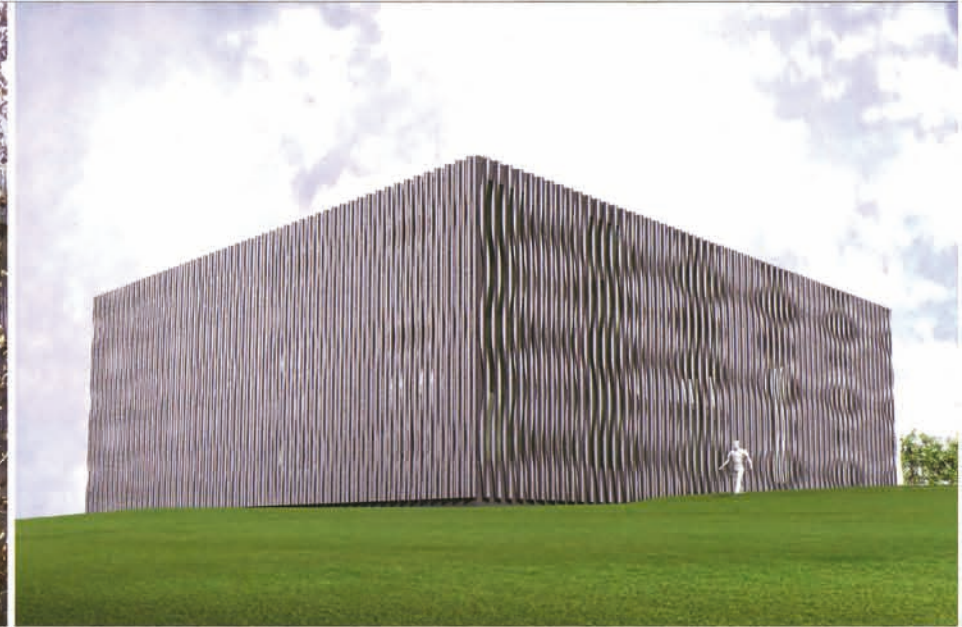
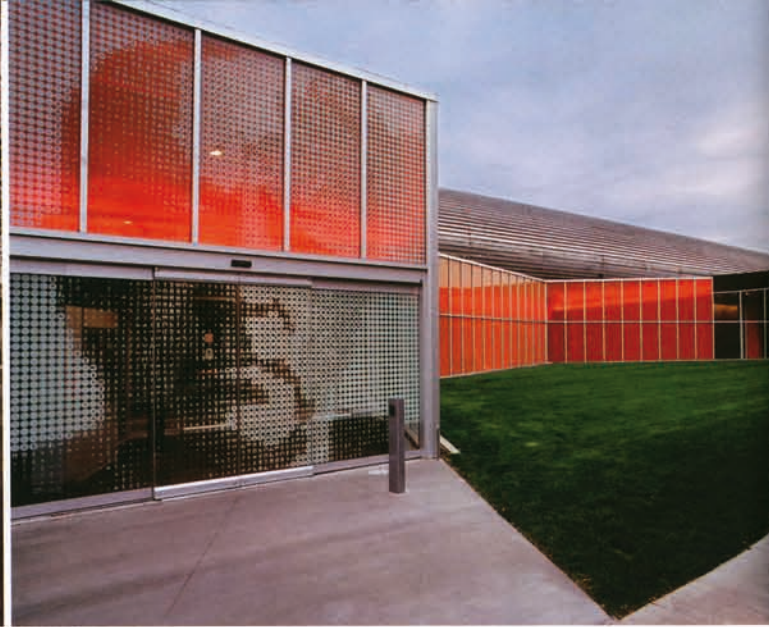


Ornamentality

RE-SAMPLING ORNAMENT

May the gods of architecture strike you down if you confuse ornament with decoration. Ornament has had some bad press over the years, wrongly consigned to the bowels of stylistic debate, but a new exhibition at the Swiss Architecture Museum seeks to reassess its importance and show how contemporary architects are once again using its potential to create buildings that invite multiple readings.

Text by Anneke Bokern



The McCormick-Tribune Campus Center, Chicago, USA, 2003, Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) with 2x4

Above, from left to right: Historical Reference: Cathedral Notre Dame, Rouen, 13th century

Entrance of the IIT McCormick Tribune Centre showing a portrait of Mies van der Rohe © floto + warner

Right: Façade Drawing © 2x4



The idea of organising an exhibition about ornament in contemporary architecture doesn't appear too original at first sight. It's a subject that has been discussed and analysed extensively over the last few years, and by now even the most trend-resistant among us should have realised that it's back in architecture. There is, however, a good reason for Re-sampling Ornament at the Swiss Architecture Museum (SAM) in Basel: this year is the centenary of the publication of Adolf Loos' legendary pamphlet *Ornament and Crime*. Of course the anniversary of this significant text, which induced generations of architects to purge their designs of any trace of such element, calls for some kind of reaction, especially in terms of its contemporary relevance and practice.

HISTORICAL REFERENCE

Re-sampling Ornament offers a glimpse of the directions in which architectural ornament is currently developing. Its historical context, however, gets a bit of a raw deal. There are banners on the walls behind the exhibits, printed with small black and white reference images, but they're too fragmented to really contribute anything to the subject. Ironically, in the end they remain just as superficial as Loos found ornament itself. For constant consumers of architectural fodder the projects here are not going to offer too many surprises, which post-Loos is a bit of a shame. There are many beautiful and forgotten examples from the 1950s that are often work as predecessors for current designs and those featured are maybe too familiar to fully engage. However, what the exhibition does demonstrate clearly is that ornament is not the bastard child of decoration. #

Re-sampling Ornament at the SAM until 21 September
www.sam-basel.org

Below, from left to right: Vineyard Gantenbein, Flaesch, Switzerland, 2006 BY Bearth & Deplazes with Gramazio & Kohler © Ralph Feiner

Programmed robot building up the brick wall © Gramazio & Kohler, ETH

Facing page: Above, from left to right: Multimedia Library, Tours, France, 2007 by Bertheliet, Fichet, Tribouillet Architectes. Bronze shavings as ornament © Philippe Ruault Cut to Fit, 2008 by Barkow Leibinger Architects; façade study of the rotating sunscreen tubes © Barkow Leibinger Architects

ROBOT BRICK BUILDER

In the three rooms of the SAM, curators Oliver Domeisen and Francesca Ferguson present 17 newish projects in which ornament plays an important role. They're combined with some historical examples and references, intended to place them in a bigger picture. The first three projects immediately demonstrate the most convincing argument for the reintroduction of ornament: its technical makeability. 'The Chinese carver works sixteen hours, the American labourer only eight,' Loos wrote in 1908, hoping that the Chinese would get more leisure time if ornament was abolished and production processes mechanised. Well, we all know that that hasn't really worked out. What happened instead, however, is that ornament has been freed from the archaic context of artisanality. Gramazio & Kohler let a robot build brick walls with braided structures; Barkow Leibinger experiment with rotating screens made from laser-cut steel tubes; and the facade of the media library in Tours by Bertheliet Fichet Tribouillet consists of acrylic panels, randomly sprinkled with beautiful, sparkling brass swathes.

The most common justification for ornament ticked off the list, the exhibition can move on to its aesthetic value. Buildings by Toyo Ito and Hitoshi Abe, featuring abstract tree motifs, illustrate the relation of architectural ornaments to nature; a baroque spiral-like sculpture by Evan Douglis and Thomas Heatherwick's remotely armadillo-shaped East Beach Café demonstrate its sensuality. In the latter's case, however, one might ask whether ornament isn't being confused with sculptural qualities. Or is the message one that suggests any shape, which isn't purely functional, should be called ornament?

The last part of the exhibition returns to more tangible issues: ornament as (commercial) icon, from Jun Aoki's logo-façade for Louis Vuitton in Tokyo to Manuelle Gautrand's Citroën-showroom in Paris. The most amusing example, however, are the 'mistakes' on the IIT McCormick Tribune Campus in Chicago by OMA. Using tiny pictograms as pixels, Rem Koolhaas has created a giant portrait of Mies van der Rohe, representing his overpowering mental and architectural presence on the campus. 'Impish iconography' is what critic Shumon Basar calls this strategy.

