

FUNCTION OF ORNAMENT AND DECORATION

The disciplined use of ornament and decoration begins with an understanding of its use and function on, for example, building façades; paved floorscapes or in the embellishment of civic space with fountains, trees or sculpture. While not adopting a high moral tone in the analysis of ornament, the authors nevertheless have great sympathy for the views of Alberti (1955) on this subject, in particular his dislike of ‘everything that favours of luxury or profusion, and [I]am best pleased with those ornaments which arise principally from the ingenuity and beauty of the contrivance.’ Although Pugin (1841) was taking sides in the ‘battle of the styles’ of the last century, his two great rules for design make sense to the twentieth century designer: ‘first, that there should be no features about a building which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety; second, that all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building In pure architecture the smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose’. It is through analysis of the meaning, purpose and function of city ornament that discipline can be established in this important aspect of urban design.

The greatest pleasure from decoration and ornament in the urban realm will result when such embellishment is in harmony with its function. Ornament and decoration are not optional extras on a building or in a city: the city needs them as much as it needs a transportation network, car parks or city centre. Decoration and ornament share with all other facets of design the primary aim of creating unity. The aim of urban design, as Alexander (1987) maintains, is to create a series of properly formed wholes ‘every part of a town, neighbourhood, a building, a garden, or a room, is whole, in the sense that it is both an integral entity in itself, and at the same time, joined to some other entities to form a larger whole.’ Alexander goes on to define a ‘whole’

by saying ‘A thing is whole only when it is itself entire and also joined to its outside to form a larger entity. But this can only happen when the boundary between the two is so thick, so fleshy, so ambiguous, that the two are not sharply separated, but can function either as separate entities or as one larger whole which has no minor cleavage in it.’ Thus decoration and ornament in urban design can knit together buildings, streets, squares and neighbourhoods so that each, while remaining an entity, functions as part of a greater whole.

A subsidiary function of decoration is to ease the transition between the main design elements, between street and square, between structural elements such as floor and wall planes. It is also used to make the transition between the different materials used in the construction of the built environment. Examples include the decorative transition between column and lintel – the Doric capital being a perfect model, where the shaft of the column swells as if under pressure, straining with the load of the entablature. The profile of the capital, the echinus, prescribes a delicate curve, a perfect transition between two structural elements. The west front of the Gothic cathedral with its great pointed entrance repeats the shape of the door in a series of moulded arches offering the opening to the surrounding wall: the building elements of the wall and the door are welded into a unified whole using an ornamental device of great beauty (Figure 1.12). On a larger scale, the vertical wall of the street meets the ground plane with raised plinth, a pavement of patterned slabs, and raised kerbs, a slow transition from carriageway to vertical plain with the junction of the two repeated in a series of parallel lines. The decorated edging to footpaths within grassed or cobbled Oxbridge college courtyards is a delightful transition from material to material, an example of a decorated edge resulting from functional necessity.

An important role of ornamentation is to give emphasis to the most important part of a building, the most important buildings or the most important

civic spaces. Elements emphasized in this way take on an added significance often imbued with symbolic meaning. The cathedral in the medieval or early Renaissance city was the building that received the greatest care and attention from the decorative artist. It was here that most time, effort and money was expended. The main civic building in these cities was important but it did not compete with the church which remained dominant in the life of the community. For example, the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, a grand and imposing building, takes second place in significance to the intricately and richly decorated marble cathedral (Figure 1.13). More mundanely a change in external flooring or changes in level using steps are often employed to indicate change of

ownership offering a clear warning of greater privacy, while directional decorative paving and tree-lined routes emphasize important paths leading eye and foot to places or buildings of significance. Such devices may be as humble as the footpath or drive leading visitors to the main entrance or as grand as the great avenue of the Champs Elysée leading to the Arc de Triomphe and the tomb of the unknown soldier (Figure 1.14).

Decoration and ornament is an expensive business. It is therefore often confined to important elements – surrounds to doors or windows. Decoration is confined to the front of the building, the rear remaining plain (Figures 1.15 and 1.16). Other functions of decoration in the city relate more directly to functional necessity, such as



1.12



1.13

Figure 1.12 Notre Dame,
Paris

Figure 1.13 Cathedral,
Siena