

different ways. It is futile to argue over the best interpretation. However, some groups within society share features of the perceptual sets and it is those shared perceptions which the urban designer tries to understand and which are addressed when attempting to decorate the city.

MEANING AND CONTENT

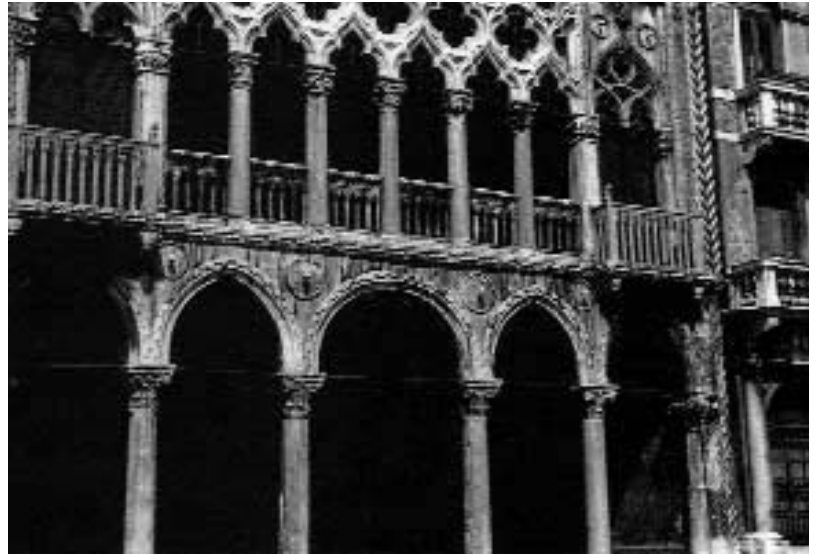
While the aesthetic qualities of decoration are to be respected, for a complete appreciation we must go beyond the visual appearance and examine meanings or content of city decoration and ornament. The inherent meaning of decoration can stand for the representation of place and/or the representation of the society occupying that place. In addition to symbolic meaning, decoration can impart information and enhance legibility.

The decoration of the city can act as a collective symbol, something that stands for a town and with which citizens identify. A notable example of such decoration is the annual bedecking of Blackpool with lights. To see 'the Blackpool lights' is an outing for young and old alike from neighbouring centres. Blackpool has become almost synonymous with the lights festival. This temporary embellishment follows the tradition of 'well dressing', an annual event in some small villages in rural Derbyshire. More permanent urban decoration epitomizing place can be found in Chester's intricate black and white half-timbered tracery; in the Art Nouveau street furniture of the Parisienne metro; in the Venetian Gothic lining that city's canals, or in the classical detailing of Bath's elegant eighteenth century streets (Figures 1.10 and 1.11). Decoration can, therefore, represent collective identity, signify place and make places distinct from one another: 'it testifies that a group of people share a place and a time, as well as operate in close proximity and with a good deal of interdependence' (Attoe, 1981). In this manner decoration contributes to the *genius loci*, while for Lynch (1960) it strengthens memorability.

Decoration can be read as reflections or indices of cultural processes and social values, as such it makes social meanings manifest. An examination of city decoration reveals how the city operates, which forces dominate life there and what the residents apparently value. Thus decoration is both a social symbol and evidence of social structure. For example, the decorative skyline of the city, in addition to standing for or symbolizing the society that occupies the city, can also provide information or clues about its organization and power structure. Thus decoration can be a social index representing the values of communal life. As an integral part of this index there are hierarchies of value and expression representing the scale of power, or 'pecking order' within the community. In some cases, there is an uneasy truce between powers which the embellishment of the city can proclaim. A delicate but decorative medieval church spire may compete with state power represented by a solid fortress or palace hung with flags and blazoned with coat of arms. At a different level, another important function is to offer individuals the opportunity to express themselves with more transient and often whimsical statements of personality, for example the personalization of the home with topiary work, or garden furniture of varying quality (see Figure 6.35).

In addition to the symbolic dimensions, decoration can also be utilitarian, an aid to orientation. Decorative skylines, for example, help individuals to know where they are and how to get where they want to go, as such the skyline has meaning as a landmark when it identifies localities in the city. Other decorative elements in the city serve this utilitarian purpose - the highly decorative street corner which acts as landmark; the growing intensity and complexity of floorscaping patterns that direct the foot along the path to journey's end; or the concentration of decorative work on the façade which indicates the entrance points. Those and other examples carry information necessary for efficient and effective movement within the public space of the city.

The classic study of orientation within the city is Kevin Lynch's, *The Image of the City* (1960). An important purpose, possibly the main purpose of ornamentation, is to make a city more memorable by giving identity and structure to its public realm. Decoration and ornament can be used to add coherence to each of Lynch's five components of city image. Embellishing these major components of individuals' mental images of the city enhances and strengthens the city's imageability. The image of the city, or the mental map carried round in the mind is the way in which people 'acquire, code, store, recall and decode information about their spatial environment - its elements' relative locations, distances, directions and overall structure' (Lynch, 1960). It is argued here that strengthening the image of the city for the citizen and visitor is the overriding purpose of decoration and ornament.



1.10

1.11



Figure 1.10 Gothic detailing, Venice

Figure 1.11 Georgian detailing, Bath