University of Wales Trinity Saint David

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MArch Architecture

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Dissertation Proposal

The Revival of Ornamentation in Modern Architecture

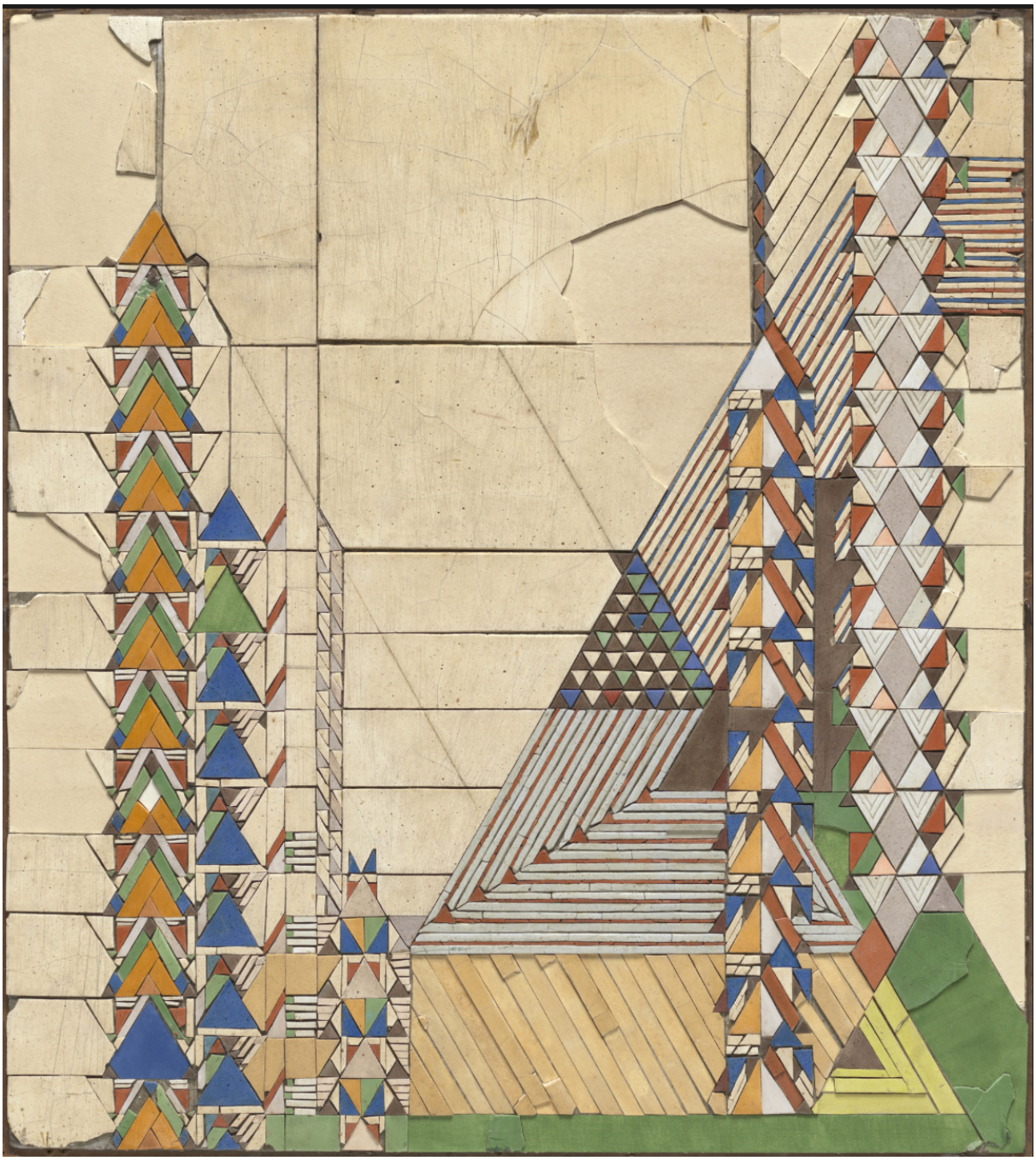
Level 7

Date: 11th March 2026

Word Count: 3548

The Revival of Ornamentation in Modern Architecture

Figure 1:



Frank Lloyd Wright / Charles Morgan - Triangles in Colour (1929) (MoMA, 2023).

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Aim of the Research

Ornamentation is a way of expressing identity; it can capture a building's story through storytelling and cultural significance. A relic of past architecture, prominent historical monuments remind us of former design practices. Ornamentation was rejected in early 20th-century architecture due to the introduction of minimalism and the rise of the function-over-form movement; the practice was a lost art. Most of the labour used to carve and form these ornamental pieces would be transferred to more functional needs, and the craftsmanship would slowly be lost over time, as it is uncommon to come across them today. As we move into the contemporary architectural movement and are exposed to new means of production, we can experiment with facilities that enable us to create and apply ornament in new ways, using contemporary methods. Although it's promising, the type of ornamentation created now is incomparable, constructed in new ways and methods, with a distinctive means of presentation: past ornamentation integrated into the surface, and contemporary ornamentation presenting an applied surface system.

The aim of the research paper is to determine the nature of ornamentation, what led to its rejection in the first place, and how, over the years, it has been slowly recognised and accepted through various methods and facilities. Determining what is meant by the "Revival of Ornamentation" and how it's shifted from being a decorative addition to a more meaningful component of the building, with contemporary structure aiming for more functional pieces that provide beneficial factors rather than embellishment. Has the ornament been completely stripped of its decorative element, and does it still retain its identity?

Key Words

Ornament, Craftsmanship, Formation, Revival and Scale

Strategy for Conducting the Research

To maintain a continuous flow and consistency in the research paper, the subject of ornamentation has been split into three separate categories. Moving from the historical context of rejection to its reintroduction, what led to its being praised again, and finally, how it's been redefined through modern technology. Treating the research thesis as a journey, from the past to the present.

Introduction / Research Question - Defining the term ornament and its significance in architecture

The Modern Movement - What led to its rejection of Ornament?

Historical context of ornamentation, defining its significance and the signs of its decline as the 20th Century approached. Exploring the influence of Adolf Loos' theories and how they set a foundation for the rejection of ornamentation. Overall, Architectural influences contributed to the rise of the international style.

Post-Modernism Movement - Reappraisal of Ornament

The transition from the Modern to the Post-Modern. Looking at Architects such as Robert Venturi, who pushed for the revival of decorative design, suggesting that architecture should embrace character and depth. Bringing back the richness and ambiguity that was lost in purity. Considering the theories of symbolism and signs, and how they cultivate the way buildings are communicated with the people. Reviewing literature such as *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Contemporary Movement - Refinement of Ornament

Discuss the rise of the digital age and how screens and fixtures are becoming fundamental tools in contemporary architecture. How has technology advanced ornament from being a symbolic gesture to a functional feature integrated into systems and building fabrication? Looking into studies on how Contemporary Ornamentation is viewed as a tool to enhance experiences and create spatiality (Moussavi, 2006, pp. 7-8).

Methodology

The methodology consists of the methods I aim to pursue to develop a critical perspective and arrive at a finalised position, which would help me throughout the paper's finalisation.

Discussing a range of literature and texts allows us to define a position in our writing and have the fundamental research to support our claims. Looking across a diverse range of literature and books, from historical to contemporary perspectives, provides insight into the architect's proposal and vision. What views and critical positions led them to gain this perspective on the subject, and what methodology did they use to back up the claims? The outcome provides an unbiased perspective on the subject matter, making us knowledgeable about what the writer proposes and giving us insight into their perspective. Considering the matter from multiple viewpoints.

Visiting local buildings that incorporate both traditional and contemporary ornament allows us to gain first-hand insight into their structures and the impact of ornament on them. Gaining research about the significance of ornamental pieces and whether they carry any relationship or meaning, factors that aren't expressed through media and drawings. Observing the structure in the present day allows us to assess the building's condition, how the proposed ornament holds up against the surrounding elements, and the human interaction. Allow us to ask whether the addition of ornament to the building is successful. Being up close in person also allows us to analyse the surface texture and fine details of the design.

Setting up interviews to discuss the research question with architects behind the various contemporary examples provides us with professional insight into the design proposal and what led to the ornamental approach. Furthermore, building on the question of why they intended to use a contemporary approach to ornamentation and what type of systems allowed them to achieve a successful outcome. Asking questions and gathering research, in which we can compare with research papers to develop an analysis and study of contemporary ornamentation and what the future outcome holds.

Pilot and case studies examine contemporary ornamental buildings and allow us to analyse the systems and approaches they incorporate. Using a range of existing, contemporary precedent studies, we can compare how development is evolving, the patterns and methods that have emerged to create the new systems, and whether the ornament has maintained a relationship with the building through functionality or narrative.

Literature Research

Ornament has played a significant role in defining buildings culturally, serving as an important means of encapsulation. It helps define historical events and preserve national heritage through the art of decoration and storytelling upon a building's surface. It's the art that defined the nation's desire, expressing its cultural identity through distinctive ornamentation and decoration.

The early 20th Century introduced the modern movement, a transition in the way we architecturally developed. Influenced by the architect Adolf Loos and the book he wrote, '*Ornament and Crime'*, Loos was an advocate for purity in his work, rejecting unnecessary additions and promoting functionalism as the main priority in a building. Arguing that ornamentation is a regressive tribute, being culturally unnecessary and a waste of hard labour. Claiming a building which characterises sleek, smooth edges, a minimalistic tone, will embody a timeless look, a style that never becomes outdated. Proposing that a street that is full of these types of buildings will "gleam with white walls" and reflect the holy city of Zion, a heavenly state (Loos, 1913, p. 189). Although Loos opposes decoration on the building's exterior, his interior work exhibits rich patterns and coherence, as seen in the Loos Haus. Flat, sleek exterior with a rich, warm interior, a transition contrast that highlights his push for more functional aspects over building form.

Figures 2 and 3:





Portrays the transition from a sleek, flat interior to a rich, highly decorative one, a staple of Loos' work.

Building styles and themes change, but pure form doesn't. This signifies that as a building span its lifespan and the surrounding themes evolve, the structures that incorporate ornament are negatively affected by displacement and obsolescence. With flat, minimalist structures, this is never truly experienced and remains an empty canvas,

ready to be converted (Bais, 2016). In comparison, Loos implies that ornament on a building's facade is comparable to a body ridiculed with tattoos all over. Highlighting that most inmates in prison are covered in tattoos, and those who have tattoos and aren't in jail are latent criminals and degenerates (Loos, 1913, p. 188). Which, overall, implies that buildings that strive to ornament their facades are like a prisoner with a body full of tattoos, emphasising that ornament is like committing a crime.

Traditional decorative ornament was predominantly handcrafted, an intensive labour that requires hard work, craftsmanship, and time to produce. Loos argues in his book that a turnover from ornamentation would not only reduce labour productivity and workers' time but also "wasted capital". Suggested that the sculptor can spend twice as long producing ornament to a high level of detail for a building and earn the same amount of income as a worker who's been tasked with producing a sleek, smoother design that functions the same and half of the labour costs. Making the ornament redundant reduces construction time and increases the building's price (Loos, 1913, p. 195).

The ideologies Loos provoked provided a foundation for the modern architectural movement, fundamentally influencing architects such as Le Corbusier and Heinrich Kulka, whose buildings emphasised minimalism, functionality, and the absence of ornament. With the focus shifting to interior spaces, a new hierarchy emerged, and complex interiors became a prominent feature of the building's design. With the push for function creating the form, leading to building under the influence, rationalised floor plans, and unusual building formations. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a German architect who was heavily influenced by Loos' teaching, pushed towards holistic design structures that made the structural system the building's identity, with a structurally honest style. A style that led to his "Less is more" stance, a quote he popularised.

Ornamentation, although rejected, wasn't completely gone. Architects such as Jože Plečnik would approach the modernist style, not from a functional but from a humanist perspective, a human-centred approach. Where most modern structures were large, monolithic structures looking down on the population, Plečnik maintained the human scale in his plans, using complex patterns and coherent schemes which felt personal to the person, embracing their sensory experience. Plečnik would use subtle symbolic ornament incorporated into the modernistic plan, becoming a predecessor of the post-modern movement, pioneering a distinctive combination of innovation from the modernistic style while maintaining the equity of traditional decorative elements.

The pre-modern movement is the predominant resurgence of decorative ornamentation. With its popularity revived, the art reintroduced itself with a new approach that embraced character and introduced ambiguity. The architect Robert Venturi influenced the rise of the postmodern movement with his use of complex characteristics that challenged the rigorous principles of modern architecture, employing techniques such as symbolism and complexity to convey ambiguity and evoke a sense of excitement (Venturi, 1966, p. 16). Using a hybrid of sleek, minimalistic structure with elements of ornament to provoke a new scene of buildings that reflect human experience while criticising the purity of modern simplicity. In the book "*Complexity and Contradictions*," Venturi believed in the power of experience and in evoking a sense of life in his work, creating a space that brings people together through its nature and architecture. As a result, his work contrasts a purpose with his

belief that a building should capture an assortment of meanings distinctive to a person, rather than a single collective statement (Venturi, 1966). This is where ornamentation became a fundamental feature, as Venturi believed that through form, you can provoke emotion that conjures symbolism and displays a sense of richness. Although the type of ornamentation used is diverse in appearance and distinctive from the traditional style, it captures the postmodern sentiment.

In Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* he remarks on the historical significance of traditional ornamental building, stating that the richness and depth were lost with the appraisal of the minimalist approach and that historical architecture incorporated complex spatiality and decorative detail, which attracted people to visit the building (Venturi, 1972, p. 75).

Through the book "*Learning from Las Vegas*", Venturi studies the architecture promoted through Las Vegas, and the response it gets from the public. Using the examples of a duck-shaped structure and a decorated shed, Venturi argues that the duck's form distracts users from its message, whereas the decorated shed clearly displays its purpose (Venturi, 1972, pp. 17-19). In the context of buildings and ornament, when placed in a city which incorporates an urban plan and is surrounded by similar structures, a building that has a decorative element along the facade and an element of signage would perform at a more sufficient rate compared to a building that incorporates form as its distinctive characteristic due to publics view point. Placing a loud form, such as a duck, in a busy urban environment isn't practical, as it can create an uncomfortable, alienating experience.

The contemporary movement defines ornament as both a decorative element on the facade and an integral system that provides functionality to the building. With advances in technology and the availability of new systems, ornamentation has been seen not just as an applied component but also as a structural element emerging from the building envelope. Ornamentation can shape the structure's form. Using technology, ornamentation can break the seal of being a physical component; with the incorporation of digitalisation and screen, it can be displayed upon any surface using projectors and fixations, allowing it to incorporate a new level of depth. Contemporary technology also allows ornamentation to be manipulated remotely, allowing it to change position and create distinctive displays that were once impossible.

"*The functions of Ornament*" by Farshid Moussavi explores the incorporation of ornamentation within the contemporary movement and how technology has revolutionised the art form. In the text, Moussavi suggested that contemporary ornamentation can be viewed through light fixtures and spatiality, manipulating light through mediums to endorse a sense of space. Moussavi argues that the digitalisation of ornamentation changes how we view ornament, enabling us to combine functionality with aesthetics, enhancing the sensory experience for users, and providing the building with a functional additive (Moussavi, 2006, p. 7).

Below is a set of tables that display a range of contemporary precedents incorporating ornamentation. The table aims to provide insight into what systems are available, how they've been incorporated into the structure, on the surface or integrated on the surface, and a description of whether the ornament provides a functional purpose or is solely decorative. Provides the medium used and the ornamental motifs.

Table 1: Example of Contemporary Buildings that incorporate Ornamentation

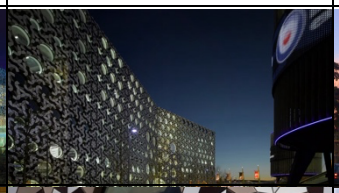
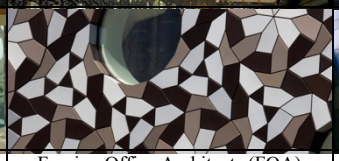
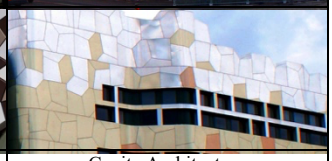
Name of the Building:	John Lewis Retail Store - Leicester	Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication - London	WJEC Headquarters - Cardiff
Image of the building:			
Image of the Ornament Close-up:			
Architect:	Foreign Office Architects (FOA)	Foreign Office Architects (FOA)	Capita Architecture
Year:	2008	2010	2010
Type of Ornament Used:	Illustration applied Directly on the Surface	Applied, Floral Geometrical Tiles forming patterns	Applied, Asymmetrical Panels with a Gradient
Materiality:	Glass	Aluminium Tiles	Metal Cladding
Description:	Decal has been applied upon the surface of the glass to create a surrealistic pattern. Allows light to illuminate through the facade, creating a level of depth and illusion.	Oriented in an approach which appears chaotic up-close but once view from afar, form an intricate pattern. Attention to detail around the curved windows and archways.	Reflective Metal Cladding that forms a gradient as you transverse up the building, pieces of the cladding sticking upwards to create castle effect.
Other:	Creates a sense of privacy for the clientele and solar protection.	Imitates a floral design, in relations to the gothic period.	Multi-Coloured Palette to pay homage to the surrounding site

Table 2: Example of Contemporary Buildings that incorporate Ornamentation

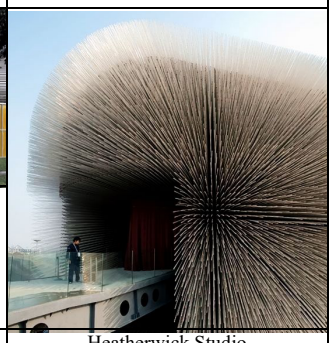
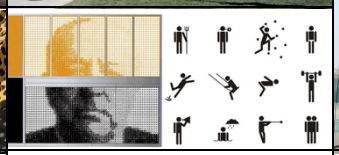
Name of the Building:	Swansea Arena - Swansea	McCormick Tribune Campus Centre (MTCC) - Illinois	UK Pavillion - Shanghai
Image of the building:			
Image of the Ornament Close-up:			
Architect:	ACME Architects	Rem Koolhaas	Heatherwick Studio
Year	2022	2003	2010
Type of Ornament Used:	Digital motion enhanced upon a Perforated Screens (Digital Skin)	Perforated Screens forming series of illustrations	Extruded, surrealistic Form
Materiality:	Corrugated Aluminium Panels	Aluminium Mesh Glass Hybrid	Acrylic Rods
Description	Perforated screen that wraps the surface of the building, creating a wave formation. Digital screen has been incorporated to advertise events and illuminate the area	The large image composed is the original architect of the building: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.	Composed of 60,000 acrylic rods, the structure is intended to form a dandelion or a hairy appearance.
Other:	100,000 LED are incorporated	Facade bends light to create a halo effect. Provides solar protection.	On the edge of each rod, a plant seed has been placed.

Table 3: Example of Contemporary Buildings that incorporate Ornamentation

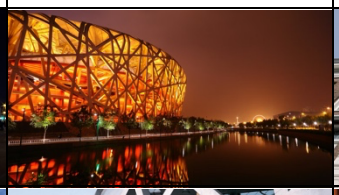
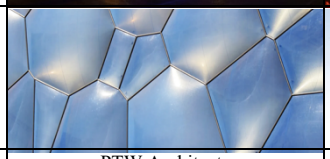
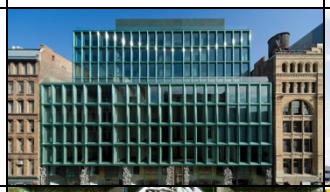
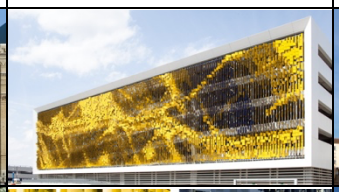
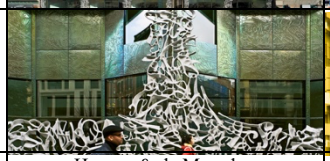
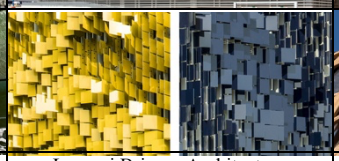
Name of the Building:	National Aquatic Centre (Water Cube) - Chaoyang	National Stadium (Bird's Nest) – Chaoyang	Ceramic House - Amsterdam
Image of the building:			
Image of the Ornament Close-up:			
Architect:	PTW Architects	Herzog & de Meuron and Arup	Studio RAP
Year	2003	2003	2023
Type of Ornament Used:	Transparent, Hazy, Slightly Extruded. Creation of a Large Bubble. Geometrical.	Geometrical Strings, Wrapping around the building	Organic Flow, creating a ripple effect along the brick.
Materiality:	Ethyl Tetrafluoroethylene (ETFE)	Steel Lattice	3D Printed Brick Structures
Description	Facade capturing an aquatic, bubbly effect. Following the narrative of being a aquatic centre.	Wrapping around the structure, a symbol of protection and has resemblance of a bird's nest.	A Contemporary twist on the traditional brick house design. Using 3D Printed slip-on brick to form the facade.
Other:	Illuminates in the night sky	Inner bowl emits a red glow through the facade openings	Sustainable

Table 4: Example of Contemporary Buildings that incorporate Ornamentation

Name of the Building:	40 Bond Apartments – New York	Parking Structure Art Façade – Indianapolis	Cultural and Leisure Centre – Chaville
Image of the building:			
Image of the Ornament Close-up:			
Architect:	Herzog & de Meurdon	Laraqui Bringer Architecture	Laraqui Bringer Architecture
Year	2007	2014	2015
Type of Ornament Used:	Abstract Foundation, levelled at the Human scale	Transitioning Panels, creating depth and gradient in the facade	Organic, Floral Facade
Materiality:	Aluminium and Stainless Steel	Steel Metal Panels	Timber (Raw Larch)
Description	Building foundation follows a rural ornamental piece inspired by the graffiti of New York	Creates shift and colour changing effects as you travel past based on your perspective and movement.	Facade follows an organic approach, displaying trees surrounding the structure, constructed using timber.
Other:	3D Patterns developed from scans	Panels turn based on the time fo the day.	Neighbouring a Forest, Reflects the buildings inspiration

Pilot Studies

For the pilot studies, two buildings have been chosen for the analysis and comparison of their ornamentation. Spanning from different eras to get a feel of contrast on how the timeframe and transition through movement affect the way ornament is produced and presented. Looking at the type of ornament used, is it considered to be integrated into the building's facade, or a piece laid upon the surface plane?

Building Study 1: The Old Bank Building (1883 - Traditional)

The Old Bank Building is a monumental piece of Victorian architecture located in the rich market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, a heavily Victorian-influenced town that holds the birthplace of the writer, William Shakespeare. The building pays tribute to the writer through the integration of red terracotta tiles laid across the first-floor exterior, depicting various scenes from Shakespeare's plays, with brief descriptions to accompany them. The main entrance features a mosaic of Shakespeare, an art piece made of Venetian glass, a symbolic gesture to the Holy Trinity Church, the burial place of Shakespeare, and a homage that welcomes you as you enter the building (Rust, 2011). The overall building facade follows the town's systematic theme, with a Victorian essence in its characteristics and the placement of the terracotta tiles, both of which tell a story through imagery and make the town's heritage accessible to those traversing it.

Figure 4: View of the building's façade and entrance:



View of the Building façade as you approach the main entrance from Sheep Street. The building's form reflects Shakespeare's influence and the impact his work has had on the town's significance.

The construction of the bank was a monumental piece for the period, introducing a masonry envelope and becoming a figure in the vast crowds of timber-framed structures. The main identity and value of a building come from the level of craftsmanship evident in its facade, particularly the ornamentation. The substantiation of human scale and the irreplicable detail that only a human hand can replicate the raw, unfiltered finish that highlights the building's value. The facade uses a of-the-surface ornament system, encapsulating the everlasting message within its various decorative tiles and creating a sense of relief and storytelling. A lost art form that uses the building's surface to express a narrative, a role of communication that implements a functional and immersive value (Bordeleau, 2009). Prominently not present in many contemporary architectural pieces.

Building Study 2: Library of Birmingham (2013 - Contemporary)

The library of Birmingham is a loud, volumetric structure which sits within the heart of Birmingham. With its distinctive colour palette and facade resembling a jewellery box, the building aims to make a bold statement. Functionally, the building creates an urban presence, located near the centre, with its interior aiming to create a direct link with people through the various capillary spaces. The building's overall formation is composed of a series of large masses stacked upon one another, with a large cylinder inserted through the centre to create circulation, with a final finish of a decorative ornamental screen wrapping the facade.

Figure 5: Eye-Level view of the building:



From an eye view, the recessed foundation creates a floating effect. A series of rings that form the facade (Walsh, 2026).

The structure follows modernist design principles, applying ornament directly to the existing plane and wrapping it around the surrounding facade in an organic, flowing state. The design follows an intricate geometrical form, overlapping a series of rings that creates an element of royalty, like a jewellery box or a Fabergé egg. This type of ornamentation is an efficient design approach, manufactured by machines rather than by hand, and can be directly applied to the surface once completed. Reducing labour and costs compared to a traditional method. An additional note about the facade's functional elements: located on the curtain wall, the ornament provides a passive means of privacy and shading from solar radiation.

The building follows the previously mentioned methods, influenced by the modernist movement and the teachings of Adolf Loos. The exterior aims to capture a timeless building, a product that will never go out of style. The interior, on the other hand, has a rich essence, following a series of Victorian-style library spaces, a complete contrast, and a switch from the ornamentation prompted by the exterior. A reverse take on the traditional style (Loos, 1913, pp. 187-202).

Compare and Comparison of the Two Buildings Studies

Both buildings are distinctive in the way they represent ornamentation. Having been established in different time periods and following separate architectural movements. The Old Bank study used non-organic, raw materiality, prominent in traditional structures and deemed as 'modern' during the period. Alternatively, the library of Birmingham is captured in a modernistic palette, using concrete and glass for the massing, with a steel layer wrapping the building. The dynamic transition between buildings creates a diverse atmosphere, with the traditional elements of the Old Bank capturing a warm, monumental essence that blends with the surrounding realm while maintaining its own distinctive identity. The Library of Birmingham features a strong testimonial piece, capturing its image through large, volumetric masses and a bold colour palette, encouraging people to enter this library that not only holds books but also wants to hold the people. Where the Old Bank was built with a sense of human scale to capture the narrative and storytelling, the library of Birmingham goes beyond this scale to create a central hub space, a palace for the people.

An immediate connection between the two chosen buildings is the subject of the poet William Shakespeare and how they interpreted his work in the building's narrative and characteristics. With the Old Bank building located in the writer's hometown, the facade pays homage by integrating scenes from his plays along its active frontage, creating a sense of storytelling as you traverse it. Displayed on hand-carved ceramic tiles and leading towards a Venetian glass portrait of the writer, a sense of human scale is preserved. Using the narrative of his presence to decorate the building and celebrating his work through the very fabric that holds it up. The Library of Birmingham takes an interior approach. Within the large cylinder, on the top floor of the building, the Shakespearean-inspired library is located, home to important pieces of literature. The space is an original piece taken from the 1882 Birmingham Central Library, which has been retrofitted and integrated into the new structure, preserving the room like an artefact (Ljeh, 2013).

Figure 6: Insight into the Shakespearean Room:



The Shakespeare Room: Located on the library's top floor. The room is decorated in a Victorian manner, rich in tones and profiles (Unique Venues Birmingham, 2026).

After much analysis, it’s clear that the buildings are heavily contrasted, emulating a design principle but many distinctive ways. It’s prominent that the ornamentation used on the Old Bank building is entirely decorative, created to express emotion and a degree of narrative, paying homage to identity, which is much celebrated in the local town. The Library of Birmingham’s approach to ornamentation has the opposite effect, with the heavily rich components sitting within the structure while having the exterior act as a protective layer, using the decorative element to process an identity, in the form of a jewellery box, and a functional aspect to prevent over exposure from the surrounding elements. No direct narrative.

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