, architecture’s most important symbols had their formative material origins in the first dwellings and early sacred structures. Some symbols were derived from the tectonic characteristics of materials and making—the textiles, carpentry, stereotomy, ceramics and metal work associated with the practical arts and four elements of architecture—while others recalled those reli-

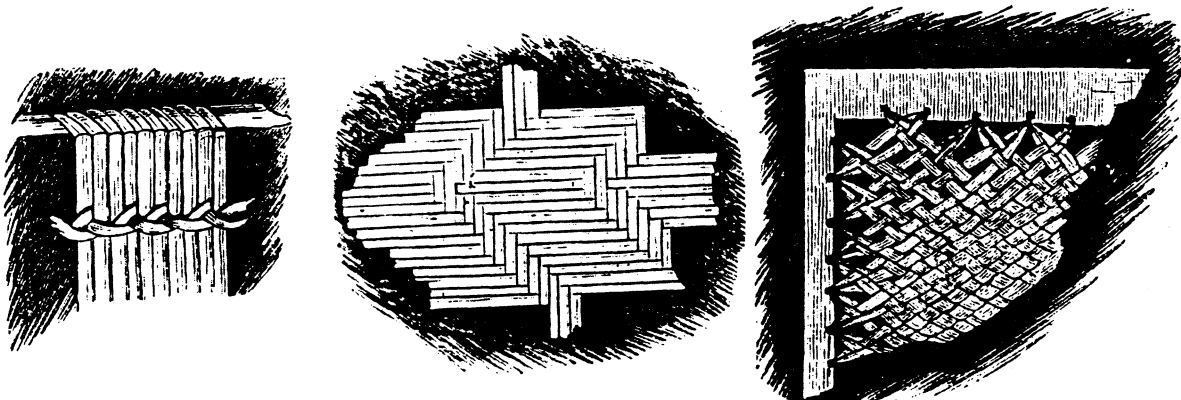


Fig. 6 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, Egyptian Plaiting, 1860.

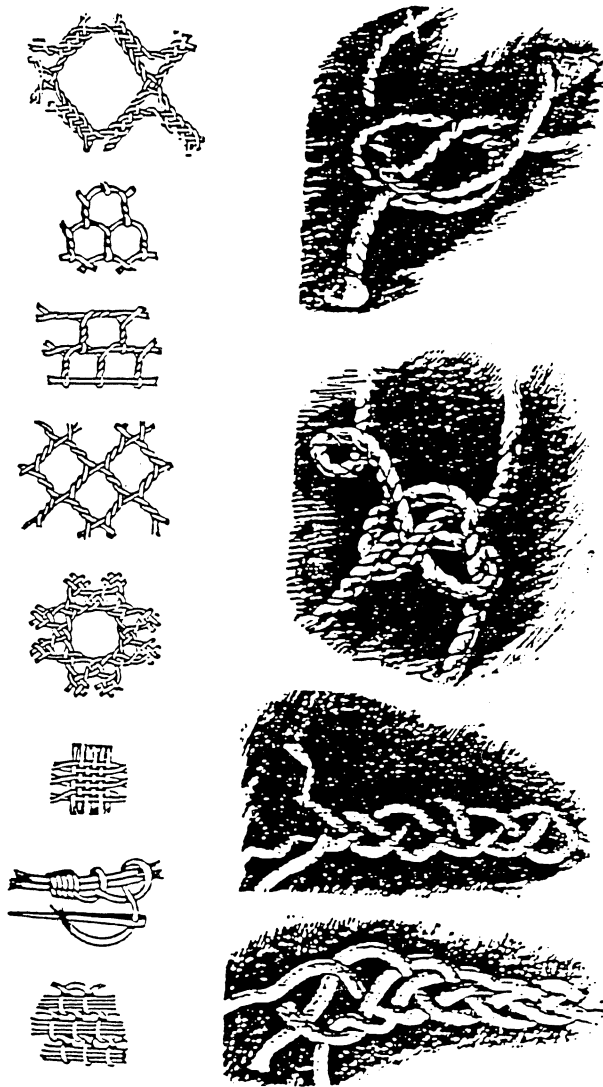


Fig. 7 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, Knots, 1860.

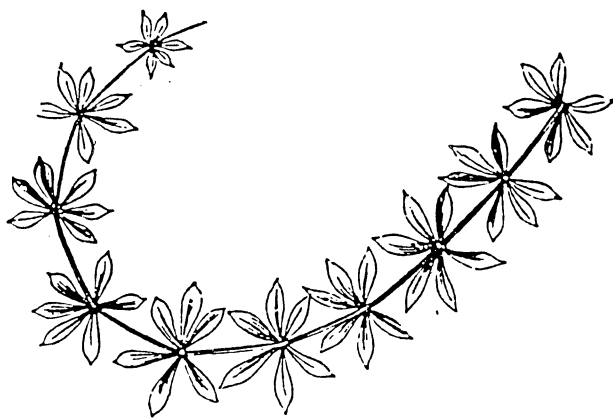


Fig. 8 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, Eurhythmia and Direction, 1860.

gious adornments and sacrifices brought from outside the realm of building for its ennoblement. In the earliest dwelling, practical necessity and artistic desire were united in the

act of building. Structure, tectonics, celebratory ornament and color were coincident and unitary, realized simultaneously through technical arts which were naturally both functional and decorative.

FROM THE HUT TO THE TEMPLE: TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE WORK OF ART

For many nineteenth-century architects, the useful history of architecture began in ancient Greece. Semper as well upheld Greek works as a pinnacle of architectural art, but he rejected the prevalent view of the “perfected” canonical forms as isolated and spontaneous expressions of Greek artistic genius. Instead he proposed a developmental view in which the temple was an artistic paragon within an immemorial continuum of venerated forms and most importantly *Urmotiven*—fundamental architectural motives—whose roots extended to the primitive dwelling hut.

In Semper’s “Theory of Style”, the original expression of any type, whether functional or ornamental, was always “telluric”—direct, unmediated, and earthly—in its purpose and material means. For example, each of the four elements in the “pre-architectural” hut accommodated a practical dwelling need through a primary form and a natural material state. Even the celebratory offerings were primary in their materiality, woven of living boughs and flowers. Through time all of these primordial elements underwent material metamorphoses, transformed due to changes in internal and external circumstances. Some changes were prescribed by practical necessity—the need for greater material strength, longevity, comfort or economy. The original flexible textile was sometimes hung on a solid underlying structure of brick or stone, or was replaced by a more durable material cladding. Despite these material changes, the secondary substitute always retained the “imprint” of its origin artistically, not to copy its physical characteristics or mimic its primordial materiality, but rather to represent the ideas embodied in its forms. Thus, even those changes wrought by necessity were addressed symbolically through the commemoration of the original which was consecrated by necessity and tradition.

By commemorating the textile enclosure, architecture retained a vestige of the original motives for spatial definition, protection, and artistic expression. In the textile, these motives were realized through a surface rather than a structure; thus, until Roman times, textiles were commemorated through material claddings and even paint, rather than geometrically patterned, constructed walls. Pictorial and decorative patterns, originally integrated in the weave or sewn on the surface of the textile, were taken up by painting and sculpture, fostering their essential roles in architecture. Raised embroidery led to bas-relief carving, while the long flat stitches of sewn embroidery inspired flat figurative representations incised in the surface of a new cladding material. Cross-stitch embroidery, geometrically regulated by the warp and weft of the textile, led to gridded patterns of

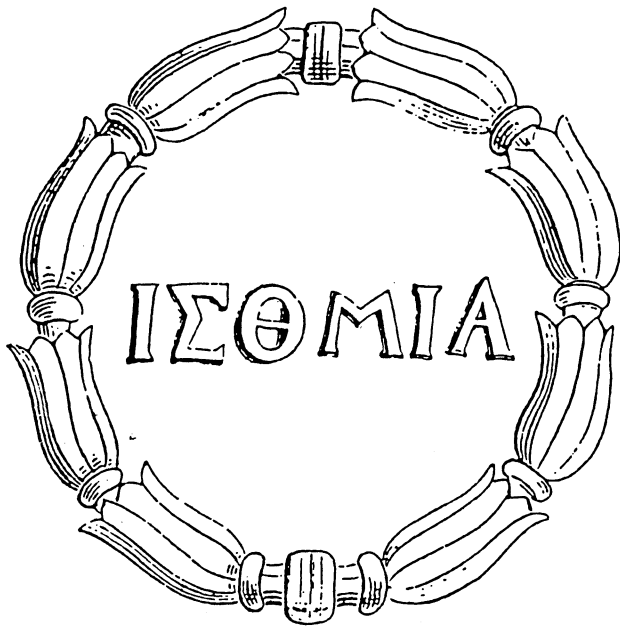


Fig. 9 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil*, Wreath, 1860.

figurative and geometric ornament such as Egyptian hieroglyphics. The geometric patterns of weaving and plaiting were retained through claddings of terra cotta, wood panels and inlay, ceramic tiles, stucco, stone, and paint. The textile enclosure had established the wall as the realm for art in architecture, and as painters and sculptors succeeded the wall fitters, the walls received their arts as well.

Celebratory offerings which had been hung on structures for worship were transformed as well, becoming permanently fixed as integral elements in the temple. No longer were they simply fastened to the walls in their natural state; they were represented artistically in stone and paint, fused organically in their materiality. They became ordered, stylized, and conventionalized as typical symbols of a spatial language which was comprehensible to all. According to the "Theory of Style", the primacy of type allowed these codified ornaments to be simplified, modified, or enriched, though their fundamental character could not be violated without the loss of legibility.¹⁰

The idea of transformation had direct implications for Semper's view of the relationship of materials to architecture. The symbolic substitution of materials, unlike the purely practical transformations, was not based on necessity but against it. Semper argued against the overt display of materials and mechanics which impeded the expression of more important architectural ideas. In order for the pre-architectural building to proceed to a higher artistic meaning, as it had in ancient Greece, the practical material basis of the original must be transcended—elevated above the level of necessity through material transformation. As a primary construction, the dwelling hut was "telluric" in its purpose and means, whereas the Greek temple was a secondary, symbolic construction—an artistic representation of original building arts and sacred ornamentation. As the

elements of the secondary commemorative temple no longer fulfilled their original motives, but instead represented them, their role became artistic and symbolic rather than functional or tectonic.¹¹ The materiality of necessity was transcended by a higher "derivative" materiality of representation.

For Semper, material transformation was imperative in order for the temple to attain the status of art. In the true art of building, the idea must emerge unimpeded by its materiality, requiring the most natural correlation between the idea of the work and its physical embodiment. Only the material most suited to the expression of an idea could act as its "natural symbol". Greek architecture above all others possessed this natural correlation between the idea and its materiality, appearing as the natural expression of a living force. Realizing this expression required an absolute mastery of the material—the medium of representation; in architecture as in art, the viewer should forget the materiality of the object which was only the necessary means to achieve the desired effect and express the idea.¹²

CONCLUSION

Semper's reverent and lucid reflections on the foundations of architecture, his poignant critique of nineteenth-century architecture and industrial arts, and his propositions for their future development established his theoretical work as among the most profound of his age. His ideas remain significant today, particularly in light of recent and contemporary architectural concerns. The critiques leveled against modern and post-modern architecture are well known; when considered in relation to Semper's ideas about the evolution from the primordial dwelling to the monumental art of the temple, both appear as incomplete constructs due to self-imposed limitations. The post-modern response to the lack of traditional elements in modern works fell quickly under-fire for its own misappropriation of forms and rejection of builderly and tectonic concerns. By contrast to both, Semper's broad and synthetic vision of architecture suggests a value system in which the tectonics of building and the symbolic meaning of forms are equally significant. His unyielding determination to reassert the multiplicity and indivisibility of architecture's social, spiritual, artistic, tectonic, symbolic, and functional motives prophetically foreshadowed the twentieth century's increasingly divided thinking which would systematically sever whole realms of architectural ideas.

Semper perceived the early signs of this division in the rapidly degenerating historic paradigms of the nineteenth century. Against the backdrop of increasingly outrageous eclecticism and rapidly changing technology, his efforts to reform architecture and the industrial arts through the "Theory of Style" were in keeping with the roots of later modernist thinking. By establishing the "motive" as the timeless essence of a work, the style theory moved toward a typological classification based on functional rather than formal criteria. He never intended, however, to banish ornament from architecture. For Semper, the act of ornamenting was itself

rooted in an innate artistic drive; thus, the vestigial maintenance of ornamental forms perpetuated the memory the first artistic urges embodied in the creative act of building.

The significance which Semper accorded the textile enclosure and *Bekleidung*—translatable as either cladding or clothing—had far-reaching architectural implications as well given the nineteenth-century development of steel-frame buildings cloaked in non-structural “curtain” walls. Semper’s collusion of clothing and cladding was not accidental; each was a dressing, one for the physical human body, and the other for the body of the building. The decided separation of surface and structure in the four elements was fundamental to Semper’s elevation of the non-structural textile wall and later substitute claddings as the free realm for artistic expression in architecture.

The distinction of the artistic role for cladding and its subservient structural support suggest an alternative to a rational critique of post-modern architecture for its seeming disregard for materiality and construction. The demand for a constructed facade necessary discounts the potential legitimacy of any non-functional idea which might merit and require symbolic representation. The significance of cladding as a covering rather than a structure recalls Semper’s reverie for the immemorial pleasure of “dressing” and “masking” which drove the creative spirit of the artist toward sculpture, painting, architecture, poetry, music and drama. The act of masking architecture’s telluric materiality was requisite to symbolic representation and allowed transcendence from utility to art.¹³

Nonetheless, Semper further stipulated that the secondary representational material be perfectly suited to the idea which it expresses in order to act as a natural symbol, which calls into question the frequent material liberties of the post-modern representation of traditional elements. Thus, before sending Semper to the defense of every dry-wall keystone or fiberglass frieze, the fit of these materials to the ideas and motives they are to represent must be critically considered. Their materiality and industrial mass-production may be so far removed from any artistic process of building as to negate their appropriateness as symbolic media for the arts. More fundamentally, in the current context of building, the legibility of traditional forms must be questioned altogether when their language of communication has been muted for so long as to efface their symbolic meaning. The maintenance of a language requires at least a modicum of shared understanding to avoid empty and meaningless babble.

In this regard, the symbols of modern architecture are significantly more comprehensible, and their materiality truer to the ideas which they represent in the present context. For Semper, the commemoration of tectonics, particularly the knots and seams of the textile, created the important technical symbols which gave architecture its own body of forms. Though rooted in relatively recent traditions, non-mediated physicality of many modern and contemporary works similarly convey ideas about structure and construction through analogous secondary forms. Unlike Semper’s

earlier examples, these symbols are firmly rooted in a primary materiality—a requisite to their legibility as symbols for construction. With little comprehension of the tradition language of ornaments, the self explanatory symbols of modernism may be the only comprehensible means of signifying contemporary social, cultural, artistic and technological values.

Semper’s reflections on the significance of architecture’s origins and evolution illuminate both the richness and loss experienced in the modern and post-modern traditions. His elevation of tectonics upheld the significance of building as constituting a fundamental language of forms unique to and arising from within the realm of architecture; their secondary representation in modern works may be viewed, not as failed rationalism but as commemoration of a primordial tradition of constructing. With regard to post-modern works, Semper’s theoretical propositions free this revival from the impossible aspiration to recreate works of the past; instead they uphold the necessity for the transformation and evolution by which architecture progresses and changes from age to age while maintaining a remembrance of significant traditions. Semper’s idealistic vision of architecture as synthetic art is neither moralistic nor unrealistic; rather it reckons with the significance and complexity of architecture’s many purposes, and recognizes commonality where there is seemingly none.

NOTES

- ¹ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam’s House in Paradise*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), p. 13.
- ² Gottfried Semper, “Preliminary Remarks on Polychrome Architecture and Sculpture in Antiquity”, (1834), ed./trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 46-47.
- ³ Semper, “Science, Industry and Art-Proposals for the Development of a National Taste in Art at the Closing of the London Industrial Exhibition”, (1852), ed./trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, p. 136-138 Semper’s Theory of Style described the relationship of all factors shaping an artistic work, and was also intended to systematically classify works according to their fundamental similarities as types. All influences on the work could be characterized within one of three categories—motive, intrinsic variables, and extrinsic variables—whose relationships were describable by a mathematical formula. The form of any work of architecture or practical art resulted from the unique combination of these coefficients, and a change in any one of them would necessarily modify the resulting form.
- ⁴ Semper, “London Lecture of November 11, 1853”, *Res* 6, Autumn 1983, p. 11, and “Science, Industry and Art...”, p. 137.
- ⁵ Semper, “The Basic Elements of Architecture”, (1850), ed./trans. Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper - In Search of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 198. See also Rosemary Haag Bletter’s description and critical analysis of Semper’s four elements of architecture in “On Martin Frohlich’s Gottfried Semper”, *Oppositions* 4, October 1974, p. 147-148.

- ⁶ Semper, "The Four Elements of Architecture - A Contribution to the Comparative Study of Architecture", (1851), p. 102-103, and "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics - A Handbook for Technicians, Artists, and Patrons of Art" (1860), ed., trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, p. 254-156. See also "London Lecture...", p. 20, and "The Basic Elements...", p. 197-199.
- ⁷ Semper, "Preliminary Remarks...", p. 52. Semper categorizes saying: "Architecture, in such a way denoting the quintessence of the arts, did in its gradual progress in no way pass from simplicity to riches and from riches to superfluity, (however much this assertion may contradict traditional viewpoints). Rather, it was with all the simplicity of its basic forms highly decorated and glittering from the start, since its childhood."

Harry Francis Mallgrave suggests that the traditional viewpoint referred to by Semper was Winkelmann's. "Introduction", *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, p. .

- ⁸ Semper, "Style...", p. 256.
- ⁹ Semper, "The Attributes of Formal Beauty" (1856/1859), ed./trans. Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper - In Search of Architecture*, p. 219-44. See also "Preliminary Remarks...", p. 53., and "Style...", p. 197-214.
- ¹⁰ Semper, Style...-Footnote", p. 257-258.
- ¹¹ Semper, "The Four Elements of Architecture - A Contribution to the Comparative Study of Architecture" (1851), ed., trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, p. 102.
- ¹² Semper, "Style...- Footnote" p. 257-258.
- ¹³ Ibid.