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## Forward: Decorative Dilemmas

Writing a preface to a collection of work around the theme of decoration is like entering into the postscript of a well-worn battlefield still patterned with recognizable, yet unavoidable cultural landmines. Whether it is a question of sexual politics (the presumption that decoration is feminine whereas structure is masculine), disputes over professional jurisdictions (exemplified by the ongoing tussle between the Interior Designers for Legislation in New York and Gov. George Pataki), recent debates over architectural aesthetics (modernism and the return of historical associations in postmodernism), or well worn theoretical machinations (Gottfried Semper's writings on the origins of architecture in *The Four Elements of Architecture*), discussions of decoration inevitably involve disputes over definitions and territories. This is not incidental, as decoration exists at gaps between things; at contested border lines, of material assemblies as well as disciplines, classes, and genders. Inevitably, in a discussion on decoration, one gets caught in protracted border disputes.

Yet, despite the extensive body of work on this topic, the question of decoration continues to resonate. Not only is the material fact of decoration compelling in its form and figure, but the study of decoration also inevitably entangles unsettled and heated disputes. Over the course of history, as cultural boundaries shift—influenced largely by changes in technology which directly effect forms and methods of material production—the definition and meaning of decoration continually shifts and changes. Although a gross simplification of a complex period, it is most certainly the case that the industrialization of the 19th century transformed costly and time consuming products of trained artisans into mass-produced and inexpensive consumer goods, changing the meaning of the same decorative element from the time-tested sign of wealth and royalty into mail-order stock useful in mitigating middle-class angst over newly acquired material resources. In turn, Modern Architecture derived its authority and rhetorical power from the shedding of this industrially produced (albeit craft-inspired) decoration in favor of an authentic decoration for the machine age: of white walls, of clean lines. Today, one need only look at contemporary paint catalogues displaying hundreds of designer whites or at reconsiderations of modern myth that support the canon to realize that definitions and histories continue to shift.



*Dash Dogs, Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, 127 Rivington Street, New York, 2005. Photo by Michael Moran.*

What then to make of the question of decoration today, where serial production meets mass-customization? Digital processes that enable and encourage deviation with repetition have reopened investigations into both complex surfaces and decoration. Vector-based information design systems with direct control over production facilities have made it possible to create forms and material manipulations that escape previously conceived categories such as decoration, structure or surface. Design tools that utilize pixel systems encourage synecdochical structures of imagination and design, wherein the seamless switching between the part and the whole encourages reconsiderations of scale through composite patterns and fields. Post-Industrial economic structures within dense urban areas coupled with an emphasis upon ecological imperatives for reuse mean that architects and designers are often presented with situations where the space for work is restricted to a wrapper or thin zone within an already existing shell.

What would historically have been considered the domain of surface decoration, construed as a thin veneer or wallpaper, is now given as the allotted space for work. This has been the case on a number of recent projects that our office has tackled, providing a testing ground for the exploration on possibilities and reconsiderations of material and pattern. In each case—whether it be Xing Restaurant, Tides Restaurant, Ini Ani Coffee Shop, Dash Dogs, or Fluff Bakery, the plan—the territory usually providing the most fertile ground for architectural design—was fixed and predetermined by a combination of economic imperatives and code constraints. What remained as the opportunity for design invention was thus limited to the elevation and ceiling—historically the prerogative of decoration. But, by considering this territory as a thickened surface, we approached each project as a testing ground for transforming the perception of ordinary materials through repetition and change, such that the overall effect exceeds the previous understanding of the material seen in isolation. This work has, paradoxically, required custom work done by hand to realize a surface conceived and developed through digital processes.

As architects and designers take greater leadership positions in the area of ecology, a continued focus on and experimentation with the life and health of material surfaces and spatial decorations will occur. Life-cycle cost estimates, cradle-to-cradle frameworks, and other green rating systems encourage a reconsideration of the value of decoration along lines not simply dictated by past or present aesthetic predilections. The recent interest in new hybrid materials, byproducts of recycling initiatives, or outcomes of research into translucency and daylight offer only the most recent exploration into the meaning and cultural impact of systems and structures of decoration.

It is from this vantage point, where decoration is not denigrated or assigned a peripheral role in the definition of the built environment, but rather served as a palimpsest for the exploration of current and past cultural politics, that this volume of 306090 offers a way into a vital area of contemporary architectural discourse.



*Ini Ani Coffee Shop, Lewis.Tsurumaki.  
Lewis, 105 Stanton Street, New York,  
2005. Photo by Michael Moran.*



*Tides Restaurant, Lewis.Tsurumaki.  
Lewis, 102 Norfolk Street, New York,  
2005. Photo by Michael Moran.*