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TASK: Essay Question 3 'The Materiality of Surface'

Examine by drawing upon current and historical context, how [pattern, texture, form, ...] functions as a medium for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. Discuss in the context of your own practice and with reference to two/three illustrated case studies.

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To explore 'The Materiality of Surface', we must consider how pattern, texture and form interact on surfaces, and how that exchange becomes a medium of meaning. Whether that be expressing identity, evoking memories of places and people, storytelling or cultural symbolism (Art, 2023). According to Guiliana Bruno, a surface is not simply decorative; it is a bridge between viewer, material, meaning and sensory experience. While pattern, texture, and form are often discussed separately, they work together on a surface to create the first impression for the viewer (Bruno, 2014). Specific forms and materials connect a community to its heritage, tell stories through symbolic motifs, and evoke a sense of place and belonging through texture and form (Mackenzie, 2004). This essay will explore how surface materiality functions historically through architecture and pottery, using theories such as semiotics, phenomenology and hauntology.

Texture refers to the visual qualities of a surface, such as roughness and smoothness (dictionary.cambridge.org, n.d.). Pattern is the repeated arrangement of motifs or elements on a surface, sometimes rhythmically or culturally coded (Exchange, 2025). Form here refers to how surface inhabits three-dimensional space and how the surface interacts with structure and viewer movement (Fussel, 2011). Bruno believes that when surface is treated as a medium of communication, the surface's texture invites touch, its pattern deepened with culture, its form situates the surface in space (place) and narrative (story), such as the "Four Famous Types of Pottery",

in China, where the form of the vessel tells the story of society from a specific period (Hu, 2021). The surface then becomes the core of the story (Bruno, 2014), the patina of weathered stone, the imprint of the maker's tool, the repetition of a motif, all carry semiotic weight. The theory of semiotics studies the science of signs and symbols. In the 1960s, Roland Barthes extended the theoretical concept of semiotics well beyond language (Williams et al., 2024). He developed a relationship between semiotics and diverse forms, regardless of context or constraints. This understanding helps us uncover a wide range of meanings connected with sights, sounds, gestures, and objects. Semiotic theories gradually begun to converge with the subject of architecture, recognising that architecture, like language, is considered as a sophisticated and intricate system of signs and symbols (Barthes and Howard, 1988).

In architecture, the term Gothic was initially used by Italian writers in the late Renaissance (late 15th to early 17th century). The word was used derogatory as a synonym for 'barbaric'. They condemned this kind of artistry as rough and ugly, attributing it to the Gothic barbarians who destroyed the Roman Empire and its classical civilisation in the fifth century AD (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019). The styles key features include pointed arches, ribbed vaults, flying buttresses, tracery and expansive stained-glass windows (Shruti Sitaraman, 2024). Semiotics in architecture is the study of how buildings communicate symbolic and religious meaning through a system of signs. The symbolism is expressed by the

intentional use of architectural elements such as the verticality of soaring spires (symbolising longing for heaven), light and stained glass (representing divine light), and the tripartite nave and transepts (representing the Holy Trinity). This perspective sees the cathedral not merely as a structure, but as a visual language that tells a tale and transmits profound theological ideas to its audience (Amra Purde, 2023). These characteristics can also be used to discuss the theory of hauntology, which is a philosophical term coined by Jacques Derrida to “describe the persistence of the past, particularly ‘lost futures’, in the present” (Derrida, 1994). It implies that elements from the past, such as political objectives or cultural promises, and a general sense of unfulfilled futures, influence our expectations and motivations today. The name combines the words "haunt" and "ontology" to convey the idea of something that exists beyond time, its essence lingering (Allen, 2023). Mark Fisher expanded on this idea as a philosophy of history that disrupts the natural progression of time by claiming that the present is simultaneously haunted by the past and the future. (Reader, 2021).

Textually, Gothic cathedrals often use large ashlar stonework, but the surfaces are rarely smooth and blank. Tool marks, carvings, mouldings, relief sculptures and gargoyles, weathering and the interplay of light and shadow all build textural complexity while the material expresses the craftsmanship and the time (Megan, 2024). Texture can influence a building's entire atmosphere, aesthetics, and

perception, giving it a distinct character and personality (Alessandro Calvi Rollino, 2023). The Gothic Surface is highly patterned, the repetition of mullions, portals and vertical lines all create a rhythm (Shruti Sitaraman, 2025). However, the structural form of gothic architecture is fundamental to surface, with ribbed vaults, flying buttresses and pointed arches giving the surface its volume, its presence in light and shadow, the surface is not flat; it curves, vaults and projects (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019). Jun'ichiro Tanizaki (2019), argues that beauty is not found in the 'thing' itself but in the patterns of the shadows, light and darkness; that if not for shadows, there would be no beauty. The theory of phenomenology is relevant here; phenomenology is a philosophical approach founded by Edmund Husserl which serves as a foundation for exploring the structures of consciousness itself (Gallagher, 2012). In the context of architecture, it is an approach that emphasises the human and lived experience of space, focussing on how individuals perceive, feel, and interact with their constructed environment using their senses (Hafza, 2024). Phenomenology does not rely exclusively on abstract or formalistic design. It employs factors such as light, texture, scale, and atmosphere to create meaningful and emotionally charged settings that are inextricably linked to human existence and emotion. This method emphasises the "embodied" experience, in which the body's relationship with space is essential for comprehending and creating it (Rethinking the Future, 2019). The creating or viewing of gothic architecture is a perfect example of how the

surface (pattern, texture and form) function as a medium for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. For example, gothic architecture often professed the identity of the town, region and faith (The Art Story, 2018), a cathedrals façade, the tracery design, carves saints and stonework inscriptions signify the civic-religious identity of the community. The material choices such as local stone, imported marble and glass all speak of the local geology and trade networks of the time of creation (Weston, 2018), the surface, therefore, becomes a record of place and time. In terms of storytelling and symbolism, the surfaces of gothic cathedrals carry narrative, carved portals tell biblical stories, stained glass tracery patterns evoke cosmology, and the patterns of tracery symbolise the divine order and infinite repetition (KAVALER, 2006). The repetition of forms suggest ascent, transcendence; the light flickering through stained glass onto stone surfaces, which all work to communicate the divine. The texture and patterned surfaces invite the viewer to move upward, to look upward – to transcend (Bork, 2012).

Take Amiens Cathedral as an example of what has been discussed, the carved stone texture is integral to the surface; the relief band changes character across the nave, transept and choir – this demonstrates different phases of construction and time (Brown, 2023), further showing how the surface is a form of communication. The pattern of leaves becomes both decorative and symbolic of growth, life and nature within a sacred space. The vaulted ceiling ribs draws the eye upwards,

the surface of the vault is a network of lines, patterning the sky-ward interior (Cataldo, n.d.) This further explains surface materiality and how the surface is more than a finish, it is structural, narrative and expressive. Pattern, texture and form are inseparable, the tracery pattern sits within the structural form on the window, and the texture of the stone enhances the play of light and shadow (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019). Surfaces are encoded identity (a city's cathedral), place (local stone) and storytelling (biblical narratives).



Figure 1. Cathédrale Notre-Dame d'Amiens, reverse of the west façade, the great organs and the gallery (Müller, n.d.)



Figure 2. Amiens Notre-Dame Cathedral, buttresses of the nave (Rose, n.d.)

As makers, it is important to consider how the surface material, the texture, the pattern and the form, together communicate beyond decoration. The surface can hold

meaning of place, craft and identity, even in ceramics (Bruno, 2014). Pottery is one of the oldest human crafts, where ceramic surfaces have long been treated for decoration and as functional surfaces. From ancient utilitarian forms to highly refined studio pieces, surfaces in ceramics carry material, cultural and symbolic meaning (Jones, 2007). Contemporary ceramic discourse emphasises how texture, pattern and surface modifications have an impact on the vessels meaning and function as well as the sense of form and identity of the maker. For example, contemporary ceramics writing discusses how “textured ceramic surfaces invite tactile and visual exploration... and appreciate the presence of the artist’s hand (Risd.edu, 2015)”. Textually in ceramics, the surface might be smooth, glazed, rough, grogged, carved and stamped. There are many techniques in ceramics that produce tactile complexity, for example, the article written by Anna Shipuling states that “artists use textured or groggy clay to achieve rough, tactile surfaces (Ceramics, 2025)”. Pottery surfaces often comprise of many patterns and repeated motifs such as geometric designs, organic floral and foliate motifs, animal imagery and incised lines. In fact, many traditional ceramic cultures conceal cultural identity in surface patterning, for example, sgraffito, this can be traced back to north Africa and Spain with many highly decorated vessels which then spread globally to the likes of Italian artists and so forth (Garden, 2023). The form of the vessel influences how the surface is experienced, a bowl, jar or vase each offer a different canvas for surface treatment. Importantly, the surface modification

may follow the form, for example the texture may emphasis the foot, rim or bulge of a vessel. Whereas the form may respond to the texture or pattern of the vessel (Lassalle, 2025). Artist Joyce St Clair Volts states “As I work, my goal is to find a place where form, texture, and surface all play an important role in expressing my ideas. It’s important for texture and surface to work to build the form as opposed to simply laying upon it. These relationships constantly challenge and excite me as I look for new balances between strength, beauty, and celebration (Default, 2019)”.

Pottery is often a marker of culture, identity and place, for example, local clay, local glaze components and local techniques passed down through generations or inspired by their environment. The surface changes indicate whether the work is practical, decorative, ritual, cultural or individual. Clay bodies carry elements of the geological place it was retrieved from, the surface texture may refer to landscape, for example rough clay may leave sediment traces (www.glendale.edu, n.d.). Hauntology is also relevant here. Surface patterning on ceramics can tell stories of the mythical, cultural and the everyday. For instance, slip patterns may record tradition, glaze cracks or craquelure may reference age, time and fragility. In contemporary ceramics, texture and pattern are often used metaphorically, for instance, embracing wabi-sabi, the Japanese theory of imperfections (Keithan-Resnick, n.d.) that acknowledges that nothing is permanent, and the notion accepts the flaws that come with age and impermanence. It

contradicts the notion that new things are intrinsically superior and that things are no longer valuable if they are damaged or present signs of erosion, such as the patina of a weathered stone adding character to architecture. Artists and decorators have embraced the concept, which is also viewed as a way of life. The surface shows the makers hand through tool marks, carving or stamping (Grant, 2025). This communicates the craftsmanship, time and labour that went into each vessel, the surface then becomes an archive of creating. Voltz (2019), describes how the sprigged jars evolve where the jar forms, the applied sprigs (texture) and glaze interact with the surface. The text emphasises how texture and surface work to build the form rather than simply being applied decoration. This example, amongst the others discussed, conveys how surface is a communicative layer in ceramic practice.



Figure 3. Textured Vase (shipulina, n.d.)

Figure 4. Vase Form (Bridgewater, 2024)

Surface materiality in pottery tells us that ceramic surfaces are both functional and expressive, the interplay of pattern, texture and form matters; a patterned vessel with smooth, flat walls will read differently from one where texture, relief and form interplay. Surfaces can carry heritage through traditional decorative methods, place through clay body and local craft styles and identity through a maker's mark. As Bruno (2014) stated, maker's must think about how surface invites touch and view, conveying meaning. In my practice of ceramics, I am increasingly focused on how the surface is not simply a finish but a narrative layer. I draw inspiration from the gothic architectural surface in how pattern and texture are embedded in structural form and how they speak of identity and place. Additionally, I resonate with how surface modifications in ceramics can reveal method, maker's hand and materiality. Inspired by the notion of surfaces as 'memoryscapes' such as cathedral stone that ages and weathers, I began to source local materials such as clay and found objects. I can experiment with surfaces by using tool marks, press moulds and motifs to evoke the sense of place so that the material surface carries traces of context, environment and time. I strive to explore surface adjustments in ceramics. From Gothic architecture, I learned the importance of form in amplifying surface, the vaults, ribs and tracery allow surface pattern and texture to play out in space.

In my practice, I experiment with forms that have curvature, relief and undulation, so the surface pattern and texture wrap around and interact with light and shadow, where the beauty lies as said by Tanizaki in his 2019 book 'In Praise of shadows'.

In sum, the materiality of surface through pattern, texture and form provides a rich medium for communicating identity, place, storytelling and cultural symbolism. The examples above demonstrate how surface on a monumental scale uses pattern, texture and form to declare civic, religious and material identity. Furthermore, how surfaces at human scale embed maker identity, craft lineage and traditions, materiality and story in tactile and visual forms. In my own practice, I am committed to treating surface not as an afterthought but as the primary site of meaning-making through material selection, patterns, textures, forms in conscious dialogue with heritage, place, process and narrative. By recognising that texture is tactile memory, pattern is cultural code, and form is spatial gesture, we can design surfaces that are not merely decorative skins but expressive layers: communicating who we are, where we are and what we wish to express. I aim to explore this terrain further in my work, and to develop pieces where surfaces are expressive and symbolic of the making.

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Figures

Figure 1. Müller, P. (n.d.). Available at:

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Figure 2. Rose, C. (n.d.). Available at:

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Figure 3. shipulina, A. (n.d.). Available at:

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Figure 4. Bridgewater, S. (2024). My Own Image