

Module Assignment EBB-5-510_1819 Cultural Context 02

Sculpting a Modern Society through Cultural Criticism
Ornament and Crime. Adolf Loos

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This critical essay expresses and evaluates the principles of the modern movement and the pivotal role of the philosophy "Ornament and Crime". How it is reflected within modern architecture and influenced by the cultural, economic, and political landscape of its period. With reference to key architectural studies during the 20th century, Adolf Loos' idealistic vision of human life and how he applied his literary treatise to his own works such as The Villa Müller, offering spiritual fulfillment within the user's surroundings. It addresses the political crisis of industrialization during the era and studies the view on the elimination of ornament as a fundamental part of regulating modern society. Loos was one of the most influential European Architects who's writing sculpted the modern movement through cultural criticism, leaving a significant impact on future generations of scholars and modernist architects. It studies how Loos' philosophy "Ornament and Crime" has been interpreted to critique his work on The Villa Muller, and analyses how other authors interpret the work of Loos within modernism and the different approaches they take toward the philosophy. Such as Beatriz Colomina discussing the ideology of spatial psychology in the journal article, Intimacy, and Spectacle: The Interiors of Adolf Loos. As well as examining his powerful language used to manipulate the understanding of contemporary criticism and cultural argument.

Adolf Loos' concludes his literary 'Ornament and Crime' with a powerful statement expressing his reasoning behind the cultural argument sculpting modernism, "The people of the herd had to distinguish themselves with various masks, modern man does not need clothes as a mask. His individuality is so terribly strong that it is no longer expressed in items of clothing. The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power." Loos, A. (2019). *Ornament And Crime*. P.202. Distinguished through this quote, it is clear Loos' considered ornament and an element to the low cultured and uneducated, as a clear expression of human aptitude which is an impediment to cultural progress in modern society. The quote is suggestive of 'modern man', throughout the philosophy Loos', infers a degradation of contemporary culture through its feminization and therefore developed a masculine approach to his literary treatise in an attempt to reclaim the public realm.

Adolf Loos was born on 10th December 1870 in the eastern part of the Czech Republic, throughout his childhood Loos attended numerous schools and at the age of 23 (1893) traveled to the United States of America shortly returning at 26 (1896) to Vienna, which remained his permanent residence then forth. It was his time in America that gave him the inspiration to devote himself to Architecture, particularly after discovering a specific art movement, the Vienna Secession.

What made Adolf Loos one of the most influential European architects? The majority of Adolf Loos' major works are located in Austria and the Czech Republic, although his work was undoubtedly of architectural significance it was his literary treatise that sculpted the foundations of the modernist movement. During the 20th century, Adolf Loos expressed his upcoming philosophy on a developed architectural style by releasing a series of written discourse decrying ornament and social ills, influencing architectural perception on ornamentation.

The method Adolf Loos began to portray in his designs was supported by pragmatic reasoning, removing anything that could not advocate its rational function. Adhering to the philosophy of utilitarianism, his designs were focused on pure practical geometric forms rather than appearance, they were stripped of decoration, shaping the architectural style of modernism.

Adolf Loos' most acclaimed literary treatise, 'Ornament and Crime' connects unornamented architecture with the culture of modernity, by expressing a common commodity in criminology, aesthetics, and architecture... a tattoo. "The tattooed people who are not in jail are latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats." Loos, A. (2019). *Ornament And Crime*. P.188. Loos believed a tattoo is bound by social class and an expression of abnormality, linking tattoos with criminals advocating sociological theories of criminality indicating crime was visible both on the body and produced by the body. Meaning that a criminal's urge for ornament is expressing primal impulses through aesthetic idealization, therefore viewed as having lost moral qualities considered normal, leaving a corrupt form of civilization. Loos explained that a modern man who urged to cover his walls with 'erotic symbols' would be viewed in the same social class as a 'criminal or a degenerate', blurring the boundaries of ornament. The argument Loos portrays is based on criminal anthropology and the attitude towards culture in architecture.

Adolf Loos' vision towards Minimalism in cultural context defines modernism, being a visual compendium during the 20th century for modern housing and began to materialize and by the 1920s, Loos became a prominent figure and his work began to establish a reputation. With the philosophy embedded within Loos' designs, The Villa Müller is a key example known as an innovative landmark to modern architecture. The external form is a cube, using basic geometry throughout the structure and the facade remained bare. Loos believed buildings should not be built for passers-by but for the residential user, he has established a radical difference between the internal and external facades which reflects the split between private and social life. Within Loos' writings, he explains how the exterior and interior are constructed simultaneously, a multiplicity of boundaries is established through the walls that divide inside and outside. His buildings were designed with the intent to keep the public on the outside and the private on the inside, using strong, dark colors internally to contrast with bright white walls and large windows. Loos' designed a staircase that takes the user round a right-angle bend and emerges dramatically between marble pillars into a double-height, open-plan sitting room. Focusing on symbolic importance throughout the villa there is a dramatic staging of different levels for spatial illusions and varying heights, encouraging a new concept of space, known as 'Raumplan'. This is a method of design through three-dimensional thinking, Loos' did not believe in design-ing plans or sections, his work would always reflect continual spaces and rooms which all had different needs and dimensions. He wrote about how a building will remain ineffective in two dimensions as the drawings can not convey the 'sensation' of space. Loos' invented the Raumplan to conceptualize space as his way of dealing with the untranslatable languages of Architecture. This design method is continued throughout the building providing unique, exhilarating views into adjacent spaces. The modern philosophy desired to provide users with surroundings of spiritual fulfillment in order to create a tranquil relationship between the user and their ambiance.

Loos' architecture, when applied in practice, can be understood once divided into sculpted components and furnishings, as it offers a dominant alternative to the concept of ornament. The majority of the interior consists of white-paint facades and can be perceived as a continuation of the composition to the exterior, although there is a great degree of visual intensity internally due to the diction of the facade and columns. It is the notable absence of decorative ornamentation that enhances the presence of sculptural composition, particularly through the use of continuous folding, sharp linear joinery, and the use of steps. Within Loos' literary treatise, he does not dismiss ornament outright but recognizes ornament as a product of cultural context and expresses it is within our responsibility to create a new ornament. This is subtly demonstrated in the design of The Villa Muller as it perceives the alternative interpretation of 'Ornament and Crime', through the staircase, joinery, and furnishings by displaying elements of art and function portraying the ideology that ornament is not dismissed but is restricted on a lifespan and is associated to the cultural and historical context of its time.

Beatriz Colomina discusses the ideology of spatial psychology in the journal article, *Intimacy and Spectacle: The Interiors of Adolf Loos*. In reference to *The Villa Müller*, Colomina states "the most intimate room resembles a theatre box, and overlooks the entrance to the communal area of the house so that an intruder can easily be seen." Colomina. (1990, P5) Using the metaphor 'theatre box' and applying it to a space referred to the similarities of its function, at the theatre an actor would be seen immediately once entering the stage by the spectator in the theatre box. In context, Colomina is citing the sequence of spaces surrounding the staircase in *The Villa Müller*, as centrally located there is a raised seating area with a glass window overlooking the communal area by the entrance. Colomina refers to Loos' interpretation of the concept, which meant by applying the same principle into the modern home would provide a sense of power, or a regime of control inside as any intrusion would be detected immediately by a residential owner occupying the space. On the antithesis, it would allow the residential owner to be both the viewer and the viewed simultaneously. Loos interiors provide a sense of theatricality, giving the illusion of domestic drama, every photograph published of the interior spaces provides a deception that someone is about to enter the room, in the same way as when a character is absent from the stage.

Colomina's article is primarily oriented around a critique towards Loos' ideology that architecture is invulnerable to the influence of mass culture, through the use of media. Expressing her belief that the building should be understood in the same term and that the boundaries of the philosophy undermine one another. The building is an instrument of representation and Colomina expresses that when discussing representation we are referring to a subject and an object and therefore contradictory.

Loos' expressed throughout his literary treatise, it would no longer be necessary for labor, effort, and craft because the development in contemporary techniques and manufacturing would allow architects to achieve intricacy with minimal effort. "The evolution of culture comes to the same thing as the removal of ornament from functional objects." Loos, A. (2019). *Ornament And Crime*. P.188. Although in contradiction to the quote the use of the material and the design of in-built furniture, bespoke to projects like *The Villa Müller* require exceptional craftsmanship and both effort and labor. Loos' then further quoted "Every age has had its style, and ours alone should be denied one?!" Loos, A. (2019). *Ornament And Crime*. P.189. When Loos wrote about 'style' he was referring to ornament, with the objection that he wouldn't accept the belief that ornament won't enhance a cultured person's joy in life. The desirability of less visual clutter and the use of basic geometric forms to create clean open spaces, during a time when the demand was for realism and functionalism, would provide harmony. However, a contradicting argument of his philosophy outlined concerns around the potential of objects becoming obsolete and it would be a crime to set aside the effort needed to add ornamentation when the object would only be in style for a short period of time, its elimination is a fundamental part of regulating modern society.

Throughout the literary treatise, Loos' also refers to 'Crime' as a disaster that is inflicted upon ornament, "The terrible damage and the devastation wrought by the awakening of ornament in aesthetic development can be easily got over' Loos' then continues with 'But it is a crime that human labor, money, and material are thus wrecked in economic terms." Loos, A. (2019, P.192). He considers disasters as a waste of resources which is a different view from the current neoliberal approach to disasters, associated with economic liberalization, taken as an opportunity for profit. The vocabulary Loos' used when referring to crime "devastation", "wrecked" and "damage" is never definitive to a particular architectural target, it is more centered around cultural behavior and not an aesthetic criticism. Within the modern movement, the larger political crisis was the anticipated arrival of industrialization, the implication it would have on the manufacturing industry, and the mass production of ornament. Loos' believed that as an ornament was no longer a natural product within the culture, the craftsmen were no longer paid appropriately. He expresses how the craftsmen who work 20 hours achieve the same 'criminally low' income as a modern manual worker, who only works 8 hours. Industrialization would remove the organic connection between ornament and culture, meaning it would prohibit the craftsmen from having a pleasurable relationship with the act of craft for ornamentation. Loos regularly refers back to ornament that lacks any symbolic meaning with material that is disengaged from any geometric origins and therefore symptomatic of a wasteful culture.

The philosophy on Modernism, 'Ornament and Crime' was developed to amplify the idealistic vision of human life and an underlying belief in the progress of society in the 20th century. With the aspiration to replace the 'traditional' architectural style and historic traditions with one that embraces the future both spiritually and functionally through the development of manufacturing technology and eliminating ornament. Loos' buildings were rigorous and conventional examples of how he ordered interior spaces based on size and function using the 'Raumplan' which is a method of design still used today through the architectural movement. Pairing certain elements of Adolf Loos' Literature and his work in practice, specifically on The Villa Muller, highlights key aspects of his conception of ornament, contemporary culture, and craft. It is reflected within his architecture and is defined through his use of sculptural aspects and furnishings.

However, Loos' nevertheless suffered greatly through his literary treatise not being taken seriously as readers would only take his words as hermeneutically conspicuous. 'Ornament and Crime' became notorious for asserting racism towards the tattooed community implying it was an extreme of cultural inferiority that focused on literary criticism. Although his writings still went on to inspire many scholars and modernist architects in future generations to embrace the abstraction and explore newer styles, treating Loos' with a level of sophistication through analyzing his work both practical and literary as expressions of his cultural argument. The Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is just one example, hugely influenced by Adolf Loos, in particular, Loos' philosophy combining ornament and criminality. His work was orientated around the emphasis on proportion and eliminated all ornamentation.

Following, architects then excavated his writings for justification on taking the century in a new direction sculpting Modernism as it's known today. The language Loos' used throughout his writings played a large part in the influence he had on his readers, it was intrusive yet powerful which encouraged an understanding of the contemporary criticism forced onto a culture that embraced its historic ornaments. Loos' regularly makes reference to modern social science within his design criticism, he focuses on the moral rather than the design technique with the intent of cultural reform, with a sense of story-telling in a biblical structure. Concluding Adolf Loos' writings he reminds us that our own era of modernity will always transfigure into something more beautiful with a meaningful past.

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