At the start of the 20th century, Adolf Loos a German Architect once suggested that, ‘ornament is crime’ not only because it symbolised the slave-works of an oppressed working class that was robbed by the capitalists with the rise of the Industrial Revolution but also because it meant an immaturity in the society’s attitude towards aesthetics, as he aggressively sold a belief that ornament was for that of the uncivilised. So ornament a crime? More like a criminal, first being accused by Adolf Loos and later by other creative elites, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, humming the same tune.

In this essay I would like to show how the long awaited release of the wrongly convicted, ornament, during the rise of Post-Modernism happened, and explain the roles it took on when ornament was applied by various architects. After being judged and trialled, Modernism and its leaders decided that only by putting ornament away, could they then make way for that of pure beauty, one that was without cultural and class baggage. The purging and elimination of ornament that was brought to extremes by Modernist architects was in fact one of the acts that exposed Modernism’s false claims of having democratic intentions, as such actions were exclusivist and elitist. The results of their actions further revealed the need to bring back ornament. One such example can be seen in the clean and stark buildings that were admittedly low-cost and fast to produce, but precisely because of that, the rapid growth of such architecture became overwhelming sterile in which the idea of minimalism was lost,

---

1 Adolf Loos; Ornament is a Crime, http://classes.design.ucla.edu/Fall07/10/Loos%20ornament%20is%20crime.pdf
2 Jencks Charles, What is Post-Modernism?, (1986), 21
3 Jencks, What is Post-Modernism?, 25
4 Jencks, What is Post-Modernism?, 23
as the end users could no longer tolerate this lack of relation they had with the buildings they lived and worked in.\(^5\)

**Robert Venturi: ornament the ordinary hero**

On that note, let us move into the first example of a Post-Modern Architecture using ornament in that respect; as an aid that formed a gel between that of the building’s design and its environment, and ultimately its users.\(^6\) Robert Venturi was one such architect who managed to address the discontent of users through his work, particularly that of The Guild House constructed in 1963. Just as he recognised the beautiful results of simplifying and purifying architecture in the early years, Robert Venturi also noticed the subsequent blandness resulting from overzealous purging of ornament that separated the building from the experience of life and the needs of the society.\(^7\)

Proposing that modern architecture was not about building epics, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown followed through this notion by slipping in symbols of the ordinary and quintessential into The Guild House, meant to house the elderly as a retirement home.\(^8\) Rightfully done as well, seeing that the clients were not interested in aesthetics and would be more accepting of a design that did not overwhelm them. This was done with ornamentation through the appliqué stripes of white bricks and

---

\(^5\) Jencks, What is Post-Modernism?, 29
\(^7\) Jencks, What is Post-Modernism?, 29
\(^8\) Robert Venturi; Biography, http://architect.architecture.sk/robert-venturi-architect/robert-venturi-architect.php
planes placed against the natural brown brick wall that acted as a street facade, which helped blend in with its surrounding older buildings. The same appliqué street facade also implied a separation from the front bulk of the building (that gave a false sense of a monumental 3 storey tower when in fact was a 6 storey) that symbolised a break-away from the modernists’ elite architecture values\(^{10}\).

The argument that modernism made of ornament symbolising the elite and Victorian past such as extravagant greek columns could no longer stand, as post-modernism’s approach to architecture was that of plurality and being inclusive. Although columns in the past used in rich, overly flamboyant palaces and temples, in the case of The Guild House that was utterly normal and ordinary, the insertion of the massive granite column that stood at the front of the building holding up the balcony saw that an ornament and its material (granite) as such spoke no longer of superficial power but of functional strength, that of transferring load on to the ground and its firm presence.

Literally topped with an ornament such as the enormous non-functional golden antenna that symbolised the casual past-time of its residents\(^{11}\), the message of a new era had arrived, which would be that of Post-Modernism, and galloping with it was the newly released convict-turned-hero, ornament. In the case of The Guild House, ornament was to play an ordinary hero, saving the building of any pretension that the modernist hailed and the residents could not appreciate. An example of this modesty was the massive ‘Guild House’ sign fixed against the white ceramic tile cladding, clearly showing the building’s entrance without pretense or mysticism, while possibly symbolising the evasive transparency that was seen throughout modernist architecture\(^{12}\). Ornament in this case, took on the role of bridging the massive contemporary form of the building that conformed to the modernist ideals with that of the ordinary expectations of its clients and its surrounding environment and buildings.

\(^{10}\) Izenour, Steven, Venturi, Robert and Brown, Denise Scott, Learning from Las Vegas; The forgotten symbolism of architectural form, (1972), 70


\(^{12}\) Izenour, Venturi, and Brown, Learning from Las Vegas; The forgotten symbolism of architectural form, 70
Hans Hollien: ornament the performer

Yet in Hans Hollien’s buildings, we see the shift change that ornament takes. From the role of being the ordinary hero that united a new building with its users and old surroundings, to a role where ornament is far from ordinary in the case of Austrian Embassy in Berlin, Germany, when it was used to emphasize the immaculate crafting of the building. The application of ornament in a contemporary material such as the pre-patinated green copper sheets, wrapped in an semi-organic body, was intentionally done to symbolise the peak of the industrial revolution that had allowed Hans Hollien to almost boast the mastering over technology that architects and designers had, oppose to the past where theirs works were determined by technique. The green copper skin that was immaculate to the eye, not only stood out in the competing rows of bourgeoisie estates but its colours also blended in with the location’s history of being a garden centre. That was one such example in the building where Hans Hollien allowed expression of culture through the use of ornament and material displaying a value held by post-modern architecture of safe guarding tradition.

If we are to look at the building as a whole, we see a careful balance of structure and ornament assisting the building, flaunting and creating an intensity that would capture its audience without

---

13 Austrian Embassy, http://en.structurae.de/structures/data/index.cfm?id=s0005219
15 Jencks, Charles, Modern Movements in Architecture, (1987), 54
16 Austrian Embassy, http://en.structurae.de/structures/data/index.cfm?id=s0005219
17 Ghirado, Diane, Architecture after modernism, (1996), 15
intimidating them. Just like a performer would with careful seduction, the ornamentation of the building demanded attention from its audience. The irregular shaped and positioned windows on the right of the building and the glassy upper eyelash-like windows on the left of the building, are the ornamental elements that helps create the melodious and sensual allure.

The ornamentation seen in the example of the Austrian Embassy, illustrates how its undertaken role of flaunting technology and beauty is not just of symbolic value but that it has its function of relating to us humans in a physical and psychological sense\(^\text{18}\) through the use of material, organic form and colour.

**Michael Graves; Ornament the voyager**

Although the works of Michael Graves may strike us initially as confusing and possibly even as eyesores, they do however bring across the fundamental point of Post-modernism’s preaching of plurality through the use of ornament in his designs. The messages within these buildings not only speak of the movement’s ideas\(^\text{20}\) but also Grave’s personal conviction that Architecture as a language, should communicate the aspirations of the human needs and rituals\(^\text{21}\), ideas that were similarly practised in Classical architecture of those in Rome and Egypt\(^\text{22}\). Such ideas and designs back then and even now in our current contemporary context may not be as easily accepted, as we have long

---

\(^{18}\) Ghirado, Architecture after modernism, 13  
\(^{19}\) *What is formalism?*.  
http://www.thearchitectpainter.com/MadisonGray/deep_SLIGHT/reviews/MoveMeaning1.htm  
\(^{20}\) Jencks, *What is Post Modernism?*, 29  
\(^{21}\) Collins, Michael, Michael Graves, (1994), 13  
\(^{22}\) Hersey, George, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture; Speculations on Ornament from Vitruvius to Venturi*, (1988), 149
since evolved from the initial post-modern movement, nevertheless we shall look into one of his works to illustrate ornament’s versatility in taking on another role, that of the voyager.

In 1972, when The Snyderman house in Indiana was constructed, the design of this building stood out and abashedly too, because of its experimentalism that expressed difference and boldness that was perhaps very much needed to liven up the bore and dullness that Modern Architecture had produced prior to that. Michael Graves, who initially started off with great influence by Le Corbusier and many other great modernist architects had much opportunity in practising architecture in a pure modernist way devoid of ornament and taboos, as such, he had to know this ‘enemy’ to fight it. Michael Graves indeed knew ornament and the taboos it held, in fact he knew it well enough to break those taboos to achieve the meanings behind the design of The Snyderman house.

With the further interrogation of ornamentations in The Snyderman House, the false facades consisting of awkward curves offset against the geometric and rigid structure of the actual building, forces one to ponder its existence. Accompanied by that, are these utilitarian structure-like poles that penetrate the building at specific points, producing a continuous three-dimensional image. Such contradicting interpretations of ornamentations in the building like that of the poles and facade leads us to dig deeper into what they represented.

As soon as we understand the disposition that Post-modernism held, we then realise the application and positioning or the ornamentation such as the façade and poles are far from arbitrary, instead they were sensitively planned and placed to suit its context, achieving the total opposite of what modernism strived for, plurality. The frames constructed by the elaborate poles that stuck vertically through the building and the air that held nothing in it was similar to those in the modern architecture that translated into minimalism and sterility, yet the organic curved façade with its rounded closed

---

23 Jencks, What is Post Modernism?, 30
24 Collins, Michael Graves, 12
25 Hersey, The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture; Speculations on Ornament from Vitruvius to Venturi, 152
27 Jencks, What is Post Modernism?, 35
surfaced wall seemed to speak of softness and unity. In this respect, Graves belief in Architecture being a language, of soft and hard living together, including different elements no matter how contradicting speaks of the acceptance that post-modernism preached.

The overall picture of the building could still send most people confused and uncertain of their feelings towards it. So one could argue this mass of conflicting messages produced in a building actually spoke of the diversity and a universal theme of man and nature that opposes and unites. Through the use of ornament in such an experimental way, Michael Graves also managed to achieve that statement of plurality and relationship that was held in the new found faith of Post-Modernism.

**Conclusion**

After studying the above examples from Venturi to Graves, we see the release of the wrongly convicted, ornament, who was accused of being a superficial burden to the industrialised post-war world. As such, ornament during the post-modernism period proved its innocence by fulfilling its duties through various roles that went beyond superficial beauty. By then ornament was utilised in a more complicated method that allied with the human psyche unlike the past where it stood as a non-utilitarian bimbo. Its main function of aesthetics helped in balancing the complexity and order when buildings were getting far too boring. With the advancement of technology and the application of post-modernism, it necessitates the physical and psychological relationship with its users.

From an ordinary hero, to a performer and finally as a voyager. In closing, ornament’s role in post-modern architecture was not so much the roles it played but rather what they meant in playing those roles. Ornament was essentially the tool that the architects were able to use and equipped themselves with, to assist and compliment the other varying messages in the architects’ intentions. The role that ornament plays is really one that was for the architect to decide.

---

28 Hays, Architecture Theory since 1968, 342
29 Jencks, What is Post Modernism?, 38
References

Austrian Embassy, http://en.structurae.de/structures/data/index.cfm?id=s0005219

Adolf Loos; Ornament is a Crime, http://classes.design.ucla.edu/Fall07/10/Loos%20ornament%20is%20a%20crime.pdf

Collins, Michael, Michael Graves, Germany: Ernst & Sohn, 1994

Ghirado, Diane, Architecture after Modernism, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996


Hersey, George, The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture; Speculations on Ornament from Vitruvius to Venturi, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988

Izenour, Steven, Venturi, Robert and Brown, Denise Scott, Learning from Las Vegas; The forgotten symbolism of architectural form, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1972


What is formalism?, http://www.thearchitectpainter.com/MadisonGray/deep_SIGHT/reviews/MoveMeaning1.htm