

THE PRINCIPAL OF CLADDING (1898)

by Adolf Loos

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Even if all materials are of equal value to the artist, they are not equally suited to all his purposes. The requisite durability, the necessary construction often demand materials that are not in harmony with the true purpose of the building. The architect's general task is to provide a warm and liveable space. Carpets are warm and liveable. He decides for this reason to spread out one carpet on the floor and to hang up four to form the four walls. But you cannot build a house out of carpets. Both the carpet on the floor and the tapestry on the wall require a structural frame to hold them in the correct place. To invent this frame is the architect's second task.

This is the correct and logical path to be followed in architecture. It was in this sequence that mankind learned how to build. In the beginning was cladding. Man sought shelter from inclement weather and protection and warmth while he slept. He sought to cover himself. The covering is the oldest architectural detail. Originally it was made out of animal skins or textile products. This meaning of the word is still known today in the Germanic languages. Then the covering had to be put up somewhere if it was to afford enough shelter to a family! Thus the walls were added, which at the same time provided protection on the sides. In this way the idea of architecture developed in the minds of mankind and individual men.

There are architects who do things differently. Their imaginations create not spaces but sections of walls. That which is left over around the walls then forms the rooms. And for these rooms some kind of cladding is subsequently chosen, whatever seems fitting to the architect.

But the artist, the architect, first senses the effect that he intends to realise and sees the room he wants to create in his mind's eye. He senses the effect that he wishes to exert upon the spectator: fear and horror if it is a dungeon, reverence is a church, respect for the power of the state if a palace, piety if a tomb, homeliness if a residence, gaiety if a tavern. These effects are produced by both the material and the form of the space.

Every material possesses its own language of forms, and none may lay

claim for itself to the forms of another material. For forms have been constituted out of the applicability and the methods of production of materials. They have come into being with and through materials. For forms have been constituted out of the applicability and the methods of production of materials. They have come into being with and through materials. No material permits an encroachment into its circle of forms. Whoever dares to make such an encroachment notwithstanding this is branded by the world a counterfeiter. Art, however, has nothing to do with counterfeiting or lying. Her paths are full of thorns, but they are pure.

[...]

But is the living space that has been constructed entirely of rugs not an imitation? The walls are not really built out of carpets! Certainly not. But these carpets are meant only to be carpets and not building stones. They were never meant to be taken as such, to imitate them in form or colour, but to reveal clearly their own meaning as a cladding for the wall surface. They fulfil their purpose according to the principal of cladding.

As I already mentioned at the outset, cladding is older even than structure. The reasons for cladding things are numerous. At times it is a protection against bad weather - oil-base paint, for example, on wood, iron, or stone; at times there are hygienic reasons for it - as in the case of enamelled tiles that cover the wall surfaces in the bathroom; at times it is the means to a specific effect - as in the colour painting of statues, the tapestries on walls, the veneer on wood. The principal of cladding, which was first articulated by Semper, extends to nature as well. Man is covered with skin, the tree with bark.

From the principal of cladding, however, I have derived a very precise law which I call the law of cladding. Do not be alarmed. It is usually said that laws put an end to progress and development. And indeed, the old master's got along perfectly well without laws. Certainly. It would be idleness to establish laws against thievery in a place where thievery is unknown. When the materials used for cladding had not yet been imitated, there was no need for laws. But now it seems to me to be high time for them.

The law goes like this: we must work in such a way that the confusion

of the material clad with its cladding is impossible. That means, for example, that wood may be painted any colour except one - the colour of wood. In a city where the exhibition committee decided that all the wood in the Rotunda should be painted "like mahogany," in a city in which wood graining is the exclusive type of painted decoration, this is a very daring law. There seems to be people here who consider this type of thing elegant. Since the railway and tram cars - as well as the entire technique of carriage building - come from England, they are the only wooden objects that display pure colours. I dare to assert that this kind of tramcar - especially one of the electric line - is more pleasing to me with its pure colours than it would be if, according to the principals of beauty set out by the exhibition committee, it had been painted "like mahogany."

[...]

Wood staining is, of course, an invention of our century. The Middle Ages painted wood bright red for the most part, the Renaissance blue; the Baroque and Rococo painted interiors white, exteriors green. Our peasants still retain enough good sense to paint only with pure colours. Don't the green gate and the green fence of the countryside, the green jalousies against the fresh whitewashed wall have a charming effect? Unfortunately several villages have already adopted the taste of the exhibition commission.

[...]

Applied to stucco work, the principal of cladding would run like this: stucco can take any ornament with just one exception: rough brickwork. One would think the declaration of such a self evident fact to be unnecessary, but just recently someone drew my attention to buildings whose plaster walls were painted red and then seamed with white lines. Similarly, the type of decoration so beloved in kitchens - imitation stone squares - belongs in this category. In general, any and all materials used to cover walls - wallpaper, oil cloth, fabric, or tapestries - ought not to aspire to represent squares of brick or stone. It is thus easy to understand why the legs of our dancers when covered with knit stockinets have such an

unaesthetic effect. Woven underclothing may be dyed any colour at all, just not skin colour.

The cladding material can keep its natural colour if the area to be covered happens to be of the same colour. Thus, I can smear tar on black iron or cover wood with another wood (veneer, marquetry, and so on) without having to colour the covering wood; I can coat one metal with another by heating or galvanising it. But the principal of cladding material to imitate the colouration of the underlying material. Thus iron can be tarred, painted with oil colours, or galvanised, but it can never be camouflaged with a bronze colour or any other metallic colour.

[...]

But no, you imitators and surrogate architects, you are mistaken! The human soul is too lofty and sublime for you to be able to dupe it with your tactics and tricks. Of course, our pitiful bodies are in your power. They have only five senses at their disposal to distinguish real from counterfeit. And at that point where the man with his sense organs is no longer adequate begins your true domain. There is your realm. But even here - you are mistaken once more! Paint the best inlays high, high up on the wood ceiling and our poor eyes will have to take it on good faith perhaps. But the divine spirits will not be fooled by your tricks. They sense that even those intarsia decorations most skillfully painted to look "like inlay" are nothing but oil paint.