

## Is Ornament Crime? Discussing The Representative Nature of Ornament in Architecture



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**Abstract:** Ornament is a conceptual and cultural discussion. But it is generally reduced to being discussed as a formal and superficial construction. It is one of the main tools of representation. It mainly represents nature. However, the change in its source of representation from nature to culture in the early 20th century leads ornament to be redefined, and even refused in architecture. Modern architects accuse it of being a crime not capable of representing modern culture. Post-modern architects embrace ornament as the main tool of representation in the second half of the century. It is called as the return of ornament in architecture. Today, the reinvention of ornament is rather discussed in the architecture of the 21st century. It is discussed by new concepts such as mediatic, phylogenetic, chaotic, eccentric, hypnotic, photogenic, and parametric due to the developments in the digital technology. As such, ornament now represents digital culture. The aim of this paper is to reveal the fact that conceptual and cultural framework of ornament is significantly changed in architecture. It is critically important to understand this change for architects in the 21st century in which ornament is rediscovered both as a tool of design and representation. The changing representative nature of ornament is therefore discussed in the paper. It will constitute a theoretical basis for further discussions on ornament in architecture.

**Keywords:** Architectural design, architectural theory, ornamental architecture, ornament, ornamentation

### Süsleme Suç Mu? Mimarlıkta Süslemenin Temsili Doğasını Tartışmak

**Özet:** Süsleme, kavramsal ve kültürel bir tartışmadır. Ancak mimarlıkta süsleme genellikle biçimsel ve yüzeysel bir inşa ve tartışma olmaya indirgenmiştir. Süsleme, önemli temsil araçlarından biridir. Daha çok doğayı ve doğal oluşumları temsil etmiştir. Ancak erken 20. yüzyılda temsiliyet kaynağının doğadan kültüre doğru değişim göstermiş olması süslemenin yeniden tanımlanmasına, hatta mimarlıkta süslemeye karşı çıkılmasına neden olmuştur. Modern mimarlar, süslemeye modern kültürü temsil etmediği gerekçesiyle karşı çıkmıştır. Buna karşılık, post-modern mimarlar yüzyılın ikinci yarısında süslemeyi başlıca temsiliyet aracı olarak kabul etmiş ve kullanmıştır. Bu, mimarlıkta süslemenin geri dönüşü olarak ele alınmıştır. 21. yüzyılın mimarlığında ise süslemenin yeniden keşfedildiği anlaşılmaktadır. Dijital teknolojinin gelişmesiyle süsleme bugün medyatik, filogenetik, kaotik, eksantrik, hipnotik, fotojenik ve parametrik gibi yeni kavramlarla tanımlanmakta ve tartışılmaktadır. Öyle ki, süsleme artık dijital kültürü temsil etmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, mimarlıkta süslemenin kavramsal ve kültürel çerçevesinin önemli bir değişim geçirdiğini ortaya koymaktır. Bu değişimi anlamak, süslemenin hem bir tasarım hem de bir temsil aracı olarak yeniden keşfedilmiş olduğu 21. yüzyılda mimarlar için kritik bir önem taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, makalede süslemenin değişen temsili doğası tartışılmaktadır. Bu tartışma, mimarlık alanında süsleme üzerine yapılacak olan yeni tartışmalar için kuramsal bir altlık oluşturacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mimari tasarım, mimari kuram, süslemeli mimarlık, süs, süsleme

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ornament is not only a formal and superficial construction, but also a conceptual and cultural discussion in architecture. It is one of the main tools of architectural representation. The representative nature of ornament is conceptually and culturally discussed in this paper. But the aim of this discussion is not to define the concept of ornament; it is rather to discuss it through the mainstream architectural theories to reveal its conceptual and cultural framework. One of them is the theory of Loos who accuses ornament of being a crime [1]. It is actually a theoretical discussion, which constitutes a basis for modern architects to imagine and design a non-ornamental architecture in the 20th century. However, we should start from the early history of ornament to understand its change and current state in architecture.

The concept of ornament comes from the Latin concept of *ornamentum* in the early 13th century which means *apparatus, equipment, trappings; embellishment, decoration, trinket* [2]. So, it is not a new concept and a new practice. It is practiced in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt and throughout antiquity, and among the so-called primitive cultures. It refers to the traditional practice of decoration displayed on the surfaces of furniture, interior, and exterior of buildings [3]. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between ornamentation and decoration. While decoration is defined as something added on the surface of the building, ornamentation is defined as something internal not superficial [4]. As such, ornament is not an applied decoration. It is rather intrinsic to the shape and mathematics of the surface [5].

There are so many definitions of ornament. But it is still an ambiguous concept. Its definition is constantly changed in such a way that it is not the ornament in history anymore. It is because of the fact that the definition of culture is also changed. As Gleiter discusses, the question of ornament resurfaces in the times of radical cultural changes such as in the first half of the 20th century with the transition from production by hand to production by machine, and in the second half of the century with the transition to the structural and post-structural processes of post-modernism. He considers *modernism* and *post-modernism* as the turning points of ornament in architecture [6]. There is another turning point today that can be called as *digitalism*. Digital culture is now the dominant culture. Hence, ornament has a new conceptual and cultural framework in architecture. This framework is revealed in the paper by diagramming the new concepts used to define and discuss ornament in the 21st century [See Figure 1]. It is a conceptual and cultural discussion, which reveals the new representative nature of ornament actually.

Ornament and its representative nature are principally put on the agenda of architecture with the theory of Semper in the 19th century. The principle of dressing (*prinzip der bekleidung*) in his theory promotes to use ornament as the primary component of architecture. Semper even suggests that architecture is a practice of ornament [7]. Ornament is again on the agenda of architecture even when it is refused by modern architects in the early 20th century. However, it is a primary practice in the pre-modern architectures such as Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Its golden age is the 19th century in which Art Nouveau enhances ornament by organic, highly stylized flowing curvilinear forms, especially floral and other plant-inspired motifs [3]. Ornament in the pre-modern architectures generally represents nature. Its cultural dimension is a challenging discussion in architecture. On the other hand, it is suggested that artists imitate nature whereas architects imitate culture [8]. Ornament is used as the main tool of imitation and representation. The changes in the definition of culture lead ornament to be redefined in architecture. As it is mentioned before, it is even refused in modern architecture due to the fact that it does not represent modern culture.

Ornament is seen as adulteration of purity and simplicity of form in the modern architecture of the early 20th century. Sullivan, regarded as the father of modernism, paradoxically considers ornament as a requirement for a fully developed architecture [3]. But Loos suggests that ornament is not capable of developing. It is a waste of labour, time, and money. It is unhealthy. He therefore accuses ornament of being a crime. It is a crime when

it is applied as a tattoo on the body of a building, furniture, dress or shoe. Loos emphasizes that there is a relation between criminals having tattoos and people applying ornaments. According to him, ornament is only for criminals or primitive people. Ornamentation is the natural result of primitiveness and backwardness. He writes “Since ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture.” [1].

Ornamentation is generally considered as a cultural degeneration in the modern society. It is thought that the evolution of culture and social structure is based on the rejection of ornament. Therefore, modern architects develop anti-ornamental discussions in modern architecture. “Less is more.” is one of them developed by Mies. It is an explicit rejection of ornamentation. However, Rykwert discusses that modern architects design their buildings as simple and pure ornaments by forming them as machines, planes, ships or factory chimneys so as to emphasize technological developments [8]. Furthermore, it is discussed that modernism and minimalism are the new ornamentations in architecture. And there is not a non-ornamental architecture at all [9]. This reminds Semper’s theory based on the discussion that architecture begins with ornamentation. For him, there is not any building without ornament [7].

Post-modern architects of the 20th century mostly think as Semper. “Less is a bore.” developed by Venturi is the manifestation of the post-modern thought on ornament and ornamental architecture. But ornamentation is mainly practiced as decoration in post-modern architecture. It is characterized by signs, symbols and meanings generally borrowed from history. But it is not mainly history characterizing ornamental architecture recently. It is *materiality*. Moussavi and Kubo discuss it as *functionality*. They discuss that functional ornament enables material to transmit its effect. Ornament is therefore inseparable from the object. It has no intention to decorate, and there is no hidden meaning in it. It is regarded as an *effective* but an *empty sign* in recent architecture, unlike it is in post-modern architecture [10]. This paper discusses that the representative nature of ornament is changed in such a way that ornament does not represent modern or post-modern culture today. It rather represents digital culture. It is the dominant culture of the 21st century, which changes the ways of defining, designing and discussing ornament in architecture radically.

## 2. ORNAMENT AND ITS REPRESENTATIVE NATURE

Ornament is one of the main tools of representation in architecture. It mainly represents nature until the 20th century (Figure 1). But its representative nature is significantly changed in the 20th century from nature to culture. It does not mean that nature-inspired ornaments are not used in architecture. It rather means that ornament is mainly used to represent culture. It is nevertheless rejected in modern architecture due to the fact that ornament is not capable of representing modern culture. In the early 20th century, Loos, as the supporter of a non-ornamental architecture, suggests that ornament is not for modern people [1]. However, ornament still represents culture by industrial materials and forms being used in modern architecture (Figure 2). It reveals the fact that it is generally used as a tool of cultural representation. Ornament is a tool of representation and symbolization as well. It particularly symbolizes cultural characteristics in the second half of the 20th century. It is defined as post-modern ornamentalism. Post-modern architects use signs and symbols intrinsic to the historical culture (Figure 3). But culture is globalized and global culture emerges towards the end of the century [8]. As such, symbolical, historical and cultural dimensions of ornament become challenging in architecture recently. The representative nature of ornament also becomes challenging in the 21st century.



*Figure 1. Ornamental buildings of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architectures  
Natural motifs, patterns, textures, and nature-inspired statues  
From left to right: Chartres Cathedral, Eure-et-Loir, France, 1194 - (mostly completed) 1220 [11]  
Basilica of Saint Peter, Rome, Italy, 1506 - 1615 [12]  
Santa Maria della Pace, Rome, Italy, 1656 - 1667 [13]*



*Figure 2. "Non-ornamental" buildings of Modern architecture  
Industrial materials, forms and machine aesthetics  
Left: Model for a modern glass skyscraper, Mies van der Rohe, 1922 [14]  
Right: Seagram Building, Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson, New York, USA, 1958 [15]*



*Figure 3. Back to the Pre-modern ornamental aesthetics in Post-modern architecture  
Cultural and historical signs, symbols and icons  
Left: Sony Building, Phillip Johnson, John Burgee, New York, USA, 1981 - 1984  
Right: PPG Place, Phillip Johnson, John Burgee, Pittsburgh, USA, 1981 - 1984 [16]*

### 2.1. The Changing / Challenging Representative Nature of Ornament in the 21st Century

The representative nature of ornament changes mainly due to the changes in culture, society, and technology. It is the natural result of the multi-cultural and increasingly cosmopolitan society of the 21st century [10]. Ornament does not represent today's culture symbolically. It is not *symbolic*; it is rather *photographic* due to the digital technology. The remarkable developments in the digital technology, specifically in the information and communication technology enable *photographic* and *photogenic* ornaments to be designed in contemporary architecture. Even the *contemporaneity* and *innovativity* of an architectural design are now discussed via its ornamental structure.

CAD (Computer Aided Design), CAM (Computer Aided Manufacturing) and CNC (Computer Numerical Control) technologies bring a new dimension to the concept of *innovation* in architecture. Buildings designed as highly *sophisticated ornaments* by using these technologies are generally defined as *innovational* and *experimental* designs. Digital technologies promote *experimentality* as well as *innovativity* in the design process. Contemporary architects are therefore enthusiastic about designing buildings as digital ornaments (Figure 4). They put excessive emphasis on the design of ornament just as Semper does in his architecture. It is called as *Digital Semper* in contemporary architecture [17]. Thus, ornament is again put on the agenda of architecture in the 21st century. It is discussed as the return of ornament or reinvention of ornament. It is also discussed that ornamenting becomes a *pattern-making* process in architecture recently. *Information* is even a kind of *pattern*. Levit discusses that ornament returns as an *information-based pattern* [9]. And Picon discusses that ornament is closer to a pattern than to a sculpted decoration. According to him, ornamenting is *patterning* [18]. Digital technologies enable architects to play with textures, colours and patterns in highly decorative ways (Figure 5). Therefore, it is rather considered as the reinvention of ornament [19].



Figure 4. Foundation Louis Vuitton, Frank Gehry, Paris, France, 2014 [20]



Figure 5. Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Germany, 2019 [21]

However, Gleiter suggests that ornament is different from pure embellishment or mere pattern and diagram [6]. But ornament is mostly *diagrammatic* in architecture. Diagrams are effective in exploring an unmediated process to visualize digital technology as a new cultural force [10]. It is neither *Modernism* nor *Post-modernism*; it is rather *Digitalism* defining the new conceptual and cultural context of ornament in architecture. Balik and Allmer discuss that ornament represents today's *image-driven* culture. It contributes to *image-making* as well. Ornament enables new images and new concepts to emerge in architecture [22]. It has a representative nature particularly related to culture. But this nature is changed mainly due to the digital technology. Digital technology leads *dynamic* ornaments to be able to designed in architecture. Ornament is therefore defined as dynamic ornament, coded ornament, ornamentals or digital Nouveau [23].

Ornament is defined and discussed by the concepts of *mediatic*, *phylogenetic*, *chaotic*, *eccentric*, *photogenic*, and *parametric* as the concept of *dynamic* in this paper. It becomes *mediatic* in a widely used network of social media. Media leads ornaments and ornamental architectures to be instantly shared with the world. They gain an instant popularity and become popular and reproducible designs. These designs have a genetic structure created physically by computers turning ornament into a *phylogenetic* component. *Phylogenetic* ornaments (or, components) lead buildings to be designed computationally as well as physically, genetically and structurally. Computer technologies enable ornaments and ornamental buildings to be designed in a *chaotic* design process in which many *parametric* design tools such as bending, stretching, folding, and curving are used. Ornament, as the design product, is *chaotic* as the design process. It is *parametric* as well. Computational parameters generally enable *eccentric* ornaments to be designed in architecture. These ornaments have *eccentric* forms. Their *eccentricity* is not only due to their form and formality. It is also due to their conceptuality and contextuality. They are formed in a new context called as virtual reality. These ornamental forms gain a *photogenic* and *photographic* entity, and so they become *mediatic* in the architecture of the 21st century.

Surface is a significant concept in the ornamental architecture of this century due to the fact that ornament is generally defined and designed to create *surface effect*. This effect is mostly created by the methods of printing and patterning (Figure 6, 7). They lead surface to be designed as *skin* or *screen*. Surface designed as being skin or screen creates a new ornamental image in architecture. This is an *illusionary* image designed digitally. It refers to the fact that digital technology promotes *surface effects* by turning them into *illusions* recently.



Figure 6. Printing the surface: Eberswalde Library, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, Germany, 1999 [24]



Figure 7. Patterning the surface: 100 11th Avenue, Jean Nouvel, New York, USA, 2009 [25]

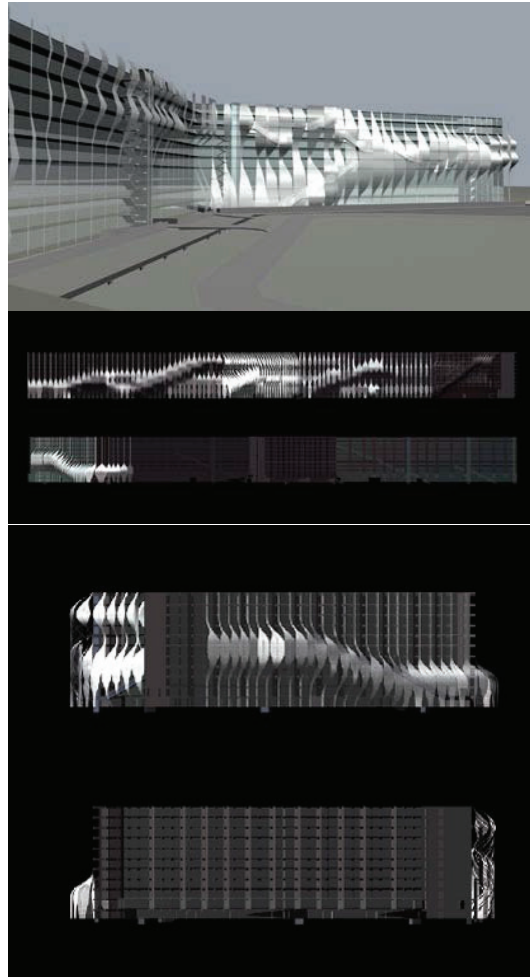
Kipnis discusses the *illusionary effect* of the surface as *cosmetic*. The concept of cosmetic is rather used to refer to the perceptual illusions about gravity, transparency or permeability of the building. It is neither decoration nor ornamentation. According to Kipnis, ornaments attach as discreet entities to the building like jewellery. However, cosmetics are indiscreet; they have no relation with the building. They relate always and only to skin. Deeply, intricately material, cosmetics nevertheless exceed materiality as they transubstantiate *skin* into *image*. Ornaments look like entities; but cosmetics look like fields, aura or air. The *cosmetic effect* is more *atmospheric* than *aesthetic* [26].

Herzog elaborates on *effect* in architecture. It is the *illusionary effect* of *skin*, not *surface*. He discusses that *skin* is created by the unity between ornament and structure. When ornament and structure unite, there is no need to explain or apologize for the decorative details. Because it is a structure, it is a space. Herzog makes a distinction between ornament and decoration. He emphasizes that ornament is not something added on, but becomes one with the production of form. Ornament is part of an autogenesis of form, something very different from decoration. The use of ornamentation allows him to avoid looking for form as such; form, whether geometrical or organic, just comes about, via the ornament [27].

As Herzog, Lynn discusses that ornament and structure are not different categories. He promotes to use structural ornament in architecture [5]. Picon also discusses that the function of structure seems to be strikingly similar to the function of ornament [19]. It is actually not a new discussion in architecture. Semper critically discusses the traditional distinction between ornament and structure in his theory of dressing or cladding. Benjamin suggests that Semper's theory is far more radical. He frees architecture from the opposition between ornament and structure [28].

Moussavi and Kubo discuss ornament in terms of its structural, functional, and material effects [10]. For Levit, it is a reductive discussion. It reduces ornament to a functional tool. Ornament is symbolic above all. Function provides inadequate motivational bases to give rise to one form versus another. *Material effect* or (as Moussavi and Kubo call it) *materiality* reproduces a characteristic theory of the picturesque, which belongs to the history [9]. However, ornament appears strongly indebted to an inquiry regarding *materiality* and human senses. *Materiality* provides *subjectivity*. Unlike matter, it can never be considered as entirely objective. *Materiality* corresponds to a certain category of experience. It corresponds to a range of experiences that give us the impression of being in genuine contact with the physical world. *Materiality* possesses a relational character. It implies an encounter between subject and material world. Designed in a computational environment, contemporary ornament is inseparable from an inquiry into our rapidly changing definition of *materiality*. It appeals strongly to the senses. It presents a new *visual reality*, and so *virtuality* and *complexity*. It promotes a *hypnotic effect* actually. As Picon suggests, this leads to a destabilization of the traditional distinction between subject and object. Another distinction between ornament and decor fades as well. Decor begins to function in

an immersive way. It even begins to function as a structural component just as ornament [19]. It is due to the developing technology that has the potential and capacity to transform the design process of decoration and ornamentation into a *digital craft* (Figure 8). It is a radical transformation, which enables the new ornament to be discussed in architecture in the time of digital revolution.



*Figure 8. Digital crafting (or, ornamenting) in architecture  
Transformation Kleiburg, Greg Lynn, Netherlands, 2001 [29]*

## **2.2. The New Ornament in the Architecture of the New Century**

Ornament has a new conceptual and cultural framework in the architecture of the new century. This framework reveals the changing representative nature of ornament in the 21st century. It also reveals the fact that ornament is defined and discussed as being *mediatic*, *phylogenetic*, *chaotic*, *eccentric*, *photogenic*, and *parametric* in recent architecture. These are the concepts related with other concepts such as *superficiality*, *performativity*, *self-representiality*, and *cosmetic*, *hypnotic* and *illusionary*. The theoretical framework of ornament is changed due to these concepts used to define and design the new ornamental architecture. It is *superficiality*, which defines ornamental architecture recently. It is because of the fact that ornament is rather considered as a superficial construction. It mostly refers to construct a digital surface in the architecture of the 21st century. This surface is *performative*, which means that it performs according to the dynamics of the virtual reality. It is the reality created by digital technology, which promotes *self-representiality* in ornamental architecture. Ornament now represents itself and its digital design process. Digital technologies lead ornament to be defined



by the concept of *cosmetic* as well. This definition emphasizes that ornament becomes a *superficial* construction more than ever. It is *surface* (or, *skin*), which is characterized by the cosmetic applications in architecture. They turn *surface* and *skin* into a *screen* by the method of *image-making*. Images, as the new forms of ornaments, lead screen to be *hypnotic*. They are eye-catching screens for watching, informing, illusioning, and even hypnotizing. These are the concepts defining the new ornament in the architecture of the new century (Diagram 1).

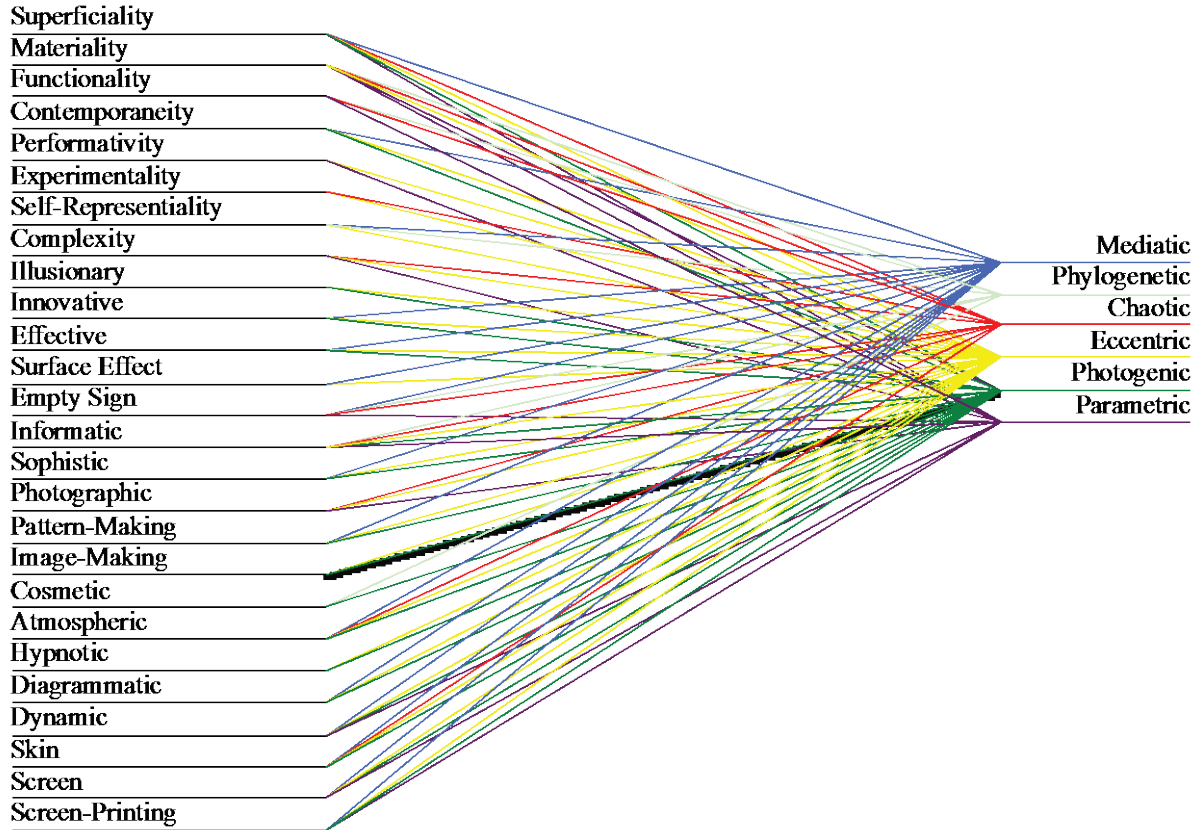


Diagram 1. The conceptual and cultural framework of ornament in the architecture of the 21st century

However, there are many other concepts used to define and discuss ornament in architecture. But a limited number of them are discussed in the paper by diagramming the conceptual and cultural framework of ornament in this century. These are the most frequently used concepts discovered by the author while making an interdisciplinary research on ornament. They are related to each other, again by the author, based on their conceptual and cultural relations and affiliations. They can be related in many other ways during the process of diagramming. In any case, it reveals the fact that ornament has a new conceptual and cultural framework recently, since it is representing digital culture and its reality.

### 3. IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

Ornament becomes a significant discussion in architecture more than ever. As such, architects realize the potentials of ornament both as a tool of design and representation. These are not only superficial and formal

but also material, spatial, structural and functional potentials to create *a new architecture*. It refers to the fact that ornament has the potential of developing architecture materially, spatially, structurally and functionally as well as superficially and formally. However, it is generally discussed as a formal and/or superficial entity. It is actually a reductive discussion. It reduces ornament to be defined only through surface, façade, skin or screen. It also reduces ornamentation to a traditional decoration. But ornamenting is beyond decorating the surface of the building; it is about designing the building. Developments in the digital technologies enable effective ornaments to be designed in architecture. They are not only designed to create *surface effects*. Ornaments are effective and performative designs to be able to create *new spatial experiences* as well. It means to design ornament as the spatial, structural and functional component of the building. Furthermore, it means designing the building as the ornament.

It is emphasized through the paper that the ways of designing, defining and discussing ornament are radically changed due to the changes in culture and technology. Digital technology even leads culture to become digital in the 21st century. Digital culture becomes the dominant culture. It dominates architecture. Besides, it paves the way for ornament to represent the new realities and dynamics of the digital culture. The representative nature of ornament is therefore changed. Its conceptual and cultural framework is also changed. New concepts are used to define and discuss the digitally designed ornament in architecture such as *parametric, photogenic, hypnotic, dynamic*, and so on.

It is therefore concluded that ornament and ornamental architecture can no longer be discussed within the context of *Modernism* or *Post-modernism*. It can rather be discussed within the context of *Digitalism*. Ornament is redefined due to the digital technologies. It is not the ornament of the last century; it is now designed in a virtual reality. It is the virtual environment created by the computer technology. This environment not only leads new forms, but also new concepts to be defined in ornamental architecture recently. These concepts refer to the changes in culture and society. They also refer to the changing representative nature of ornament in the architecture of the 21st century. They even reveal the fact that ornament becomes self-representational in this century. It begins to represent its own digital design process rather than culture or nature.

This leads some critical questions to be asked in architecture such as “What is the new in ornament?”, “Is it really new?”, “Does its changing representative nature make it new?”. These questions will be helpful to make a further discussion on ornament in architecture. They will also help to change our perspective on ornament generally restricted it to a mere superficial structure.

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