

Michael Dürfeld
The Ornamental Art and Architectural Form.
Systems-theoretical Irritations.

Summary

Interpreting ornamental art merely as decoration or embellishment - the established way it is seen by architectural theory - does not do justice to the current diversity of ornamental phenomena in architecture. Studies discussing the architectural theory of the ornamental phenomenon have succeeded in relating it very convincingly to specific design strategies. Yet none have defined an ornamental concept, which would encompass all of these phenomena in equal measure. The common denominator of these phenomena obviously has to be a very general relationship between ornamental art and architectural design.

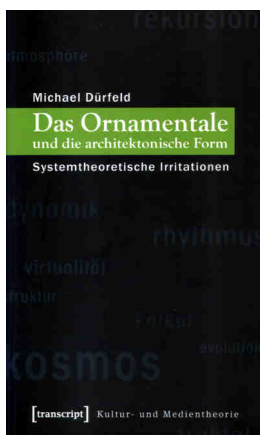
The question whether there is a common basic genotype of all ornamental phenotypes draws attention to the controversial debate of ornamental art in the 1960s and 1970s, and to a new type of decoration. Though the structuralist notion of the ornamental, developed in those decades, made it possible to subsume a multitude of ornamental phenomena in a single concept, the structuralist theories do not offer an appropriate set of instruments for the process-oriented idea of the ornament particularly necessary in our day. What we need is a set of theoretical tools able to overcome the aporia of structuralist approaches and provide terms, which do justice to the process character of the ornamental.

Apart from the deconstructivist concept of a Jacques Derrida and the constructivist approach of the 'new natural sciences', there is a third theoretical path (hitherto neglected by architectural theory), which offers an excellent terminology to describe processes of transformation: Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. In his book *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995), he defined ornament as 'the form of a process of elaborating one form going on another'. With this process-oriented definition, Luhmann shifted the focus from the ornament as a formal configuration to the ornamental as a process configuration. The ornamental thus becomes the fundamental artistic form-giving and form-generating principle.

This publication takes up Luhmann's definition of ornament and tries to reinterpret the ornamental in terms of architectural theory. A fundamentals chapter 'stakes the claims' of this reformulation, describing the basic problems inherent in the conflict-laden relationship between architecture and systems theory. The study tried to find answers to the following questions: are there ways to use systems theory in architectural theory? Does systems

theory possess an architectonic structure? What is the nature of the relationship between architecture and art? What role does space play in systems theory? And finally: is there a formal theory of the theory of design?

Luhmann's definition of ornament is decompressed in the main section of the book. The author analyzes the way Niklas Luhmann referred to different, albeit complementary concepts regarding the 'foundation, formulation, form and function of the ornamental'. The analysis decompresses the subject matter to look at four facets of the ornamental, i.e. *Ornament & Perception*; *Ornament and Calculation*; *Ornament & Geometry*, and *Ornament & Structure*. The observations on the different themes end where they lead on to the next subject and another new question. Thus the discussion of the interaction between ornament and structure raises the question of the relationship between ornament and atmosphere, and the analysis of the interaction between ornament and calculation raises the question of how to conceive ornament and evolution as one entity. Picking Luhmann's understanding of ornament apart leads to the architectural-theoretical subject complex of ornament and geometry and to the question of how to conceive afresh the relationship between ornament and virtuality. The question of how to ground the ornamental in the relationship between ornament and perception finally leads to the question of the rapport between ornament and cosmos.



Michael Dürfeld
Das Ornamentale und die architektonische Form.
Systemtheoretische Irritationen.

Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2008.

www.duerfeld.de