

Ornament, memory and the cosmopolitan city

Abstract

Late modernism frowned on applied ornament, reinforcing the production of plain, monolithic urban architecture. Plunging into one Asian textile shop in Tooting, London, I analysed its contents through drawing them, investigating both functional items that were patterned as a result of structural repetition and ornamental ones such as embroidered saris. The outcome was *A Patois of Pattern*, an artist's book. Its collocation of disparate spatial ideas makes visible fundamental discontinuities between world views: between those located in 'cultural memory' and 'identity' and those which not long ago intended to create a future universal, homogenized utopia through rationalism and standardization. With this focus I suggest that in 'the imagined city' more open understandings of 'culture' and 'identity' might inform the urban environment if architecture were to reflect such varied meaning and memory, folding together a wider, more inclusive range of understandings of time, space, place and pace.

Key words: *ornament; pattern; city; feminine; urban; cultural memory; identity; architecture.*

For a long time I had a workspace in a warren of artists' studios in a yard near Tooting, South London. The yard contained all sorts of industrial units. Among others, there were a paper, string

and packaging firm, an Italian ice cream factory, a shed where all day long, shrieking machines cut kitchen worktops out of marble and granite. And there was a space that particularly intrigued me. It had a cement floor splashed white with plaster of Paris and belonged to a company which turned out reproduction architectural mouldings by the ton. The craftsmen filled rubbish skips with fragments of plaster ornament: egg-and-dart coving, broken cornicing, chalky ceiling roses and plaques in 'antique Greek' or 'Victorian gothic' or 'French eighteenth-century' mode, or Brighton Pavilion 'Indian'. The items that came out whole from the moulds were sold in smart interior design shops in Fulham and Battersea.

I often used to negotiate a path between the backing, hooting lorries in the yard to walk to the shops in Tooting, always casting an eye at the repro plaster firm's skips.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Tooting was a poor and marginalized suburb. In 1905 Charles Masterman, MP and social journalist, published an article entitled 'In dejection near Tooting'. In it he remarked that Tooting, 'the place of all forgotten things', was notable only for the size of its cemetery, its workhouse and what was then called its 'asylum' (Masterman 1905: 156). The inexpensiveness of property there, as in other such London margins, undoubtedly made it affordable to immigrant populations arriving in large numbers in the years after the Second World War.

Tooting is now home to many communities originating in India. The Broadway and Upper Tooting Road are full of their shops, selling food and clothing, jewellery and music. One Asian shop selling ornamented textiles there drew me repeatedly. It was housed prosaically in a modest Victorian building between the underground stations, jewelling its dull setting. It was interesting in itself and because it might be in any one of Britain's numerous multicultural urban settings.

Gradually I began to try to think in a more focused way about the *mêlée* of ornament in the place where I found myself, about ornament as a subset of a larger array of patterning forces involving meaning and memory. A work arising from such heterogeneous and hybrid space began

to seem a possibility, a foregrounding of the polyglot narratives arising from conjunctions of pattern-in-place in all their disrupted and disruptive energy.

My question as an artist, working largely with drawing processes in a fringe of London is: what is the city becoming? And how can we *all* be at home here? This is a pressing question in a cosmopolitan city. I want to use the project that I then embarked upon as a focus for approaching these questions.

There is a danger in linking a sense of ‘belonging’ in place solely to geographic ‘rootedness’. In a multicultural urban setting this can too easily make for an exclusive, excluding set of territorialisms. But how to uncouple notions of community from fixed territoriality?

Stuart Hall suggests that the concept of diaspora provides an alternative framework for thinking about imagined communities:

Because it is spatially located, but imagined as belonging not to one but to several different places, the concept of diaspora contests actively the way in which place has been traditionally inserted into the story of culture and identity. It therefore forges a new relationship between the three terms – culture, identity and place [...] it conceives of individuals as capable of drawing on different maps of meaning. (Hall 1996: 207)

This opening up of concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘place’ bears on other questions that the project began to raise for me. How can ‘a sense of belonging in place’ develop for groups outside the most powerful? How can there be a belonging in urban place that does not demand identification with the static, authoritative or monumental in the existing built urban environment? The accreted, fragmented visual ornament, layered up around me on my city walks was a pointer towards openness, to an understanding of place in terms of multiple narratives, intersecting

networks in process, rather than as monolithic; an understanding which seemed to offer nourishment, in particular, for the diverse femininities which are partly my focus.

Well into the second half of the twentieth century, the practice of architecture remained an exclusively male domain; partly it was an art and a technology of public (i.e. masculine) expression, and women's education and representation in the necessary engineering skills were non-existent. This masculinized practice in the period of aesthetic modernism may be associated with tendencies towards building in 'pure', monolithic modes. The legacy of such past aesthetic thinking is made manifest in that which is exclusive and authoritarian in much of the contemporary built urban environment and also in the long recent Western history of the repression and denial of ornament.

The early crisis facing ornament was crystallized by the Great Exhibition of 1851. By then it was clear to some that the conditions of industrial manufacture ran counter to the 'organic' generation of ornament. The historian of ornament James Trilling speaks of 'the growing recognition that the future belonged not to ornament but to industrial design' (Trilling 2001: 10).

A key work on ornament at the height of the British Empire in India was Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856). Jones designed the Indian Pavilion for the Exhibition, and later advised the then South Kensington Museum on its collections of ornament, producing his immense pattern collection in 1856. His approach to the complexities surrounding the subject was both to look for examples of ornament that would lend themselves to mechanical reproduction, and also to masculinize the subject as a form of knowledge, a branch of science, thereby gathering to it an aura of authority. In his *Grammar of Ornament* – a telling title – he sought to turn it into a taxonomy, a system of illustrated axioms along lines of categorization which were Linnaean in their complexity. And he endowed it not only with 'scientific' authority, but also with that deriving from the then entirely masculine realm of architecture, as a work of a size, *gravitas* and dignity to lie in an architect's office, for an architect's use. He acknowledged, however, the huge debt to

textile design and production (in which women have always been very active) in furnishing him with examples of ornament.

He was not alone: *The Grammar of Ornament* has to be seen in the mid-nineteenth-century context, a time of collecting. Examples of ornament were collected, as was ethnographic data, as in the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford. It was a time when the world was seen as reducible to collectable 'knowledge' – so examples of criminal physiognomies were collected, and fossils, rocks, and perhaps most stupendously, plant material. World ornament was being collected all over Europe; in France a little later Albert Racinet published a sumptuous tome entitled *L'Ornement Polychrome* (Racinet 1869-73) [*Polychrome Ornament*] and C.B. Griesbach was likewise collecting in Germany (Griesbach 1975). Such collectors invariably associated themselves with the masculine realm of architecture.

In the nineteenth century the problem seemed to inhere both in adapting existing designs for ornament for machine production, and in generating new ones expressive of industrial conditions. In Germany the architectural historian Gottfried Semper suggested a different possibility: that the opposition between applied ornament and edifice perceived at the time by architects and architectural writers such as John Ruskin was in fact unnecessary. Semper argued that the first form of ornament was indivisible from the idea of 'the wall' as a vital component in architecture, that ornament had structural origins; in that the earliest walls may have been a form of textile (he proposed woven branches). Later textiles (rugs, tapestries) hung on built walls that acted merely as supports for the textiles that had the true function of wall as essential space-dividers, space-producers (Semper: 1989). Ornament, he suggested, had therefore once been inherent, structural. The implication here is that it was thereby also permissible. By dissolving away the binary of surface versus structure, ornament could be appropriated in a Western context as a properly masculine field.

In any society, the built environment is often a spatialization of the ideas and desires of those dominant enough to be in a position to order building. 'Will' is embodied in building, as well as 'function'. In the earlier part of the twentieth century the problem became one of finding any permission at all in design contexts for applied ornament. In this economically harsh period Western urban environments were formed, often brutally, expressing as ever prevailing hierarchies and their attendant dominant and subordinate social and financial relations.

Early twentieth-century modernism in architecture sought to create a visionary and above all universal ideal future through streamlining and a utopian hygiene through simplicity. 'Progress' was bound up with 'purity'. Modernist domestic and city space was to be clean, rational, efficient. The art historian Paul Greenhalgh, in his history of modernist simplicity, *The Modern Ideal: The Rise and Collapse of Idealism in the Visual Arts*, notes that in design matters, 'simplicity became purity' (Greenhalgh 2005: 211). Clarity – 'cleanliness' – seemed incompatible with applied ornament. The desire for 'cleanliness' has had, of course, a deadly history, which perhaps renders problematic the persistent tendency to equate 'good taste' with 'purity' and 'simplicity'.

Industrial design generates structural pattern that for the best part of a century has substituted for ornament. Adolf Loos in the early years of the twentieth century wrote famously on 'Ornament and Crime', meaning among other things, economic crime, unwarrantable lavishness in a time of widespread poverty (Loos 1998; see also Trilling 2001: 198 for a careful commentary on this). But Loos's essay is imbued with the attitudes of his time: he equated people whom he called 'savages', through their tattoos, with working-class and 'degenerate' Western men. Loos's 'crime' included the kind of work that women had traditionally produced. In this scheme they were never far from degenerate weakness either. He associated the persistence of applied ornament into the modern period, the period of developing industrial design, with such 'degeneracy' – and significantly, specifically with feminine 'degeneracy', giving the criminally low wages of embroideresses as an example of the degradation caused by a devotion to ornament on the part of

wealthier women. 'I have discovered the following truth,' he wrote, 'and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles of everyday use.' (Loos 1998: 167).

Such difficulties on the part of the (then heavily) masculine profession of architecture concerning permission for ornament seem in many ways connected to masculine anxieties about involvement in a field whose association with the feminine rendered it dubious. Embroidery, a major medium for ornament, in particular sinned against modernist aesthetic ideas of wholeness and integrity, for a 'feminine' way of working is often additive. A piece is built stitch by stitch, morsel by morsel. Embroidery lent (and lends) itself to being pursued between household distractions. Appliqué and patchwork, other incremental 'feminine' activities, are similar in this. But the status of these additive techniques suffers in that they can be made to carry overtones of covering and thence disguise, bringing into play an ancient disgust with 'fucus' – make-up, masquerade, concealment, and under all that, perhaps horror of female flesh itself.

More recent approaches to ornament, through the 'playful' or 'ironic' appropriation characterizing postmodern design, have sometimes seemed only to emphasize our alienation from ornament. And yet it never goes away. It has roots deep in desire which, in its secret knottedness with memory, runs everywhere along the axes of race, culture, gender, however much denied. James Trilling writes:

Ornament – the elaboration of functionally complete objects for the sake of visual pleasure – is as old as humankind, yet for most of the twentieth century it was systematically excluded from the mainstream of Western art-making and art appreciation [...] never before had so fundamental an expression of the creative spirit been singled out for elimination (Trilling 2001: 6).

In the same place he writes of ornament as an ‘art of intense if elaborately veiled emotion [...] its emotional energies are implicit, masked by the discipline of pattern’ (Trilling 2001: 6). In modernist design, form was to follow function; but ‘function’ was always defined narrowly, exclusively, literally. And yet humanness exceeds the notion of ‘function’. Human fullness, human meanings are complex and have complex expressions. The science and technology underpinning modernity are only one way of narrating the world and human existence, and an incomplete way. Human beings persist in seeking integration within themselves and in the world in ways (for example, religious, quasi-religious, mythic) that generate other kinds of expressions. Among these is ornament.

In the Tooting shop selling embroidered and patterned saris is a reminder of everything to which modernism in design was opposed. Visual pattern can be, wittingly and unwittingly, the bearer of meaning and of memory. In the context of the shop, and the hundreds of others like it, the trade in ornamented textiles brings into play not only aesthetic delight but the forces of cultural memory. The complexity of this term is suggested by Jan Assmann, who discusses it as ‘the outer dimension of human memory’ (Assman 1992: 19) and by Cornelius Holtorf’s gloss on it as ‘the collective understandings or constructions of the distant past, as they are held by people in a given social and historical context’ (Holtorf 2005) – distant and not so distant, one might add. Identity is involved – another complex concept. Richard Handler reminds us that groups are symbolic processes that emerge and dissolve in particular contexts of action, that they do not have essential identities. He evokes ‘who we are’ as a ‘communicative process’ and points out that it includes ‘many voices and varying degrees of understanding and, importantly, misunderstanding’ (Handler 1994: 27-40). This suggests how great was (and still is) the potential for misunderstanding and alienation through ignorance of self and others when aesthetic modernism, with its standardizing and universalizing impetus, sought to repress or compromise affective expressions, such as are found in ornament, of profoundly disparate processes. Yet, though so much was streamlined away

in the paring down of the international modern style into 'cleanliness', and though its utopian claims have long been discredited, cities are still deeply marked by the modernist legacy, the urge to 'pure' functionalism in design.

Ornament nonetheless survives in London, however unnoticed, grimed and bedimmed, evidencing more multiplicitous and complex modes of being than can be contained within reductive paradigms. For it is a cosmopolitan city, a place of exchange of all kinds, of goods and services, ideas, insults, courtesies; one of the world's great marts where people make all sorts of signals, approaches, offers to each other. In this brimming city, the sari shop and the variety of skills, culturally specific (and hybrid) attitudes, practices and productions that the shop enfolds and borders, exceed all rigid and exclusive accounts.

'The British' – whoever, complicatedly, they are – have a complex relationship to what the Tooting sari shop represents. Their history of empire in India is implicated: a tricky set of memories (or constructions) now transforming into new and vivid life in the becoming of the contemporary cosmopolitan city. In thinking about 'British' attitudes to the dazzling pattern cultures brought to Britain by India, it is clear that the British find a variety of different ways of giving themselves permission for desirous response. These ways divide significantly on gender lines. An anecdote: I once bought in a London Oxfam shop a man's expensive city suit of dark pinstripe worsted, and unpicked it in order to understand its structure, only to discover that in the invisible, that is the 'private' areas of the jacket, under the collar and lapels and inside the pockets was a silk lining of crimson paisley. Replicated doubtless in thousands of other suits, this detail is suggestive of a kind of haunting. Women, significantly less anxious, perhaps, about showing their hunger for delight in ornament, openly embrace fast-selling interpretations currently marketed everywhere towards them in high street fashion and interior design, ornament that embraces colour, sparkle, pattern. The current explosion of embroidery on clothes and accessories is work produced in India, adapted and hybridized, for Western feminine taste, a contemporary manifestation (the

current popularity of Bollywood-themed films is another), of a phenomenon with a long history, going back at least to the eighteenth century.

Carrying these ideas, these hauntings in my mind, my journeys in London began to enact a process of visiting and revisiting, looping back and forth between the South Asian Galleries at the quite centrally located Victoria and Albert Museum, with its suggestion of past empire, and the more peripherally situated suburb of Upper Tooting Road. This movement led me to reflect not only on the problematic nature of 'centre' and its relation to 'periphery', but on the way in which the Indian diaspora in Britain in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seems to be an unfolding from an earlier movement of people, that involved in the imperial British occupation of India of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to be consequent on it; places like Tooting make this unfolding visible.

The sari shop clearly offers homely reminders, through its textiles, to various local populations originating (though perhaps at the remove of one or more generations) in India. The shop sells mainly to women. The ornament on the saris and other textiles is not all blandly hybrid; culturally specific families of pattern continue to be bought persistently, whether from aesthetic choice or as markers of devotedly held cultural identity.

Women play a major role in culture bearing. As textile consumers and often as textile workers, whether in the home or the factory, they are involved with the motifs, fabrics and garments, which hold narratives, memories, shifting meanings. For example, the ubiquitous *boteh* motif, known to Westerners as a component in paisley patterns, may refer verbally and variously to the mango fruit, or a palm leaf unfolding, or a flower bouquet; its fascination comes from its instant recognizability and within that, its infinite linear variety. Textiles also call sensuous knowledges into play: the effect of the motif is nuanced according to its articulation, printed, beaded, embroidered, in diaphanous chiffon, in heavy silk, in soft washed-out old cotton. The denial of ornament (even of all textiles in some interiors) in modernist design was a denial

also of these knowledges and of the meditative practices and time of hand-stitch. This is a knowing which exists in the feminine, in the minds of a great section of the population in any city.

To me the Tooting shops represented also all sorts of geographic distances folded into the closest of proximity: the distance of twenty-first-century British South Asians from India; that of the past British imperial excursion from Britain; less tangible distances between diasporas, between imperialists of different centuries, between old 'Londoners' and newer ones growing into complex citizenship. The effect is to create a cosmopolitan neighbourhood. It is, precisely, not an 'exotic' one, for that suggests a one-way dominant gaze veiling divisive notions of difference. Rather, the folded distances render the street as a complex space of difference offering the possibility of diverse ways of belonging and the potential for encounter.

The anthropologist Hervé Varenne suggests with reference to the last half century of major migration that there has been a shift whereby the powers of patterned wholes have become less potent than processes of fragmentation and collision (Varenne 1999). As he puts it, when human beings start interacting with each other, separately developed productions become context to each other, and the conjunction of these productions makes something new, 'a whole (pattern, gestalt, culture) which if massive enough, will lead to reinterpretation of any new production in its terms.' Here 'productions' refers to various kinds of material culture, such as dress or architecture, articulated through pattern (whether conscious or unconsciously produced) (Varenne 1999).

I wondered, might the shop as a site be apprehended, represented and read through the processes of visual patterning it contained? Could there be a mapping/modelling of urban place which foregrounded the diversity of the patterns (and hence meanings) it presented, as well as the discontinuities between patterns – the disrupted and the polyglot?

I had written to the proprietor, and telephoned. When at last I pushed open the door, I found kindness, as on every subsequent visit.

I wanted to focus on the heterogeneous narratives arising from conjunctions of patterns-in-place in all their discontinuity. Clearly, visual *pattern*, in the context of this work, is not the same as *ornament*. Pattern may contain ornament, but is not coterminous with it. Ornament implies embellishment, while the repeated rhythmic qualities of pattern may appear for purely functional purposes, as in a row of coat hangers, the markings on a thermostat or a gas meter, the repeating structure of a shelving unit, tiles, brickwork, and so on. An important issue is how these different sorts of pattern contextualize and recontextualize each other; this conjunction of ornament and structurally produced pattern is key, rendering this project an exercise in intertextuality between motifs derived from the international modern style and those derived from culturally specific ornament.

In the shop I took over two hundred photographs and then began to sort and study them. At last I began to draw, using different drawing processes including freehand observational drawing, measured drawing and copying and tracing. Through this drawing I began to be more physically aware of all the kinds of things in the shop, the functional international modern and the ornamental, rubbing up together in one small space through the processes of commerce.

Inside the shop there are other heterogeneities. The shop deals in textiles made by hand but also by machines that embroider and weave. Where this is so, they are often imitating the older styles (but imitation may be a kind of remembering. Machine reproduction hovers between carrying an element of longing, itself poignant – a reminder of the body which once generated its patterns to another rhythm; and the enabling of the marketing of ‘roots’ as industrially produced commodity). So the site is discontinuous, there is no ‘pure craft’, and no preciousness in the idea of ‘preserving handwork traditions’. The shop offers what sells best, shawls, scarves, salwar kameez, saris priced from £7 to £700, machine-made, handmade, bearing ornament referencing motifs hundreds of years old, others digitally generated only the other day. The goods are already complex: India is a multicultural country racing to modernize, full of Internet and industry – at

least in its large cities – making it pointless to speak of ‘authenticity’ or ‘purity’ in origins. Meanings are in flux, as perhaps are the identities and the memories of the women who buy here as consumers and some of whom may well embroider for themselves at home.

Because Tooting is home to various communities originating from India, I took as my starting point the ten ‘Indian’ pages in *The Grammar of Ornament*, interrogating its imperial categorizations and homogeneities. The work I produced, *A Patois of Pattern* (Scalway 2005), reverses Owen Jones’s imperial approach by asking: what can be found in the pattern pool in just one small London Asian shop in the postcolonial period, plunging in with deliberate lack of selectiveness?

A Patois of Pattern is a postcolonial revisiting of *The Grammar of Ornament*. It is an artist’s book, lithographically produced at the Curwen Studio near Cambridge in the U.K., a studio that specializes in lithography for fine art, the very medium used historically in the great pattern collections of the nineteenth century, pioneered by Owen Jones. *A Patois* contains nine pages of interlaced linear pattern motifs. While its dimensions refer to those of the 1856 edition of Jones’s collection of ornament ‘specimens’, its impetus is to subvert his classifications as long untenable.

In preparing the pages of artwork, I investigated through drawing for hours the dozens of photographs, the rows of coat hangers and trees of life, gas meters and teardrop paisleys, fuse boxes and mughal florals, telephones and Islamic geometrics. In those hours something odd happened. In looking at pattern derived from different kinds of space, a *boteh* floral next to an aluminium clothes rack, a grid of halogen ceiling lights by a geometric motif of possibly Islamic origin, I also found myself negotiating very different orders of time and reflecting on the implications of different modes of representation: ornament, the pattern created by the representation of systems, and the illusionistic perspective that seemed to present itself as one of the means of suggesting the shop’s functional physical context.

A system of visual representation is also a system imbued with a sense of time. A culture's modes of spatial representation may be considered as underlying the way it sees itself in relation to the world. Approaching this perception at the beginning of the twentieth century, the art historian Erwin Panofsky coined a term: 'iconology' (Panofsky 1939). The word 'iconography' referred only to separate represented items – iconology was much more. It connected theories of vision with theories of spatial representation and the latter to phases in cultural history.

If we accept Panofsky's suggestion that something of a culture's sense of its relation to the world is revealed in its spatial representations, a system of visual representation is also a system imbued with a sense of time. A culture's modes of spatial representation may be considered as underlying the way it sees itself in relation to the world.

James Trilling defines ornament as 'the elaboration of functionally complete objects for the sake of visual pleasure' (Trilling 2001: 6). Delight is a powerful motive but ornament has also sometimes implicated meaning, in Western as in other cultures, so that it exploits or includes *sign* or *code* (tartan, grape, cross, wheel, for example). Individual meanings may become blurred, unstable, lost; motifs may be understood in different ways in different places and times, making simple readings foolhardy. But still ornament has recurrently been used as a way of marking family, clan, tribe, territory, particular production or possession, notions of good fortune, fertility, protection, sacredness.

In the shop the question of who produces motifs and for whom has no simple answer. Origins are varied, from items produced in factories in Mumbai and Chennai on an industrial scale, to costly silk hand-weaving produced as 'outwork' in homes in Benares. The relation between 'Indian' producer, 'British Indian' consumer and the 'British' who buy variant items designed with them in mind in a shop a few doors away is also confused: patterns originating in India have been reordered in Britain; ideas and instructions have criss-crossed back and forth; some motifs have been blurred through endless adaptation.

Yet, spread out on the shop counter, certain patterned textiles still intimate conceptions of time other than that of the digital clock on the shop wall. These patterns reflect the multiculturalism of India, from regions where one religion or another predominates, Islamic or Hindu (there may well also be motifs with a Buddhist origin: the proprietor declares that it is ‘All Indian’). In their very different ways the ornament associated with such religious cultures implies a world where the notion of infinity is, at least in some contexts, still connected to that of timelessness. Islamic geometric pattern often lets the eye travel across the field and then, because the repetition can go on forever, wander out into a suggestion of infinity, without the illusion of temporally-experienced distance created through a perspectival system orienting the gaze to a specific point. Geometric pattern originates in the same ancient interest in mathematics that made Eastern astronomy pre-eminent, and it alludes to a divine perfection in the world’s design, the endless possibilities in geometry for crystalline, kaleidoscopic patterning (see Labrusse 2004: 36). The arabesque line marks an unfolding of divine energy in space. Islamic ornament can be utterly minimal; but space, for example in an apparently empty room or courtyard may be full of light or of angels – it is never merely vacant. On a Hindu *stupa* in southern India the exponential explosion of gods, humans and creatures all from one tiny invisible point also suggests the world’s space conceived as inherently generative, endlessly fertile, maternal (see Hardy 1998). The ability of Eastern pattern-generating cultures to fill an available space with pattern suggests not *horror vacui*, fear of the void, but a sense of its humming fertility. (Not that utopias exist in religious cultures any more than in secular ones.)

Many of the shop’s textiles allude in this way to perfections in the world’s design. But repetition that may imply sacred infinity can also mean hard labour. Embroidery should not be sentimentalized by failing to acknowledge that in a commercial context it has always been a painfully driven way of earning a living. It is only when hand embroidery is free of such constraints (and therefore really beyond price) that there is access to a time of pleasure.

In the shop, a textile might be covered in thousands of sequins, each held by a hasty thread; here and there a sparkler has come loose and hangs down; threads are left dangling; the gold is not gold. Everything is necessarily in close proximity; such stuff as dreams are made of lie on scuffed shelves next to the plumbing pipes ... This evidence of labour, evidence of both fleshly creatureliness and hard economic reality in the pursuit of a dream, memory or hope of delight, somewhere along the line from craftswoman (or craftsman) to customer, gives the shop a poignancy, a lived quality, a human richness.

I aimed, successfully or not, at a format that could lightly, nimbly, touch and hold diverse material. *A Patois of Pattern* is a slender work. It seeks to play on the variety of modes of pattern books. The phrase pattern (or ‘model’) book is interestingly ambivalent. It may point towards a ‘pattern archive’ that is not the same as a commercial ‘sample book’, though it might feed a sample book. A ‘pattern book’ can exist as a record of past work, as instruction, and as stimulus to new ideas and invitation, offering the chance of new formations appearing in the juxtaposition of motifs liberated by their very decontextualization and lack of indication of scale.

Owen Jones was aware, like other architectural and design writers of the nineteenth century, of the fissures in his own world. He responded with a work of intended *gravitas*, suggesting, perhaps illusorily, that monumental solutions were still possible. He might have seen his collection in several ways: as a didactic ‘Grammar’ deriving authority from its allusion to architectural orders, seeking to create a coherent system for the placement of ornament: as a magisterial teaching collection: as a mini portable museum, framed according to the lights of his colonial day: and as a work relating, in its sweep (which has something of mapping about it), both to architects’ plans and to atlases of his world.

I reflected on the multiple modes of being of Jones’s tomes and came up with something that touched on them externally, with reminders of their atlas-like dimensions and their rich colours. But though *A Patois of Pattern* alludes to *The Grammar of Ornament*, it is actually more

akin to a textile designer's informal sketchbook. In *The Grammar's* volumes of imagery, each spread is formally laid out. Jones separated his thousands of motifs into discrete areas and arranged these into balanced compositions. In *A Patois* – a brief logbook of looking and tracing – I tried to subvert this formality, to show the entanglement of elements: of pattern coming from functional structure and ornament coming from cultural memory, the complexity of the world which holds them both. So a line drawing overlaps or is juxtaposed with another, tracing contrast or rhyme; leaf tendrils spread over electricity meters; the curves of a row of *botehs* echo those of a telephone; visual routes are traced, are disrupted and resume between the 'international modern' and the culturally-specific Asian, in a way in which I wanted to resist finding closure. Sketchbooks are for such reflection, inwards and outwards, for just-beginning thoughts, for emergent outlines. Their open format gives permission for suggestion, for experiment with barely realized connections, for laying out material in order to quiz it and to render the unnoticed more visible.

Draughtsmen know, however inarticulately, that drawing like other embodied practices is a form of corporeal knowing. What I had not foreseen was what would be revealed through this attempt to 'know'. At one moment I would find my pen whisking sharply along a steel rule as I sought to re-enact the lines of a rack of industrial metal shelves or lighting unit; the next, the pen went wisping and wandering at an entirely different speed and pressure among the tendrils of a *boteh* motif. These different physical engagements with the varied material elements produced, as drawing often does, a bodily enactment or performance of different paces, perhaps echoing the ones implied in the different underlying conceptions of the world brought together in this particular place, from the rational modernism of the shop's functional systems to the fertile universe: the gardens and paradises – references in textile ornament to divine perfection – where speeds vary from Ethernet-fast to the slowness of hand embroidery and the clack of industrial textile machinery.¹

Pattern is essentially rhythmic. The project led to the beginnings of visual articulation of the interaction of some of the complicated visual rhythms to be found in any such shop. Profound changes in street and shop visual rhythms have occurred as a result of the widespread arrival of Asian and other immigrant communities in cities like London, an aspect that might conduce to an understanding of its ‘vibrant’ complexity. Rhythm in music exemplifies the corporeal effects of sound pattern, but visual pattern appeals to a related human sensibility. This project began to enact, through the embodied, performative practice of hand-drawing, the way in which different design purposes, developed in different cultures, interact to produce the kaleidoscoping visual rhythms of the cosmopolitan city. Indeed, the very word ‘vibrant’, clichéd in its application to cities, to streets and scenes, becomes more interesting when we inquire what ‘vibration’ entails in the context of visual urban rhythms.

Perhaps among the more evocative inclusions in *A Patois of Pattern* are the interleaving of representations of digital and of embroidered patterns, for example of digital chip-and-pin machines and phones amidst spreading ornamental motifs, suggesting the rhizomatic spatiality of the digital and cultural processes and practices which connect this shop and its contents to others in the city, the country and other continents. This may recall something of Hall’s ‘circuits’ (Hall 1996: 207). Truly one sees here an embodiment of his play on words, whereby ‘roots’ turn into ‘routes’ (209). Digital communication tends to work rhizomatically and in the case of texts in particular, lateral patterns build up through the accretion of small processes, not unlike embroidery.

Now, in some architectural practices, a licensing of delight in pattern is back, thanks to virtual technologies. Digital graphic media offer architects immense powers of visual speculation, profoundly affecting the ways in which architecture is designed. Architectural publications show fabulously intricate diagramming, fulfilling the desire for visual patterning, one of the old roles of ornament. Architectural practices are springing up, driven by digital technology, driven in the

sense that such technology goes far beyond being just a tool: rather it is an intoxicating creative medium in its own right. Responsive, 'intelligent' architecture seems a thrilling possibility.

Yet perhaps it is telling that so much of the imagery in recent publications seems oddly disturbing, dreamlike and glassy. This suggests that the old difficulties with relation to finding permission for ornament have a current legacy: that the mathematical, disembodied nature of its digital source is betrayed as much in the self-referentiality of some of the patterning, however virtuoso, as in the distanced slickness of the two-dimensional graphics.

Bart Lootsma, writing on 'digital architecture' describes practices that are based on the belief that the computer will dramatically change the nature of architecture in terms of the design process as well as on the levels of organization and experience. He writes: 'Instead of trying to validate conventional architectural thinking in a different realm, our strategy today should be to infiltrate architecture with other media and disciplines to produce a new crossbreed. Reducing everything to flows of data and quantities, the computer offers us exactly this possibility' (Lootsma 1999: 7).

The key word here is 'reduced'. It raises a question: what other disciplines, 'reduced' to what data, what quantities, will produce a crossbreed which can 'utter us' with real subtlety and complexity?

I return, by way of contrast, to the embodied experience of the Tooting Asian textile shop with its mass of visual and physical intricacy and intimacy, its textures and its smells. Desire is present in the digital practice as in the shop, but its operation is in a distanced, more purely optical (and perhaps more frustrated) manner.

How, then, may digitally generated architectural pattern, with all its potential, its futurity, gather to itself the poignancy and lived richness of the patterned and ornamented urban present and past? This question leads to others. How may the city utter difference, so that difference may, finding its reflection, identify with the city, making possible the fullness of citizenship? Where and

how in the city may the feminine of different cultures find embodied their modes of fluid and multiple being, their meanings, memories, times, spaces? Where in the city is the city that addresses who we are, that has spaces where alterities might encounter each other, as well as pockets and folds sustaining local difference? Must 'encounter' inevitably take the form of power play?

The 'imagined city' need not appropriate, in any leaden, literal way, the ancient ornament of immigrant populations. But pattern and ornament such as that in the Tooting shop do contain histories of meaning, memory and emotion pertaining to difference in gender and in culture. To look into ornament in the context of the cosmopolitan city is to become aware of pressing questions concerning the as yet barely guessed-at powers of the digital dispensation in envisioning inclusive environments – which means an engagement with varied, not monolithic or monocultural, spatialities. These digital powers might offer themselves to the recognition and braiding of the city's varied histories of meaning and memory into present and future city building. In this way the imagined city might celebrate continuity, complexity and futurity in folding together a wider, more inclusive range of understandings of time, pace, space and place.ⁱⁱ

Notes

1 For a discussion of the ways in which such symbolic motifs need nuanced understanding see Spooner (1986: 207).

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