ORNAMENT AS NARRATIVE:
A FRAMEWORK FOR READING ORNAMENT
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

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The aim of this thesis is:

1. To explore the concept of ornament.

2. To develop a framework for understanding the design of ornament in the twenty-first century.

3. To explore the definition of ornament and its correlation to the imagination through narrative.

Narratives help to consider meanings associated with spatial or conceptual relationships in design which reveal pluralistic and singular interpretations of space (Betsky, 1995; Dresser, 1977; Ruskin, 1907). In its simplest form it is a chronicle of experiences. In the most complex narrative, ideas and meanings are woven together from culture, societal values, and historical context to convey a narrative described as a tapestry or a multifaceted continuum.
A review of the literature examines the significance of ornament in the Western world as it has influenced the design of the Modern Age (1890-1940). In the Modern Age, designers started to reexamine the significance of ornament in design (Beeby, 1977; Brolin, 1985; Greenberg, 1977). From this review, the following question emerges: how does ornament convey a narrative in the contemporary context of the twenty-first century?

To tackle this question a research methodology is developed consisting of case studies and design process. Case studies illustrate principles of design and clarify similarities and differences (Groat 2002). Principles of ornament are used in these case studies as a framework to compare related interior spaces of the modern age (Bloomer 2000). The design project illuminates ornament as a systematic process of design that can generate a narrative.

Ornament has traditionally been understood as historic precedent. At the end of the nineteenth century, Art Nouveau enthusiasts wanted to move past historic precedent to develop their own language. In the early twentieth century, the Bauhaus left precedent behind to develop logical systems of design, and towards the end of the twentieth century, postmodernism reintroduced ornament in the context of technology and a pluralist society. From the perspective of the twenty first century, a resolution between historic precedents, technology, materiality, and global society come into focus and suggest a new direction in the development of ornament within contemporary design.
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1.1 Introduction

Ornament has been present in the western world throughout recorded time revealing human desires, activities and beliefs (Abercrombie, 1990; Brolin, 1985; Focillon, 1948; Grombrich, 1979). The presence of ornament and its use in design were evident up until the early twentieth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, many scholars and designers explored the area of ornament and ornamentation in theory and practice (Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1979). In 1878 the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi wrote in his journal words which represent the spirit of this exploration:

*To be interesting, ornamentation should represent objects that remind us of specific ideas and that constitute motifs. Such motifs are historical, legendary, representing deeds, emblems, fables—regarding man and his life, actions, and passions* (Gaudi, 1973, p. 19).

It is from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century that designers start to reexamine the significance of ornament (Brolin, 1985; Beeby, 1977; Greenberg, 1977). In his book *Ornament and Crime*, architect Adolf Loos claimed that the greatness of the twentieth century was that designers would no longer design ornament. Decoration, he claimed, was left behind to enter into a new world without ornament. (1908).

Prior to this period of Modern Age, (1890-1940), ornament had been developed from historic precedent. During this period, ornament began to lose its importance as historic precedent removing any formal or functional precedent from
design (Greenberg, 1977; Collins, 1987; MIA, retrieved September 4, 2002). This paper examines views of ornament in the Western world. Specifically it examines the design literature that has influenced the perception of the ornament of the Modern Age. It also explores the demise of ornament as a topic of scholarship and exploration.

The modern age is of particular interest in any exploration of ornament because of two historic shifts in the paradigm of decoration that influences contemporary perception. As historic precedent, the importance of ornament in the Modern Age begins to decline due to many social, economic, and humanistic concerns (Beeby, 1977; Brolin, 1985; Greenberg, 1977). As the architectural critic Brent Brolin presents in his book, *Flight of Fancy*, ornament becomes disguised and virtually disappears in the modern age (1985). It is within this context that a contemporary understanding of ornament in the twenty-first century will be explored.

1.2 Objective

The aim of this thesis is:

1. To explore the concept of ornament.
2. To develop a framework for understanding the design of ornament in the twenty-first century.
3. To explore the definition of ornament and its correlation to the imagination through narrative.

Ornament has a direct correlation to the imagination as it reveals human desire, activities and beliefs (Abercrombie, 1990; Gaudi, 1973). The French art
historian Henri Focillon in *The Life of Forms in Art* called ornamental art the first alphabet of human thought to come into close contact with space (1948). Kent Bloomer concurs with Focillon, saying that ornament’s purpose is to articulate a realm of the imagination (2000).

The framework developed in this paper is imbedded in this world of the imagination. To paraphrase the *Oxford English Dictionary*, imagination is that process, through which a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses, is formed. This mental concept, as evident in ornament, will be identified for the purpose of this thesis as the term narrative (Simpson, retrieved November 11, 2002).

1.3 Justification

One way to understand space is through the meaning people derive from their environments. These meanings develop connections between material objects and human understanding. As it is applied to ornament, these objects and meanings, can be considered and understood through the framework of narrative.

In *The Nature of Ornament*, Yale University professor Kent Bloomer outlines principles of ornament that distinguish the importance of narrative. The purpose of ornament, Bloomer states, is to enlighten the imagination, yet he does not develop the singular or pluralistic narratives that stimulate the imagination. In this paper, it is important to investigate and develop the realm of the imagination as proposed by Bloomer. To develop this realm of the imagination as narrative, beyond the existing work of Bloomer, a new focus on narrative for designers emerges to create spaces that have meaning (2000).
1.3 Problem Statement

In the modern age (1890 to 1940), designers developed new approaches to addressing design problems by considering particular design conditions outside of historic precedent (Brolin, 1976; Greenberg 1977). Through these new approaches, they replaced the authority of antiquity with that of the program. In this sense, program is a “description of spatial dimensions, proximity relationships, and other physical conditions necessary for the expeditious performance of specific functions” (Greenburg, 1977, p. 65). Program became the authority and designers looked away from historic precedent, which was now considered to be obsolete (Brolin, 1985; Greenberg, 1977).

Although architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright were modernists, they were educated in the style of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. These fine-arts instructions were geared towards a wide range of artistic disciplines concerned with ideas of beauty and the historic precedent of ornament. The influence of this kind of fine-arts education can be seen in the work developed in their designs through ornament (Beeby, 1977; Van Zanten, 1977).

With the rise of modernism, a contemporary view of education based in the philosophies of modernism arose. In contemporary design education, the discussion of ornament is virtually absent from many design curriculums. Many designers are not typically educated by the principles of ornament. Modernist philosophies of design, like that of program, as opposed to the fine arts, influence the view of
ornament and its application in contemporary design (Beeby, 1977; Brolin, 1985; Van Zanten, 1977).

In studying precedent in the modern age, the suggestion that ornament has disappeared is questioned and the influence of ornament on twentieth-century architecture is investigated to illustrate the role of ornament in the contemporary view of the twenty-first century.

1.5 Summary

In the *Nature of Ornament*, Bloomer develops broad principles. These principles transcend historic styles and can be applicable to all types of ornament from classical systems, to more contemporary systems like the ornament of the Bauhaus or Frank Lloyd Wright. By developing a narrative exploration of ornament and considering frameworks for understanding in the design of ornament, a methodological process for defining the role of ornament in the twenty-first century is discovered.
2.1 Introduction

In a review of the existing literature, two paradigm shifts influence how the ornament of the Modern Age (1890 to 1940) is perceived in the twenty-first century emerge. The first shift of thought began in England in the middle of the nineteenth century forty years prior to the Modern Age with the Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations of 1851. The second shift began at the beginning of the twentieth century with the construction of the Bauhaus facilities by Gropius at Dessau, Germany in 1924. In relationship to these two shifts of thought, the literature review reveals the broader context of narrative as a framework in which to view ornament in the twenty-first century (Brolin, 1985; Greenberg, 1977).

2.1.1 The Shift of Thought in the Nineteenth Century

By the middle of the nineteenth century in England, there was a desire among designers and scholars to clarify the view of ornament and the decorative arts as they related to fine art. Designers and scholars thought it necessary to develop an alternate theory of design that differentiated between the decorative arts and the fine arts. They wanted this theory to illustrate what was said to be the primary distinction between the decorative arts and fine arts, the distinction between form and abstraction: between the reproductions of natural appearance (that could occur in fine arts), and
the expression of the decorative arts where it should be avoided (Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1979).

The Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations of 1851 was a predecessor of the contemporary World’s Fair. Part of the intention of this exhibition was to educate the public. By giving examples of objects that illustrated what was said to be good design, the hope was to elevate the tastes of the middle class (Brolin, 1985; Collins, 1987; Grombrich, 1979).

The austere Crystal Palace and the elaborate quality of the decorative arts on the interior, demonstrated a contrast between what designers believed to be good design and what the middle class desired. (At this time good design was equated with “beauty.” If something was “beautiful” it was considered by most to be good design).

This schism was due to an economically mobile middle class that was generally considered by designers and artisans to be unsophisticated. The middle class goal was to acquire material possessions to be representative of wealth, more so than representative of the quality or design of an object. Many objects were made of an inferior mass-produced quality to fulfill this need. The desire of the middle class to acquire possessions began to alter the view of “beauty” (good design) by displacing the centuries old formula of the relationship between the artisan and patron, to a modern day relationship of supply and demand (Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1979).

From a more contemporary view, scholars like the architectural critic Brent Brolin, in *Flight of Fancy* suggested the Crystal Palace began an aesthetic shift: from nature as the guide to beauty to a more design-theoretical view, which evolved into the machine aesthetic (1985). Brolin speculated that the definition of “beauty”
reversed and what was “beautiful” (nature) became ugly and what had been
considered ugly (the machine) became the new model for measuring beauty.
Moreover, this inquiry into what was considered good design or “beautiful” cleared
the way for what some scholars refer to as a revolution in design at the beginning of
the twentieth century (Beeby, 1977; Brolin, 1985; Collins, 1987; Greenberg, 1977).

2.1.2 The Shift in Thought in the Twentieth Century

In the early part of the twentieth century, groups of designers, collectively
referred to as “modernists” started to move away from designs based in historic
precedent and classical languages reinforced by ornamental systems. These formal
systems were considered to be irrational and obsolete. Designers began to view their
subject in what was considered to be, a new rational and logical manner. Specifically,
this revolutionary ideal is seen in the construction of the Bauhaus facilities at Dessau,
Germany. These facilities, designed by Walter Gropius, distinguish this shift in
thought because it was at Dessau where Gropius most propagated his new ideas
which were in line with his modernist colleagues (Brolin, 1985; Greenberg, 1977;
Beeby, 1977).

Many scholars who have studied this period of the twentieth century suggest
that what the modernists wanted to do was replace the view of borrowing from
historical precedent by considering modern problems through the concept of program.
By stripping away the visual historic precedent in ornament, the Bauhaus created a
design of a new morality. Ornament was considered obsolete. Gropius said the
architect’s duty was to: “help our contemporaries to lead natural and sensible lives

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instead of paying heavy tribute to the false gods of make-believe” (Greenberg, 1977, p. 65).

2.1.3 Summary of Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, academics and designers hoped to educate a new upwardly mobile class. They did this by pursuing theories of design that would influence decorative arts and ornament. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a shift in thought stripped ornament from surfaces. The intent was to improve the standards of living for the masses by developing a new strategy for design based on the rational logic of program. Thus, these modern designers refused historic precedent as a valid design initiative (Brolin, 1984; Grombrich, 1979).

2.2 Ornament at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, Leon Battista Alberti and his book, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, influenced the view of architecture (1545). To understand ornament in the contemporary framework of the twenty-first-century, one must first look back to Alberti. Alberti was influential in developing an understanding of ornament that carried into the industrial revolution. His view was that architecture is ornament. The German architectural scholar Alois Riegl wrote in *Problems of Style Foundations for a History of Ornament* that Alberti, if read in original Italian, collapsed the words ornament and architecture as if the two were inherently interchangeably (1893). Riegl stated that Alberti’s view was to not: “discriminate
between parts of a building as it was to describe that unity which should permeate every stone and act of design in good architecture” (Riegl, 1992, p.4).

The idea that permeated architecture and its relationship to ornament up until the industrial revolution was that architecture and ornament were interdependent as part of the whole structure. During the industrial revolution, with new technological enhancements to iron, architecture became focused on the structure of the building as separate from the exterior façade. Ornament was no longer viewed as an inherent part of structure (Bloomer, 2000; Riegl, 1992).

Out of the use of iron evolved new kinds of buildings that could be thought of as succinctly separate parts. The façade becomes separated from the structure, as opposed to the façade and the structure being the same, like in stone building. Iron was a main influence on design and academic thought from the middle of the nineteenth century. Large-scale productions were made of iron. Machinery was invented to allow the building of even larger scale structures like bridges and exhibition halls. With this new materiality, ideas of structure as related to ornament evolved. These are revealed by examining the works of four scholars as they related to these new forms of structure (BCTD retrieved December 2002).

Their views of structure and ornament influenced the perceptions and principles of design and ornament in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. They also influence how the modern age of design is viewed from the contemporary perspective of the twenty-first century. One of the most influential on the contemporary perspective is the architect-theorist A.W.N. Pugin who said that he did not develop a style but a principle (Wainwright, 1994).
Pugin developed principles of design, based on the ideas of honesty of materials, function and the spirit of the times. These principles were used to support the promotion of Pugin’s own admiration of gothic revival architecture by declaring that the gothic revival was the spirit of his times. For Pugin, the Gothic Revival symbolized a religious necessity to connect historical and moral endeavors. Gothic architecture represented man’s true relationship to God because it represented the virtues of the Middle Ages (Brolin, 1985; O’Donnel, 1994; Wainwright, 1994).

Principles of honesty and function were also used to elevate the level of taste of the Victorian middle class. As a point of education, these principles, according to Brolin, were a deliberate move. Pugin knew that problems of taste could not, in the end, be judged by the complexities of aesthetics. Therefore he moved the role of design and ideas of taste, into the area of morality (Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1979).

Through these principles, Pugin influenced not only the design of his own century but also the twentieth century as well. He led the way for modernist to strip away ornament in their interpretation of his ideas: honest expression of materials, structure, function, and the spirit of the times. Pugin’s principles promoted his ideals of the gothic-revival and led the modernist to develop the principles into their own language (Wainwright, 1994; Brolin, 1985).

Although John Ruskin in the Stones of Venice expressed it differently, he developed a view of ornament that was reminiscent of Pugin’s principles of design (1851). Ruskin revealed a theory of ornament that was dependent on maintaining a relationship between the craft of ornament and the craftsman. Ruskin, like Alberti before him, felt ornament was inherently related to structure. Stone building was of
the utmost importance to Ruskin, because of the inherent connection between ornament and materiality (Grombrich, 1979; Riegl, 1992).

Ruskin had a great disdain for iron construction. He believed that buildings constructed of iron skewed the relationships between structure and ornament. Ruskin was one of the main critics of this new form: the iron construction of the industrial age. Ruskin’s pleasure in the appreciation of ornament was based in his belief that ornament represented the relationship between god and man. Ruskin closely associated craft and the craftsman as being inherent in the spiritual development of man that is conveyed by the quality of the ornament (Bloomer, 2000; Collins, 1987; Grombrich, 1979).

The rhythm of the craft and the craftsman was conveyed in the stone itself. The imperfections that the stonemason creates were considered an expression of life (Bloomer 2000; Ruskin, 1907). In Ruskin’s own words:

...Pleasure in architecture I must insist upon at somewhat greater length, for I would fain do away with some of the ungrateful coldness which we show towards the good builders of old time. In no art is there closer connection between our delighting the work, and our admiration of the workman’s mind, than in architecture and yet we rarely ask for a builder's name (Ruskin, 1907, p. 36).

This natural liking Ruskin describes as the natural draw of people who delight in what they do. This delight was a natural expression of god. Ruskin felt that the craft of ornament was dependent on the craftsman delighting in the act of making it. It was in the craft of making that man develops a relationship with God. In the same way, an observer who delights in ornament is delighting in god's work (Bloomer, 2000; Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1974; Ruskin, 1907).

In Ruskin’s words:
But the second requirement in decoration [ornamentation] is sign of our liking the right thing. And the right thing to be like is god’s work, which he made for our delight and contentment in this world. And all noble ornamentation is the expression of man’s delight in god’s work (Ruskin, 1907, p. 40).

In the act of crafting the ornament, the craftsman had to enjoy doing it.

Ruskin’s interest in stone building represents this relationship between craftsman and the craft, and one’s relationship with god. If it was unsuccessful, it was because the craftsman who made it did not delight in the craft of it.

Then, as regards decoration, [ornament] I want you only to consult your own natural choice and liking. There is a right and wrong in it; but you will assuredly like the right if you suffer your natural instinct to lead you (Ruskin, 1907, p. 41).

The work of Ruskin suggests that narrative can be seen. It is through this relationship between the craftsman and craft that narrative is revealed. Ruskin described his own view of architecture as it tells a story and develops a narrative. The narrative is seen as a view of history that was related by time through the context of the ornament being viewed.

The reader will now begin to understand something of the importance of the study of the edifices of a city which concludes, within the circuit of some seven or eight miles, the field of context between the preeminent architectures of the world: --each architecture expressing a condition of religion; each an erroneous condition, yet necessary to the correction of the others, and corrected by them (Ruskin, 1907, p.16).

Ruskin’s work also suggests the idea of ornament in relationship to the utility of the object. As this relationship develops between the representation of the motif and the materiality, the meaning develops as a narrative. Working at the same time as Ruskin, the decorator Christopher Dresser developed a definition of ornament that
contrasts to Ruskin’s view of architecture that was dependent upon the structure and façade of buildings being the same.

Christopher Dresser, in his book *The Art of Decorative Design* articulates a definition of ornament at the end of the nineteenth century that altered the view of ornament by practitioners and patrons alike over the next 100 years (1873). Dresser’s definition evolved under the influence of a major work by his predecessor the scholar and designer Owen Jones. In Jones’ seminal work, *The Grammar of Ornament*, ornament is grouped in ethno-cultural and stylistic categories (1865). Jones believed that designers would use his book to develop new compositions based on a synthesis of the material he discusses (Beeby 1977).

It is unclear whether this occurred or not, but it is speculated by scholar Thomas Beeby that Jones inadvertently influenced the schism between structure and ornament. By illustrating ornament outside of a greater context of utility or materiality, Beeby says that ornament had “become a dressing that had no particular relation to the structure involved…Owen Jones unintentionally contributed to the contextual dissociation of ornament from structure” (Beeby, 1977, p.11).

Dresser states his definition on the first page of his book:

*Ornament is that which, superadded to utility, renders the object more acceptable through bestowing upon it an amount of beauty that it would not otherwise possess…the application of ornament to objects cannot be said to be absolutely necessary* (Dresser, 1977,p.1).

Dresser develops structure as an elemental starting point. He states the elemental structure should be well flushed out and proportioned in form, so that the
application of ornament can begin (Bloomer 2000). For Dresser the idea of ornament connotes the idea of embellishment as an addition of something to beautify:

*For the most part ornament is superadded to utility, a wall is a wall, whether decorated or not; and a tube will convey gas equally well whether it has chased upon it beautiful devices or is without enrichment* (Dresser, 1977, p. 4).

“Beauty” informs Dresser’s view of ornament as a “quality of an object which causes delight, gladsomeness, or satisfaction to spring up within the beholder…” (Dresser, 1977, p. 3). If the ornament causes delight, it is beautiful. Dresser unlike Ruskin, only views ornament as something that beautifies, not as a symbol of greater moral good. Dresser says that if the ornament is good it is beautiful. Dresser claims that one must ask the question; does it become more beautiful the longer it is viewed? If the answer to that question is yes then it is good ornament (Brolin, 1985; Bloomer, 2000; Dresser, 1977).

By illustrating ornament in his book, Dresser further takes the direction of Jones. Dresser developed drawings of ornament which, unlike Jones, are of his own design. Dresser’s examples give a view of contemporary ornament in the nineteenth century in England. By developing his own designs, he develops significant examples of precedent.

Both Dresser and Jones developed ornament through illustrations that begin to suggest a relationship to ornament as a form of narrative related to culture and style. In the same way that Ruskin weaves a narrative of the relationships of buildings, Jones illustrated ornament through the cultural and stylistic concerns of the nineteenth century. As well, Dresser developed contemporary examples of his own design at the
end of the nineteenth century. The development of narrative in the relationship between ornament, and their cultural and stylistic categories is also found in Germany by Dresser’s contemporary Alois Riegl. Riegl further suggests the narrative of ornament through the identification of motifs and their relationships and meanings in situ.

Like Dresser, Alois Riegl in his book *Problems of Style Foundations for a History of Ornament*, was grounded in the idea of the styles of ornament as precedent (1992). Riegl illuminated two important issues of ornament as a foundation for how ornament evolves. Riegl’s first research began by tracing the roots of the motifs of oriental rugs. He discovered that the original oriental motifs were based on Greek motifs that were a thousand years old. This idea of the conventionalization of a motif indicates an agreement between viewers and craftsmen with whom a motif has acquired a shared identity. Overtime, the motif has been abstracted from its native shape through the repetition of its materiality and form. Riegl’s discovery illuminates the motifs through their original meaning (Gombrich, 1979).

The second item Riegl revealed was the relationship between abstraction and primitive cultures. Riegl contested his contemporary’s view of ornament. This view was that the earliest forms of ornament were essential primitive geometric form attributed to limited material and technique. Riegl claimed that these kinds of abstract ornament were not based in a limited understanding of materials and techniques, but based on the action of evolved study and the abstraction of nature (Riegl, 1992).

Riegl’s suggestion that these early forms do not always come out of a primitive form of technique and material, support the idea of the abstraction of nature.
into ornamental forms and meanings. These forms contend that meaning is inherent in the abstract concepts that evolve through these ornamental forms exhibiting an understanding of the world. Riegl valued the abstract nature of ornament’s symbolic representations that over a period of time can evolve and begin to communicate a narrative.

2.2.1 Summary of the Nineteenth Century Scholars

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the architect Adolf Loos published *Ornament and Crime*. The radicalism of this book, seen in equating the practice of ornament to a crime, must be viewed in the context of the malaise that decoration had brought about in the theorists of the nineteenth century. This malaise is rooted in the cheap-imitation product demanded by the middle-class. This demand turned away from the craft traditions. In turning away from the craft tradition, the development of ornament and the imagination declines. As Ruskin believed, the necessity of ornament was dependent on craft and craftsmen, it was here where the imagination is evoked, and a story begins that related to the craftsman, the craft and the greater world at large (Grombrich, 1979).

Because of new forms of structure and materiality, a greater distinction was made between the structure and ornament. Ornament becomes an application and not necessarily a shift from aesthetic to function. The narrative of ornament, as it moved into the twentieth century, was diluted and was perhaps misunderstood by the population at large as ornament is abstracted into a form that is not easily distinguished en situ.
2.3 Twentieth Century Influences

In the modern age at the beginning of the twentieth century designers look away from historic precedent to develop a new rational and logical approach to design. At this time, ornament lost its connection to “traditional social norms and rituals, symbolism, metaphorical, structural and ornamental systems, and transcendental meanings that characterize classical and other eclectic styles (Greenberg, p. 65, 1977). Some designers and theorists even suggest that ornament had out lived its usefulness and therefore it should be eliminated from a contemporary design lexicon (Brolin 1985, Beeby 1977, Greenberg 1977, Loos, 1908).

At the same time, designers at the beginning of the twentieth century do not hesitate in borrowing Pugin’s modern tenets of design, understood as the honest expression of structure, the honest expression of function, the honest expression of materials, and the honest expression of the spirit of the times. It was on these tenets of architecture developed by Pugin: the honest expression of the spirit of the times, that Gropius closely focused his work. Within this desire to take design out of historic precedent, designers and design-theorists start to evaluate how design should be approached and how design should be viewed. The following twentieth centuries scholars are working together to reveal insight into the ornament of the Modern age (Brolin 1985, Wainwright, 1994).

A.D.F. Hamlin begins to develop ornament beyond style into a systematic history, by creating identifiable principles of ornament in his book, *A History of Ornament Ancient and Medieval* (1916). Hamlin was a classicist at the beginning of
the twentieth century when the greater design community was pursing theories of modernism. Hamlin, like Dresser in the nineteenth century, related to design as “beauty.” Hamlin stated that structures must be beautiful, and if they are not, they are only engineering. It is only when aesthetics (or ornament) is added to a structure it becomes architecture. Perhaps to make the classical systems of ornament more accessible and to bring more focus on them, Hamlin wrote in the preface of his book that he hoped to create a systematic viewing of ornament. Hamlin realized the importance of identifying principles of ornament noting that there was a lack of systematic treatises on the history of styles (Hamlin, 1916; Hamlin, 1922).

In addition, Hamlin realized a need to create a system for organizing principles of ornament that can be taught. Principles are important to a contemporary view of ornament because they work to give a generalized method that can be used to understand ornament. Although Hamlin identifies principles, he does not apply them to the organization of his book. Hamlin’s main contribution to the understanding of ornament is by identifying the need for principles that can be applied to reading ornament as a framework that transcends styles, cultures and time periods.

In the 1970’s the architect Thomas Beeby identifies four basic manipulations from which all ornamental motifs are derived. An understanding of these manipulations can be used to read the ornament of the modern age. His article, The Grammar of Ornament/Ornament as Grammar, stated that ornament may have appeared to have vanished from the architecture of the modern period of design, yet in fact it had not. Beeby argued that modern architecture was ornamental but not
identified as such. In Beeby’s view, ornament had simply synthesized into a new
grammar at the beginning of the twentieth century (1977).

In a systematic way Beeby analyzed plans and elevations of modern design to
uncover evidence of ornament and to develop a framework for understanding how to
manipulate an ornamental unit. In doing this, Beeby questioned the validity of the
wide spread belief in the revolution that occurred in design at the beginning of the
twentieth century. This revolution was to have rejected historical expression,
morphology and methodology. Beeby suggests that perhaps ornament can actually be
viewed in the architecture of the modernist (Beeby, 1977).

Specifically, Beeby developed a framework to understand how ornament was
designed regardless of style or place by identifying four ways in which an ornamental
unit is manipulated (Beeby, 1977). Beeby does not further a discussion on the
implications of ornament and its particular purpose of relating a narrative. Narrative
and ornament must be intentionally viewed because they do not reveal themselves at
the forefront of the experience of space.

The architectural critic, Brent Brolin, wrote that his book, *Flight of Fancy*,
was pursued in hopes of understanding why ornament, which had been present as an
important part of life for millennia, virtually disappears by the beginning of the
twentieth century (Brolin 1985). Brolin viewed ornament through a specific context
of historic forms and systems of ornament. Therefore, Brolin saw aberrations of
forms not as ornament, but as ornament that were disguised. Namely, that the
ornament of the modernists like Gropius disguised ornament. It was not fully
expressed because of a radical inability to acknowledge the benefits of ornament. And
since designers and people have a desire for ornament it is therefore has to be
expressed in a disguised manner (Brolin 1985).

Brolin illuminated the aesthetic shift from nature to the machine that occurred
in the middle of the nineteenth century. As well, he simplified the concept of
ornament by suggesting that ornament, decoration and embellishment are the same.
Following the view of Dresser (ornament is superadded to utility) ornament is seen as
application. Dresser goes on to suggest that ornament can also be used as part of
structure, or to disguise structure. Brolin states that ornament’s purpose was to
manipulate an object visually, and to add order to our surroundings, through
beautification. This idea was seen as well in the writings of the art historian E. F.
Grombrich who stated that the purpose of ornament is to order and make sense of our
environments (Brolin, 1985; Grombrich, 1979).

In his book, The Nature of Ornament, Yale University professor Kent
Bloomer identified principles of ornament to understand its nature. This, rather than a
definition of ornament, was the focus of Bloomer’s work, to help reveal its cultural
and psychological importance (Bloomer, 2000). This framework was essential to
understanding the views of this modern age and to how they relate to a contemporary
framework for ornament. These principles can be distilled into eight key terms. To
illuminate these key terms, examples illustrate their forms.

2.4 Bloomer’s Principles Expanded
Illustrations of Bloomer’s principles work to clarify their role in uncovering the nature of ornament. As it was seen with Hamlin, Bloomer distinguished principles of ornament important because of their appeal to universal application.

The first principle, linework is created in ornament by an emphasis on the line; and its line weights, to reinforce a focal point of composition. To explain this term, Bloomer stated that when analyzing ornament it is useful to say that ornament is linelike and its objects are formlike (Bloomer 2000).

An example of linework can be seen in a Renaissance print (Figure 2.1). This example reveals the linelike form in the embellishment of a frame. And the frame itself is the formlike object of the ornament. The linework heightens one’s experience by reinforcing the attention to the portrait.

![Figure 2.1. Example of line work: Framed Renaissance portrait (Bloomer 2000).](image)

Rhythm is concerned with organization. This second principle is the reoccurrence of an element that has a reference to progression or duration. Rhythm is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Due correlation and interdependence of parts, producing a harmonious whole” (Simpson retrieved 02-05-03).

The banqueting hall in Lismore Castle, Ireland designed by the team of Pugin/Crace illustrates rhythmic organization (Figure 2.2). The curved arch moves at different scales from the ceiling to window. The repetition of the paneling translates
in the repetition of the wallpaper. These motifs develop the order of the ornament, the statics, or balance of the whole.

Figure 2.2. Example of Rhythm—Banqueting hall, Lismore Castle. Pugin/Crace (Wainwright, 1994).

In ordering ornament, it is seen that the principles of rhythm and statics are closely related. Ornament’s ordering is dependent on the overall balance of the composition as it is found in situ. The balance is between the geometry and the proportion; the motif and its placement is essential to successful ornament. This is referred to as the statics (Figure 2.3). This harmony develops between the object of the ornament and the structure of the form.

Figure 2.3. Example of Statics: The west window in Erdington Abbey 1850 (Wainwright, 1994).

There must be coherence in the relationship between the ornament, and what it is embellishing. The forth principle utility refers to the purpose of an object being ornamented. An example of utility is a hinge by Louis Sullivan on the tomb of Carrie Eliza Getty (Figure 2.4). This example illustrates the motion or rotation of the ornamental motif as it relates to the possible movement of the hinge.
The meaning of the object’s function and the ornament create a combinational meaning. The telamon is designed as part of the supporting pillar (Figure 2.5). The combinational meaning of the object comes alive within this context of the object being viewed. The form is a man as an arch which is supporting overall a part the structure of the building, which forms the combination of its meanings.

The sixth principle, liminal, pertains to the threshold or initial stage of a process (Simpson retrieved 11-04-03). Details present in the design of an object enhance the relationships of the transitions and connections between material elements; they continue the movement of the eye, and the experience of the mind which is the subliminal experience.

In Horta’s Tassel House, the staircase shows ornament within transitional spaces: column to ceiling, floor to rail, and ceiling to wall (Figure 2.6). Not only are the physical connections present but also the connections of the mind from being present in the physical reality, but also the world of the mind, the liminal as a threshold containing the narrative of an event.
Through imagination there is a simultaneous occurrence between material and form and material and meaning. Though ornamental objects can be thought of as being complete, they can spark the hybrid of an ordinary object into something extraordinary. In the example of the Paris Opera, the staircase is not just a way to traverse one level to the next, but also a way to take the viewer into another world (Figure 2.7). Through these hybrids, both a reality and a fantasy are present that would not otherwise exist (Bloomer 2000).

Through imagination and its relationship to the other principles of ornament, the meanings of objects are conveyed into a cerebral occurrence. This transformation, the last principle, can seemingly take mundane objects and turn them into otherworldly. Therefore in the example of the Paris Opera, the transformation occurs as the complete experience of the interior itself. A mix of meanings, emotional
attachments, and associations influence transformation so that the mind articulates a narrative that can be read and developed.

Bloomer’s principles suggest a guide for the exploration and discovery of ornament in the twenty-first century. These principles can be used to analyze an object or space as ornament. This framework is essential to understanding the views of the modern period as they relate to a contemporary understanding of ornament.

2.5 Summary of Literature Review

From this process of exploring ornament, it appears that the context in which one views ornament is decisive: i.e. the meaning of an object changes based on where the object is located. One generalized example of this is to visualize a short vertical line drawn on a blackboard. Within the context of numbers, the line is a one. In the context of the Arabic alphabet, the line is an L or an I. The context is decisive to the line. Similarly, the context or framework in which one studies and understands ornament is imperative to what one finds.

The framework for this process was developed through an analysis of Bloomer’s principles of ornament. Bloomer’s principles are significant because of their universal applicability to any historic time period and style. This framework is clarified through the literature review matrix that demonstrates consistencies between Bloomer’s principles and the ideas of earlier scholars (Figure 2.8). Linda Groat, in *Architectural Research Methods* states that by reducing and displaying data, patterns and explanations are found (2002).
2.5.1 Literature review Matrix Summary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATERIAL</th>
<th>line work</th>
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Figure 2.8. Literature review matrix:

In comparing Bloomer’s principles of ornament with the scholars of the literature review, what becomes apparent is that Bloomer’s principles can be used for their universal applicability in understanding the nature of ornament. The matrix creates a visual organization to clarify Bloomer’s principles in relation to other works reviewed in the literature (Figure 2.8). The scholars discussed in the literature review: four from the nineteenth century and four from the twentieth century are examined to identify which of Bloomer’s principles appear in their readings. The matrix demonstrates that there are two areas of ornament described by other scholars that Bloomer does not identify. Five scholars identify beauty and morality as a principle of design. The placement of beauty and morality on the grid is important in contrast with Bloomer’s principles. This demonstrates the intrinsically prescriptive way in
which beauty and morality are discussed by this group of scholars. There is no universal application in this prescriptive approach. Without universal application these two principles do not have relevance to this study.

A second finding through the matrix is that Bloomer’s principles can be divided into two broader contextual categories of material and mind. The first four principles relate to the physicality of the nature of ornament (linework, rhythm, utility and statics) and the last four relate to ornament and the mental concepts of the mind (combinational meaning, liminal, transformation and imagination). These categories differentiate the nature of Bloomer’s principles in relationship to ornament and the narrative that develops through physicality and imagination.

In the literature review matrix, only Riegl and Hamlin discuss the concept of the imagination. All four scholars in the nineteenth century discuss some aspect of the category of mind while in the twentieth century, there is no discussion concerning the area of mind. It is clear that in the literature of ornament in the twentieth century the idea of the relationship of ornament to the mind and the imagination and the development of narrative is diminished

2.6 The Narrative Continuum

The imagination illuminates the concept of narrative. Imagination is that process through which a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses is formed. This mental concept or idea evoked by ornament is narrative. But this narrative develops in many different ways and is dependent, as is any mental concept,
on the observer, the context, the ornament, and the view (Simpson retrieved 02-05-03).

The illustration of the narrative continuum (Figure 2.9) clarifies the narrative as it relates to ornament. The “narrative continuum” suggests a relationship between ornament, narrative and context. The context is decisive and if the context alters the narrative becomes open to reinterpretation. Ornament communicates a story through its materiality; the communication is interpreted by mental concepts. The diagram is fluid and ever changing. Thus the perspective of the viewer is also key to the understanding of the narrative. In the narrative continuum this is represented by the areas “singular and plural.” The singular view is the intent of the architect and the pluralist view is the interpretation of another observer.

![Figure 2.9. The narrative continuum.](image)

This form of the narrative is more than just a history or a story. This story exists, as long as the object (ornament) is able to be viewed, the narrative continues to evolve. Focillon said that as old meanings are lost, new meanings attach themselves just as quickly and the ornament never even changes shape (1948). In the vein of Focillon The Narrative Continuum is depicted as an organic form: an ebb and flow—
old meanings are lost new meanings attach themselves. A narrative could develop over centuries, or possibly a narrative could be the inherent intent of a designer.

This narrative continuum is an inclusive text given by the ornament, which is understood in two capacities: as a singular reading (the intent of the designer) or a pluralist reading (the understanding or interpretation by any other viewer). A singular view is the view of the designer of the object. A pluralist view is the view of an outside observer whose understanding is dependent on his/her knowledge of the object.

An ornamental narrative is based on interpretation and knowledge, whether it is the singular, intention of the designer, or the pluralist interpretation drawn from many different viewers. What Focillon says of art, can be applied to ornament that “whenever we attempt to interpret a work of art, we are at once confronted with problems that are as perplexing as they are contradictory” (Focillon, 1948, p.1). It is this seemingly contradictory interpretation that is dependent on the context and the relevant connotations.

A critique of this outlook of the narrative continuum states that in a context of a contemporary western culture, a reading of narrative is extraneous. Some critics believe that we have advanced beyond this emotive reading of our environment. Since we can communicate through complex linguistic systems, other systems of communication that exist on a peripheral or psychological level are obsolete. In A Philosophy of Interior Design, Stanley Abercrombie believes ornament has been relieved of a narrational reading and has only been left within the realm of aesthetic (1990). Abercrombie supposes that there is only one way in which to communicate
and we have evolved beyond any early forms. Yet Bloomer illustrates that the nature of ornament exists in the liminal and the transitional (Abercrombie, 1990; Bloomer, 2000).

Bloomer is suggesting that the narrative does not exist in the forefront, but on the peripheral of our experience. Perhaps it is not the most conspicuous form of communication, yet this does not negate its importance. A narration through ornament is not inherently the same manner of communication implied by the development of a formal linguistic system. One exists in the forefront, the other in the peripheral. One is essential to our abilities to function at a base level. The other exists in a world of hybrids and transformation. Here, ornament creates a world of memory and the imagination. It is from the combinational reading of the line-figure and its multiple grounds that a narrative develops (Bloomer, 2000).

It is in the peripheral experience and in the combinational meanings of ornament that one discovers the narrative. Ornament is a form of communication that cannot be articulated in a direct manner. It is a communication that does not exist in words, but in the mental concepts it evokes. The question is raised: how does ornament convey a narrative in the contemporary context of the twenty-first century?
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Design research is the search for new knowledge and new ideas about the built environment. Design can be a form of research inquiry if it incorporates three characteristics: clearly identifiable goals within a project that responds to a question, a credible and systematic method of inquiry, and finally significant results thoroughly documented that enhance the understanding/knowledge within the research domain (IAR, 2003, Retrieved April 19, 2003).

By investigating the contemporary literature of Bloomer and Beeby through case studies and design methodology, a connection between the narrative continuum and ornament is established producing a framework for understanding the narrative continuum present in the ornament of the twenty-first century. The literature review explored ornament to understand its relation to the interior design of the modern age. Part of this exploration uncovered the intrinsic link between ornament and narrative, which is viewed as the framework, the narrative continuum. The question evolved, how does ornament convey a narrative in the contemporary context of the twenty-first century?

To tackle this question a research methodology was developed consisting of analysis through case studies and an exploration through design process. Principles of ornament are used as a framework to analyze related case studies of interiors.
designed in the modern age (Bloomer 2000). The interiors analyzed in the cases were examined for implementation of Bloomer’s principles of design.

For the purpose of this paper, case studies examine the inherent narrative found in relatively disparate interior spaces that were designed in the modern age (1890 to 1940). This is accomplished by illustrating Bloomer’s principles of ornament. These principles are used in each case to study and interpret the narrative of ornament that evolved in the spaces. By contrasting the work of three different designers from the modern age, as they relate to each other in the context of this paper, the narrational reading of ornament becomes apparent.

To explore the relationship between ornament and narrative a design project was developed. The project process tested the manipulation of the ornamental unit to generate narrative through built form (Beeby 1977). The design project focused on design as a process. Developed around principles of ornament, the three-phase project explored the designer’s conception and vision of the narrative continuum (Bloomer 2000).

The narrative continuum distinguishes whether narrative is generated through design intentionally, or if narrative is something that simply develops in an arbitrary manner. Previously, the method for manipulating an ornamental unit has been used to interpret pre-existing ornament (Beeby 1977). This project applied the method as a generator of design. The project was set up in three phases: the exploration of ornament as narrative in two dimensions through pattern making, the exploration of ornament as narrative in three dimensions through modeling, and the exploration ornament as narrative in space as form.
The development of this project was akin to learning a new language that developed into pluralistic view. Within the three phases of the development of the project Beeby’s framework informed the project, more so than systematically regulating it. In the end Bloomer’s principles are used to evaluate the design project.

Through the development of case studies, Bloomer’s principles identify ornament in existing built forms of the modern age. In the design project Beeby’s method focused on generating a narrative continuum, revealing the designer’s ability to develop narrative through the generation of ornament. This methodology develops a language of ornament that can be used to understand built form in the twenty first century.

3.2 Case Studies

The interior spaces of three different interiors representing three stylistic periods of the Modern Age were analyzed through the literature review matrix categories: material and mind. Within these categories, the term material as represented by line work, rhythm, statics, and utility, and the term mind as described by: combinational meanings, liminal, transformation, and imagination were used as a framework. These key terms are employed to illustrate three disparate interior spaces as representative of ornament in the modern age (1880-1940).

An attempt was made to thoroughly research the literature: biographies of designers and the history of related social conditions and the histories of the specific design styles to understand the space within its original context. To develop a narrative of ornament, a background of knowledge is essential to understand and
develop each designer’s most probable singular narrative which then influences and informs an individual’s pluralistic narrative.

When exploring the interior spaces, the two areas of material and mind were focused as a way to contain an understanding of the space through descriptions. Questions were asked: how does the ornament convey itself through the materiality of the space. And how does ornament present itself through imagination? After this preliminary review is answered, to become familiar with the cases, each of Bloomer’s principles of ornament was identified and described. From these descriptions an interpretation of the singular or pluralistic viewpoints were made.

These historic precedents were chosen based on the three following criteria: the time period built, the designers being well respected in their areas, and the researcher’s definition of ornament based in the view of ornament as precedent. The spaces were designed and built within the modern age by Victor Horta, Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius, respectively. Since ornament is historically understood by precedent, these studies were chosen based on how a viewer uninitiated to the principles of ornament might respond to a space, an immediate response, as that is ornament, that might be ornament, and that is not ornament (Figure 3.0).

The interpretations of the spaces are examples of a pluralistic narrative. Each space can be interpreted through their singular histories discovered through the designer’s writings. Yet no one can fully speculate the meanings Horta, Wright, or Gropius held to describe his own personal narrative. Like any significant narrative, every scholar or student reading it will have distinctly different understandings of its development. For example, to draw from the area of fiction, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*
could have different interpretations: one, Harold Bloom is on a great adventure in depth and demeanor of that of the book’s namesake, and conversely, that Harold Bloom is simply depressed and wanders aimlessly around town hallucinating. Thus, with any pluralistic interpretation of a narrative each view can be stated with varying degrees of validity based in the context of the interpreter’s experience.

Figure 3.0 Tassel House, Ennis-Brown House, and Dessau Bauhaus (Aubry 1996, TPCH 2003; BDF, 2002).

3.2.1 Tassel House

Victor Horta’s Tassel House (1895) is a key example of the Art Nouveau. In the framework of ornament, the Tassel House conveys a narrative of materiality and the imagination. It is through the use of iron, and the whiplash motif, as a referent to nature, that the narrative is suggested. Based on the realm of the imagination, the narrative develops in the distinct separation between interior and exterior. The exterior makes no reference to what occurs on the interior. The interior is consumed by the imaginary living organism growing around and consuming the viewer with such control that the real exterior is obscured.

Horta’s use of line work in the ornamentation of Tassel House is evident in the curved form and the whiplash motif. The whiplash motif is a thin vine like curlicue whose end flicks with the release of energy. The line work is essential in
drawing the eye up and through the space-connecting floor, column, and ceiling 
(Figure 3.1.).

The progression of rhythm enhances the sense of fantasy in the interior driven 
by the translation of the whiplash motif. A clear composition is formed along the 
staircase, urging transcendence (Figure 3.1). The whiplash moves with the viewer, 
along banisters and railings to the upstairs landing with similar and varying scales and 
sizes of the same element. On the landing, stained glass illuminates the room 
directing the view to the ceiling the stained glass obscures the views to the outside. 

The individual parts relate to each other through the geometry of the space. In 
the octagonal hall, the floor tile motif balances with adjacent doors (Figure 3.3). In 
the floor, an air vent is centered in the middle of the space, around which the mosaic 
rotates. In the stairway: light fixtures, column, banister and whiplash relate in a 
composition posed which in situ maintains the intensity (Figure 3.1). This whiplash is 
also seen in the construction of the building designated into the iron columns and the 
railings translated as embellishment in two-dimensional motifs in paint and in stained 
glass. The significance of the whiplash becomes the relationship between it and the
objects it embellishes; here it embellishes everything. Horta was said to have believed that the construction dictated the form, and the curve was the best way to express the plasticity of iron. The curve also presents itself as a two-dimensional motif in the curve of the walls, in the embellishment of the columns through paint and stained glass.

The whiplash motif is translated across the edge of a half-wall of the winter garden where the columns seem to grow up and out, releasing into an arch to support the structure. The motif is then carved into the plasterwork of the ceiling. The whiplash is also seen as the root like growths of the octagonal hall, which seep out from the edge, barely noticed as if one is viewing a living organism. Hector Guimard, the French architect, relayed to a journalist that Horta had told him, “from the plant I take the stem, not the flower…” (Aubry, 1996, p.55). It is the stem that becomes the whip that contains energy. The flower illuminates, but the whiplash has the power. The whiplash motif enlightens the imagination and the fantastic of the interior of the Tassel House.
The iron railings and columns are reinforced by the painted wall motifs that work to infuse the space with energy and a hint of violence. This tension is only relieved in simplistic light fixtures where the stems finally extend into blooms that put forth light. To contrast the dark quality of the whiplash, light is imbued in the space through fenestrations.

The transformation that occurs in the Tassel House is not understood passively; it is something that could perhaps only be understood through experience. It is in this experience of the space as if one is walking into the ornament itself that the narrative begins. It transcends the experience of the home and is as if entering a work of art and immersed into a world that has escaped everyday life (Aubry, 1996).

The ornament in the Tassel house is placed physically in the peripheral. This subliminal experience also occurs as the peripheral experience from outside to inside. The interior expression contrasts greatly with the exterior and the exterior is rendered unimportant in the narrative of the Tassel House. The façade of the building barely hints to what is on the inside, therefore upon first entering the experience is one of surprise. The narrative of comparing the exterior and interior relationship reveals the world of the fantastic and the imagination. It adds and subtracts history and theory overlaying new ideas and understandings.

The Tassel House suggests the possibilities of a narrative which is not typically considered: ideas of nature and violence. By separating the exterior façade with the interior space, the Tassel house develops a world of total immersion as an interpretation of the narrative of the ornament. This reading of the narrative begins to
develop a new pluralistic interpretation of a violent nature represented by the whiplash motif driven with energy.

3.2.2 Ennis Brown House

Frank Lloyd Wright developed his singular theory of the textile-block-houses of southern California over a decade before they were built. The Ennis-Brown House (1924) is developed through a progressive masonry construction of concrete blocks. This narrative suggests a pluralistic interpretation of Wright’s singular view found in his writings. The house itself is the depiction of a narrative of the environment in which the house was built (Kaufmann, 1974).

Line work is seen at the level of the single block, which is a diagrammatic motif of the site plan (Figure 3.7). Line work is seen in the single concrete block which is translated throughout the house through texture, line and scale (Figure 3.6). Rhythm is evident in the consistent application of the site motif in the progression of space. Through the use of different materials and the application of the ornament as lintel, column, or frieze, and the switch between the motif being applied to the block or left out, a subtle rhythm develops. The varying scales of the motif and its relationship to the site create a connection between the exterior and the interior from the smallest detail to the largest part of the plan.
The Ennis Brown House inspires the interpretation of ornament as narrative through spatial composition and materiality; simply accomplished, by the translation (and absence) of a single motif across a plane through different forms and of material (Figures 3.7 and 3.8 and 3.9). Concrete is used both inside and out to convey the narrative of Wright’s singular theories of concrete and the nature of materials (Kaufmann 1974). This material covers the home vertically and horizontally transforming its appearance as planes and masses. The result is a texture like that of the hillside in which it is located.

Wright developed the singular understanding of the concrete block, and what it can build. His desire was to use mechanical means to produce a building that would
reveal a machine aesthetic. This intention led to the block to look tough and light simultaneously with nothing unnecessary (Kaufmann, 1974). In his own words, Wright said:

*Standardization as the soul of the machine here for the first time may be seen in the hand of the architect, put squarely up to imagination, the limitations of imagination the only limitations of building* (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 225).

Wright develops the relationship between concrete and the block as it represents standardization for architecture. Wright’s vision is developed in the hot dry climate of Southern California where it was appropriate to develop something that could withstand heat and would be fireproof (Kaufmann, 1974).

Part of the subliminal experience of Ennis-Brown house comes from the exterior of the building. From the outside the block is viewed, not individually as it is on the interior, but as a monolithic form (Figure 3.10). The outside does not hint at what will be on the inside, and when one enters the Ennis-Brown house, the experience transforms because of this contrast. From the outside Ennis-Brown reveals its purposeful relationship to the site and the importance of the dominating quality of the architecture over the landscape. It is here the delicate detailing of the block transforms into a monolithic mass enhanced by the direct light of Southern California. From this perspective, the interior is yet to be revealed.
The experience of the building is of the environment. This may be a complex system of blocks, yet the interpretation of the motif is simple. In its simplicity, it conveys solely the narrative of the material, and its construction. Through this materiality the imagination is inspired as to the possibilities of design itself. Wright had his own poetic narrative of this home in the landscape, which remains, on the edge of the experience of the structure.

*La Miniatura happened... in a region that still shows what folk from the Middle Western prairies did when, inclined to quit, the prosperous came loose and rolled down into that far corner to bask in eternal sunshine...This foreground spreads to distances so vast—human scale is utterly lost as all features recede, turn blue, recede and become bluer still to merge their blue mountain shapes, snow capped, with the azure of the skies* (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 210).

In an almost otherworldly experience, one escapes the intensity of the outside world and the interiors reveal a contrasting experience. This context is clarified further in structure of the house itself. The blocks bring the color of the landscape into the interior as well as the diagrammatic form of the site modeled into the block itself.

*We would take that despised outcast of the building industry—the concrete block—out from underfoot or from the gutter—find a hitherto unsuspected soul in it—make it live as a thing of beauty—textured like the trees* (Kaufmann, 1974, p. 216).
The Ennis-Brown house illustrates that materiality can represent a macrocosm of ideas in a small detail like a molded concrete block. This representation in material connects the viewer to an inspired view of the outside world and the landscape and the imagination of what could be. Here the interiority is not the fantastic but the possibility of connecting the interior to the exterior by framing views through abstracted representations of nature framed in glass and concrete. The interior and exterior are distinguished as separate experiences connected through ornament.

3.2.3 Bauhaus Facilities at Dessau

A contemporary view of ornament is that it has evolved from historic motifs that embellish and adorn, to elements disguised into the form of the building itself. This view of ornament as form does not take into consideration the interior spaces of the buildings of Modernism. Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus facilities at Dessau (1925) is most likely seen by the uninitiated viewer as being stripped of ornament: iron, concrete, and glass which dominate the austere language presented to the observer. Through the application of Bloomer’s principles in the consideration of the interior and exterior of the building the ornament of the Dessau building can be identified and given new pluralistic interpretation through its narrative (Brolin, 1985).

The Bauhaus stood almost alone in asking how Modernism should be mastered in design. Gropius’ theories encompassed mass production and the process of program. The development of ornament in Gropius’ work is evident in the use of the repetition of manufactured materials as design elements. (Stein Retrieved
February 13, 2003). Ornament is driven by line work. The line work exists in an elemental form, a rectangle, as an ornamental motif viewed from the outside and from the inside (Figure 3.11). The rectangle moves across planes articulated in walls of glass.

![Figure 3.11 Detail (BDF, 2003).](image)

The manipulation of the ornamental unit is translated through the placement of objects (Figure 3.12). Radiators are placed in succession down the hallway forming a relationship through the statics of the windows above and the doors across and the support beams in the ceiling. Here utilitarian objects become the ornament. The transitional characteristics of ornament are seen in the columns to vertical beam relationships (Figure 3.12). It is also through a rhythm of symmetry and rationality that ornament is formed. Rhythm is seen in the placement of furniture in the canteen: the tables in relationship to the stools. It is also seen in relationship again between the glazing and the overall structure communicating a systematic ordering of function and ornament (Figure 3.14).
Dessau exists as a harmony of statics between the relationships of scales from individual column to the overall grid of the structure. The support beams are placed based on the grid system. The light fixtures are placed between these beams in relationship to the beam. The rectangle motif is seen in the windows, radiators and doors (Figure 3.12).

Without a desire to explore the function and potential of glass as utilitarian objects, the necessity of other objects like the repetition of radiators for warmth would be insignificant. The radiators along the bridge and on the staircase landing are essential to this potentiality of glass and steel as the skin of the building (Figures 3.12 and 3.16). Columns are moved away from the exterior into the interior, embellished from ceiling to column (Figure 3.13) are an example of utility of form. Thus the combinational meanings of the utilitarian objects and the materiality develop.

Figures 3.14 and Figure 3.15. Public space and canteen (BDF, 2003).
The columns represent a diagrammatic form of their function. Gropius manipulates their form to hint at how they are supporting the building: the extra triangular shape is a transition connecting ceiling to column as embellishment, a reminder of the purpose of a column (Figure 3.13). The line itself is seen as an embellishment or as a rationalization of the time occurring in the mullions of the glazing. The meanings that evolve are concerned with the process of rational design.

![Figure 3.16. Staircase (BDF 2002).](image)

This narrative exists on the peripheral of our emotive experience. These experiences in the Bauhaus are related to narrative as the purpose and rationalization of architecture. Exterior forms reflect the interior program. When one is viewing from the interior, the exterior experience is present. The columns are moved away from the exterior wall to create the expanses of glazing demonstrating the potential of structure.

The imagination is evoked by the austere quality of the building at Dessau. It is this line work; from the largest form viewed as a grouping of windows and doors, to the rectangle of a single window, that creates the fusion of the interior and exterior. By stripping away the ornament of the interior world, the exterior has become the interior. It is a fusing of what is typically separate. Traditionally men are thought to
exist in the outside world while women create the world of the interior (Betsky, 1995, p. xiii-xiv). The experience of Dessau is a world created by men. In fusing the exterior and interior world, ideas of comfort are lost. Thus, the austere ornament of Dessau evokes a narrative comment about the elemental relationship, between exterior and interior, male and female.

The narrative develops between the male and female roles at the Bauhaus Dessau. Women were relegated to the interior world in their course of study specifically to the textiles department. In the textiles department, Master Textile Designer, Gunta Stölzl’s was at the time debatably one of the most successful which she suggested was because the public could most understand her department’s designs (Wingler, 1969). Other female designers, like Alma, were disillusioned by their experiences at Bauhaus. She was uncomfortable with the inflexibility of the program and the ambivalence towards its female students (Alma Life and Times retrieved February 13, 2003).

Although ornament is apparently absent from the space, the potential of narrative develops through the framework of Bloomer’s principles. The principles help to identify the ornament in the repetition of manufactured materials which relate to the changes in the roles between men and women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Concrete and glass and the light become the austere focus of the viewer’s attention. A new ordering evolves revealed through material, form, motif and meaning. From this meaning, a narrative is conveyed. By stripping his building of ornament, Gropius subtracted the feminine in his building. By subtracting the
feminine, the interior ornamentation is abstracted, and the exterior masculine world is placed in the interior (Brolin, 1985).

3.2.4 Summary of Case Studies

The three case studies bring to light examples of ornament as narrative that developed through the modern age in a relatively short period from 1895 to 1924. And in these twenty-nine years the view of ornament alters drastically. From the sweeping gestures and plasticity of iron in the Tassel House, to the austere elements of concrete and glass of the Bauhaus, ornament evolves and is revealed.

By contrasting these three interiors, Bloomer’s principles are used to understand the nature of ornament and how it is conveyed as narrative. The narrative developed throughout these spaces, intrinsically related to the form of the building and the relationship between the interior and exterior to perhaps reveal the spirit of the times in which they were built.

3.3 Design Project

The design project developed in three parts to explore ornament: in two dimensions through pattern making, in three dimensions through modeling, and in space as design. The objectives of this project were to explore how ornament can be used to articulate a narrative of interior space and to cultivate ornament in a contemporary context. By cultivating ornament in a contemporary context, one is able to clarify the relationship of ornament as narrative. The design project tests if
ornament can be used to generate a narrative or if narrative develops arbitrarily over time through interpretation.

The method used to explore ornament in two dimensions was taken from the work of the scholars Thomas Beeby and Kent Bloomer (1977 and 2000). Thomas Beeby’s research of ornament distinguished nine ways in which the ornamental unit is manipulated. He used these to analyze and describe ornament (Figure 3.17). This design project uses Beeby’s framework to create and design ornament.

![Figure 3.17 Beeby’s Nine Ways to Manipulate an Ornamental Unit (1977)](image)

The first phase began an inquiry into ornament through pattern making. Motifs were taken through each of Beeby’s nine manipulations as a requisite development in the process to become ornament.
After these motifs were developed, patterns were designed based on the combinations of Beeby’s method of manipulating an ornamental unit (Figure 3.18). It is at this first phase where the idea of context started to play an important role in the development of ornament. To suggest context, these patterns could be utilized to develop plastic laminate. In developing this context, the narrative began to emerge when the relationship between material and object became resolved (Figure 3.19).

In the second phase, ornament was explored in three dimensions through modeling. First, the patterns designed in phase-one, were developed into model form (Figure 3.20). These models can be viewed as an extension of pattern. At this point it became evident that the context of these models was not clear because they did not have a function. Therefore, this phase was revisited and an object was explored as ornament and form as it related to a particular context.
By developing the conceptual context of the oracle, the narrative began to emerge when the relationship between material and object became resolved. A frame for a mirror was the result. This frame began the narrative that was continued conceptually into the final phase of this design project. The frame was designed to be placed in an oracle.

The term oracle is used as a place one would visit to be told the future. This is clarified by the words of Connop Thirlwall, in *A History of Greece*. Thirlwall suggests that the Gods there had many agents at their command for conveying their prescient abilities. At times, if they wanted to make their presence known, that place would be termed an oracle (1835). The mirror designed for an oracle was viewed conceptually for the place that one went to discover the future. In this case, by viewing ones own reflection (Figure 3.21).
The final phase of this project carried the development of ornament from motif, to pattern, to structure in the context of the oracle. This motif was inspired by the figure of two trees growing up from each other forming a "V." In the development of the singular narrative of oracle, the words of William Maxwell, in *The Folded Leaf*, worked to help justify the location of the oracle in a densely populated forest. Maxwell says that all woods are the same; they are enchanted ground, places of solitude and of safekeeping (1945).
Beeby’s method of manipulating an ornamental unit is used to develop the structure focusing on the translation and rotation and inversion of the motif. In the end, Bloomer’s principles are used to evaluate the project to see if the nature of ornament is represented in the design through: line, rhythm, statics, utility, combinational meaning, liminal, imagination, and transformation (Bloomer 2000).

5.5 Design Critique

Bloomer’s principles were used in the development of the design project. One of the challenges was the contemporary context of the twenty first century, where ornament is traditionally viewed as precedent. How one embellishes a form that is not based on a historic precedent was challenging. This was resolved by Bloomer’s concept of liminal. The liminal is about the connections of parts. By dividing the structure into triangular forms, and embellishing the interior section of those forms, the edges and the connections of the structure were emphasized. Along with emphasizing the edges, it focused on the linework of the edge of the structure. The linework is also present in the form of the motif itself.

Rhythm is seen in the relationships of scale and the progression of the space. This leads the viewer to the location of where the oracle, historically a person, would sit. The rhythm is also seen in the relationship between sky to forest, tree to structure, and pattern to motif. The oracle itself is concrete, manipulated in its construction to reveal impressions of patterns, thus emphasizing its materiality and the structure’s relationship to modern construction techniques (Figure 3.22).
3.6 Summary of Design Project

The development of the oracle began as a way in which to explore the nature of ornament as it relates to narrative. Through this project, a new language of design emerges through materiality and form as ornament. From this expansion of ornament the narrative begins to be conveyed.

Figure 3.22. A motif and pattern based on the tree.
Figure 3.23. Final design.

Site Plan
Perspectives
Details of embellishment.
4.1 Introduction

This study illustrates that narrative may be articulated in an interior space through the design of ornament. Narrative is also expressed in interior design through other vehicles of expression: as design concepts, materiality, form, light, color, or texture. As this exploration progressed it became evident that the language of ornament becomes used as a framework for understanding design. In developing the correlation between ornament and narrative, narration is on many levels a prescriptive act. “We tell stories to ourselves in order to live” said the contemporary novelist and cultural critique Joan Didion in her collection of essays *The White Album*. She states further that we tell stories to ourselves to justify that what happens in life has meaning. These justifications, also called narratives, piece together our view of the world (1979).

As designers we also create stories, through which people live and understand their built environment. As with any form of shared communication, there must be an authentic interaction. If the story cannot be read, the narrative may not be clearly viewed. This is part of the challenge in designing for a narrative.

There are three categories in which this discussion progresses: ornament as language, ornament as process, and form as ornament. Ornament as language is seen as a way in which ornament can be discussed to understand the principles of design; ornament as process is seen specifically as a method for learning the language of
ornament to facilitate design; and form as ornament is discussed to develop as a language of design as a way to critique contemporary design for its use of ornament.

4.2 Ornament as language

The principles of ornament are used as a framework to understand ornament as a design language that can be used to critique, discuss, and develop design (Bloomer 2002). This language, as seen in the literature review, was largely neglected over the last seventy-five years. Therefore, in this exploration of the language of ornament, there was a desire by peers and mentors to understand that language. It was evident in the design process, through design critiques, the challenge that comes with learning an unknown language.

As with any language, ornament is learned comprehensively. The antidotal evidence of this occurred at design critiques at the beginning of the process. Comments like: “I’m not sure what you are trying to do here, or where you’re trying to go.” To comments like: “I didn’t understand a thing you said.” By the end of the process peers became more engaged and communicant of the language of ornament. One student started to use the language of ornament to interpret one of her own designs and other students used the language of ornament in critiques of this paper’s design project bringing a new level of clarity to design critiques.

Design is based not only on real-life-influences but also the worldview of the designer (Groat, 2002). Thus, the worldview and the concepts of a pluralistic and singular narrative were of importance to the understanding and interest in ornament.
The nature of a narrative evolves over time. Like reading a book, it sometimes must be read twice or even three times to be able to understand and discuss it. As narratives evolve through ornament, it takes time to learn how they communicate most effectively. Through this exploration of ornament, an understanding of the language of ornament (and the language of design) evolved in a practical way as a framework to communicate insights about the environment and structures in which people live. The working definition of ornament developed from this process must be viewed not as a final definition, but as a preface into the development of the understanding of a language of design in contemporary society: the definition of ornament has emerged from this process as a line figuration developed through materiality and used to enlighten a narrative of space and form.

4.3 Ornament as process

Two objectives for this study were: to explore ornament and its correlation to narrative and to develop a framework for understanding the design of ornament in the twenty-first century. At the end of this process, the final value of the study is not the research development nor the working definition of ornament, but the emergence of ornament as process: the methodological examination of ornament itself and its use as a strategy for design.

Ornament as process reveals a framework for a systematic interpretation and application of design. This view develops insight into not only historic precedent but also a way in which to create new forms from the smallest ornamental unit to an overall building mass. As applied to education, the understanding of the language of
ornament can be used to teach design principles. These design principles expand the issues that are relevant to the design process in contemporary society.

4.4 Form as ornament

From the framework of the language of ornament, works of contemporary architects such as Frank Ghery and Rem Koolhaus can be interpreted for their use of ornament. In the early twentieth century the Bauhaus simplified the ornamental unit to the rectangle and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ornamental unit has been abstracted into complex form. These forms, dependent on materiality and technology, begin to express a contemporary narrative. For example, The Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles is experienced as an abstracted ornamental unit at the scale of the city.

Ornament can be used to discuss Koolhaus’ work like the Prada store in Soho, New York. There, ornament is prevalent through the use of pixilated laminated wall murals, which represent technology. Oversized mannequins read as sculpture ornamenting the space. A wall defined by an individual ornamental unit, a box, translates over the length of a wall. By exploring ornament as form, ornament becomes applicable in contemporary society, as a way to evaluate and discuss new forms of design in ways our current design language does not completely reveal.

4.5 Summary of Discussion

Our understanding of ornament has traditionally been based on historic precedent. At the end of the nineteenth century, Art Nouveau enthusiasts wanted to
move past historic precedent to develop their own language. In the early twentieth century, the Bauhaus left precedent behind to develop logical systems of design, and towards the end of the twentieth century, postmodernism reintroduced ornament in the context of technology and a pluralist society. From the perspective of the twenty first century, a resolution between historic precedents, technology, materiality and global society comes into focus. Thus, this perspective suggests a new direction in the development of ornament within contemporary design. The areas of focus for further exploration in the development of ornament within contemporary design are:

1. Ornament as language: an interpretation of the way in which design is understood and discussed.
2. Ornament as process: a method of discovery within the development of complex forms and space.
3. Form as Ornament: a way in which to resolve direct issues of materiality and technology.
4. Ornament as narrative: a continuum in which to view the pluralist interpretations of a global society.

This exploration of ornament is a platform to think about ornament in contemporary society and its linkage to precedent in design. From this framework of ornament, a critique of the design in twenty first century can be viewed.
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