



1 / ORNAMENTS AS PRODUCTS OF UNFOLDING

Ornament arises, naturally, when a person is making something and seeks to embellish this “something” while making it. The embellishing is spontaneous. It comes from the continued unfolding of the whole, going naturally from the broad wholeness of the thing to the microstructure where the chisel, hand, brush, and trowel make patterns in the thing, in order to continue and extend its wholeness. Most concretely, *it arises as a result of the latent centers in the uncompleted thing requiring still more centers, requiring still more structure, in order to be complete.* That requirement, when followed faithfully, creates ornament that grows from the whole.

This is a natural process, whenever the thing is being MADE. But if a building is “produced”—not made—in a technically divided situation where making is severed from design, the process of ornamentation cannot occur naturally. There, when an architect tries to draw the ornament or specify the ornament “within” the technical process, what happens becomes awkward, stilted, too stiff, not fundamental—and also not profound—because it does not arise from the joy of the making process itself. It cannot be profound because the maker is not reacting to the whole in its state as an unfinished thing, which may then be completed by the ornament. For the ornament to be profound, the

motifs and disposition of the ornament must arise, naturally, from latent centers which are felt within the uncompleted thing.

Since (in any living process created by repeated application of the fundamental process) we understand that the creation of a building is in every case the creation of a system of centers which emerges naturally from the field which surrounds it, this understanding of the task of embellishment no longer distinguishes between “function” and “ornament.”

The task of building is to produce a field of centers which makes itself complete. This gives us a clear and sensible way of understanding ornament precisely, one which tells us exactly what to do. At a certain stage in the making of the building we have produced a field of centers there. But the field still contains rough spots. It is not perfectly resolved. Some parts are not intense enough; the centers are not distributed to produce the most perfect field. At this stage, some additional “smaller” structure is necessary.

The so-called “ornament” is simply this smaller stuff. It is the stuff we have to create at this last stage, to complete and perfect the field of centers. Thus it is not something extra or extraneous; it is a continuation of the same process we have followed in creating the field up to this point. It is *necessary* in order to complete the field.



2 / ORNAMENT AS DETAIL WHICH EMERGES DIRECTLY FROM THE PROCESS OF MAKING

In a living process, the generation of ornament in the building goes hand in hand with its construction. It is simply the detail that forms as a result of a process which is constantly trying to refine the centers which are there.

In 20th-century architecture and construction, ornament—perhaps for the first time—

became something separate, something *applied*, which came after the main job of design was finished. Of course artists and writers have often said that “good” ornament is somehow organically related to the building; that in the best cases the motifs arise naturally from the material and circumstances of the design. But in spite of this



*Ornaments which I cut with a jigsaw into the doorframe of the Etna Street cottage, and then filled with plaster, 1973. The ornament came into my mind directly while building the door-frame.
With a pencil and a jigsaw, and then with a few trowels of white plaster, the whole thing was done. It came directly from the whole, was inspired by the whole, and then activated and made accordingly.*



Formwork for an ornamental band on the Fort Mason bench. I thought this ornament was unusually successful—very simple, but satisfying. Christopher Alexander, 1984



Early samples of the blue and white tiles based on a sketch for a single repeated blossom branch.



Terrace, Sullivan house, Berkeley, California. The surface of this terrace is made of 800 tiles, cast in blue and white terrazzo, ground and polished. Christopher Alexander, Katalin Bende, 1996.

theoretical philosophy, in practice, the ornament of the 20th century was most often separate, pre-fabricated, and applied — because, within the framework of 20th-century thought about architecture, it was never clear *theoretically*, how ornament should, or could, be part and parcel of the design and construction process itself.

That is because within the drastic separation of design and construction that was current in the 20th century, the very process of ornamentation was upset.

The architect, being the designer, is supposed to specify every aspect of the made thing, the building. The builder — that is, the contractor — is supposed to do what is on the drawings which have been specified by contract and by working drawings. The contractor is therefore not free to undertake this kind of embellishment — and besides, it doesn't arise naturally in

relationship to money, either. The contractor gets no extra for doing it; indeed, he would be in violation of the contract, often, if he *did* do it. In addition, because of the effects of the machine age, it is quite likely that the technicians and builders in a construction company have lost all natural sensibility that would allow them to make graceful, profound, ornament.

The machine-age architect, on the other hand, who may have the intuitive ability, or the desire to make beautiful ornament, is often too removed, has no connection with the tools, materials, or actual processes, so the natural ornament does not flow naturally from his hands. For such an architect, the very circumstances of his existence dictate separation, so that ornament almost cannot be made to flow naturally from the centers which exist in the plan, the rooms, the walls of the emerging larger structure.