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# THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ORNAMENT AND DECORATION

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## INTRODUCTION

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Urban design, the art of city building, is concerned with the methods used to organize and structure the urban realm as distinct from the detailed design of the private domain. This book deals with one aspect of urban design: the role, function and form of ornament and decoration in the city. The book is written from the perspective that all development should be judged as an attempt to decorate the city. Alexander has suggested that each increment of development should aim to 'heal' or make 'whole' the city (Alexander, 1987). The thesis presented here accepts this notion but advocates the primacy of ornament and decoration in the process of unifying parts of the city into comprehensive wholes. The thesis that each increment of development should be seen as an attempt to decorate the city does not conflict with the idea that urban development results from consideration of such practical matters as function, use, cost, economic location and available finance: the city would stagnate and die without due consideration being given to these prerequisites of development. However, having solved the practicalities of development, the ultimate criterion for evaluating any addition to the city is whether that increment decorates the city.

Ornament and decoration, when used to heal the city has three interrelated functions. They are: to go beyond the decoration of individual buildings and to enrich the decorative themes of a locality; to enhance the physical, social and spiritual qualities of location, that is, to strengthen the *genius loci*, and thirdly to develop the 'legibility' and 'imageability' of the city. Prior to the twentieth century, the conscious effort to decorate was an intrinsic part of large scale development (Figure 1.1). In the twentieth century, with exceptions, it would appear the primacy of decoration has been replaced in urban development by other, mainly economic interests. It may be that we have to look back to the past to rediscover the rationale for decoration. Without such a rationale, decoration and ornament in the city may be seen as fussy, precious and florid, a veneer to cover cheap and shoddy development.

For the purpose of this book, ornament and decoration will be taken to mean the ways in which the main elements within the city are arranged to form a pleasing and memorable pattern. The analysis of ornamentation and decoration in the city will be structured around Lynch's notion of urban legibility (Lynch, 1960). The text will therefore be based upon the five components Lynch suggested as being key to imageability: the path, the node, the edge, the