
Is Democratic Ornament Possible?

Thomas Golsenne

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/13588>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.13588

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 May 2014

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Thomas Golsenne, « Is Democratic Ornament Possible? », *Critique d'art* [Online], 42 | 2014, Online since 01 May 2015, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/13588> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.13588

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Is Democratic Ornament Possible?

Thomas Golsenne

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Antoine Picon, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*, Chichester: Wiley, 2013, (AD Primers

- 1 Antoine Picon's book, *Ornament: The Politics of Architecture and Subjectivity*, deals with the comeback, over some thirty years, of ornament in architecture, after the modernist parenthesis which excluded it. A comeback, because ornament has always been present in European architecture—Antoine Picon's book takes its history back to the Renaissance, but we should go much further back than that: to the Middle Ages of Suger and Bernard de Clairvaux, or to the Antiquity of Vitruvius.¹ A comeback nevertheless marked by a deep-seated difference—and not just linked with the fact that the forms and ornamental motifs of contemporary architecture are novel, with regard to those of the architecture of past centuries. What is missing, according to Antoine Picon, is the political dimension of ornament in architecture. We can find confirmation of as much by examining theoretical writings on contemporary architecture. The famous book by Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo, *The Function of Ornament* (2006), presents an ornamental typology of famous 20th and 21st century buildings, from Louis Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott Department Store (1904) to Norman Foster's 30 St. Mary Axe (2004), based on criteria connected with their morphology, the materials used and the affects they give rise to. A different history of modern and contemporary architecture is thus mapped out from the ornamental viewpoint: the authors note that pre-1900 edifices involve Form and Structure more, while Screen and Surface remain the main forms of architectural ornament after that date. But not a word is said about the political dimension of these buildings.² Great contemporary architectural projects, and the edifices of famous architects, skip the expression of the shared values which cement democracies. When, on the other hand, architects focus on the political aspect of their work, ornament disappears from their

thoughts. In a recent issue of the magazine *Le Visiteur*, a special study devoted to “Architecture and Politics” mentions city planning and collective living projects, and rails at the egos of the stars of architecture and the dash for Babel-like skyscrapers; but no contribution mentions ornament as a vehicle of political expression. Only the architect Paul Chemetov lashes out with this scathing observation: “When politics is just communication, architecture is its décor.”³ For his part, Patrick Bouchain, known for his rehabilitations of industrial wasteland as cultural spaces and public housing, well removed from Dubai, Jakarta and other all-powerful economic centres where the most prestigious projects flourish, expresses, in his own way, the wish for an architecture adorned to measure for and by its users, at the same time as its total absence from the present-day landscape.⁴ The fact that the ornamentation of an edifice may have served a political idea was nevertheless quite obvious in past centuries, and we can only agree with what Antoine Picon has to say about this fundamental function of architectural ornament. Because of its production costs, ornamentation first of all expresses the economic power of the commissioning person or body, and often honours their political power. Oleg Grabar, a specialist in Islamic architecture, quoted at the beginning of Antoine Picon’s book, has for example written a book about the Alhambra Palace in Granada. In it he perfectly demonstrates how the sumptuous ornamentation on which the reputation of this palace is based is distributed on the basis of a highly organized plan: the most ornate rooms being those which, at the heart of the complex, are reserved for the sultan and his close entourage, as if his power were disseminated in an ornamental way around his person.⁵ In the 12th century, the abbot of Saint-Denis, Suger, pleaded in favour of the magnificence of the church, whose excessive equipment was meant to display the spiritual excess of the deity. He addressed the great and good of this world whose outstanding gifts would enhance the beauty of the divine place and their own glory. There was nothing aesthetically gratuitous about this decision, but an interpretation in terms of the suitability of the ecclesiastical *décor* (in Latin, *decere* means “to suit”) which gives it its ethical basis. The decorative function of ornament would dominate not only architecture but also all forms of social appearances from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, inclusive. In this decorative, hierarchic and extravagant way of thinking about society, the most powerful are entitled to more sartorial finery and the most ornate edifices. Ornament visibly displays the social order and its architectural application incorporates it within the political landscape. It is no coincidence that, as Antoine Picon reminds us, the theory of orders was developed in writings on architecture just when the centralized States were becoming consolidated in Europe. In this respect, Antoine Picon mentions the misadventure of Nicolas Fouquet (p. 110), Louis XIV’s treasurer. The monarch refused to tolerate the splendours of the castle of his minister at Vaux-le-Vicomte, had him confined, and confiscated all his possessions, while putting his team of architects and decorators to work on the construction of Versailles.

- 2 The 19th century marked both the apex and the end of the decorative order of ornament. With the improvement of techniques and the advances of industrialization, ornament became standardized at the same time as it was becoming democratized, just like society. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc was still in a position to think that mediaeval Gothic represented a model for a standardized and popular ornamental production, but John Ruskin already lamented the good old days of craftsmanship and the ornamental fantasies of the mediaeval masters. Backed up by allegorical statues and panegyric inscriptions, ornament never expressed the values of the homeland, great men, the arts and the

benefits of European civilization as much as it did at that time. Those talkative political ornaments would not survive modernism, except in totalitarian regimes: they thereby betrayed a manner of expression more linked to the monarchical style of power than to that of democracy. But if historians of architecture and ornament—Owen Jones, Gottfried Semper, and Alois Riegl in particular—thought they could see therein the basic expression of the soul of a people, its *Kunstwollen*, this was always to do with distant peoples in time and space: in their own lands, they declared that the *Kunstwollen* of European society had become watered down in eclecticism. Democracy had not yet found its ornamental style. This is why, in radicalizing criticism in the early 20th century, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier would put ornament back in the cupboard, because they thought it ill-suited to industrialized and democratic society. In fact, if ornament no longer expressed any political and collective value, this was because it had above all become the expression of an individual subjectivity, shared between the commissioning party, the architect and the user. This capacity of ornament to express a subjectivity is not new, and Antoine Picon also retraces its history. He starts it with the issue of the licence in the theory of orders in the 16th century: it displays the play in the rules which great architects like Michelangelo⁶ authorized themselves. In the 19th century, ornament broached subjectivity in a new form, that of interior decoration, while middle-class society imposed individual freedom, the spirit of distinction, and the gratuitous style as higher values. Art Nouveau was the dazzling manifestation of this, but opposed by modernist theoreticians of architecture, preferring equality, the collective, and functionalism.

- 3 So modernism finished with the decorative style which granted the hierarchy of appearances to the social hierarchy, and interior decoration which people chose in accordance with their desire to express their bourgeois individuality. Ornament is no longer a relative value. It is no longer enshrined by the rules of an ethics: it becomes radically criminal, incarnates Evil, and henceforward becomes the object of a moral rejection.
- 4 So when Antoine Picon and other contemporary authors continue to deny ornament any political scope in architecture, they are prolonging the declaration of the founders of modernism. Yet the specific feature of Antoine Picon's books is that it adds an additional sense to architectural ornament today, outside this style.
- 5 The triumph of neo-liberalism, since the 1980s, the concentration of wealth, and the phenomenon of the star system in architecture, associated with a handful of big names, entails a return of the assertion of subjectivity through ornament. That, needless to add, of architecture which, through its works, alters a landscape by setting up a landmark in it, like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao designed by Frank Gehry; that, obviously enough, of the commissioning body, involved in overbidding with their competitors, like the princes of baroque Rome in the age of all-out capitalism. The subjectivity of the user, for his part, is usually abandoned, except in certain cases, analyzed by Antoine Picon, where it is implicated in a sort of dialogue with the edifice, whose ornamentation, akin to the skin of a living organism, encompasses it to produce affects on it—the affect being, in the Deleuzian terminology followed by Antoine Picon, the effect produced by the ornamental sign when this latter is no longer communicating anything comprehensible. And the author quotes several noteworthy examples, such as the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum by Herzog & de Meuron, whose coating evoking Braille motifs gives rise to an undeniable tactile affect. We might extend these observations by reading

Jacques Soullou who, since his book *Le Décoratif* (1990), has been defending the idea that ornament expresses something else, like a vital force necessary for all living beings, starting with man. And if the ethical use of ornament as *décor* declined in the 19th century, it was invariably present in the architecture of the 20th century, like a force at times repressed (modernism), at others liberated (postmodernism). This vital function of ornament is an idea originally formulated by Gottfried Semper, a selection of whose writings has been translated by Jacques Soullou, and who is regarded with great interest by a large number of contemporary architects.⁷ However, despite their quality and their interest, these examples are too exceptional to deeply change the subjectivity of individuals, their way of experiencing space, and, what is more, their way of living in a community.

- 6 Perhaps we should turn to more modest examples to refind a political use of ornament with concrete collective effects. In 2000, the painter Edi Rama, Minister of Culture since 1998 in Albania, Europe's poorest country, became the (socialist) mayor of the capital, Tirana, until 2011 (since September 2013 he has been the country's prime minister). As mayor, but with no funds, in a city prey to real estate anarchy, where the public space was almost reduced to nothing, he notably undertook to have the façades of low-cost housing blocks painted. Choosing very bright colours and geometric shapes, he transformed the streets into compositions worthy of the Bauhaus painters. His authoritarian method (he did not ask inhabitants for their opinion about the choice of colours, for example) caused people to gnash their teeth, but in the end had the effect he reckoned on: the colours of the street became people's main topic of conversation, and in this way they re-appropriated the public space. If this painterly gesture has not changed the material conditions of the life of the populace, which shows very clearly the ornamental treatment, on the surface, of the problem, it has still been effective with regard to the opening of a "parliament", a place to talk in, which is the basis of all democracy.⁸ This example shows that, on the sidelines of the high-tech and powerfully subjective ornament of masterpieces of contemporary architecture, there are other more modest, more political uses of architectural ornament, whose description remains to be made.

NOTES

1. Read for example: Bonne, Jean-Claude. "Pensée de l'art et pensée théologique chez Suger", in *Artistes et philosophes : éducateurs ?*, Paris : Centre Pompidou, 1994, p. 13-50, edited by C. Descamps ; and the writings of Gilles Sauron on the *Ara Pacis*.
2. Moussavi, Farshid, Kubo, Michael. *The Function of Ornament*, Barcelona : Actar, 2006, p. 5-11
3. Chemetov, Paul. "L'architecture du grand nombre et la politique moderne", *Le Visiteur*, no18, November 2012, p. 41-48
4. Bouchain, Patrick. *Construire autrement : comment faire ?*, Arles : Actes sud, 2006, p. 56
5. Grabar, Oleg. *The Alhambra*, London: Penguin Books, 1978

6. To complement Antoine Picon's swift words on this subject, read: Payne, Alina. *The Architectural Treatise on the Italian Renaissance: Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literacy Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
7. Cf. Soulillou, Jacques. *Le Décoratif*, Paris : Klincksieck, 1990 ; and by the same author, *Le Livre de l'ornement et de la guerre*, Marseille : Parenthèses, 2003 ; Semper, Gottfried. *Du Style et de l'architecture : écrits, 1834-1869*, Marseille : Parenthèses, 2007 (trans. J. Soulillou, N. Neumann) ; Koetz, Laurent. Thibault, Estelle. "Ornement architectural et expression constructive : concepts d'hier et débats d'aujourd'hui", *Images re-vues*, no10, 2012, online at <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/2386>
8. See on this subject Anri Sala's film, *Dammi i colori* (2003) and read the interview with Edi Rama in *Ever living - Ornement*, exh. cat., Paris : B42/Vélizy ; L'Onde/Versailles ; La Maréchalerie, 2012, p. 125.