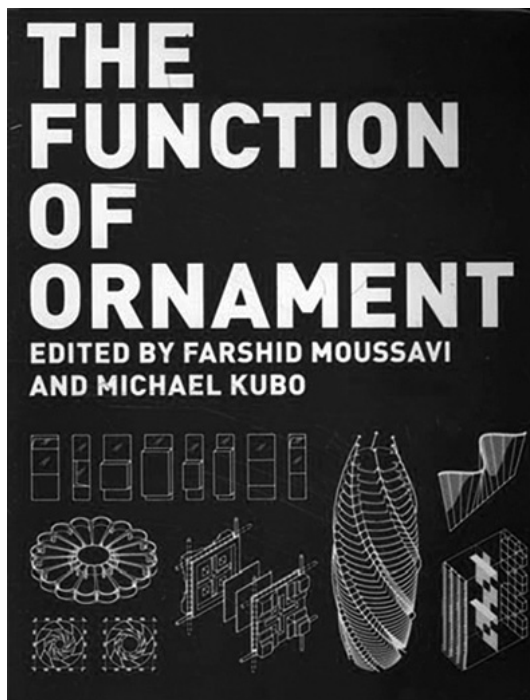


THE FUNCTION OF ORNAMENT

by Farshid Moussavi and
Michael Kubo, eds.

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In today's complex and multifaceted cultural landscape, the shaping of built forms turns into an increasingly challenging task. No single formal language or architectural style dominates the scene as might have been the case only a few decades ago. Instead, with the incredible wealth of information that surrounds us today, design languages become as diverse and distinct

as the people to which they cater. To understand such a myriad of architectural manifestation, however, requires substantially more than looking through images in glossy architectural magazines. Yet, even the more technical publications outlining construction details of these built forms seldom explain the design motivation and/or the thinking process behind them. And it is this gap that *The Function of Ornament* sets out to fill—i.e., to provide an insight into the motivation or “forces” behind the outward forms or design solutions.

But why “ornament”? The book title itself seems almost oxymoronic as it alludes to two distinct Modernist notions—function and ornament—one being regarded as valid force behind the spatial organization, and the other famously denounced as a “crime”. A clue lies in Moussavi's differentiation of “ornaments” from “decorations.” To Moussavi, “ornaments” are more or less inherent in the tectonic expression in architecture, whereas “decorations” are mere external elements fulfilling mainly representational purposes. Ornament, he says, “is the gure that emerges from the material substrate, the expression of embedded forces

through processes of construction, assembly and growth. It is through ornament that material transmits affects. Ornament is therefore necessary and inseparable from the object.”¹ With that in mind, the analysis herein aims to reveal the motivating force behind each “ornament” as well as the affect that it entails.

What distinguishes the book from other analytical discourses in design lies in its extensive use of graphic illustration. In fact, the analysis seems to rely almost exclusively on drawings—detailed sections, axonometric, conceptual diagrams, for examples—with brief explanatory texts only when necessary. To understand the work’s main argument, therefore, it is recommended that one begin by reading the introduction text by Moussavi, which naturally outlines the theoretical framework, rationale, and conceptual structure for the materials to follow. Briefly put, the analysis is structured around three main classifications—namely, depth, material and affect. While the classification in terms of depth—the level of involvement in which order or ornament is applied to each case study—is clear and easy to follow, the materials and affect classifications can sometimes be puzzling. This is particularly so when considering the terms used in these two categories: it is less clear, for example, if or why “construction” is in fact the material or determining force behind the vertical I-beams in Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building, or if “cladding” is the only material at play in Herzog & de Meuron’s Signal Box. It seems unfortunate that in order for the analysis

to be presented in such a visually gratifying and concise manner, the richness and profundity of the work may be sacrificed in the process. Given, however, that the drawings and analyses are all conducted by students as a part of Moussavi’s studio and seminar at Harvard Graduate School of Design over a period of one semester, the outcome is still quite robust and very commendable.

In the end, what makes *The Function of Ornament* worthwhile may be the fact that it allows students of architecture to “read” into contemporary built forms and understand the designs more clearly as they recognize the relationship between materials and affect. Through such an understanding, these ornaments may be “reused” critically, not blindly copied and pasted as might otherwise be the case. Also, when thinking of theoretical discourses in architecture, large, difficult texts with little accompanying images come to mind. Stylistic analyses of buildings throughout history, for example, are usually in the form of thick architecture history books. On the contrary, documents on building details are laden with jargons and technical details. *The Function of Ornament* shows that analyzing and/or theorizing architecture does not have to limit itself to mind-boggling texts alone, and technical details do result in aesthetic expression. In a way, the work sheds light on another possibility of doing “design research,” particularly one that has direct ramification in architectural practice.

¹ Farshid Moussavi, “The Function of Ornament: Introduction” in Farshid Moussavi and Michel Kubo, ed. *The Function of Ornament* (Barcelona: Actar, 2006).