Urban Housing and Ornament

Architectural Thesis by
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Abstract

Architecture must be personalized to create a humane living environment. Scale, attention to detail, and the use of ornament can effect the personalization of design. Ornament was chosen to explore the creation a humane living environment for this project. Three issues regarding ornament in architecture were chosen for study. These issues include the ornamental aspects of light, the exploitation of design implications of the joining of contrasting materials, and the repetition of elements to create pattern.

A mixed-use building in downtown Indianapolis containing commercial space and 24 residential units was designed for the study. Salient issues for the problem included creating an urban identity for residents of the building through sculpted building form and articulating commercial and residential areas, enhancing the quality of pedestrian life, creating an urban edge for the city block, and marking the corner site location. The goal of this project was not only to design an environment that responds well to both people and the urban environment, but also to discover my definition of ornament and its importance in architecture.
Building Program

Ground Level
commercial space
residence entrance
   lobby
   stairs

First through Fifth Levels
residences
   foyer
   living
   dining
   kitchen
   bath
   bedroom(s)
   balcony
   storage
Background

As one pages through any of the glamorous professional architecture journals, one is impressed with the creative, sleek designs that are published. However, I question the "humaneness" of many designs: the use of slick, polished materials, the lack of attention to ornamentation, and the disregard for the human in design are only part of the problem that I see as an architecture that is unfriendly. Are contemporary architects designing for one another to get their work published or are they designing for people--their buildings' users? Does contemporary architecture accurately describe our society? At a time in the architectural profession when impersonal design is prevalent, I feel this project is a way to address these problems and to possibly offer alternatives for design and thought.

The idea for this thesis was generated from travelling to the Orient in the summer of 1988 and from experiences in Baltimore, Maryland. Throughout my trip to the Orient, I was fascinated by the ornament of the traditional architecture of China, Korea, and Japan. Materials, texture and form made the architecture seem very humane and personal. I felt drawn to touch the architecture and to experience it. I then realized that the personalized design found in the Oriental architecture was not present in the Western architecture with which I was familiar. Similarly, while in Baltimore, Maryland I lived in an ornately detailed row house and was able to see that the ornament and detail made the entire neighborhood feel comfortable and "livable". Unfortunately, not enough of these comfortable places exist. Because our surrounding environment effects us immeasurably, I feel that it is my responsibility as an architect to create a "personal architecture" so that the environment feels comfortable to interact in. Therefore, from these experiences, my thesis topic developed into the creation of a personal living environment that helps one feel a part of the architecture--a part of the context--and to helps one to express their individuality in the urban environment. These experiences led me to believe that this could occur through the use of ornament in architectural design.

To many the home is an extension of the self; the condition of the house may have an unseen effect on its inhabitants. Much of contemporary urban housing design offers little prospect for spontaneity, individualization or personalization. The machine/industrial aesthetic derived from the modern movement makes people apathetic toward their impersonal environment. Therefore, due to these reasons and because every person interacts with housing, I believe urban housing was an appropriate building form to investigate in this study.

I assembled a questionnaire in order to better understand the design elements that created a personal design. The survey's results implied that low scale, textured materials, sculpted form and diversity are characteristics of a personalized design. (See Appendix for detailed questionnaire analysis.) The questionnaire's implications aided the conceptualization of the project and the eventual product.
Site

The project's site is located in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana at New Jersey and Vermont Streets in a context rich in ornament and materials. The location was selected because the site is near other proposed and existing residential units, is in a rich architectural context, is in a location for viable commercial space and because it would fill an undesirable hole in the urban fabric. Salient urban design issues included continuing the streets' predominant horizontality, articulating the corner site, articulating commercial and residential zones, and filling the urban fabric hole created by the parking lot to regain the urban street wall.
Conceptual Statements

reacting to some images...
Slick surfaces...redundant forms...nothing for the eyes to touch.
The person has been forgotten in the architecture that was created for him.
Impersonal living environments make for impersonal living.

the thesis statement/hypothesis....
an architecture that is humane and/or personal—that is, an architecture of texture, human scale,
sculpted quality, tangibility, and regional identity—will help to:

- create more comfortable and better living environments;
- express one's identity in the city;
- create more pride in ownership;
- create a visually interesting architecture;
- create a more-true/moral/more-correct architecture

the kind of architecture anticipated....
a contextual yet unique work which will create a place in the city, within which will lie identifiable
living places, within which will lie comfortable, livable spaces that can serve as a base for personal
expression. an architecture with...

projections, rustications, material changes, colors, openings, closings, deflections,
shadows, highlights, movement, extroversion, introversion, familiarity, nativeness

the building type and functions and etc. anticipated...
-a five floor building containing 24 -1000 sq. foot dwelling units.
-commercial spaces will occupy the first level.
-deck/patio/enjoyment area/multipurpose room will occupy the rooftop area.
Conceptual Narrative

Five o'clock and she was ready to go home. Deb had a strenuous day at the hospital. The surgeons in the operating room had been very demanding of her skills and knowledge during the day. She was ready to relax at home. As she walked out of the hospital, the setting August sun felt good on her face. The August air felt surprisingly crisp and mild as she walked to her bus stop. As she stepped onto the bus and melted into the seat, she anticipated a relaxing evening with her husband. He had promised her an evening of dinner and music. After the demanding day she needed some fun.

Bob always looked forward to his walk home. He enjoyed the excitement and convenience of living and working downtown. The walk was a bit therapeutic for him too; his mind would slow down after the fast pace of the office. And after all, it was 14 minutes of exercise. As he walked north, he anticipated a fun and relaxing evening with his wife. They hadn't spent much time together for several weeks due to Bob's late nights at the office. His walk home seemed quick.

People and buildings flew past Bus 31 like images and sounds on a video screen. The constant drone of the engine and the deafening silence of the over-packed bus made for a lonely ride home...thank goodness the ride lasted for only 15 minutes. As Number 31 passed through the cold corridors of downtown, Deb looked forward to her neighborhood. The lower scale of the buildings and her neighbors would be a welcome sight. She sighed relief as she stepped off the bus...home at last! She glanced back at the downtown skyline and appreciated the quiet warmth of her neighborhood. As her building emerged around the corner she discovered something new about it...it seemed that she was always realizing something new about it. Her apartment house was very unique but it felt comfortable to her. She remembered how the stone and brick's texture and color compelled her to touch the building as she approached it the first time she saw it. And windows. She loved windows. She always liked to gaze out of the huge picture window in the house where she grew up. But this time she realized how the building caused the sun to produce designs and patterns on its surface. It was part of her and she of it and proud to call it home.

Bob opened the door to the apartment and walked into a sea of light. The soaring space welcomed him home as patterns from the evening sun danced on the living room walls. He was glad to be home. As Bob opened the large glass door and stepped onto the terrace, he looked at the busy city below. People. Cars. Shoppers. He somehow felt secluded from the bustle of the street.

As her building emerged around the corner she discovered something new...the building caused the sun to produce designs and patterns on its surface...as patterns from the evening sun danced on the living room walls.
With these concepts in mind, I initiated the project by studying various structural types which would order and shape the interior spaces. A number of studies were conducted on the bearing wall-column concept to determine apartment configuration and building circulation. Model studies determined that a "stair corridor" was preferable over an interior double-loaded corridor. To help create potentially dynamic spaces, Le Corbusier's Marseilles Block served as a model for loft apartments. Access to the apartments occurs at every-other level. Stair towers served as the circulation corridors for the 24 apartments. These towers provided a space for a sequencing of events to create a transition from the exterior to the interior. These events included a filtering of space at the entrance, viewing the outside form the stairs, and penetrating a wall to access the living areas.

Models were then built to make all concepts tangible. The models showed the potential dynamism contained in the concepts. After several weeks of the project's development through drawing, I found that the design had lost its original spontaneity and dynamic potential. I continued for several more frustrating weeks until I discovered that the project's problems stemmed from a lack of focus and a lack of intuitive thinking. I was attempting to solve too many design problems at once. I focused on the ornamental aspects of light, the exploration of design implications of the joining of contrasting materials, and the repetition of elements to create a pattern as the sources for ornamental exploration and found that the project became much more manageable and focused. I also began to draw and design intuitively in order to bring the spontaneity back into the design. I then interpreted the "intuitive drawings" in order to discover the practical implications of the exercises. I was able to deal with compositional, material, formal, and textural issues without the burden of examining the practical implication simultaneously and could better handle the issues intended for study.
Building Concepts

The project's concept was determined from the structure which helped to organize spaces and provided the opportunity for dynamic spaces. A structural system of load-bearing masonry walls was developed in conjunction with columns as a base for spatial exploration. The structure provided the guidelines that helped define the interior spaces which in turn defined the exterior spaces and elevations. The layering of the structure and spaces provided opportunities for spatial expansion and contraction, framed and filtered views, and filtered light. All of these elements helped to create extraordinary spaces for living.

I chose load bearing exterior walls with series of columns as the structural concept because the load-bearing walls refer to other residential units in the area and the heavy wall provided the opportunity for light to dynamically penetrate spaces. Columns helped to further define interior spaces. Spaces from the residential units that were extruded from the masonry wall would reduce the building's scale, create a sculpted building form, and allow people to identify their apartments. I saw the building metaphorically representing the city of Indianapolis as a collage of materials, people, and personalities.

I initially defined ornament as a process rather than a product; that is, ornament is the thought behind design and the care taken with materials. Ornament is an attitude. Although there are many types of ornamentation, it was impossible to attempt every interesting issue in this thesis. Therefore, three issues regarding ornament in architecture were studied. These issues include the ornamental aspects of light, the exploitation of design implications of the joining of contrasting materials, and the repetition of elements to create pattern.
EXTERIOR STUDY
EXTERIOR NIGHT VIEW
Analysis

Through this project, I was able to see the importance of intuitive thinking in design. Intuitive thinking is a continual process but I discovered that its proper use and focus is the key for its successful use as a design tool. I now understand how to combine practical and intuitive thinking into a spontaneous design that is functional. This may seem to be a very mundane realization; however, up to this time I have been frustrated because I have been unable to achieve the same level of spontaneity combined with functionality as I have in other design disciplines such as graphic design and metalsmithing. Because I was designing "Architecture" which had to be "Functional", I was unable to design intuitively because the design had to "work". I understand that design can be both intuitive and practical. My goal is to attain a successful balance of the two thought processes. I now realize the importance of both types of thinking and I look forward to exciting architectural designs in my future.

I began this project with a preconceived definition of ornament while paradoxically not knowing quite what ornament was. In hindsight, I believe my initial definition of ornament--process rather than product--was tentative but because I had never before designed with ornament in mind, I had difficulty working with it at first. Therefore, this definition as a process and as an expression of a function and the tangible expression of a concept enabled me to attack my thesis problem. Although I still define ornament in this manner, I more fully understand the definition: "Everything has the potential for being ornamental." The treatment of an element and its surroundings through the use of color and proportion, for example, are the factors that can make an element ornamental. I realize that this definition has just begun to form and it will continue to grow and develop throughout my lifetime.
Conclusion

This thesis has been more than an investigation into ornament and the personalization of the living environment, it has been a discovery of my design process. The strengths and weaknesses of my process have been exposed and I have learned a great amount about myself, intuitive thinking and its role in the design process, and my definition of ornament. This quest to find my definition of true or moral architecture has been both painful and joyful. The pain is a result of weaknesses in my process of designing and the pleasure is a result of the discovery of something new--the learning process. I realize that I have just begun this quest for "architectural truth". Whether this insight or opinion for which I'm searching requires another month, several years or even a lifetime to discover is not important because I've realized that the process of discovery is a major part of the excitement of design. I am trying to define and discover my "style" or "theory" of design and in the process am discovering myself. True excitement.
1. What are the characteristics of buildings that you find attractive; what makes them appealing to you?

2. Which building material do you think is most appropriate for housing? Rate order of preference with 1 being first choice.
   ___ steel
   ___ wood
   ___ brick
   ___ concrete
   ___ stone
   ___ glass
   ___ other:

3. Which building material conveys a feeling of warmth and intimacy. Rate in order of preference with 1 being first choice.
   ___ steel
   ___ wood
   ___ brick
   ___ concrete
   ___ stone
   ___ glass
   ___ other:

4. Please name and describe your favorite building. Why do you enjoy it?

5. Of the following qualities, please describe what you like/dislike about your present home.
   Privacy
   Building materials
   Ornament
   Color
   Location
   Architectural style
   Other:

6. What is the feature you like best about your present home?

7. If you could change anything about your present house, what would that be?
For the following questions, please refer to the diagrams below.

Rate each response in order of preference.

8. Which building seems most "personal" to you?  
9. Which building would be most exciting to be in?  
10. In which building would you feel most secure?  
11. In which building would you feel most comfortable?  
12. Which building seems most interesting to you?  
13. Which structure is most beautiful?  
14. Which building is the most ornate or ornamented?
For the following questions, please refer to the diagrams below.

Rate each response in order of preference.

15. Which building seems most "personal" to you?
16. Which building would be most exciting to be in?
17. In which building would you feel most secure?
18. In which building would you feel most comfortable?
19. Which building seems most interesting to you?
20. Which structure is most beautiful?
21. Which building is the most ornate or ornamented?
ANALYSIS: QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The following analysis is based upon responses from ten individuals who completed the questionnaire. The questions were purposely broad in nature to develop an understanding of a small sample of public opinion. After analyzing the results, I may now proceed to develop new and more specific questionnaires that will help to focus my thesis.

When asked to describe what they liked best about their present house, most people chose functional as opposed to aesthetic reasons. However, aesthetics are important to many; people specifically described things they find attractive in buildings. Comments such as "texture", "materials", "intricate design", and "fine craftsmanship" suggest people enjoy architectural elements of relatively small scale. Favorite buildings were usually characterized by the same elements that people described as creating attractive buildings; there appears to be no relationship between function and favored buildings, however.

Response to questions 8 through 14 was almost unanimous. The two diagrams featured structures that were virtually identical, although one was altered a bit. The building in Diagram B, which was the more conventional and familiar of the two, was preferred by nearly all that were surveyed. It appears that slight alterations to buildings can either benefit or hinder perceptions of a design.

The results of the graphic questionnaire (questions 15 through 21) proved to be very interesting. Scale, texture, familiarity of form, and material seem to play an important role in making architecture seem personal. People felt that being inside of buildings featuring a sculpted exterior and identifiable building parts would be more exciting than being inside of less sculpted buildings. In addition to a sculpted quality and identifiable building parts, people viewed textured buildings as most ornate. Formal familiarity, diversity, low scale and a sculpted form seem to make buildings beautiful. The texture and the scale of a building appears to make the architecture comfortable while familiarity of the form is less important than originally anticipated. If this analysis corresponds to a "personal" or "humane" design, the following words and phrases describe the architecture: low scale, textured form and material, familiar elements, sculpted form, and diverse.
1. What are the characteristics of buildings that you find attractive; what makes them appealing to you?

* Many windows and a lot of wood; efficient homes.
* Texture, form, meaning in the architecture, composition.
* The way the space is used in the area; textures of materials.
* Brick or stone construction, full basements, picture windows, several floors, Victorian or Colonial design.
* Modern-looking, warm.
* Interesting design which provides character—dislike "cookie cutter" buildings.
* Uniqueness, brick or wood, two story buildings.
* Fine craftsmanship and detailing at the level where people can enjoy it; honesty in materials.
* Detail, form, use of materials, feeling within spaces.
* Older buildings with intricate design, stone, and leaded glass.

2. Which building material do you think is most appropriate for housing? Rate order of preference with 1 being first choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steel</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brick</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A_other:

3. Which building material conveys a feeling of warmth and intimacy. Rate in order of preference with 1 being first choice.

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
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<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stone</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A_other:
4. Please name and describe your favorite building. Why do you enjoy it?

*There’s an old house near where I live. It was built in 1870 and has two spiral wooden staircases on each end. It also has a place in every room where you can put a fireplace or stove. It has 2 balconies.

*An efficient, small but spacey New England cottage...wood doorways and window sills.

*My home; I grew up there.

*Sears tower--modern looking, very close to town, big, plain looking.

*A Victorian mansion in Union City, Michigan. It is a three story home of brick with large rooms, wood shutters inside. Wood trim inside fireplaces, etc.

*A church in Canada: It had all natural wood trim and was a truly beautiful picture inside.

*The Pantheon--I enjoy it because one immediately senses a wholeness, a complete work of art when one enters it. It is complete in every detail and functions perfectly for its intended use.

*TWA terminal, FLW studio.

*Elliott Hall, BSU: it is an older building made of stone with leaded glass. The inside has a lot of wood in it. This building has a lot of warmth.