

# Reinventing the Meaning of Ornament

University of Chicago Press, 2006).

**16** See on this theme Philippe Muray, *Le XIXe Siècle à travers les Ages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

**17** See for instance Nabila Oulebsir, Mercedes Volait (eds), *L'Orientalisme Architectural: Entre Imaginaires et Savoirs* (Paris: CNRS, Picard, 2009).

**18** Mark Crinson, *Empire*

*Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp 138–66.

**19** David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

**20** Pierre Caye, *Empire et Décor: L'Architecture et la Question de la Technique*

à l'Age Humaniste et Classique (Paris: Vrin, 1999).

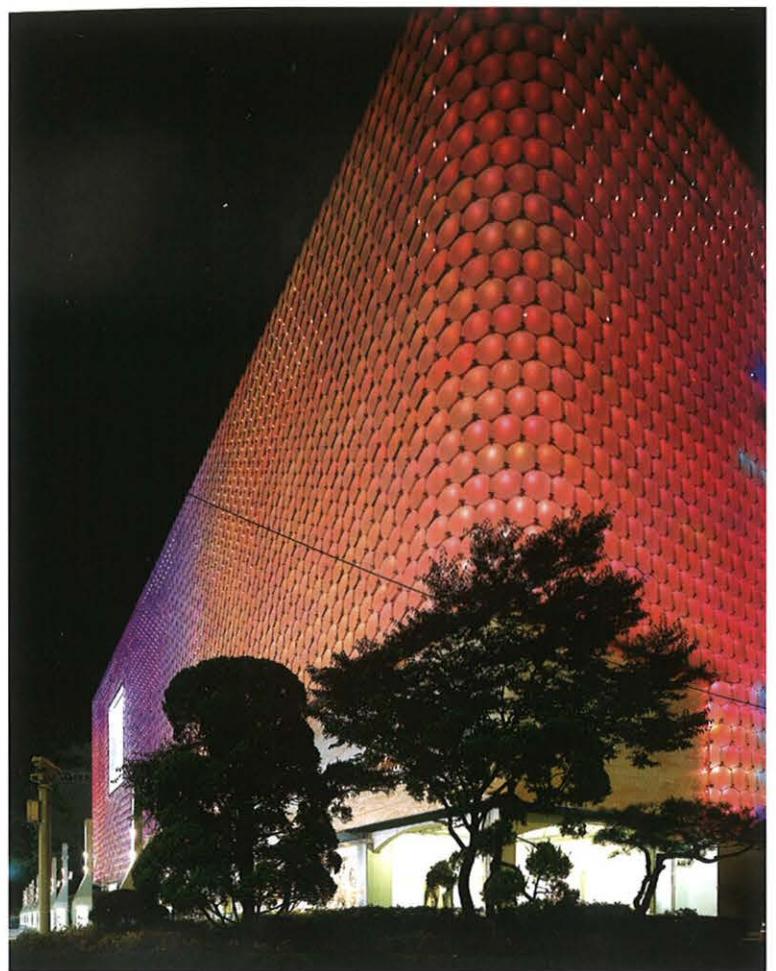
**21** Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p 193.

**22** Yasmine Abbas, *Le Néo-Nomadisme: Mobilités, Partage, Transformations Identitaires et Urbaines* (Limoges: FYP, 2011).

In direct relation to the development of digital culture, ornament has returned. Projects as different as UN Studio's Galleria Department Store facade in Seoul (2004) and Manuelle Gautrand's extension of the Lille Museum of Modern, Contemporary and Outsider Art (2009) present a strong manifestation of this phenomenon. After discussing at length the gap between yesterday and today, between the decorative tradition that prevailed until the dawn of Modernism and the contemporary ornamental trend, the time has come to examine how they are nonetheless related through issues pertaining to subjectivity and politics.

## A New Architectural Subject

The subjective dimension does not seem initially obvious, given the abstract character of many present-day ornaments. We are not immediately reminded of a visage when looking at textures, patterns or topological structures. If its relation to subjectivity doesn't stand out, today's ornament appears instead strongly indebted to an inquiry regarding materiality and the human senses. Under the influence of a series of factors ranging from the spectacular development of material sciences to the rise of the computer and the possibilities it offers to visualise and operate at various levels, from macroscopic to nanoscopic scales, our understanding of materiality is evolving rapidly. Contemporary architectural ornament is inseparable from this general



**UN Studio, Galleria Department Store facade, Seoul, South Korea, 2004.**  
The new facade is made of 4,330 glass discs mounted on the existing concrete skin of the building. These discs incorporate a special dichroic foil which generates a mother-of-pearl effect during the day. At night, LED lights create a wide variety of visual effects. The facade can respond in particular to the dynamics of atmospheric conditions.

movement. Its appeal owes something to the desire to experiment in a field, which looks more and more like a new frontier for design and manufacture.<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence that so many material investigations in architecture present an ornamental character, from Gramazio and Kohler's robotic assemblages to Neri Oxman's explorations of the new permeability between the natural and the computable.

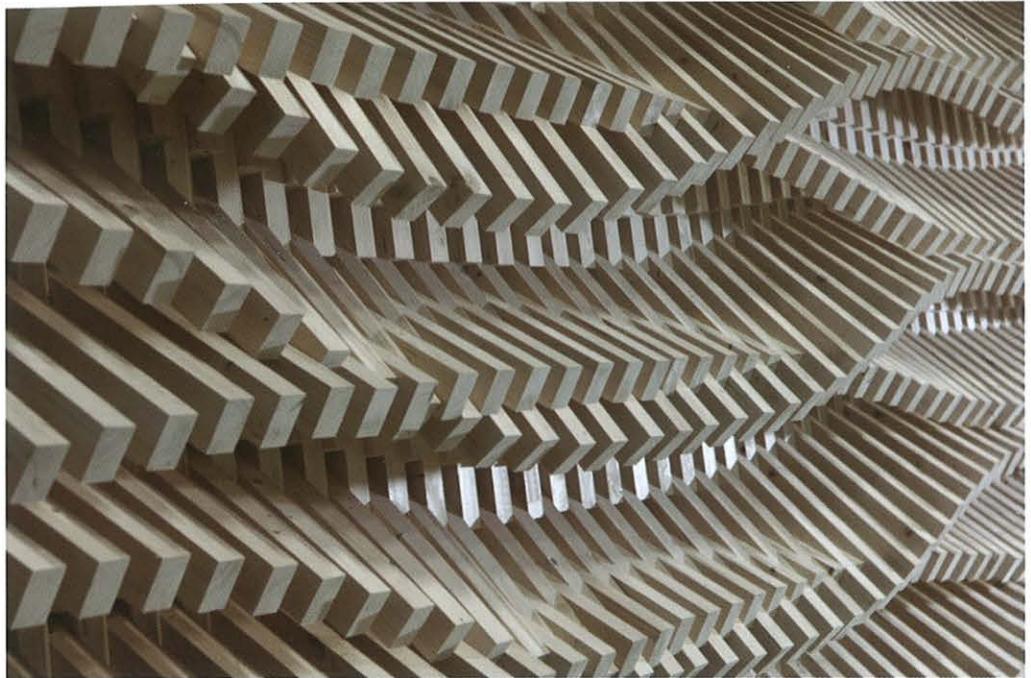
Actually, the notion of materiality provides us with a first clue regarding the renewed importance of subjectivity. For materiality, unlike matter, can



**Manuelle Gautrand, extension of the Lille Museum of Modern, Contemporary and Outsider Art, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 2009.**  
Manuelle Gautrand's project is an addition to an existing building by Roland Simoulet dedicated to a collection of Art Brut works. The thin envelope is made of Ductal, a high-performance fibre-reinforced concrete with a smooth finish. The ornamental screens are meant to modulate daylight and the visual relation of the interior to the surrounding park. The precious effect they produce is inseparable from the technical properties of the concrete.

never be considered as entirely objective. Materiality corresponds to a certain category of experience. The point becomes more evident when one considers its opposite, immateriality. Nothing is in itself immaterial. We call something immaterial when we cannot relate to it in certain ways – by seeing it with our own eyes or with the help of instruments that we trust, for instance. Conversely, materiality corresponds to a range of experiences that give us the impression of being in genuine contact with the physical world. Some of these experiences are based on immediate sensory evidence; others involve instruments and machines, binoculars, microscopes or computers. Whatever the case, materiality possesses a relational character. It implies an encounter between a subject and the material world.

From this perspective, materiality appears as a mix of permanent ahistorical features and cultural factors. At any given time, materiality articulates physical constraints, such as the laws of mechanics or the physiology of perception as well as social constructs such as the value we attach to certain types of observations. For the 17th-century adversaries of Galileo, the images of the moon he had obtained by looking through a telescope were immaterial.<sup>2</sup>



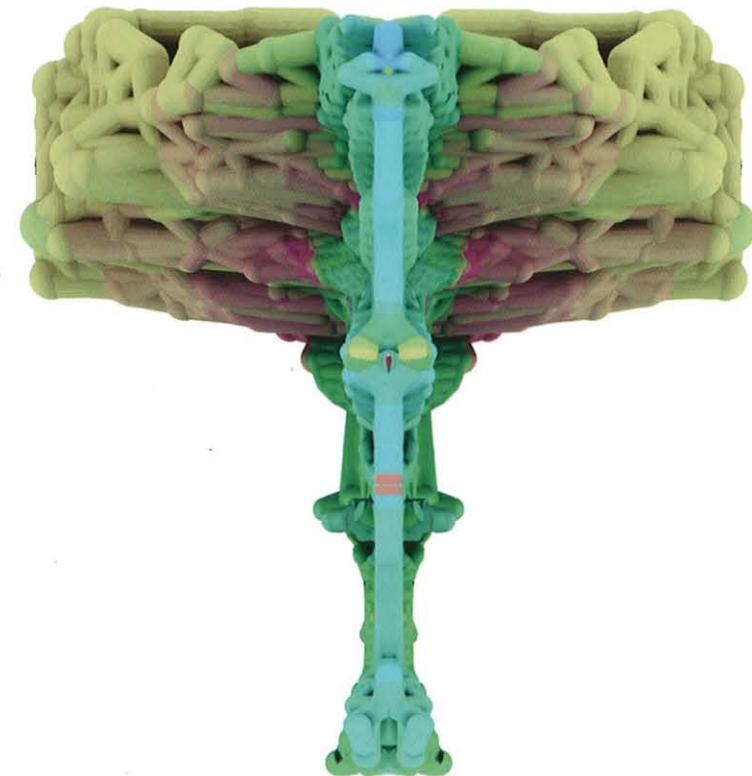
They would become material with the triumph of the scientific revolution. Similarly, the new generations of 'digital natives' no longer perceive computer imagery as immaterial.<sup>3</sup>

Designed and fabricated with the help of the computer, contemporary ornamentation is inseparable from an inquiry into our rapidly changing definition of materiality. In connection with this inquiry, it presents a number of revealing features. First, it appeals strongly to the senses, to a mix of sight and touch in particular, which gives the impression of engaging the whole sensorium. The tactile dimension is evident in the case of Herzog & de Meuron's De Young Museum with its dots that evoke a text written in Braille. With their intriguing textures, many other projects invite the viewer to stroke their facades with his/her fingertips. Tactility reached its climax with the now dismantled Heatherwick Studio's UK Pavilion at Shanghai 2010 Expo and its 60,000 acrylic rods that evoked a giant fur ball.

This haptic character often goes together with a visual complexity that borders the hypnotic. The swirls and tendrils of Foreign Office Architects'

**Gramazio & Kohler,  
Architecture and Digital  
Fabrication, ETH Zurich,  
The Sequential Wall, 2008.**  
In their experiments on  
architecture and digital  
fabrication, Fabio Gramazio  
and Matthias Kohler at ETH  
Zurich often create structures  
with a marked ornamental  
character.

**Neri Oxman, Fate Maps,  
2008.**  
The sculpture derives from  
an investigation into the  
conditions that govern the  
formation of materials and  
tissues at the intersection  
of design, computation and  
biology. Through this type  
of research, Neri Oxman's  
objective is to facilitate  
the emergence of a 'new  
materialism' in architecture  
and design.



John Lewis department store present a hypnotic quality. Studio 505's Pixel building in Melbourne (2010) likewise captivates the eye with its coloured panels that remind the spectator of a cybernetic sculpture of the 1960s, a Nicolas Schöffer creation, for instance. More generally, contemporary ornament often seems to take after the artistic experiments of the 1950s and '60s, from cybernetic to Op art. Its textures, patterns, curves and folds look animated. Like many of the experiments in the 1950s and '60s, it tends to address perception as a whole, at the level of the sensorium rather than through isolated channels.

From the accent put on the tactile to the almost hypnotic effects of superficial visual complexity, what seems fundamentally at stake is a destabilisation of the traditional distinction between subject and object, as if the viewer and the architectural work were part of a single continuum. Such a continuum

is anti-perspectival in that it abolishes the notion of a privileged point of view from which one should contemplate the building. Perspective implied a distance between the observer and the scene or the object observed, a distance that is no longer relevant if seeing becomes akin to touching. The traditional distinction between ornament and décor also fades. Like décor, contemporary digital ornament functions in an immersive way. The recurring analogy drawn by critics between Baroque and digital design might have to do not only with their eventful geometries, but also with the immersive tendencies, which they both display.<sup>4</sup>

To convey this new regime of relation between architecture and its viewers, today's designers readily refer themselves to the Deleuzian notion of affect. In their book on ornament, Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo consider, for instance, that the main purpose of contemporary architectural décor lies in the production of affect.<sup>5</sup> According to Gilles Deleuze, affects are not attached to a subject's mind in the way personal feelings are. Of a much more physical nature, they denote a change in intensity that concerns both the body and its surrounding space and time. From this perspective, affects represent a more primitive form of experience than emotions. Contrary to emotions that presuppose a localised psychological interiority, affects appear linked to a kind of generic superficial condition. They are both superficial and immersive, two features that correspond especially well to the characteristics of present-day ornament.

The Deleuzian reference reveals itself inseparable from an approach to the relation between the subject and the world based on their continuity. The subject, if one may still use this term, can no longer be envisaged as a separate substance; rather, it appears as a kind of inflection or as a zone of



**Heatherwick Studio's UK Pavilion at Shanghai 2010 Expo.**

Known by the public as the Seed Cathedral, the UK Pavilion at Shanghai 2010 Expo housed some 60,000 plant seeds at the end of acrylic rods. The stunning effect produced by the hairy object blurred the boundary between the visual and the tactile.



**Snøhetta, Norwegian Wild Reindeer Centre Pavilion, Tverrfjellhytta, 2011.**

Located on the outskirts of the Dovrefjell National Park, at an altitude of 1,200 metres above the sea, the project is based on the contrast between a rigid outer shell and an organic inner core. Using natural materials such as wood, the core may be interpreted alternatively as architecture, furniture or ornament. Here also, tactility represents a major dimension of the design.

peculiar intensity in a field. This conception leads to placing the accent on entities like forces, fields, flows and gradients, and on actions like twisting, bending and folding. The analogy between such a vocabulary and the type of formal manipulation fostered by computer software ranks among the reasons that Gilles Deleuze's philosophy is so attractive to digital designers, even if the attention paid initially by someone like Greg Lynn to the figure of the fold and to Deleuze's eponymous book predated widespread use of the computer in architecture.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to continuity, multiplicity and complexity represent other key aspects of the Deleuzian heritage. Contrary to the Cartesian subject, the Deleuzian individual looks inherently manifold and complex, rhizomatic or network-like. Again, these figures prove admirably adapted to the play upon textures, patterns and topology that characterises the envelope of so many digital projects. Rather than evoking a traditional visage, contemporary ornament seems to offer a glimpse into a labyrinthine set of modules, connections and processes. No longer comparable to a mask, the skin becomes analogous to a permeable interface, an osmotic membrane.



**Foreign Office Architects,**  
John Lewis department  
store, Leicester, 2007.  
The swirls of the facade  
present an almost hypnotic  
character, not so far removed  
from the effects aimed at by  
cybernetic or Op art in the  
1950s and '60s.



**Studio 505, Pixel building,**  
Melbourne, Australia,  
2010.  
The building is Australia's  
first carbon-neutral office  
building. Its coloured  
panels provide view, light  
and glare control. Made  
of recycled material, they  
are supported by spandrels  
which provide shading  
and grey-water treatment.  
The project is emblematic  
of the close association  
between ornament and  
environment-friendly  
envelope performativity  
that characterises many  
contemporary design  
approaches.

Late cyberneticists like Gregory Bateson had also raised the issue of an inherently multiple subject in continuity with his environment.<sup>7</sup> Echoes of this conception are still detectable in Bruno Latour's or Peter Sloterdijk's writings, through their insistence on the multiple mediations that relate individuals to the world and seem almost literally to distribute their identities along various

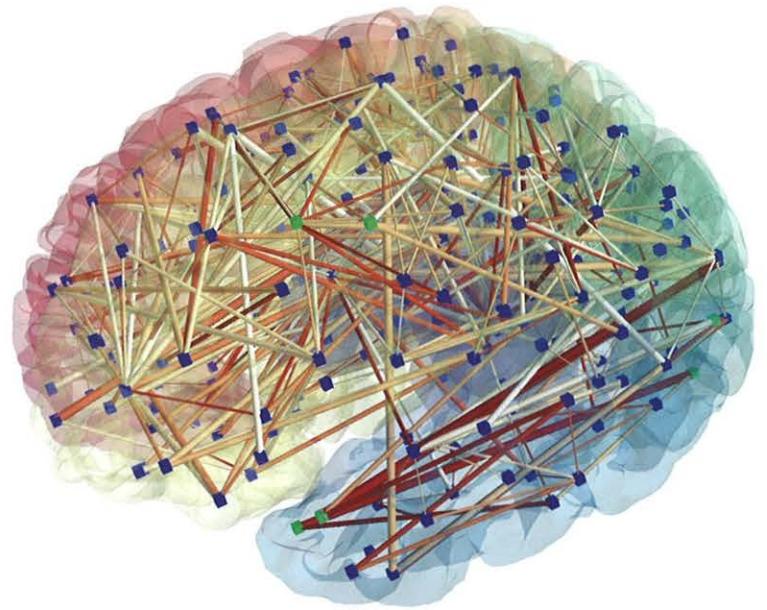
canals.<sup>8</sup> Their influence in the design world testifies to the actuality of the question. Above all, contemporary science and technology lend credibility to such a vision day after day. The neurosciences have broken, for instance, with the classical interpretation of the brain as a unified information processor and see its activity, probably including self-consciousness, as the result of a series of complex interactions within layered networks. From this perspective, we are akin to environments, 'ecologies'.

With the rise of digital culture, the idea that we are inherently manifold and difficult to separate from our environment has taken a new turn. Indeed, our identity seems to flow outside our body into the myriads of cyber arteries and veins that connect us to others. With the multiplication of such canals, we need no longer stick to Japanese architect Toyo Ito's proposition that we, of the age of Internet, possess two bodies: one made of flesh, the other of electrons.<sup>9</sup> We are no longer cyborgs obtained through a crude collage of flesh and technology, but existences finely distributed within various meshes, which articulate almost seamlessly the biological and the electronic.

Does this distributed mode of existence still allow us to speak of a human subject? Fuelled by postmodern philosophy, by the most recent progress of

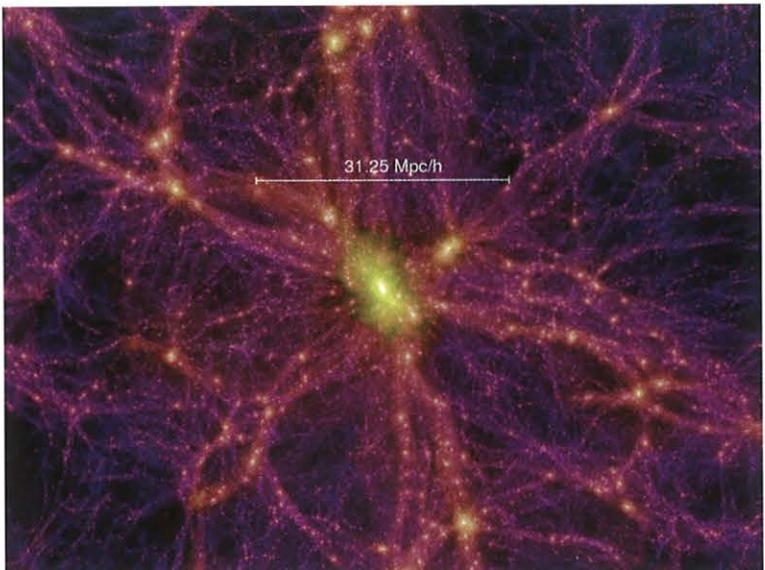
**Thomas Deerinck, NCMIR/**  
Science Photo Library,  
synapse nerve junctions.  
A coloured scanning  
electron micrograph of  
nerve cells showing the  
synapses between them. At  
the synapse, an electrical  
signal is transmitted from  
one cell to the next in only  
one direction. When an  
electrical signal reaches a  
synapse it triggers the  
release of neurotransmitter  
chemicals contained in the  
yellow vesicles visible on the  
image. We are network-like,  
from the microstructure  
of our brains to the macro  
level of our involvement in  
an ever-increasing number  
of technological and social  
systems.



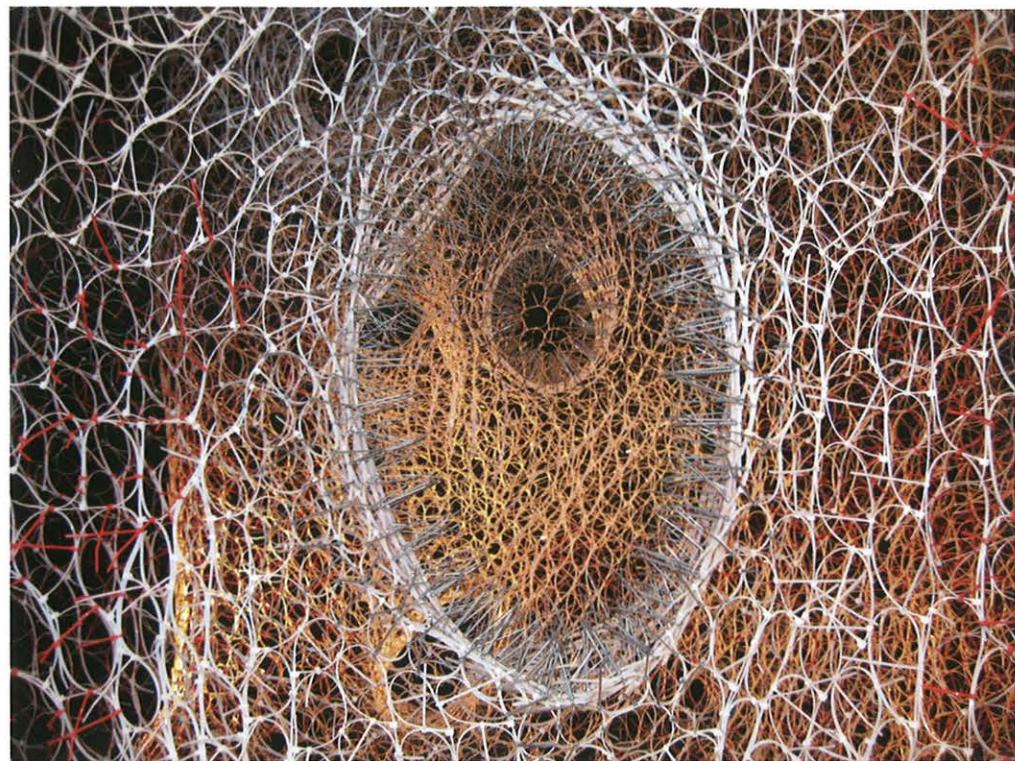


Stephan Gerhard, Patric Hagmann, Jean-Philippe Thiran, Connectome Mapping Toolkit, Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne and Université de Lausanne, Switzerland, 2010.

A connectome is a comprehensive map of the neural connections in the brain. At the EPFL, a team has been working on the production of an open-source framework to manage, analyse and visualise connectomes. At this level also, we appear inherently multiple, network-like.



Volker Springel, Simon DM White, Adrian Jenkins, Carlos S Frenk, Naoki Yoshida, Liang Gao, Julio Navarro, Robert Thacker, Darren Croton, John Helly, John A Peacock, Shaun Cole, Peter Thomas, Hugh Couchman, August Evrard, Joerg Colberg, Frazer Pearce, simulation of the joint evolution of quasars, galaxies and their large-scale distribution, 2005. Visually, the universe described by contemporary astrophysics strangely resembles the world of neurosciences.



Sabin + Jones LabStudio, 'Branching Morphogenesis', 2008. Involving a mix of designers and scientists, the project explores fundamental processes in living systems with the objective of finding potential applications in architecture. Interestingly, this type of interdisciplinary research with strong design and computing dimensions presents an ornamental character.

a more and more intrusive technology as well as by artistic endeavours such as Stelarc's or Orlan's attempts to modify and extend the human body, the literature on the posthuman represents a thriving genre.<sup>10</sup> In architecture, Andrew Benjamin suggested a few years ago that interrogating, if not destroying, the subject was among the key features of recent design evolution.<sup>11</sup>

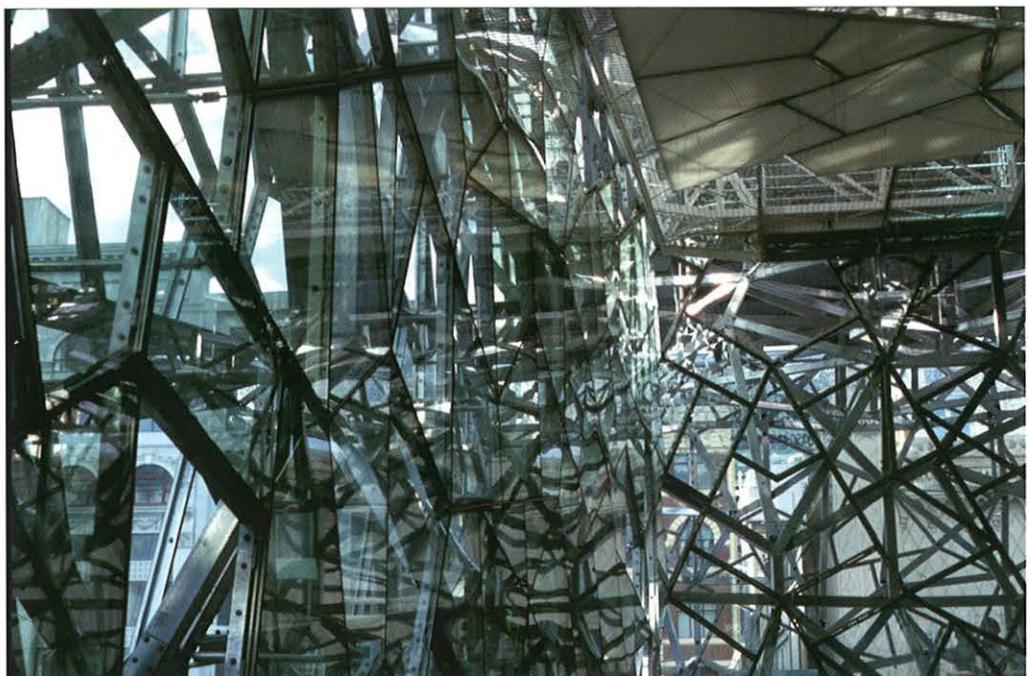
Online life is again revealing. On the one hand, as sociologist Sherry Turkle has observed, multitasking, the shorter and shorter attention span generated by intensive browsing and the accumulation of identities, tend to blur the traditional definitions of identity and personality.<sup>12</sup> We are indeed manifold with the ever-increasing trail of usernames, passwords and avatars that follow us on the Internet. On the other hand, however, we tend also to reconstruct more stable representations of ourselves through homepages and blogs. We definitely try to appear as fully-fledged subjects on Facebook and LinkedIn. Distribution and dispersion are perhaps not sufficient to characterise

contemporary subjectivity. It may prove preferable to approach it in terms of a constant pulsation, a movement of expansion followed by a tendency to contract in order to resemble once more a traditional subject.

In this constant beat, the role played by ornamental practices is equally telling. Taken in a broad sense, ornament exerts a dissolving power on individuality and subjectivity. From reality shows to advertisements, we bathe in an ocean of ornaments that produce anonymity. The collective rituals to which they correspond are not without analogy to popular entertainment, which inspired Siegfried Kracauer's famous analysis of the 'mass ornament'.<sup>13</sup> We might be facing a new and hysterical version of the 'mass ornament'. Whether truly postmodern or not – French sociologist François Ascher found it, for his part, rather hypermodern – our society reveals itself intensely ornamental.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, ornament is also mobilised to reconstruct a highly personal approach to the world. No matter that some ornamental practices, like piercing and tattoos, actually present a mass character, the aim is usually to assert one's identity and unique vision. The proliferation of tattoos proves especially

**LAB Architecture Studio, Federation Square atrium, Melbourne, Australia, 2003.**  
With its complex folded geometries following a triangular pinwheel tiling pattern, the glass walls of the Melbourne Federation Square atrium seem to echo the labyrinthine character of contemporary subjectivity.



**Hajime Masubuchi and Thom Faulders, Airspace, Tokyo, Japan, 2007.**  
A porous, multilayered meshwork facade designed with the ambition to rival nature by providing an interface with properties similar to a layer of dense vegetation. The layering constitutes an answer to the building's inner organisation. It creates a zone where the artificial blends with nature.

remarkable from this perspective. Our streets are full of young queens and warriors adorned in a manner that would have horrified Adolf Loos, although he would have been slightly reassured by its dependence upon social class. Despite what some scholars have called a 'tattoo renaissance', children of the middle and upper classes still seem less prone to get tattooed than offspring of the working classes.<sup>15</sup>

Where does architectural ornament fit into this broad picture? As we have seen, it relates clearly to the new form of subjectivity that is emerging before our very eyes. It expresses some of its most fundamental features, such as its seamless integration within its environment, its multiplicity and complexity. The new superficial condition of architecture that it epitomises also echoes a propensity to live and perform at the surface of things and beings, which has been noted by philosophers and cultural thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard or Fredric Jameson. Jameson, in particular, has observed how in many

postmodern productions, 'depth is replaced by surface or by multiple surfaces'.<sup>16</sup> Whether post- or hypermodern, the contemporary subject similarly displays a marked tendency to recognise textures and patterns rather than forms and structures.

However, does the role of architectural ornament extend beyond this expressive function? Does it directly participate in the deconstruction/reconstruction of subjectivity, in response to this fundamental beat or pulse? So far, the effectiveness of contemporary architectural décor seems to lie primarily in pleasurable affects. To be more precise, the viewer finds himself exposed to alternatives of almost subliminal enjoyment and conscious realisation that ornament provokes changes in himself and his relation to the architectural object. Such alternatives are not without analogy to the way in music one can almost simultaneously experience music in a pre-subjective state that dissolves the distinction between the self and the world, and enrol it to heighten one's level of self-consciousness. There is something musical in contemporary architectural ornament.

There are still incomplete and missing dimensions today. In the first chapter of this book, we proposed to read ornament under a triple light: as connected to pleasure, but also to social distinction and knowledge. If ornamental pleasure has returned, the relation between contemporary décor and social ranking and prestige remains tainted with ambiguity. As for the link with knowledge, it appears almost completely absent.

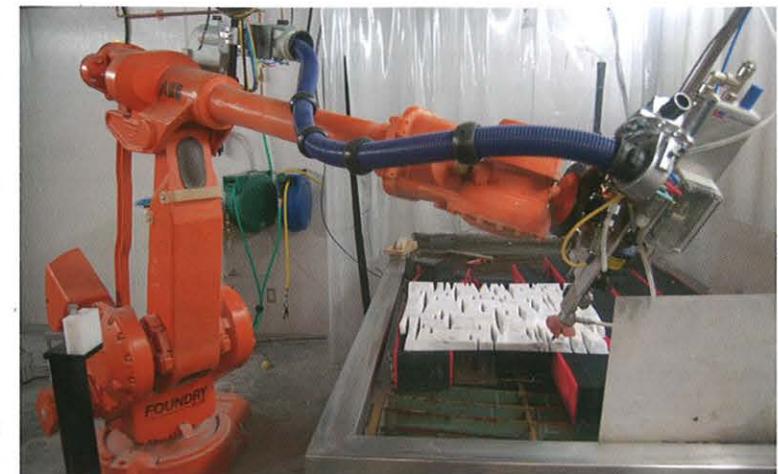
Present-day architectural ornaments connect to questions of social ranking through the type of programme they usually adorn: prestigious museums, stadiums and theatres, high-end offices and condominiums. Yet, no clear gradation exists leading from monuments and luxurious programmes to modest buildings. When the budget allows for it, an architect will use the same type of texturing and patterning for social housing as for a museum. The neutrality of architectural décor with respect to social hierarchy, which used to represent a fundamental role of ornamentation, is troubling. One may interpret it as a manifestation of social generosity; it is more probably



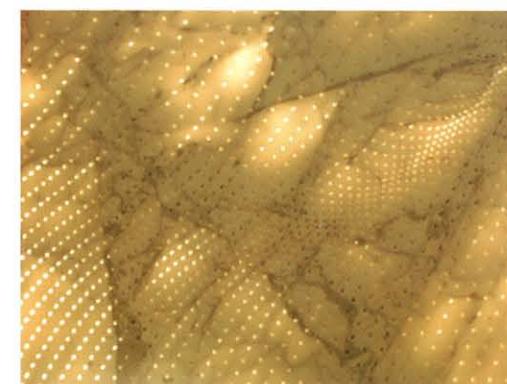
Alan Antiporda, Illusive Photography, Chrissy, 2010.

Today, tattoo represents more than ever a means of individual affirmation. One may wonder to what extent contemporary architectural ornament does not correspond to a kind of extended tattooed condition.

Martin Bechthold, marble surfacing studies done with a robotic arm at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2008. The study focuses on the use of a robotically controlled abrasive-waterjet cutter to shape marble through CNC machining. This exploration reveals new material effects such as translucency. Computer fabrication gives the impression of reconnecting with a long-gone artisanal dimension. However, the question of the relation between design and labour remains unanswered.



dictated by a feeling of helplessness, when faced with having to distinguish and differentiate in a society paradoxically more and more inequalitarian.



The very generic nature of the subject targeted by today's architectural décor proves even more problematic. Contrary to tattoos, which are associated with relatively specific profiles, architectural ornaments do not have clear addressees. Neither rich nor poor, neither educated nor uneducated – it does not really matter – the contemporary subject of architecture seems deprived of any specific social character. The only element of certitude lies in his/her intimate connection with the designer. It is as if the figure of the architect had replaced all the other players, artist, artisan and client. The eclipse of the artisan is especially noticeable. Strangely enough, given the attention paid by the author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* to the worker's prerogatives, the artisan has disappeared from the stage in the name of a 'digital Ruskinism', which posits the designer as the new craftsman of the age of computer-aided fabrication. Along with Semper, Ruskin represents a common reference for digital designers because of the accent he puts on materiality and craft, but his discourse on the dignity of labour has fallen into oblivion.<sup>17</sup> In the current discourses on 'non-standard' fabrication, nothing exists besides the hand of

the designer moving a mouse in front of a screen and the machines milling materials according to his specifications.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of relation between contemporary architectural ornament and knowledge is far more conspicuous than the paucity of its social relevance. The predominance of affect appears directly responsible for this shortcoming. There is, of course, nothing intrinsically problematic in calling upon affect, if other levels of reference complement its contribution to architectural expression. However, when affect reigns supreme, architecture may risk losing its capacity to be on the verge of speaking. Again, buildings never speak, but part of their appeal lies in the impression that they could if the proper conditions were met.

### Political Uncertainties

The ornamental triad – pleasure, social distinction and knowledge – was instrumental in the articulation of the subjective with the political. The ambiguities that plague them today may have to do with the political uncertainty that digital architecture has to confront despite its ambition to be as politically relevant as its forerunners. Part of the uncertainty comes from the questions left unanswered by affect. What type of political order does it presuppose? Does it even imply a social bond between the people it concerns? Of course, one may consider that such a bond exists, and that it lies in shared pleasure, as if architecture were only enjoyable as a collective and somewhat passive spectacle. From this perspective, one could invoke again the analogy between ornament and music. Is this, however, enough? Should one remain confined to a politics of affect?

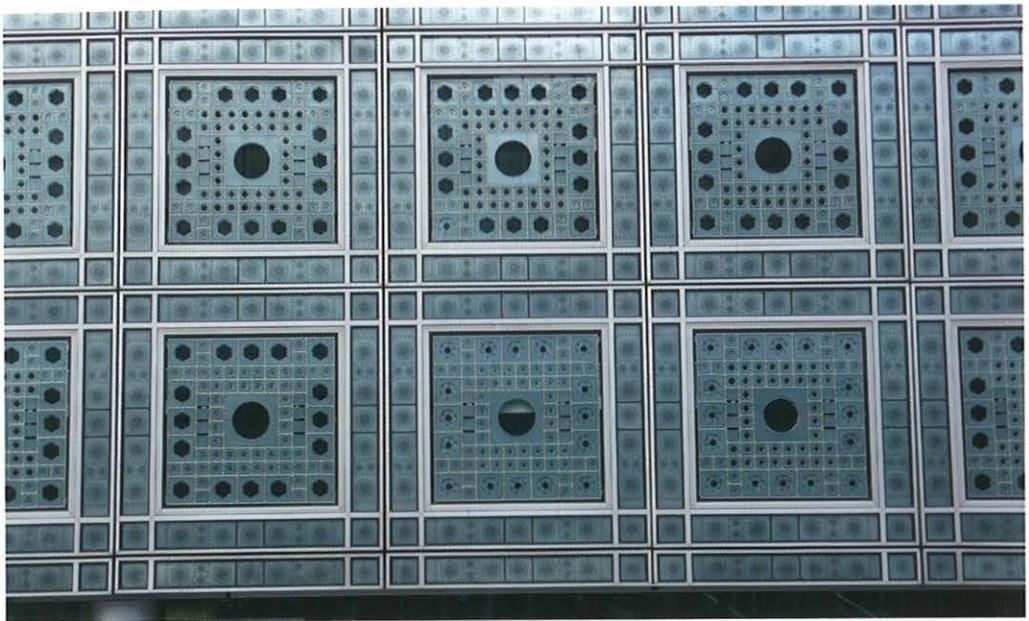
Modern architecture complemented its use of affect by a discourse on function and by ideals of technological and social progress combined with a genuine concern for the natural dimension of life. The performalist attitude adopted by so many contemporary digital designers, which might eventually replace functionalism, has not yet reached a sufficient degree of maturity.<sup>19</sup> It is not enough to envisage architecture in terms of how buildings behave and what they produce. The question remains of how performalism translates concretely in the design process. As for the values that could substitute themselves for the former faith in progress, apart perhaps from the rising concern for sustainability, the least one can say is that they remain unclear.

Of course, the problem does not lie at the level of political parties and programmes. One should not reduce the relation between architecture and politics to the ideological role that it has played at certain moments in history, albeit not always successfully. One may even wonder if reinventing general values comparable to the Modernist faith in progress represents the ultimate issue in all this. Architecture is often at its best when the message that it conveys remains ambiguous. Oleg Grabar probably offers a better avenue to explore with his suggestion that architecture's vocation is to constitute 'an invitation to behave in certain ways' by the sheer virtue of the setting that it creates. To behave in certain ways and in interaction with others: it is difficult not to be reminded of Schinkel's famous characterisation of the architect as 'the ennobler of all human relationships'.<sup>20</sup> Another way to express the same idea could be to define architecture as an incentive to act in a meaningful way.

How can architecture trigger meaning? There have been multiple answers to this question, from 19th-century historicist doctrines to 20th-century phenomenological approaches. Towards the end of the Modernist period, the issue had acquired certain urgency. Published in 1970, Charles Jencks and George Baird's collection of essays, *Meaning in Architecture*, offered a comprehensive panorama of the attempts made to define a notion that proved as elusive as it was enticing.<sup>21</sup> Since that time, meaning has been discarded because of the excesses to which it had led, such as crude historicism or cheap symbolism. In this trial, Postmodernism was an obvious culprit and many designers swore never to make the same mistakes again. Digital architecture, in particular, rejected meaning as leading to unnecessary additions, which confused the train of affects that architecture was supposed to convey. The time has perhaps come to reexamine the question more closely. Without reinventing Postmodernism, it may be useful to rediscover some of the issues that it raised, beginning with the quest for a renewed legibility of architecture.

### Meaning and Symbols

Meaning is still officially taboo, but what is one to make of so many iconic projects that seem to indulge in an almost naive form of symbolism? Retrospectively, one may consider that Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe (1987) opened a new era of symbolic manipulation with the sunscreens of its main facade, which played on a mix of references including traditional Arabic mashrabiyyas. Almost Orientalist, the use of Islamic-inspired decorative patterns has continued to this day with highlights such as OMA's project for the New



Jeddah International Airport (2005). Other symbolic references to nature, art or technology have appeared in various adorned buildings. In some 'green' buildings, trees and other vegetal elements seem also to play a symbolic role, and this all the more since the designer has placed them in both highly visible and improbable positions, like trophies meant to celebrate the victory of sustainability upon industrial philistinism. Robert Levit clearly has a point when he evokes 'the return of the symbolic repressed' in the use of ornament.<sup>22</sup>

Irresistible as it may appear, the return of the symbolic repressed remains largely unacknowledged and untheorised. In these circumstances, there is a serious risk of falling back into easy symbolism. The best way to avoid this lies in a reexamination of the question of meaning in architecture. Such reexamination may appear as a manifestation of a more general need for the architectural discipline to break with presentism and reconnect with a sense of history that has been eclipsed by the rapid development of the digital. Whatever judgement one may be tempted to pass upon Patrik Schumacher's ambition to resurrect the notion of style in order to theorise 'Parametricism', one must recognise the role played by history in his endeavour.<sup>23</sup> Until recently, such an intensive mobilisation of historical references by a practitioner would have been almost impossible.

**Jean Nouvel, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 1987.**  
The facade designed by Jean Nouvel possesses a remarkable evocative power. Even if the range of references extends from camera diaphragms to computer chips, one retains an overall impression of precision that is reminiscent of a mythical and adorned Orient. It is as if this mythical Orient were joining forces with high-tech, a suggestion definitely in line with the vocation of the building to showcase the vitality of Arab culture.

**OMA, project for the New Jeddah International Airport, 2005.**  
The intricate embroideries of the skin make explicit reference to the decorative patterns of traditional Arabic architecture. They seem to contradict the claim that contemporary ornament is no longer symbolic.

Despite its seduction, the concept of style might not reveal itself the most appropriate to present-day challenges. We are neither confronted with problems of coordination between tectonic and ornament – ornament seems to have won – nor with an ever-expanding catalogue of decorative elements borrowed from the past. Meaning is no longer threatening because of a potentially cancerous proliferation. The difficulty lies in determining what type of message architecture should convey and how.

Useful precedents are not provided by 19th-century allegories. It seems difficult, to say the least, to imagine that architecture will again be adorned with symbolic figures like Carpeaux's *Imperial France Bringing Light to the World and Protecting Agriculture and Science*. Robert Venturi's billboards or today's giant digital screens may represent a better type of solution, but they come generally after and with little or no connection to the architectural form.

At this point, it may be profitable to revisit once again the five orders of the Vitruvian tradition. The point is definitely not to advocate their return, in the manner of Postmodernism. Charles Moore and Perez Architects' Piazza d'Italia colonnades in downtown New Orleans (1978) no longer appeal to us, and this is probably for the best. Although the fundamental codes of Greco-Roman-inspired architecture are still highly recognisable by lay people, they do not offer a viable solution to computer-aided design conundrums.



What remains truly fascinating, in the case of the orders, is how they were both abstract, and invested with definite symbolic content. This double character was especially pronounced in the case of the Tuscan, Doric and Ionic, which comprised no elements taken directly from nature, at least in their generic form, contrary to the Corinthian and Composite with their acanthus leaves. Instead of being based on imitation, the analogy between the orders and the human body stemmed from a mix of intuition and cultural convention. Of course, the solidity of the Doric shaft could evoke masculinity, whereas the slender Ionic seemed closer to feminine proportions; but the connection was anything but deterministic. It was as much a cultural legacy and convention as a perception. Nothing in the Doric and Ionic resembled human bodies. Actually, the only anthropomorphic type of column, the so-called Caryatid order, played a marginal role in the Vitruvian tradition.

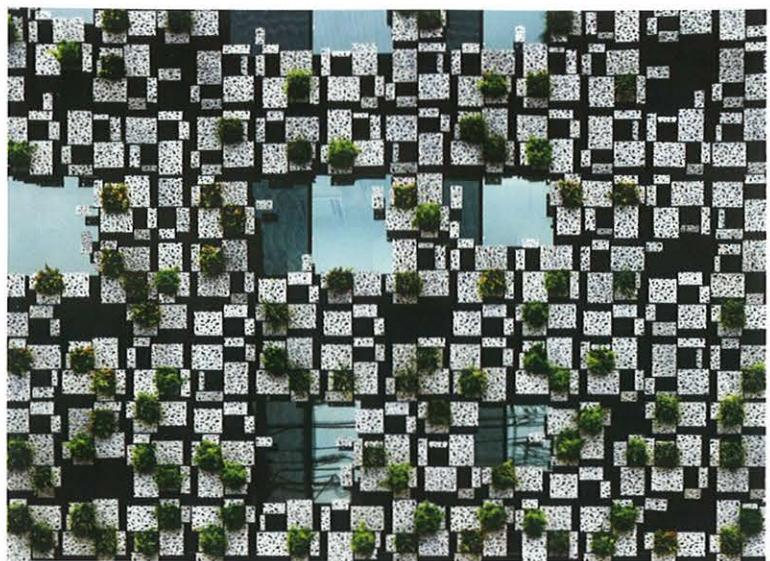
What the example of the orders tends to suggest is that architectural symbolism does not necessarily entail a return to representation, or at least to indisputable analogy. Symbolism may also lie in the emergence of a possible resemblance, at the articulation of perception and culture, rather than in a static set of imitative features. Just as architecture should always look as



MVRDV, 3D Garden,  
Boom Hengelo, Hengelo,  
Netherlands, 1999.

What is the exact status of nature in this project, which transposes to housing the principle of the suspended forest tested by the architects for the Dutch Pavilion of Hanover Expo 2000? Trees might be nothing more than giant ornaments imparted with a clear symbolic function.

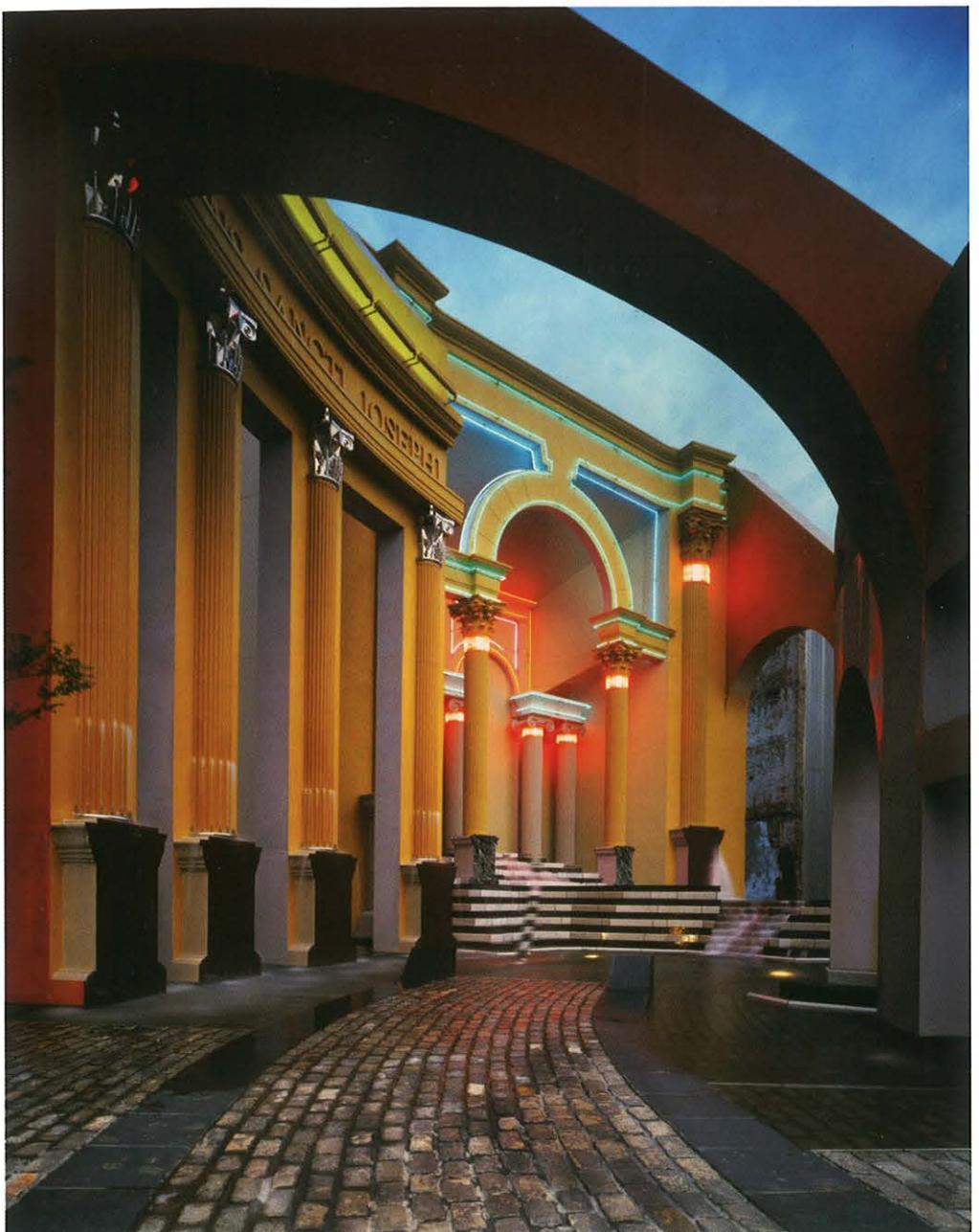
Kengo Kuma & Associates,  
Green Cast, Odawara-shi,  
Japan, 2011.  
A more discreet mobilisation  
of nature as ornament on  
aluminium die-cast panels in  
which plants are inserted.



if it were about to speak, all the while remaining utterly silent, the most powerful architectural symbols are perhaps those engaged in the process of representing something. What they truly embody is a movement towards representation, a dynamic captured in the material of the building, something like a figure on the verge of appearing.

Another stimulating aspect of the five orders is how they related to a set of highly formalised mathematical operations. Their dependence on proportion and eurythmic considerations constituted rules, namely practical principles of operativity rooted in the firm belief that the world we inhabit can acquire a sense for humanity. The orders suggested the possibility of a rewarding framework for man and society. This type of suggestion represents perhaps the best way for architecture to demonstrate its political relevance. What we need today are rules, not styles; rules that may help us to attribute meaning to our actions.

When governed by rules, architectural ornament can display its profound connection to cosmos and order. However, the common mistake often made by theorists, historians and practitioners, consists in considering cosmos and order as entirely natural. When Ralph Wornum explains in his *Analysis of Ornament* that the reign of the ornamental begins with the domination of symmetry and contrast over any other considerations, he is actually trying to



Charles Moore and Perez  
Architects, Piazza d'Italia,  
New Orleans, Louisiana,  
1978.

Widely acclaimed at the time of its completion, this icon of Postmodernism began rapidly to deteriorate. The play on elements borrowed almost literally from the past, beginning with the orders, also lost its relevance with the decline of architectural Postmodernism. No longer the first 'Postmodern ruin', since its restoration in 2004, the Piazza remains as a testimony of the ambition and shortcomings of a certain relation to history.

ground ornament in the physics and physiology of perception.<sup>24</sup> The same temptation at times pervades Ernst Gombrich's great synthesis on ornament revealingly entitled *The Sense of Order*.<sup>25</sup> Of course, such order depends on a series of natural laws like those that condition the way we perceive forms and colours.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it also appears as a cultural construct.

As a cultural construct, ornament, when governed by clear rules, corresponds both to a historical legacy and to a project, for it is always simultaneously received and transmitted, submitted to preexisting codes and reinterpreted. Rules are essential to allow architecture to connect to its own history in a productive way. The constant negotiation between tradition and novelty presents a political dimension, a juggling between resistance and acceptance. It is after all one of the functions of politics to articulate past, present and future into a coherent perspective.

As we have seen, the architect was also able to express himself through the modulation of rules or codes. Today, pure and boundless variability has replaced modulation. The only alternative to repetition seems to lie in a quest for original solutions, the status of which, work of art or architecture, remains difficult to assess. This constitutes another limit of the discourse on the non-standard.

How can we transpose the lesson of the orders to contemporary digital architecture? A difficulty immediately arises: the crisis of the tectonic is leaving us uncertain about what will eventually replace the conventional elements of architecture if parametric design continues to spread. As Georges Legendre remarks in his *Book of Surfaces*, 'parametric relationships are not parts (...). Thus a form shaped by parametric modulation has no discrete limb to speak of – you cannot chop it into pieces, nor indulge in the separate application of permutation, substitution and scaling of parts.'<sup>27</sup>

In this context, it may be urgent to engage in a reflection, at both theoretical and practical levels, on what may replace parts in a computer-driven design world. Elementary operations such as twisting, bending or folding should probably be envisaged from this perspective, just like certain fundamental types of textures, patterns and topologies. The next stage could be to recognise that these operations – textures, patterns and topologies – can carry a symbolic load. This is already the case with neo-Islamic patterns, which are so often used in projects for the Muslim world. To acknowledge openly their symbolic resonance represents perhaps the best antidote to the return of naive Orientalism. One might even realise that they are not to

be systematically associated with a specific culture and the regions where it predominates. The potential meaning of these patterns extends beyond seducing Middle Eastern, Pakistani or Indonesian clients.

At a more fundamental level than cultural and regional connotations, the new regime of relations between the subject and his/her environment could constitute a major source of symbolic inspiration. After all, ornament already conveys essential aspects of this new condition through properties such as tactility.

When looking for rules both rigorous and open to interpretation, the use of the computer offers a unique opportunity. For the first time since the demise of Vitruvian proportions, architecture may be able to reconnect to mathematics in an authentic way.<sup>28</sup> Scripting and algorithmics could be envisaged as a platform on which to base such reconnection, provided that a genuine concern for meaning tempers the quest for innovative programming.

The five orders are not the only source of inspiration which can be mobilised to understand how architectural ornaments can be both abstract and permeated by meaning. Writing may constitute another source of inspiration, not as much in terms of the explicit messages it conveys but because of its intrinsic expressive power. Hebrew, Arabic or Chinese characters talk to us, even if we do not speak the languages. In the lobby of the new city hall of Montpellier in southern France (2011), the architects Jean Nouvel and François Fontès have proposed a new take on the decorative power of writing with a ceiling adorned with photographs of ancient civil-status documents by film director and artist Alain Fleischer.

Having writing in mind may also enable us to take the full measure of the rapidly changing relation between architectural ornament and the body. For the extended and distributed contemporary subject can no longer be approached in terms of proportion and following a model according to which the skeleton represents the main organising principle. We are increasingly made of networks and interfaces, a disconcerting mode of being, which is perhaps better captured by analogy with writing than by more traditional modes of figuration.

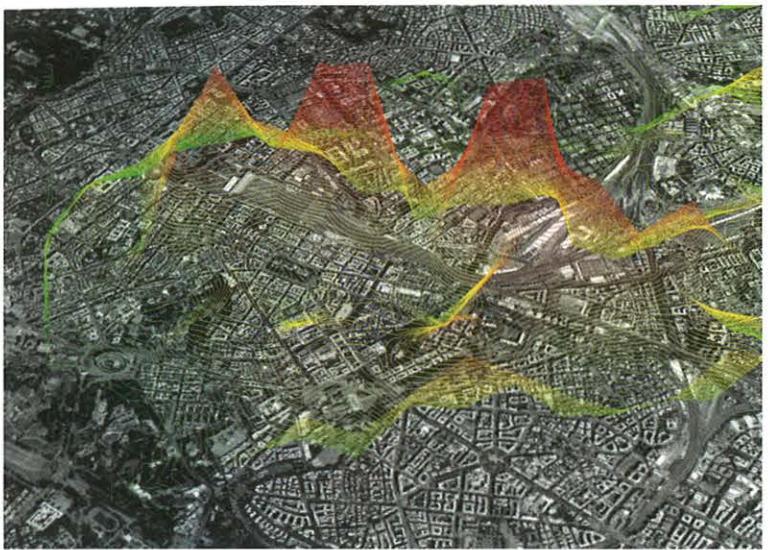
Yet, one may wonder whether this mutation will ever come completely true. For part of ourselves also resists such a vision and prefers to stick to a more traditional representation of individuality. We might have no other

choice than to alternate between Deleuzian and Cartesian conceptions of the self, between a multiple and distributed and a unified mode of being. In the future, another possible role of architectural ornament could lie in helping us to cope with this double existence without falling into irremediable schizophrenia. More generally, one of the functions of architecture is to help us live multiple lives on various levels, in reality but also in our dreams, as physical beings made of flesh and technology and as fictions fed on desire.

Ornament presents us with a kind of mirror. In this mirror, we see ourselves as we believe we are and as we would like to be. Ornament is inextricably about knowledge and illusion. Although tainted with dreams (but is this not always the case with what is in our mind?), the knowledge component appears essential. After a long eclipse, its role should be on the rise in the near future, once we overcome the limitations of an approach to décor that is almost exclusively based on affect.

We seem now to experience a new ornamental turn, more radical than the one that Kracauer had identified in the 1920s. Kracauer's 'mass ornament' revolved around the property of key collective manifestations of modernity, from labour organisation in Fordist factories to music-hall ballet, to present an ornamental character. Contemporary technological evolution follows an even more spectacular trajectory. In a number of instances, structural approaches yield to interfacing concerns imparted with an ornamental dimension. With its millions of vibrant sites and its billions of colourful pages, the Internet appears less and less as a network of networks; it tends to evoke a sprawling ornament. In early cyberpunk fictions, novelists like William Gibson or Neal Stephenson had evoked virtual worlds resembling some giant Las Vegas Strip.<sup>29</sup> With its shining appearance and irresistible seduction, the Internet has outdone their vision.

Contemporary societies present many ornamental features, which go beyond the decorative character that Cannadine attributed to the British Empire, or the 'surface-level expressions' of the epoch, which attracted the attention of Kracauer during the first half of the 20th century.<sup>30</sup> Cannadine's ornamentalism complemented an aristocratic vision of the world that is no longer sustainable today. As for Kracauer, his mass ornament was made possible by a society composed of relatively anonymous individuals. The age of the mass ornament corresponded to the rise of the undifferentiated crowd. As MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte argued as early as the mid-1990s, before the development of online personalised mass consumption,



**SENSEable City Laboratory, MIT, Real Time Rome, 2006.**  
This is a still of an animation displaying the location and intensity of phone calls placed in relation to a concert given by Madonna in Rome. The moving surface is obtained by summing the individual calls placed by the people. Digital technologies enable the passage from individual to collective behaviour and vice versa. The visualisation of real-time urban life evokes contemporary ornamental research.

before the customised recommendations of Amazon and the Apple Store, the digital age would be marked by a strong return of the question of the self: 'in being digital I am *me*, not a statistical subset'.<sup>31</sup> To be more accurate, in the digital age, I am both a statistical subset and myself. In addition to successive phases of Deleuzian dispersion and Cartesian regrouping, contemporary subjectivity seems also characterised by an alternation of anonymity and exacerbated individuation. This new situation gives a sharper relief to the question of ornament. Contemporary ornament is expected to address both masses and highly conscious individuals. Fashion designers like Martin Margiela have bet on this duality.

The age of ornaments meant only for the masses seems to be reaching its end. In a recent book, Lars Spuybroek has suggested a very similar idea.<sup>32</sup> This might account for the re-emergence of architectural décor as a mediating element between the masses and individuals. The political relevance of ornament lies also in this mediating role. To play this role, ornament must convey lessons. Again, it must reconnect with reflection and knowledge.

People want their bodies and lives to be adorned. Institutions and governments develop more and more elaborate design strategies. From Bilbao to New York, and from London to Los Angeles, stararchitects' buildings look like ornaments at the scale of the city. Revealingly, the new

dynamic maps produced by research initiatives like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology SENSEable City Laboratory, enable us to follow urban rhythms in real time and to generate ornament-like visualisations.<sup>33</sup> In such a context, the line separating understanding and adornment becomes day after day more permeable. The time has come for architecture to regain its full momentum by throwing some light on what it means to live together in this strange ornamental world.

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