detail, Detail, Ornament, and decoration: A Taxonomy

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INTRODUCTION

Few architects today possess the passionate loathing that led Adolf Loos to describe Ornament as one of the lowest forms of human expression—evidence in modem times of a criminal or degenerate personality at work. Perhaps today, architects are more indifferent than passionate due to extended deprivation or merely lack of exposure. The modem banishment of architectural excess, particularly in the form of Ornament, virtually eliminated it from discussions of critical, rational architecture. Nearly a century later, few architects understand or consider their works in terms of Ornament, though many find obvious satisfaction through elaborate and even fetishistic expressions of Details. The calculated articulation of celebratory Details surely pushes the Rationalist limit of pure ontological presencing, giving rise to new forms of tectonic adornment of the joints, seams, edges and fields of contemporary buildings. These works challenge our ability to compare the salient similarities and differences between Detail and Ornament today.

Ornament and Detail share many characteristics but they are not the same. This paper attempts to define their distinguishing characteristics by questioning their relationship to each other and to architecture. The investigation adopts a taxonomic structure to order Details and Ornaments, as well as subsidiary categories of detail and decoration, relative to criteria; these are source, reference mode, subject matter, purpose, intention, necessity, and permanence.

TAXONOMY

Taxonomy is the science of classifying living and extinct organisms. Therefore, its relationship to architecture is by analogy. Taxonomic structure originated as a system for comparing and classifying biological species based on specific selected characteristics. Early taxonomies ordered subjects by visually observable phenomena; through time and the growth of scientific knowledge, the range of taxonomic criteria expanded allowing for more exacting descriptions, hierarchical stratification, and successively finer divisions of all organisms in the "kingdom".

Despite the scientific origins of taxonomy, structuring a taxonomy is a highly speculative and calculated activity. The selection of criteria fundamentally affects the result and reflects its underlying philosophical bias. For example, a typological taxonomy in biology might preference any one of a wide range of traits including morphology, anatomy, reproduction, or habit; any selection dramatically affects the resulting categories. Similarly, the traits by which a Detail / Ornament taxonomy might be ordered are vast. Criteria such as period, style, use, composition, likeness, or reference' suggest that the specification of traits is a question of emphasis rather than correctness; it would be more accurate to describe a taxonomy as rigorous and consistent within its own frame of reference, logic, definitions, and rules than to suppose it absolute or correct. A good taxonomy will point to some significant relationships between its subjects based on appropriate, reasonable, and *particular* criteria for describing them.

Any taxonomy begins with the selection of categorical terms. More important to the ultimate questions and conclusions of the classification, however, is the hierarchical significance of these terms which is expressed by their sequencing. Taxonomies progressively divide subjects, first by gross distinctions, and continuing through finer and more specific characterizations. Each characteristic is qualified by all those preceding it, and for this reason, the primary division has the greatest affect on all aspects of the taxonomy, laying the fundamental structure of its argument.

To illustrate the significance of this choice, we can initially consider two possible primary criteria for a Detail / Ornament taxonomy which present themselves rather overtly. The first distinguishes Detail from Ornament based on a purely rational characterization of purpose as utilitarian or other. The second distinguishes Detail from Ornament according to inner-referent versus outer-referent sources for their architectural expression.

UTILITY

The first taxonomic structure differentiates Details from Ornaments based on the criterion of utility. This taxonomy

would distinguish those things which fulfill an instrumental purpose relative to the life of the building (presumably Details) from any thing else which, by such a comparison, is not useful (presumably Ornaments). The modem banishment of Ornament was in part premised on such a utilitarian notion that form should follow function (synonymous with use in this view)--by extension, no function, no form, and thus, no Ornament. The idealized vision of efficiently utilitarian architecture promised a rational future distinct from the irrational and excessive past of Ornament.

A taxonomy premised on utilitarian distinctions implies categories whose members share the characteristic of utility or non-utility, but often nothing else. For example, medieval gargoyles and modern scuppers share generic as well as specific utility in directing water away from building* their utility gathers them together under the loosely conceived category of utilitarian Details along with caryatids and wide flange columns, Gothic mouldings and copper flashing. Likewise, the chrome column claddings of the Barcelona Pavilion and all of Mies van der Rohe's tectonically expressive but structurally useless architectural elements find themselves awkwardly classed as Ornaments. To be sure, the subsequent qualifying traits (subdividing the orders, genera, and species of Detail and Ornament) would eventually clarify these initially incoherent groups. Nevertheless, the primary determinant in the taxonomic sequence creates the greatest affect on the classification and should, at least, lead to a coherent general division.

More importantly, division along utilitarian lines produces a severely limited view of the fuller purpose by which Details and Ornaments may elevate buildings beyond utility to a higher level of architecture. Utilitarian division is ultimately limited if, in fact, architecture involves art, as utilitarian descriptions are unlikely to reveal or point to the nature of art.[2] At an extreme, purely utilitarian buildings can only be common and expendable tools for consumption and use.' Distinctions based on utility artificially separate useful from aesthetic objects when only very specific human creations are purely useful or purely expressive. More importantly, architecture must possess both. The gradients between utility and expression is far more productive ground for considering the significance of Detail and Ornament. A richer view of architecture would see expression in the purposeful articulation of utility, and would recognize other significant purposes of non-useful elements; surely both contribute to the larger life of the building. Instead, if both Detail and Ornament were considered with the broader view that the ultimate purposes of building extend beyond utility to attend the betterment of human activities and experience, we might identify "function" rather than utility as an appropriate descriptor of significant purpose. To function, a Detail or Ornament must ultimately contribute to the betterment of human functions by improving the quality of living.[4] By such criteria, both Ornament and Detail are functional. In fact, the "instrumentally useless" might ultimately be the most clearly functional, contributing powerfully to architecture's exten-sion of human activity by pointing to the higher purposes of building.

REFERENT SOURCE

The second taxonomic organization which addresses utility and non-utility as secondary traits, distinguishes Detail from Ornament by their visibly tectonic or figural sources. Detail is tectonic. Ornament is figural. While classification by appearance became antiquated in biological comparison, it illuminates coherent categories of Detail and Ornament and implies a broad range of related issues. Distinguishing figural sources for Ornament from tectonic sources for Detail does not suggest that the primary significance of either resides in its appearance. Rather the distinction allows a natural extension to other significant characteristics including reference mode, connection and bonding, and position, and implies a broader scope of architectural subject matter and re-presentational possibilities.

Division according to referent source is somewhat limited when classing contemporary architecture which by such criteria is predominantly articulated through Detail rather than Ornament. The scarcity of figural Ornament in contemporary discourse and work is decidedly a residual effect of architecture's modem revisioning which drew *both* utilitarian and referent lines between Detail and Ornament. The modern priority to Detail and rejection of Ornament was only partly a question of utility, and was perhaps more deeply concerned with the type of reference and communication implied by figural adornment. Beyond non-utility, the notion of excess pointed to the external character of figural form as separable from the tectonics of architecture. The new paradigm did not, in fact, reflect the abandonment of all physically superfluous form. Rather, the demand for abstinence implied a shift in the form of excessiveness from symbolic to tectonic modes of architectural elaboration. Likewise, a taxonomy based on distinctions of referent source cannot assume that tectonic Details are necessarily useful, or that representational Ornaments are necessarily useless; Details can be structurally superfluous but visually central to a building's legibility, and Ornaments can be vitally necessary to its physical life. Traditional Ornaments frequently adorned necessary parts of buildings, and often described their particular purpose through the selection of subject matter. A gargoyle's role as an Ornament for shedding water by physically spitting water out its mouth is a logical and legible method for expelling water. Thus, the taxonomic category of referent source points to differences in articulation and communication by which Ornaments and Details reveal their various purposes—utilitarian or otherwise. (Fuller examination of the figural is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Relative to architecture, division by referent source can generally be defined as inner-(self) referential or outer-(other) referential.[5] Details are inner-referential elements, drawing their cues from within the realm of building. Thus Details may encompass the poetic amplification of construc-

tion, structure, materials, process, use or operational characteristics of architecture—those things which necessarily occur in the act building or in support of habitation. In addition to both physical and material sources of reference, more abstract aspects of architectural order such as geometry, rhythm, proportion, direction, hierarchy, and symmetry may be inner-referent (although they may equally outer-referent as reflections of the order of nature).[6] To articulate architecture through inner-reference points to the inherent significance of conceptualizing, constructing, and making architecture. Through inner-reference, architecture creates its own subject matter related to building and human function, and constitutes its own expressive system of tectonic forms.

Inner-referent sources create a self-limiting closure to its own tectonic system and discourse. The outer-referent sources of Ornament extend architecture's inner-referent system and subject matter by drawing inspiration external to building. Ornament encompasses a larger realm of subjects such as nature, iconography, mythology, religion, ritual, history, or cultural practice. Such outer-referent sources are gathered as figural additions to the body of the building to adorn, sanctify place or function, teach, or articulate utilitarian or other purposes of architecture. Through outer-reference, architecture may become the cultural repository of significant communal and individual values, commemorated through the fixing of representational Ornament in building.

REFERENCE MODE

As a primary taxonomic criterion, referent source creates visually coherent categories of inner-referent Detail and outer-referent Ornament. Other significant characteristics follow by extension. The idea of reference is suggestive not only of sources, but further of the modes and means by which Details and Ornaments, as referent objects, refer to their subjects. The self-referential character of Details communicates directly—not without reference, but with reference to and in the presence of its subject of reference. Details may be described as nearly, but impurely ontological, falling short of pure ontological being as idealized re-presentations.[7] Similarly, the outer-referent character of Ornament communicates representationally, as a new presence standing in for its absent origin subject. Ornaments may further re-present the second subject which they adorn in a symbolic rather than ontological form. We may say too, that Ornaments are impurely representational, as their necessity for bonding with the building and further re-presenting its purposes demand their dependence and compromise, and consequently their cessation as autonomous works of art.

SUBJECT MATTER

The sources and modes of reference point further to a broad range of architectural subject matter. Ornaments and Details, as referential objects, are not the true subjects of architecture, but rather secondary referential vehicles for re-

presenting or representing other subject matter. Through re-presentation and representation, significant aspects of architecture are amplified, heightened, and brought to bear on its greater meaning; subjects are elaborated and elucidated through inner or outer-referent means.

In the realm of Ornaments, re-presentation entails the reconfiguration of the referent subject toward a new purpose, and in the new physical materiality of building. The subjects of Ornament thus point doubly to both a reconfigured source, and to a new materiality and context within the building. To re-present the context, the Ornament must point to its significant and purposeful relation to that which it adorns.

The inner-referent nature of Details limit their subject matter to those inherent self-referent aspects of architecture. To re-present these aspects, however, is to show them again in new light, and to elevate pragmatic building to a higher level of architecture. To re-present subjects through Detail is the poetic work of *techne*[5] by which imagination and power are brought to interpret, visualize, transform, and reveal materials as both beautiful and useful media; Details may capture evidence of the hands, tools, and machines used in the process of making; they may tectonically amplify materials, construction, structures, operations, and use––inherent and inseparable aspects of architecture.

Despite the fact that the subject matter of Details are generated from the practice of architecture, not all Details are practical in purpose. In such cases their inner-referent subjects are the purposes which they re-present rather than fulfill. The symbolic re-presentation of tectonics, for example, has been practiced for centuries as a means to referentially articulate buildings. Frank Lloyd Wright used the term "analogous structure" to describe the external patterns of wood trim which were not structurally active, but which described the hidden presence of structure beneath. Other examples of non-useful, tectonic elaboration may be seen in the triglyphs in ancient Greek temples which, by some interpretations, re-present the former presence of covered joist ends. The bizarre case common to ancient Roman architecture is the vestigial applique of trabeated orders to massive arcuated structures–structurally unrelated but nonetheless referent to a revered building practice. Canonically modem examples are Mies van der Rohe's structurally superfluous but tectonically expressive comer Details, re-presenting the idealized nature of the lightweight steel structures deeply buried within massive concrete fireproofing.

LIMITS OF DETAIL AND ORNAMENT

To further characterize Ornament and Detail, we must recognize the points at which either transforms into something else. To address these limits, we may consider Kubler's identification of tools and fashion as the utilitarian and stylistic boundaries of human material production;[9] their architectural analogs in constructional details and decoration are proposed as the limiting ends of Detail and Orna-

ment. While referent source is instrumental in the preceding distinction between Detail and Ornament, traits such as purpose, intention, necessity, and permanence help define their opposite limits in decoration and detail.

PURPOSE AND INTENTION

Since Alberti, a philosophical tradition distinguishing buildings and architecture has existed. Within this tradition, all works of architecture are buildings, but not all buildings are considered architecture. The differences between them lies in part in the previous distinction regarding utility and function. The motives behind mere building are predominantly utilitarian; buildings offer little more than warm and dry shelters for housing necessary activities by materially, spatially and economically efficient means. In comparison to architecture, buildings purport nothing, promise no extension of cultural or aesthetic values, and make no presumptions about the possibility of creating, sustaining, or supporting greater significance in human activity. Not all buildings are architecture. Similarly, not all Details are the re-presentational sort which artistically elevate building. Like utilitarian building, the motives behind details remain at a base level, practically related to necessities of general construction, structure, or systems. They are unintentional with regard to expression, and are thus purely ontological in their non-referent being.

By contrast to building, architecture's functions extend beyond minimally satisfying necessity to better human activity. Similarly Details transform and elevate pure necessity to a higher level of architecture--from utility to function--detail to Detail. Such transformation results from the addition of energy, artistry, invention and intention, applied to reveal some salient characteristic or cultural significance of building. The conscious intention toward re-presentation is proposed as the significant distinction between details and Details. Thus, details define the limiting edge of Details when distinguished by the taxonomic categories of purely utilitarian purpose, and purely ontological intention.

NECESSITY AND PERMANENCE

Similarly we may consider a system that characterizes the limiting ends of Ornament in decoration. This distinction is premised on two other criteria of the taxonomy —necessity and permanence—and their implications for bonding, portability, and position. Regarding necessity, the addition of decoration, whether internal or external, does not contribute significantly to the life of architecture. Anything which can easily be brought to or removed from the building cannot be fundamentally essential to its extended life. decoration is the only class in the taxonomy which is inessential to the building.

Degrees of permanence are described by the terms of bonding and portability. The portability of decoration implies no mutual dependence or compromise between the building and its adornments, and implies a coincidental, rather than intentional, relationship. Excepting those remarkable cases of total and complete choreography of environments rooted in notions such as the *Gesamkunstwerk*, decoration is relatively expendable, changeable, and even removable without significant affect to the work of architecture.

Conversely, bonding is essential to the life of details, Details, and Ornament. Each must exist in a permanent and bonded condition with the building and is incapable of separation without significant loss to both the object and the building itself. Bonded objects and their buildings exist in a directly physical and meaningful state of necessary dependence—separation radically changes their presence, significance, and use, as well as their ability to express. Regarding the significance of bonding, we may consider Violet-le-Duc's notion of essentiality which called for a constituent unity between parts and whole.[10] He described this condition of dependency and balance in biological terms, comparing it to the essential and necessary balance of natural organisms. Similarly, all parts of the whole building must be balanced and necessary, contributing to both its physical and meaningful life; the absence of any essential part greatly affects the building as a whole. Physically, we might imagine that absence affects stability, while visually, absence may leave us wanting for lost understanding. With regard to the de-bonded object, the loss of context decidedly alters its use, identity, and significance. In separation, the absence of descriptors irreparably changes the meaning of the decontextualized object which at most may lead a separate but emaciated life as a displaced artifact."

Bonding requires a physical marriage of the part and the whole in order for each to become dependent and inseparable. The condition of bonding is most easily understood with regard to details and Details because their inner-referent physical presence easily bonds to the physical fabric of the building. For Ornaments, bonding is more difficult due to their outer-referent form. Ornamenting a building requires colliding or joining of unlike figural and tectonic systems. In such cases, a hybridization must occur by which both the Ornament and building give something up in order for bonding to occur. For the Ornament, this may imply a modification of its proportion, position, number, or geometry. For example, natural vegetal or biological forms may be ordered, regularized, or bounded by geometry allowing them to bond with the geometry of the building. A figure may be pictorially flattened as a means of bonding to an architectural surface. Most importantly, Ornaments compromise through their transformation into a builderly materiality. The necessity of bonding demands, for Ornaments, a kind of agreement between the Ornament and its host building. Ornaments tend toward positions which most naturally suit their referent sources. For example, a human figure may be protectively housed in a receiving niche, providing a shelter within the shelter—in this case, the building is modified to receive the Ornament. A botanical Ornament may wrap, or spread suggesting the idea of its growth, suspended through the fixity of a transformed materiality. Animorphic creatures

TAXONOMY

Source (relative to architecture)	inner presence-being tectonic		outer absence-other symbolic	
Reference Mode	impurely ontological re-presentational		impurely representational representational	
Subject Matter	inner-referent subject		outer-referent subject subject ornamented	
Purpose	utilitarian	functional	functional	functional
Intention	ontological	referent	referent	referent
Necessity	essential	essential	essential	inessential
Permanence	bonded	bonded	bonded	portable

| detail	Detail	Ornament	decoration
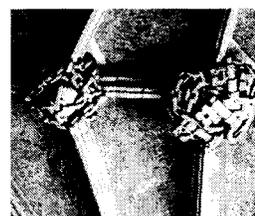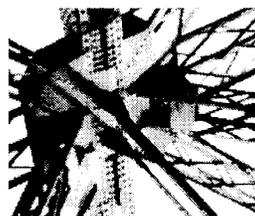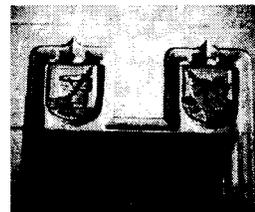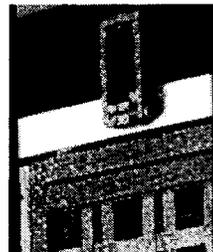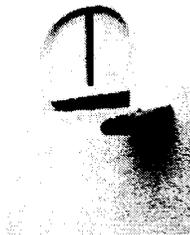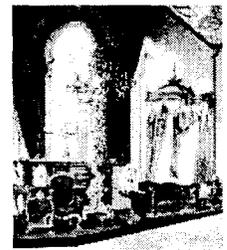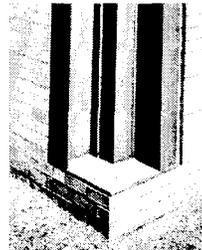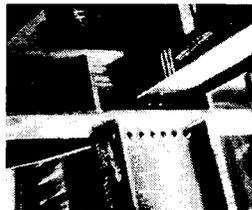
Fig. 1. The table represents the criteria selected for the taxonomy and their role in distinguishing Details and Ornaments, as well as subsidiary categories of detail and decoration. The images illustrate examples of each category according to the selected criteria of the taxonomy.

may cling, or climb, or perch atop buildings.[12]

For the building, the hybridization may involve establishing Detail or Ornament-friendly loci which allow them to bond naturally. Tectonic details naturally bond with those elements to which they refer. Seams where different materials meet, joints of structure, and construction connections provide abundant opportunities for elaboration through tectonic Detail as well as Ornament. Violet-le-Duc provided another interesting notion regarding appropriate realms, particularly for the "occupation" of figural Ornament." Speaking of the Greek temple, he described tectonic Details occupying structural realms, while figural Ornaments resided most naturally in the unresisting areas of the building—areas free for art. For example, the space within the pediment of the temple was liberated from structural requirements due to the protective beams which created the residual space; thus, the pediment provided an appropriately habitable realm for non-tectonic Ornaments. Similarly, inner-referent triglyphs alternated with pictorial metopes recalling the alternation of structural beams and their intermediate, non-resisting spaces reserved for bas-relief adornment. Gottfried Semper as well accorded great significance to the non-structural nature of the woven textile wall, first as the primordial surface for delimiting space, but more importantly as an original locus for art in architecture through tectonic weaving, binding, and knotting, and through figural embroidery.

CONCLUSION

While attractive in its promise of a distinct classification, taxonomy is by definition both speculative and subjective, and by application, artificially limiting. In regard to Detail and Ornament, it creates absolute lines between things whose similarities are at least as compelling as the specific differences revealed by systematic division. The subjective nature of selected traits affects the resulting categories so fundamentally that they can only be understood within their own frame of reference and rules. Even with the most broad and balanced selection of traits, hierarchical ordering necessarily preferences a primary characteristic which inevitably sets a philosophical bias for the system as a whole.

Nevertheless, taxonomic order may be pedagogically instrumental in providing a framework of both shared and distinguishing features of Ornament and Detail. Students frequently express interest in Details and Ornaments as physical, formal objects, but find themselves with little ability to clarify or define their interest. Questioning the significance of these objects more critically demands both criteria and descriptive language. Developing a descriptive definition most often begins in reverse, starting with the largest collection of subjects and seeking to identify those differences which will describe smaller and more specific

groups. Discussions of these characteristic traits often point to long standing issues of architectural debate.

Without the hierarchy of taxonomy, each trait points fairly clearly to a coherent group of subjects which share the limited definition of a distinct feature. Comparing these singularly descriptive groups inevitably produces contradictory assumptions regarding an overall classification of things. Ultimately, the desire to name and "comprehensively" define leads to an ordered stratification, which is largely taxonomic. While artificially absolute, such a defining structure helps students to order their own thinking about Details and Ornaments and the various intentions, modes, and means which contribute to their expressive significance.

NOTES

1. Kubler describes a variety of ordering devises which have been applied to the systematic study of human production by various fields of study, *The Shape of Time - Remarks on the History of Things,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 1-5.
2. Michael Swisher, "Here & There: Point & Frame or On the Use / Function Distinction", (unpublished paper), p. 2.
3. Kubler, p. 16.
4. Swisher, pp. 2-3.
5. The terms "inner-referent" and "outer-referent" are borrowed from Kent Bloomer's characterization of architectural ornament, Ornament Theory and Design, Graduate Seminar, Yale University.
6. Gottfried Semper, "Style", *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 196-207.
7. The terms re-present/re-presentation are modified from Karsten Harries' characterization, "Representation and Re-presentation in Architecture", *VIA 9 Re-Presentation,* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988).
8. Robert Meahger, "Techne", *Perspecta* 24, (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), pp. 159-162.
9. Kubler, pp. 38-39.
10. Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, "Architecture", *The Foundations of Architecture-Selections from the Dictionnaire Raisonne,* (New York, George Braziller, 1990), p. 73.
11. Bloomer, Ornament Theory and Design.
12. Ibid.
13. Viollet-le-Duc, "Lecture XV", *Lectures of Architecture,* (New York: Dover, 1987), pp. 176-177.

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