

Debates and Discourses on Ornament in Contemporary Architecture

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Abstract

This paper neither intends to construct a theoretical framework of the history of ornament nor focuses on its thresholds. Mainly, it aims to uncover the long-lost meanings of ornament by delving into the origins of the concept. It discusses the issue of "the function of ornament" today, mainly through *The Function of Ornament* (2006), edited by Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo. This book distinguishes itself from other current publications because it is one of the first works to discuss ornament from a new viewpoint by graphically analyzing a variety of twentieth and twenty-first-century buildings in terms of form, screen, structure, and surface. The book shows that ornament, as an integral element, is integrated to material, structure, and form, rather than being extrinsic and additional, which brings us to the etymology and the origins of the term. Thus, this paper explores what is considered as new in terms of ornament in contemporary architecture by analyzing case studies from the book.

Keywords: Contemporary Architecture, Envelope, Farshid Moussavi, Ornament, *The Function of Ornament*.

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Received: 23.01.2022 - Accepted: 17.03.2022

INTRODUCTION

The rich and dense history of ornament can be analysed and categorized by a variety of ways. It has been, for example, classified chronologically, organized in terms of structural technology or production technique, and grouped according to created surface effects. This paper neither intends to construct a theoretical framework of the history of ornament nor focuses on its thresholds. Mainly, it aims to uncover the long-lost meanings of ornament by delving into the origins of the concept. By doing so, it comparatively discusses the issue of “the function of ornament” today from a new perspective.

Architectural exhibitions, themed journals, theoretical courses, seminars, and lectures of the last two decades are a part of the intention to redefine and discuss ornament. While trying to construct the theoretical framework of ornament, they prove that this framework is as broad and productive as being ambiguous. As these various architectural media show, ornament is still a current issue today.

Among these architectural media, *The Function of Ornament*, edited by Farshid Moussavi and Michael Kubo (2006), distinguishes itself from other publications as one of the first works to discuss ornament from a new viewpoint (Figure 1). The founder of Farshid Moussavi Architecture (FMA) and professor at Harvard University Department of Architecture, Moussavi has been experimenting with envelope and membrane using new technologies in her practice and teaching. *The Function of Ornament* was initially designed as a course at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. The book, as the outcome of the course, graphically analyses a variety of twentieth century buildings in terms of ornament. The main argument of the research is that ornament in contemporary architecture is closely related to effects and sensations. This effect does not necessarily indicate an interior atmosphere; it mostly refers to the effect of ornament in the urban fabric. As one of the book’s findings, Moussavi and Kubo argue that symbolism as the postmodern function of ornament is synthetic and extrinsic, while architectural effects are intrinsic and essential. To prove their argument, they group a number of twentieth and twenty-first century buildings in terms of form, screen, structure, surface, and graphically analyse them to explore what technique is used to produce ornament and what kind of effect and sensation the ornamental envelope produces. Among these categorizations, most buildings are included under the title “screen,” since it is the most recent concept. As a whole, the book shows that, ornament is integral to structure and form, rather than being extrinsic and additional.

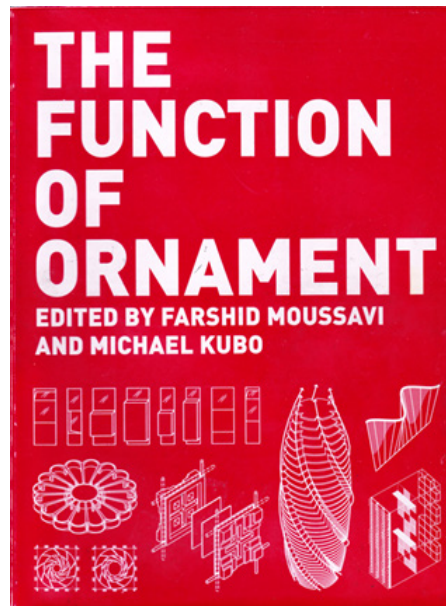


Figure 1. Farshid Moussavi & Michael Kubo, *The function of ornament*, Actar, Barcelona, 2006.

	category	effect	project	page
FORM				
01	program	fluid	Marina City Apartments	16
02	program	aggregated	Capitol Mall	20
03	construction	rigid	20 St. Mary Ave Street	24
04	cladding	band	Johnson Wax Laboratory Tower	28
05	light	dematerialized	Tower of Winds	32
06	image	amorphous	Sethriggs Department Store	36
STRUCTURE				
07	construction	undulated	Church of the Christ the Worker	42
08	construction	tilted	Belmont Lambert Headquarters	46
09	construction	oblique	Carson Pirie Scott Department Store	50
10	construction	sculptural	MIT Simmons Hall	54
11	construction	vertical	Seagram Building	58
12	cladding	curved	Prada Arona Store	62
13	cladding	modular	US Embassy	66
14	pattern	random	Sergentine Pavilion	70
15	pattern	radial	Waller House	74
SCREEN				
16	program	diverse	Sheldon Museum	80
17	program	modular	Bancroft Free University	84
18	construction	refracted	Dunhouse Winery	88
19	cladding	textured	Bancroft Free Book Library	92
20	cladding	plated	Christian Dior Grimaldi Store	96
21	cladding	discontinuous	Serdar Mediterranean	100
22	pattern	differentiated	Acute Spanish Pavilion	104
23	pattern	undifferentiated	John Lewis Department Store	108
24	pattern	complex	The Arcium of Fabrication Square	112
25	branding	kinetic	Louis Vuitton Roppongi Hills Store	116
26	branding	monoc	Louis Vuitton Regency Store	120
27	image	differentiated	Da Young Museum	124
28	color	differentiated	Torre Agbar Headquarters	128
29	light	geometric	Institut du Monde Arabe	132
30	light	cinematic	Museum de Niro	136
31	light	luminescent	Museum de Braganca	140
SURFACE				
32	cladding	wrought	Ricco Lachen Warehouse	144
33	cladding	deep	Signal Box	148
34	cladding	differentiated	Baerlinger Ingelheim Offices and Laboratories	152
35	pattern	curved	Christian Dior Grimaldi Store	156
36	pattern	altering	IBM Training and Manufacturing Center	160
37	reflection	camouflaged	Urbane Alpha	164
38	color	total	Lalor Garcia Center	168
39	image	undifferentiated	Prada Marcomuseo Factory	172
40	image	textured	Museum de Braganca	176
41	image	branded	Louis Vuitton Regency Store	180
42	image	single	Elaborados Library	184

IS ORNAMENT TURNING INTO AN INTEGRAL ELEMENT THAT CONSTRUCTS THE DESIGN TODAY?

Throughout the history of architecture, ornament has been cited with different connotations, while various words have been used as synonyms (Table 1) (Balik, 2016). Similarly, equivalent words in Turkish, “bezeme,” “taki,” and “donate,” can be handled in this category. The variety in the definitions of ornament is a major reason which makes its meaning ambiguous and unclear.

Connotations	Synonyms
Additional	Adornment
Attractive	Bezeme
Beautiful	Decoration
Decorative	Donatı
Degenerate	Embellishment
Delightful	Enhancement
Dirty	Enrichment
Elaborate	Flourish
Elegant	Furnishing
Enhanced	Garnishment
Excess	Garniture
Extravagant	Pattern
Fancy	Süsleme
Flamboyant	Takı
Graceful	
Harmonious	
Luxurious	
Order	
Superficial	
Superfluous	

Etymologically, in Latin, the root of the word "ornament," modified from "ornatus" is "ordo," and is associated with order and arrangement. Similarly, "adornment," which derives from "adornare" has "ornare" in its stem (Balik, 2015). In parallel with the etymology, the Ancient Greek orders of Dorian, Ionian, and Corinthian are related with the arrangements of specific elements. Yet the origin of "ornament" indicates an abstract and divine meaning rather than physical. Deriving from the Ancient Greek word "kosmos," it is associated with world order (Balik, 2015). In Ancient Greek philosophy, cosmos is defined as a harmonious and proportionate whole created out of chaos. The divine attributions of ornament prevailed in the Roman Empire in terms of "ornatus mundi," or "beautiful harmony." As the Ancient Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (1855, Chapter 3, Section 4) argues, "For what the Greeks, from its being ornamented, have termed kosmos, we, from its perfect and complete elegance, have termed mundus." The Ancient Greek ornament's relationship with kosmos and order refers to the concept of cosmetics. Cosmetics is associated with the art of beautifying, dressing, and ornamenting, whereas in Ancient Rome, "Mundus" refers to ornament, in addition to elegance and sophistication. This past reference posits ornament as an element that gracefully constructs the design rather than being additional. Furthermore, Cicero (1875), the Roman philosopher and writer, defines orators as "the ornaments of the city." The sophisticated structure of speech and use of metaphor in oratorship can be easily compared to the structure of ornament. Similarly, kings were conceived as "the ornaments of the realm." During the Renaissance. The attribution of ornament to kings and orators supports the conception of ornament as an inherent element that highlights and brightens the significant parts of a design.

Within this context, this paper poses the question: After bearing numerous attributions and meanings throughout architectural history, has ornament today reconnected with its etymology by transforming into an intrinsic element that constructs the design?

Herzog & de Meuron may be used as a case to dwell on this critical question since their architecture interprets ornament through a variety of aspects. Moreover, The Function of Ornament contains 8 of their projects, including their Pritzker prize winner project, Signal Box. Yet, their most innovative approach is exposed in their use of structural ornament, as

in the case of the National Stadium in Beijing, also known as the Bird's Nest, built two years later than the publication of *The Function of Ornament* (Figure 2). Winy Maas, one of the founders of MVRDV, defines this building as “the culmination of new ornamentation” (Van Raaij, 2014), since space and surface are handled together as a whole for the ornament not to be additional, as emphasized earlier by Jacques Herzog (Chevrier & Herzog, 2006).

Within this context, Herzog & de Meuron's approach stands directly in contrast to the Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti (1988), who sees ornament as a symbolic element that highlights the beauty of a building. Alberti's education was Aristotelian, the dominant method in academies within the context of natural sciences in the Renaissance. Therefore, his attitude toward architecture was based on the Aristotelian perspectives. Aristotle defines the essence of objects through beauty, goodness, and truth. He sees these qualities as intrinsic properties of objects, and thus, ethical principles that evoke pleasure. This conception is similar to Alberti's understanding of ornament as a pleasing element that complements and highlights the beauty of architecture (Balik, 2015)



Figure 2. Herzog & de Meuron, National Stadium (Bird's Nest), Beijing, 2008 (Copyright: Author).

WHAT MAKES ORNAMENT “NEW” TODAY?

Ornament as an inherent component of buildings, such as in Herzog & de Meuron's practice and unlike Alberti's conception, works together with the climatisation, function, and context in various architectural scales. However, this new understanding makes this question relevant: What makes ornament “new” today? The claim that ornament has achieved a new feature due to new digital design and production tools is highly debatable since ornament today can be as symbolic (in a postmodern sense) as experimental.

At this point, we might refer to postmodernism to analyse ornament in the sense of Venturi and Scott Brown. In their postmodern theory and practice, ornament is not handled primarily as a functional and practical element, but an expressive, symbolic, and representational element. They indicate two architectural typologies; the duck and the decorated shed (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, 1996). Duck refers to a symbolic form *per se*, the plasticity of architecture as an aesthetic dimension, distorting space, structure, and program. On the other hand, decorated shed, which defines the architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown, refers to applied ornaments on the façade that communicate symbolically with the building program.

Considering the iconic contemporary buildings, this paper speculates that the duck and the decorated shed still prevail. Although these buildings are produced through novel technology, they do not propose a new approach to ornament at all times. For example, one of the common approaches today is to use ornament for expressing the building program, representing its identity or publicizing a brand, similar to the postmodern understanding of the duck and the decorated shed. The postmodern theorist and architect Charles Jencks (2011) asserts that iconic buildings as urban landmarks carry plural meanings and metaphors. Ornament becomes a means in this respect. In the case of the Christian Dior Ginza Store in Tokyo, designed by Kumiko Inui, when the building is seen by passers-by, it is clearly conceived as the building of the worldwide known brand (Figure 3). It can be classified as a decorated shed covered by a large version of Dior's

iconic interlaced pattern. On the other hand, the newness to ornament, in this case, can be considered as constructing semi-transparent façades by perforating the metal surface.

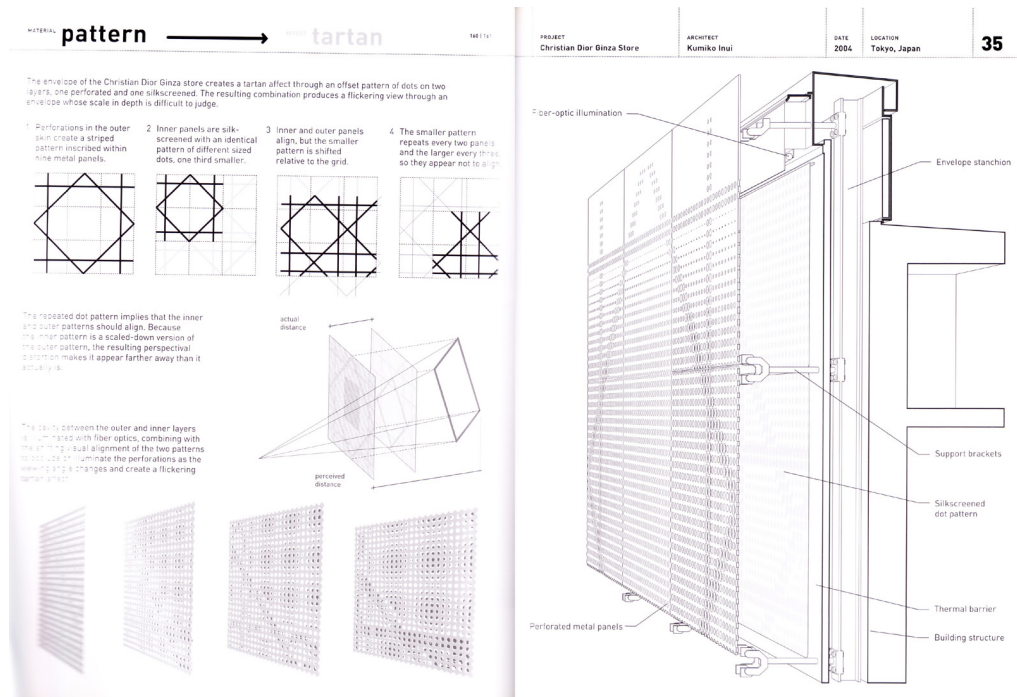


Figure 3. Kumiko Inui, Christian Dior Ginza Store, Tokyo, 2004.

Today, ornament has been justified in various aspects. As The Function of Ornament unfolds, these aspects can be roughly classified as the advancement of digital technology, experimentations on surface patterns, and explorations of different surface effects (Figure 4). Yet even the expression of newness in digital design and production technologies through ornament can be considered as a symbolic aspect, since its primary intention is to represent the newness of technology. On the other hand, with the impact of new technologies, concepts such as porosity, fractal, morphogenesis, pixellation, and parametricism are added to the repertoire of ornament. By means of contemporary architecture practices, such as UN Studio and NOX, new concepts like deformation, evolution, variation, and mutation within the scope of surface and form prevail. Going beyond referring merely as ornament, every architecture practice began

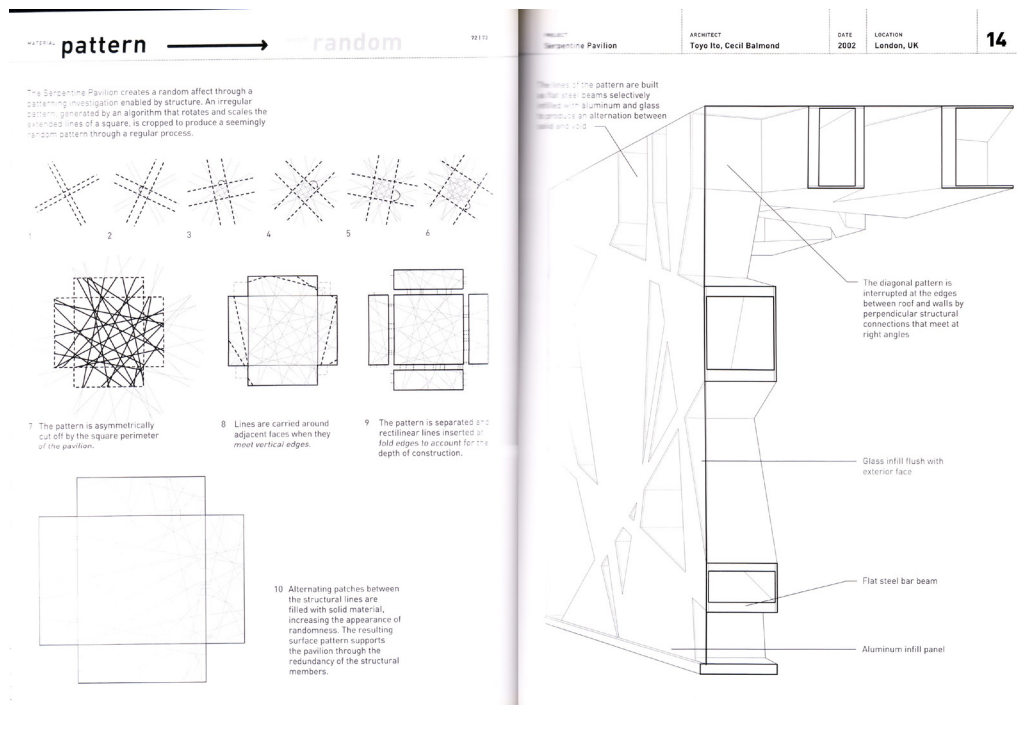


Figure 4. Toyo Ito & Cecil Balmond, Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London, 2002.

inventing their own approach to ornament, using adjectives, such as coded, dynamic, and digital.

Another aspect that paves the way to justifying ornament is to experiment with surface by means of a large repertoire of new materials (Figure 5). While this experimentation composes new patterns, it can also create different visual effects from a distance and up close. Many architects also argue that ornament should represent the context, rather than the building program. As a case, the façades of the John Lewis Department Store in Leicester, designed by the Foreign Office Architects (FOA), gives reference to an old fabric pattern that was used to be produced by this department store. (Figure 6). This kind of approach to ornament connects the historical context and tradition with the urban fabric.

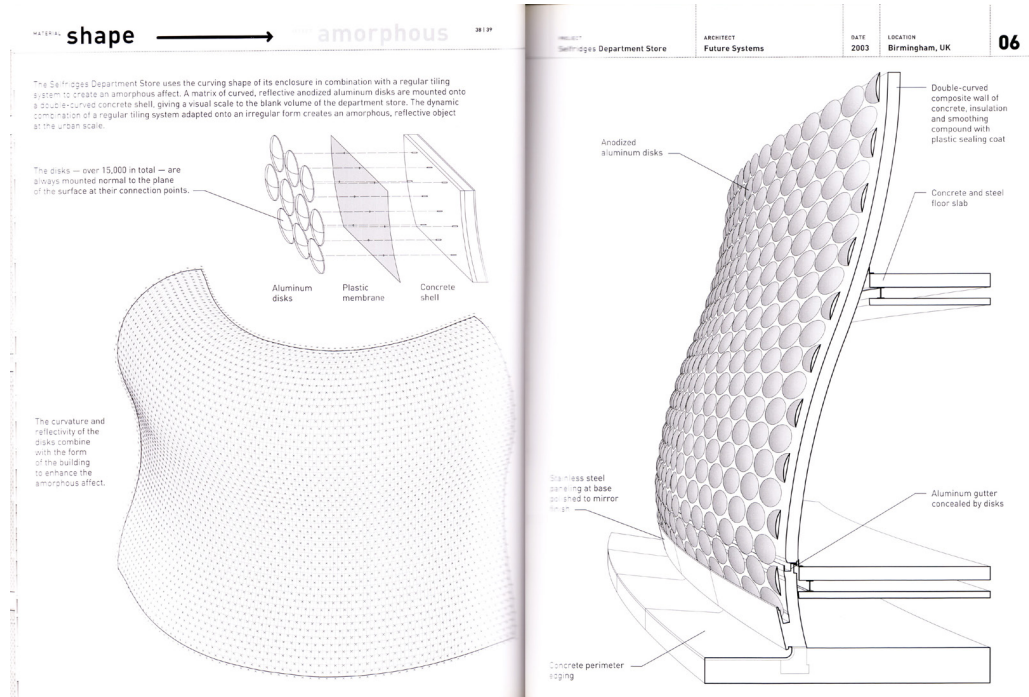


Figure 5. Future Systems, Selfridges Buildings, Birmingham, 2003.

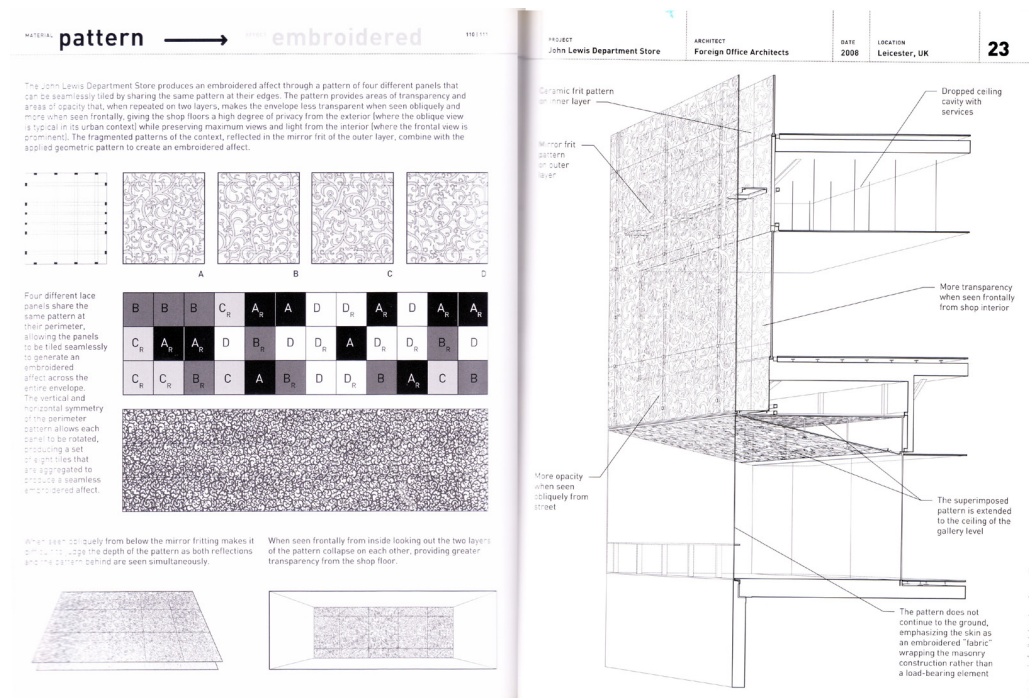


Figure 6. Foreign Office Architects, John Lewis Department Store, Leicester, 2008.

EPILOGUE: HOW CAN WE TACKLE WITH ORNAMENT TODAY, FROM WHICH PERSPECTIVE CAN WE DISCUSS THIS ISSUE?

While many contemporary publications highlight “the newness” of ornament today, much emphasis given to spectacle and surface effects turns ornament into a superficial product of our image driven culture. Ornament has become a means of a new architecture that has been reduced to visual image and has come forward with the symbolic exchange values of image, spectacle, and representation, much like a consumption product. This issue raises concerns over the relationship between ornament and capitalism: For whom are the ornamental surfaces produced; potential customer, user, or passer-by? In this respect, ornament acts as a tool for commercialization, marketing, and prestige of architecture and the architect.

Although the production of ornament today does not depend on traditional craftsmanship and is achieved by technologies, such as CNC, 3d printer, robotics, it still costs high. This issue revives discussions on whether ornament is really necessary or not, as in the latest case of the Birmingham Library. Designed by the Dutch architecture practice Mecanoo, the building is clad with ornaments, associating with metal filigrees that give reference to the industrial past of the city (Figure 7). Yet due to budget issues, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the government's advisory organization, intensely questioned the necessity of the ornamental design on the building façade (Pallister, 2009). As seen by this case, the long dispute between the decorative and the functional ornament since the early twentieth century, persists within today's conditions.

Today, ornament expands through various aspects, such as sensuality, representation, structure, sustainability, and digitisation. It demands a change in our perspective of architecture culture, as it has not been discussed over traditional Modernist values anymore, such as economy, labour, identity, and hygiene. Rather, a contemporary understanding of ornament is handled together with current cultural and social layers.



Figure 7. Mecanoo, Library of Birmingham, Birmingham, 2013 (Copyright: Martin Pettitt).

Financial Disclosure

This research had been supported by Dokuz Eylül University, Scientific Research and Development Support Program, No. 2010.KB.FEN.020.

Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics committee approval was not required for this article.

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In this research, the necessary permissions were obtained from the relevant participants for using a photograph (Figure 7).

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