

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2018)

Heft: 32

Artikel: Plastic love nest

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919040>

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Plastic Love Nest

Plasticity Studio

According with the IKEA 2017 catalogue, «Home is the place where we can be ourselves.»¹ Within the post-Fordist western culture, the home became one of the most important status symbols, a preferred stage for an individual's «habitus», meaning as the system of tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it.

Moreover, home is one of the main measures of someone's wealth and, in a way affecting our mating potential. The making of the new home, for newly married couples, is a sort of rite of passage in which they try and build their own private heterotopia², a «love nest».

In doing so, the young couple customizes the place they live in—beyond the sheer need of shelter—in accordance with a series of needs, resulting from their cultural backgrounds, comfort, history... Despite the efforts of hyper-rational modern architects and intellectuals, people still use ornament, decorations and accessories to express their selves within the world.

Following the appearance of «On the Origin of Species»³, the place of ornament in evolution moved to the center stage. It soon became a crucial topic as it finds itself at the intersection of Science, Architecture, Art and Philosophy. Critics of the natural selection theory underlined how the existence of ornaments in nature escaped the strictly mechanistic processes ostensibly described by Darwin. He explained the «anomaly» of ornament by arguing that ornamental characters were secondary sexual characters used to attract the opposite sex.⁴ This argument applied to both animals and humans: Darwin and others, for instance, were struck by the primitives' urge for tribal tattoos. «That [savages] have a passion for ornament», Darwin wrote, and added that they deck themselves with plumes, necklaces, armbands, ear-rings... and paint their own bodies in the most diverse ways. According to Darwin, even clothing, typically seen in utilitarian terms, might have been «first made for ornament and not for warmth». The discovery of tribal and atavistic populations forced the scientists to put humans on the same level as other natural elements. They unwittingly provided the basis for contemporary post-humanism.

The role of taste in evolution was one of the most relevant among Darwin's intuitions. He believed in the possibility that taste «may in the course of time become inherited», for this would explain each race's «own innate ideal of beauty». Many animals make numerous sensory evaluations in the course of their

lives—for example, among potential mates, fruits, or flowers. Why, for example, do philosophers frequently mention flowers as examples of natural beauty (Kant, for example), but not plant roots? Unlike roots, flowers function through the subjective sensory perceptions and cognitive evaluations of other organisms⁵. Flowers have evolved to attract pollinators. In the same way, the aesthetic production (and perception) changes in relation to how the humans' evaluation ability evolves. Hence we can say that aesthetics, in nature, is coevolutionary. Criteria for aesthetic judgment by each individual may be determined by genetic, environmental or cultural factors. In any case, it is a matter of taste. About 100 years after Darwin, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu investigated the role of taste within social classes. He expanded Marx's theory of capital and came to the conclusion that there are cultural, economic and symbolic types of capital. Bourdieu stated that «taste classifies», it couples social and sexual partners.⁶

Dwelling is an aesthetic experience because it is felt. It is, indeed, both the affirmation of the self and the mutual recognition between the self and the world. Besides humans, most species in nature are in the habit of using a series of aesthetic communication codes to elaborate their social and sexual behavioural patterns. In this sense, dwelling, is not just a cultural matter, but rather a natural condition. Inside this context, ornament plays a fundamental role. It is one of the main links between the human and non-human world, since it is a common feature that unites living beings, including plants. «Homecare», for example, is a fundamental practice within human communities, and it is recently proved to be used by some animal species, among birds and fish in particular, who decorate their nest in order to attract mates. Certain species of fish show outstanding abilities in designing their own home—a practice which is regarded as purely human—in order to find love.

«Torquigener albomaculosus» is a recently discovered (2014) kind of pufferfish⁷. This particular fish has an innate talent for design. The males are



Visualization 'home' © Plasticity Studio

known for creating amazing circular-shaped nests in the sand, measuring two metres in diameter. Nests are created to attract mates through an impressive decorative design which influences a female's choice. So the male fish who owns the most beautiful home will probably be the most successful.

Torquigeners are not the only fish using home-design to get a high-ranking position: as the ethologist Konrad Lorenz wrote in *King Solomon's Ring*, female Sticklebacks pick their sexual partners based on their do-it-yourself ability to build homes⁸. Furthermore, male sticklebacks change their colour during the breeding season. This is not simply a functional colouring that acts as a camouflage, protecting fish from predation. Lorenz suggested that this spectacular colouring may act as a form of aggression, the vivid and unambiguous marking of territory. In other words, for Lorenz and other neo-Darwinists, this excess is the bodily expression of something like a territorial imperative, a key element in the struggle for survival.

Deleuze and Guattari disagreed with such arguments. They stated that territoriality is indeed bound up with sexual and artistic production. «It is not the mark that is formed to protect a preexisting territory but rather is it the mark that creates territory», they state, intending territory as the consequence of an

artistic work. «Territory is artistic, the consequence of love not war, of seduction not defense, of sexual selection not natural selection»⁹.

The living beings that mostly validate this thesis are birds, with their innate artistic skills such as singing, dancing and architecture. The family of the Ptilonorhynchidae (better known as «Bowerbirds») are particularly noteworthy: these birds make large use of ornament as a sexual interaction tool. Bowerbirds are romantic (and highly skilled) architects, as they build intricate structures to seduce females. They are renowned for their unique courtship behaviour: the male bowerbird has a colorful way to seduce females. To attract them, he builds peculiar structures, decorated with colourful ornaments. He collects all kinds of brightly colored small objects, and places them visibly outside their love nest. Most bowerbirds collect objects in either one or two colours.

The female birds are attracted by these bright colors, but before they pick a partner they commonly check out multiple bowers. Once the intercourse took place, the female bird will leave and raise the chicks on her own. When they collect more than one colour, they also carefully separate them. Bowerbirds have also quickly adapted to the anthropocene era, as they use human waste (such as plastic fragments) to adorn their home. When a bowerbird lives close to a human



Visualization «nest with collected objects» © Plasticity Studio

environment, it has the possibility to interact with a wider range of colorful materials. The more colorful the nest, the more attractive the male will be for the females.

The Tooth-billed Bowerbird (*Scenopoetes dentirostris*) is another species from the same family. It is also known as stagemaker bowerbird, because of its architectural seductive strategy. «Every morning the *Scenopoetes dentirostris* cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler, internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made; and directly above, on a creeper or branch, while fluffing its feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates; it is a complete artist: colors, postures, and sounds that sketch out a total work of art.»¹⁰

In the late nineteenth century ornament became a sharp boundary between the functional and the arbitrary, in art and architecture alike. In the modern era, intellectuals began to strongly oppose decoration, and they gave birth to a completely renewed concept of «design» as a purely functional matter. One of the most important pioneers of this «modern thinking» was the famous Austrian/Czech architect Adolf Loos who authored several polemical

works against the use of decoration in the production of objects for everyday use.

Loos's contribution to architecture theory was to tie ornament directly to cultural evolution. He stated that «because ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer an expression of our culture. Ornament as created today has no connection with us, has no human connection at all, no connection with the current world-order.»¹¹

Violence against ornament characterized nineteenth-century critics besides Loos—Nietzsche, for example, condemned «decorative culture» in his renowned «On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life»—but we need to remember that before Loos there was a heated debate revolving around ornament in architecture. Alois Riegl, architecture theorist and Semper's successor, re-evaluated the role of ornament in an evolving world. Riegl regarded ornament as the one and only architectural element not governed by evolutionary forces—a primitive and inherent element of a building, a sort of natural urge. To justify this statement, he used to consider the Maori's taste for decoration: according to Riegl, the Maori were an isolated tribe, free from external influences, exemplifying contemporary Europeans as if they were «purified» from all the cultural superstructures. Like Darwin, Riegl argued that the practice of tattooing

even ‹preceded› that of wearing clothes: «the human desire to adorn the body is far more elementary than the desire to cover it [...] the decorative motifs that satisfy the simple desire for adornment [...] surely existed before textiles were used for physical protection»¹². In his book ‹Stilfragen. Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik› Riegl collected a large number of ornamental motifs and examples of their use in ancient populations, in order to demonstrate the presence of an atavistic and instinctive ‹will to art› in humankind.

Loos has never hidden his will to be part of an elitist society, he intended design as a tool to radically emancipate people by escaping the culture of picturesque. Nevertheless, what happened to the modern rational design is that it became just another kind of minimalist ornament adopted by a group of people to identify themselves within a class taste which is strongly related to both their social position and cultural level.

The absence of ornament works as a form of ornament. It is just an intermediate step in the making of a coevolutionary human aesthetics. And as with other styles before (and after), it has a political meaning: in response to the elegant and rational bourgeois aesthetics, popular classes often react with noisy and flashy signs. This ‹aesthetic fight› is the making of the territory for contemporary humans. Territory is artistically inscribed, the consequence of an artistic gesture. The first artist, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the architect: the one who distinguishes the inside from the outside, the one who actually draws a boundary. This boundary is not self-protective. It defines a stage of performance, an arena of enchantment, a mise-en-scene for seduction that brings together heterogeneous and otherwise unrelated elements: melody and rhythms, a series of gestures, a nest, an audience of rivals, an audience of desired ones. Since each form of life undertakes its own connections of body and earth, architecture is the most primordial art form, and this awareness is a valid starting point for what Deleuze and Guattari called ‹becoming animal›: a process that implies a political deconstruction of the western prevailing subject, based on constant factors that are expected to be universal—such as the now famous ‹white adult male›.

Sadly, the western contemporary society seems to be pretty far away from this virtuous process, since our relationship with nature—albeit being very strong on a rhetorical scale—is mainly human-centered. Nature is considered as a non-human system we need to take care about, a Great Outdoor which is external to the world-for-us, our home. ‹In this home, everything is familiar; we are surrounded by things that belong to us. We open the doors of this circle and go out: there is a second circle there, were animals and plants dwell without thinking and being thought. This is nature as such. [...] We grab something there and go back inside.»¹⁴ Several high class homes, today, have an ‹earthly› mood: despite being smart and filled with hidden technologies, they are characterized by warm

and natural elements, such as wood, stone, plants... And what's ironic is that while humans use domesticated natural elements to shape their territory, some animals—as bowerbirds—use human-lifestyle wastes to make their nest more appealing. By doing so, they can create ornaments that cannot be found in nature. In a sense, we can assume that human's out-of-control consumption is increasing male bowerbirds' chances of mating.

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