

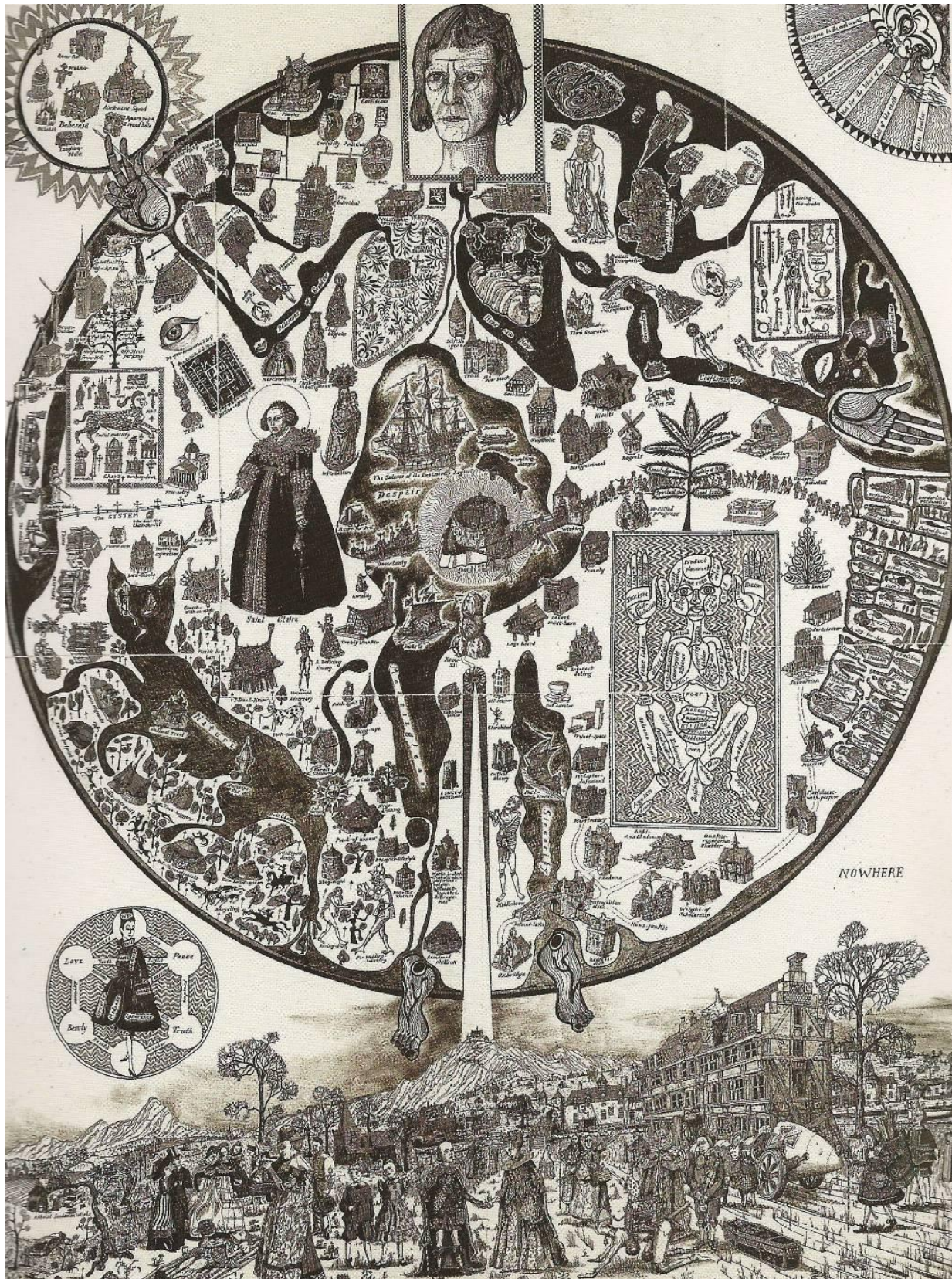
Architecture Dressed in Meaning

Study of ornamental ceramic facades through the eyes of Gottfried Semper

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1. Introduction

A mask refers both to what is hidden and to what is revealed. It creates a layer of meaning, it dresses what would otherwise be naked. Dressing (Bekleidung) is in Gottfried Semper's theory considered a means of expressing inner purpose, material and technique, as well as outer influences such as climate, religion and traditions.¹ As he pointed out: "In all Germanic languages the word Wand [wall], which has the same root and basic meaning as Gewand [garment], directly alludes to the ancient origin and type of the visible spatial enclosure."² When addressing architecture, he looked for its origin in people's experiences and reasons lying behind artistic creation, rather than architecture as such.³ He also considered the stage of a theatre whose dressing changes based on the story it communicates, and together with Richard Wagner in 1840s coined the term "Gesamtkunstwerk", or "synthesis of the arts."⁴

It was then another Wagner who at the end of the nineteenth century embraced Semper's "aesthetics of the mask."⁵ Otto Wagner searched for a method on how to combine Secessionist right of personal creation with ability to communicate historical development, and this approach enabled him to stay true to the traditional building structure and dress it in "poetry."⁶ Semper thus managed to bring attention to artistic meaning that the society in the era of industrial revolution was struggling to define, as Mallgrave points out in the introduction to *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*.⁷ However, the fear of ornament becoming a cheap factory-made product made people reject it and paved the path for the twentieth century modernism. Postmodernism which followed, used ornament only as a means of mockery targeting classicism.⁸

In this essay we will bring into spotlight one of few contemporary feats of architecture that creates a "Gesamtkunstwerk" by employing layers of ornamental meaning - A House for Essex designed by FAT Architecture and Grayson Perry in 2015. (Figure1) Through the eyes of Semper and his worlds of ethnography (as study of cultural influences), physics (as study of material and execution of ornament) and philology (as study of literary texts)⁹ we will assess the principles of dressing in its ceramic facade compared to the Majolikahaus (1898-1899) by Otto Wagner, within a larger discourse on maximalism and minimalism and the potential of ceramics in architecture. (Figure2)

¹ Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004), 20.

² Ibid., 247.

³ Mari Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74.

⁴ Semper, *Style*, 50,250.

⁵ Ákos Moravánszky, "The Aesthetics of the Mask: The Critical Reception of Wagner's Moderne Architektur and Architectural Theory in Central Europe," in *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993),199.

⁶ Ibid., 203.

⁷ Semper, *Style*, 3.

⁸ Edwin Heathcote, "Architecture Explained -With The Help of Grayson Perry's Shrine," *House&Home*, November 18, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/e5d781ce-8896-11e5-90de-f44762bf9896.html?siteedition=uk#slide12>.

⁹ Spyros Papapetros, "World Ornament: The Legacy of Gottfried Semper's 1856 Lecture on Adornment," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no.57/58, (2010): 312-13, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25769985>.



Fig.1: A House for Essex, Wrexham, FAT Architecture, 2015



Fig.2: Majolikabau, Otto Wagner, Vienna, 1898-1899

2. Culture

The theory of Gottfried Semper links construction purpose with material concept. Concept is a key word because even though textiles are the only material associated with walling, any material can fit the purpose as long as it divides space by employing textile dressing principles. Thus Assyrian tapestries, tile cladding or a motif applied on an Alabaster panel, can fall into this category.¹⁰ (Figure 3) This assumption opened many doors for Semper's ethnographic studies and he turned his attention to various decorative objects using textile techniques such as African weaving of grass, Asian carpet-making or Canadian creation of headdresses.¹¹ Tattooing was also not only reserved for humans but its effect could be applied on a facade, example of which can be seen on a Wagner's "carpetlike" Majolikahaus. Thus Orient and its flower formations provided another invaluable source of inspiration.¹²

When applied to architecture, such dressing in combination with structure tries to communicate with its audience about the cultural origin. This ambition is demonstrated in A House for Essex whose references are numerous. They include Scandinavian stave churches for their form and wooden carvings, Byzantine chapels, Russian dolls or Fabergé eggs.¹³ (Figure 4) However, we can also find traces of popular culture such as sets from Tim Burton films, The Hobbit or Game of Thrones.¹⁴ This is largely thanks to the involvement of Grayson Perry, an unconventional British potter whose forte is the observation of today's ordinary life.¹⁵



Fig.3: The Assyrian tapestry motif on alabaster



Fig.4: Stave church design

¹⁰ Semper, *Style*, 13,28.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ákos Moravánszky, "The Aesthetics of the Mask: The Critical Reception of Wagner's *Moderne Architektur* and Architectural Theory in Central Europe," in *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993), 226-29.

¹³ Edwin Heathcote, "Living a Fantasy: A House for Essex by Grayson Perry and Charles Holland," *Interior Design*, August 26, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.interiordesign.net/projects/10301-living-a-fantasy-a-house-for-essex-by-grayson-perry/>.

¹⁴ Hugh Pearman, "The House Where Julie Went," *Riba J*, June 3, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016

<https://www.ribaj.com/buildings/a-house-for-essex>.

¹⁵ Heathcote, "Living a Fantasy."

In his career, Perry has done research on Tang Dynasty bronzes, pottery from Satsuma, Japanese mingei, North Africa, America as well as traditional English ceramics.¹⁶ One of his first ceramic shrines was dedicated to his teddy bear Alan Measles.¹⁷ (*Figure 5*) Essex scenery, where he comes from, was depicted on some of his plates.¹⁸ (*Figure 6*) These works show how he projects the mixture of cultural influences and fictional worlds into his own life and creates art. Being a transvestite, Perry has been also preoccupied by the feminine, whereas on a dressing level or the level of psyche. Therefore The House for Essex is dedicated to his fictional character Julie Cope and mirrors Perry's biographical moments as well as observations on women of Essex. According to him, these women are resilient because of the obstacles they had to overcome, the house celebrates their goodness and he calls it a "temple to thwarted female intelligence."¹⁹ Temple in this sense means something sacred but not religious as such. It is a secular alternative - a great interest of Perry and Alain de Botton, whose organisation Living Architecture commissioned the project for holiday rentals in order to let people experience daring contemporary architecture.²⁰ In response to his design approach Perry said: "I am naturally what I would call a maximalist. I make things that are incredibly ornate and shiny so perhaps they adhere to a more working-class aesthetic."²¹

This prejudice that ornate equals cheap and low-class, shows a typical current mind set of the contemporary design world and it will continue to preoccupy us in the next chapters. Even if the Julie's fictional story is one day forgotten, the house will still provide a rich reference to the culture of Essex and its people.



Fig.5: Shrine to Alan Measles



Fig.6: Commemorative plate no.17

¹⁶ Jacky Klein, *Grayson Perry* (London: Thames&Hudson, 2009),138,227.

¹⁷ Ibid.,158.

¹⁸ Ibid.,33.

¹⁹ "Grayson Perry's Dream House," accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/grayson-perrys-dream-house/on-demand/54816-001>.

²⁰ Pearman, "The House Where Julie Went."

²¹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, 42.

3. Material

Ceramic pots, as Semper observed, were at first used to satisfy human needs but developed into religious funerary objects. Not only were they thus artistically important but they also had a technical potential thanks to the favourable properties of fired clay compared to stone or metal.²² Particularly significant were oriental majolica works that gave precedence to Italian faience with a peak in the fifteenth century.²³

A House for Essex is externally clad by 2300 faience tiles worth approximately 200 000 pounds. They were designed by Grayson Perry and made by a firm Shaws of Darwen.²⁴ Pargetting, a technique of applying ornamental plasterwork, was originally considered because of its association with Essex, however, ceramics proved to be a more practical and apt option because of Perry's pottery making experience.²⁵ (Figures 7,8) However, the application of the tiles proved to be challenging because of the precision required both in the tiles themselves and in the blockwork, which they were fixed onto, as Charles Holland from FAT pointed out.²⁶



Fig.7: Pargetting



Fig.8: Perry's preliminary design

²² Semper, *Style*, 468.

²³ Ibid., 484.

²⁴ "A House for Essex," accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.szerelmey.com/document/a-house-for-essex/>.

²⁵ Robert Bevan, "Exclusive: Grayson Perry and Architects FAT Design A House for Essex," *Evening Standard*, May 15, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/design/grayson-perry-and-architects-fat-design-a-house-for-essex-10252424.html>.

²⁶ "Grayson Perry's Dream House."

Semper brings our attention to another challenge when producing faience, i.e. the homogeneity of the paste composed of clay, clay marl and sand.²⁷ Its density and the width of a product has to be uniform to achieve even shrinkage of the material when firing.²⁸ The latter rule caused enormous problems when manufacturing the 'Julie tiles'. Because of their sculptural character, namely the size of the belly, a special baking program had to be designed.²⁹ (Figure 9)



Fig.9: Julie tile manufacture

Majolica is earthenware onto which a glaze is applied. Thus patterns and colours can be incorporated on its surface. In the case of Majolikahaus, Wagner designed oriental ornaments in pink, blue and green tones, complementary to its flat oriental treatment. (Figure 10) Such approach was at the end of the nineteenth century in Vienna considered innovative, although criticised for its Secessionist influence.³⁰



Fig.10: Majolikahaus - facade detail

²⁷ Semper, *Style*, 579.

²⁸ Ibid., 561.

²⁹ "Grayson Perry's Dream House."

³⁰ Vera Horvat Pintarić, *Vienna 1900: The Architecture of Otto Wagner*, trans. Magde Tomasevic (London: Bestseller Publications Limited, 1989), 109.

Semper, however, saw a big advantage in applying Chinese motifs on the flat ceramic surface. They are free-flowing and thus allow for imprecision, which could be caused during the process of manufacture. Such imagery includes diaper ornament, arabesques and leaf motifs; and he warned against the incorporation of a straight line and regularity into the composition.³¹ Therefore Majolikahaus, with its abundant use of curved lines and florals, namely laurel leaves, merged very efficiently the beauty of painted ornament and ceramics in an Egyptian way.³² In a working-class Viennese district it thus plays a role of an exotic “urban painting,”³³ while it is perhaps A House for Essex which would fit more into this environment due to its reminiscence of green tiled European stove.³⁴ (Figures 11, 12)



Fig. 11: Interior fireplace

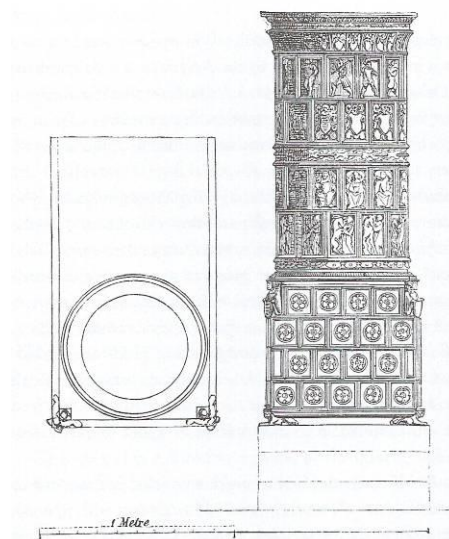


Fig. 12: Stove in Tirol castle, Merano

It was Luca Della Robbia from the Tuscan school (1388-1430), who first manufactured faience (terra invetria) in Italy. Its name comes from Faenza, a significant place for its production and it is distinguishable because of its plasticity. Umbrian school with its use of majolica, stayed true, by contrast, to the flat Oriental treatment of the surface.³⁵ A House for Essex tiles would according to this principle belong to the Tuscan school, whereas Majolikahaus tiles to the Umbrian school.

³¹ Semper, *Style*, 582.

³² Pintarić, *Vienna 1900*, 29, 109.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Bevan, “House for Essex.”

³⁵ Semper, *Style*, 578.

4. Narrative

In his theory of style, Semper offers us a manual on how to read symbolism according to principles of eurythmy, symmetry, proportion and direction.³⁶ We will thus attempt to follow the rules and assess both overall composition and ornamental details of our case studies.

Composition

In a Greek Temple, the most significant religious symbols would be carefully placed in the areas where forces act, to celebrate their meaning. Thus friezes, tympana and column capitals came to be richly decorated.³⁷ Where does one position ornament on a building which rather than structural force, celebrates omnipresent sacred feminine force? Everywhere.

All external walls of A House for Essex are fully clad in faience tiles conveying the story of Julie Cope. In Semper's view, there should be a recognizable vertical hierarchy in the ornamental facade treatment. Dark rusticated ground floor should convey heaviness and slowly create a gradient leading to the top dominated by brighter colours evoking lightness.³⁸ Front and back elevation of A House For Essex both incorporate this principle, although the transitional section is missing. (Figure13) On the side elevation, the effect is rather contrasting with the heavy green tiles dominating the top. (Figure14)



Fig.13: North elevation



Fig.14: Side elevation

³⁶ Semper, *Style*, 18.

³⁷ Gottfried Semper, Kathryn Schoefert and Spyros Papetros, "On the Formal Principles of Adornment and its Meaning as a Symbol in Art (Second Section)." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no.57/58, Spring/Autumn, (2010): 307, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25769984>.

³⁸ Semper, *Style*, 40,130.

Majolikahaus works with a noticeable gradient but is also top heavy both in terms of ornamental density and sculpturality. (Figure15) A preliminary design from 1897, however, offers a junction between a darker bottom third of the facade and the rest of the surface, seemingly creating a border. (Figure16)

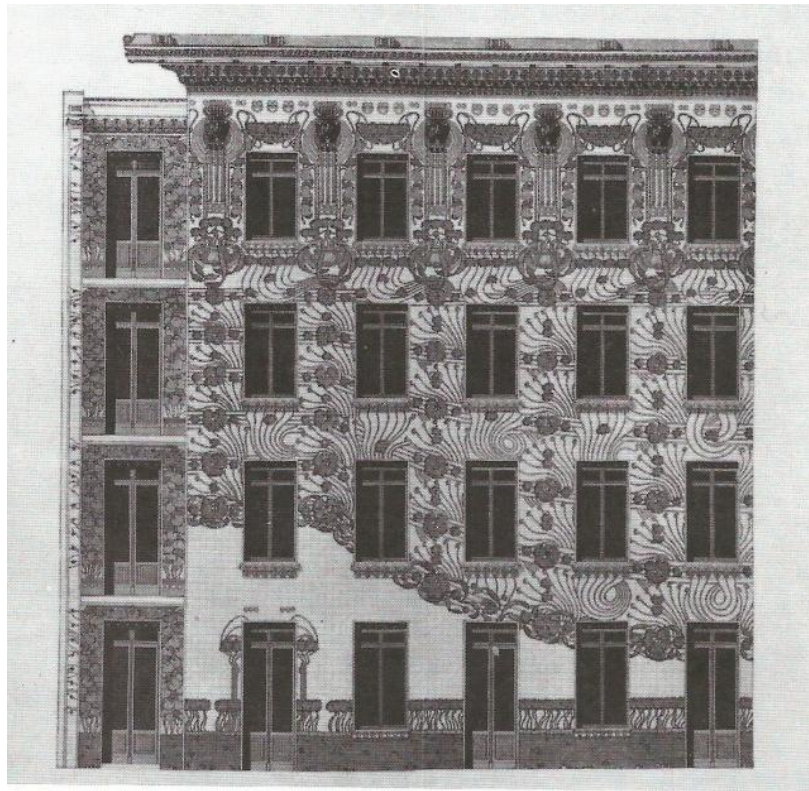


Fig.15: Majolikahaus facade design 1898

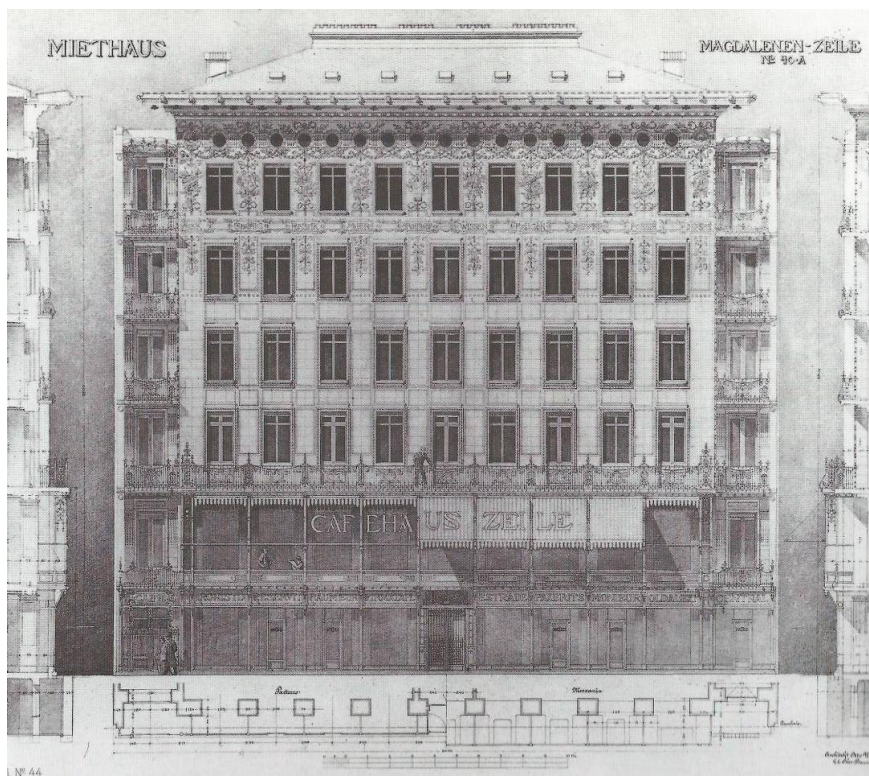


Fig.16: Majolikahaus facade design 1897

This feature is in line with Semper's ideas on fabric principles. He distinguished a "seam" and a "band."³⁹ Surface which is ideally vertically symmetrical can be either "standing upright" or "hanging."⁴⁰ An upright surface resembles a curtain as its vertical dimension is larger than the horizontal one.⁴⁰ According to this rule, the front and back elevations of A House for Essex are seen as upright whereas the side ones belong to the hanging category. (Figures13,14) In both cases we can see a "seam" which, based on sewing principle, always works from left to right.⁴¹ It is represented by the zig-zag pattern of the triangular tiles that leads our eyes diagonally from one side to the other, and by the alternating rows of these tiles and green Julie tiles.(Figure17)

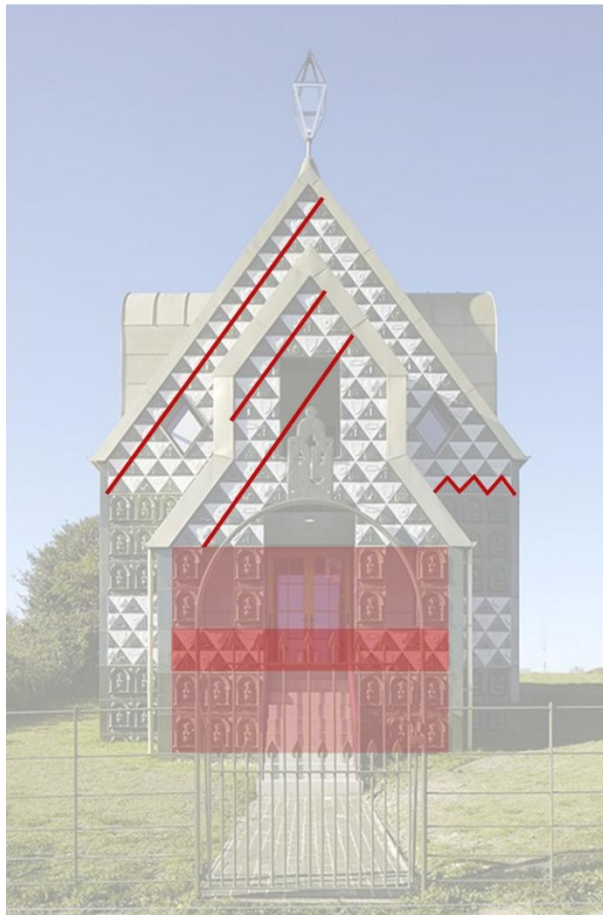


Fig.17: 'Seam' Diagram

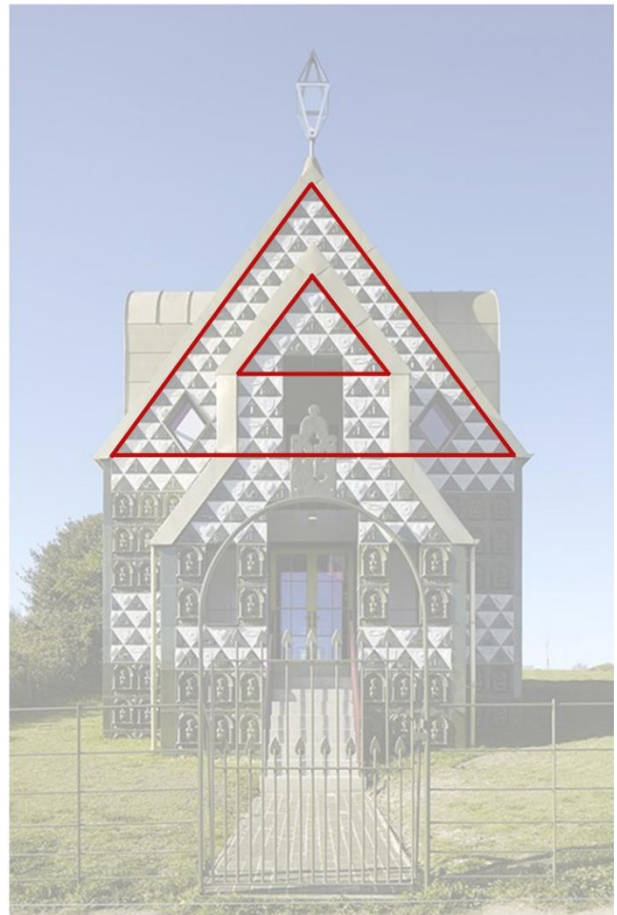


Fig.18: 'Direction' Diagram

Triangle is as a rule an indicator of a surface type depending on the direction of its apex. Thus the apex pointing upwards or downwards indicates an upright or hanging surface respectively. The ambiguity is, however, brought by a multiplication of this motif acting in both directions.⁴² We could assume, though, that thanks to the upper triangular surface of the front and back facade pointing upwards, the prevalent impression is that of an "standing upright" wall. (Figure18)

³⁹Semper, *Style*, 157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁴¹ Ibid., 157-58.

⁴² Ibid., 125.

Direction is one of the most important stylistic rules that Semper derived from human adornment. Based on a study of clothes, jewellery, tattooing and headdressing, he defined a "directional ornament - Richtungsschmuck." This serves as an exaggeration of a person's dimension and as an expression of their movement, and can be often observed in head decorations.⁴³ (Figure19) Greek and Assyrian helmets provide us with an example of this approach.⁴⁴ (Figure20) Such principle can be also applied to architecture. If we imagine the body of A House for Essex to be Julie herself, we can draw a parallel between the roof and her head. Thus the statues, chimney and weather vane crowning the roof ridge can be interpreted as Richtungsschmuck pointing towards the sky and swaying in strong winds on the Stour estuary. (Figure21) Semper also recognized this relationship and brought attention to Greek acroteria serving as an indication of a monument or ship direction.⁴⁵ (Figure22) Similar crowning symbols can be seen on the works of Grayson Perry as well. (Figure5) "The head should always be at the top," Semper pointed out and criticised the use of such symbolism in the bottom region.⁴⁶ Compared to the image of an Assyrian castle on figure 23, the pattern on A House for Essex does not adhere to this rule and largely borders the bottoms of the facades. (Figure24)



Fig.19: Aborigines from Mount Hagen, New Guinea

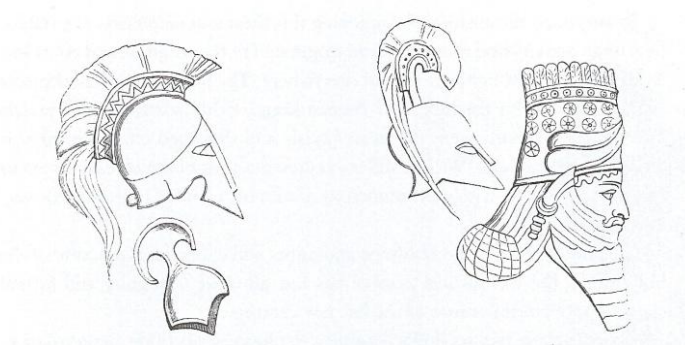


Fig.20: Greek and Assyrian helmet decorations

⁴³ Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, ed.2 (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1984),48.

⁴⁴ Semper, *Style*,28-29.

⁴⁵ Ibid.,122.

⁴⁶ Ibid.,126.



Fig.21: Roof sculptures

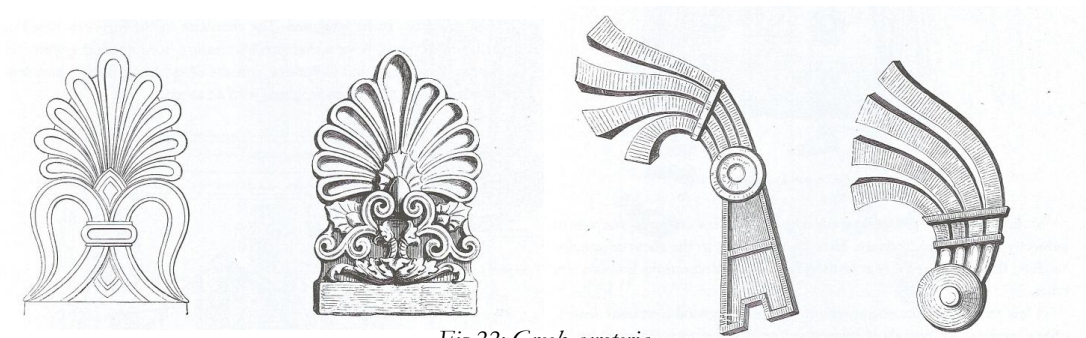


Fig.22: Greek acroteria

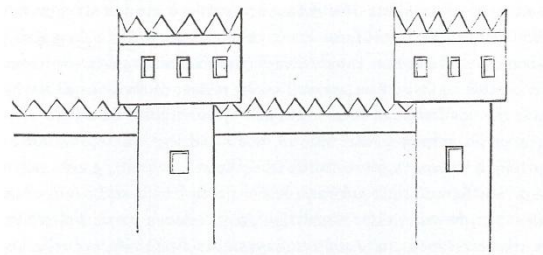


Fig.23: Assyrian castle with battlements



Fig.24: 'Crowning pattern' diagram

Julie

“Julie takes a deep breath,
she shocks herself,
lonely moments of parental stress.
She becomes her livid puce-cheeked mother,
swinging wildly from rage to blame and shame.
She learns to step back and grate her anger,
to hand out choice pieces where it is due.
Julie felt she was finally free to be herself.”⁴⁷

Grayson Perry, excerpt from The Ballad of Julie Cope

The Ballad of Julie Cope talks about a life of a fictional character invented by Grayson Perry. It is embedded in the whole House for Essex, from its external form to interior fixtures. Every visitor obtains a copy of the poem upon arrival, however, its words are inscribed in architecture itself.⁴⁸ It is a story about an ordinary woman from Essex and her life journey; a story about her two marriages, children, travels, work ambitions and death. The house is a temple dedicated to Julie by her second husband.⁴⁹ Her omnipresence in all its artworks is therefore natural. She is a goddess peeking from the tapestry in her bedroom through the dormer windows to narrate what she has been through. (Figure 25)



Fig.25: Dormer windows

Charles Holland, an architect behind this creation, said in an interview: “Some of my most powerful architectural experiences have been in churches and cathedrals.”⁵⁰ Thus the house picks up on narrative techniques of sacred architecture to tell a secular story. Holland justified this approach by explaining that in churches, ornament is built on a narrative framework.⁵¹ Due to the complexity of the story and subsequent richness of decoration and ornament, it could be seen as a protest against modernist minimalism.

⁴⁷ “Grayson Perry’s Dream House.”

⁴⁸ Bevan, “House for Essex.”

⁴⁹ Heathcote, “Living a Fantasy.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Externally, the narration is enabled by roof sculptures and faience tile cladding. There are two types of tiles in white and olive green - triangular and rectangular. Triangular tiles depict various symbols associated with Julie's life such as hearts (symbols of love), cassette tapes (symbols of her enjoyment of rock music), nappy pins (symbols of her children), letters J (symbols of herself and every Essex Julie), shields (symbols of Essex county), and wheels (symbol of a motorcycle that caused her death).⁵² (Figure 26) Letter J incorporates a trefoil, a Gothic religious symbol, which might serve as an expression of the bond with her two husbands or her elevation to sainthood.

Rectangular tiles are the most dominant. They measure 450 x 620 mm and depict Julie herself as a fertility goddess.⁵³ Their multiplication suggests that not only Julie Cope is idolized and worshipped but the whole womanhood of Essex should be acknowledged. Julie is after all an 'Essex Everywoman.' (Figure 27)



Fig.26: Triangular tiles

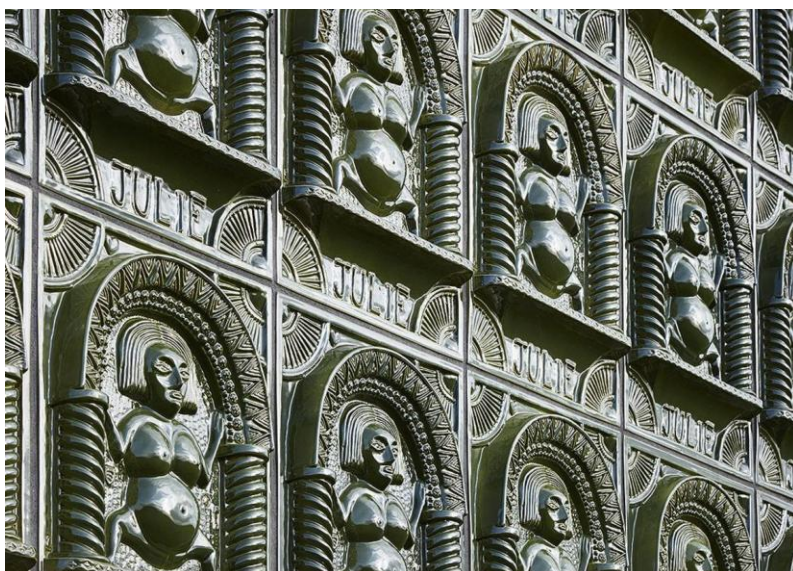


Fig.27: Rectangular tiles

⁵² Bevan, "House for Essex."

⁵³ "A House for Essex."

The design comes from Celtic figures ‘‘Sheela Na Gigs.’’⁵⁴ They always portray a pregnant naked woman and can be found as stone or wooden carvings on Romanesque or Gothic churches. (Figures 28, 29)



Fig. 28: St. Michael & St. Mary's church (Gothic), Egremont

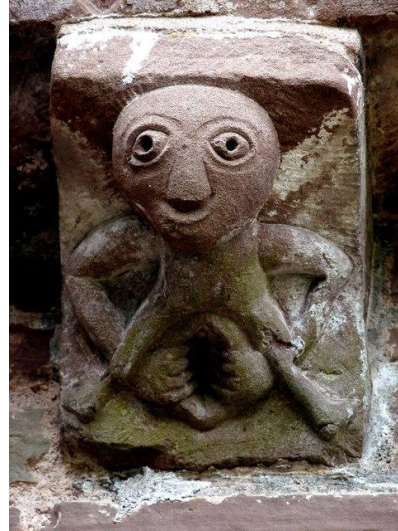


Fig. 29: Church of St. Mary and St. David (Romanesque), Kilpeck

Other references for these creatures can be traced back to Scandinavian stave churches that influenced A House for Essex in its external form. (Figure 30) Looking directly at Perry's work, his research done for the exhibition entitled ‘Tomb of The Unknown Craftsman at the British Museum,’ points to the Egyptian Bes as a possible source of inspiration for the Julie tile.⁵⁵ (Figure 31)

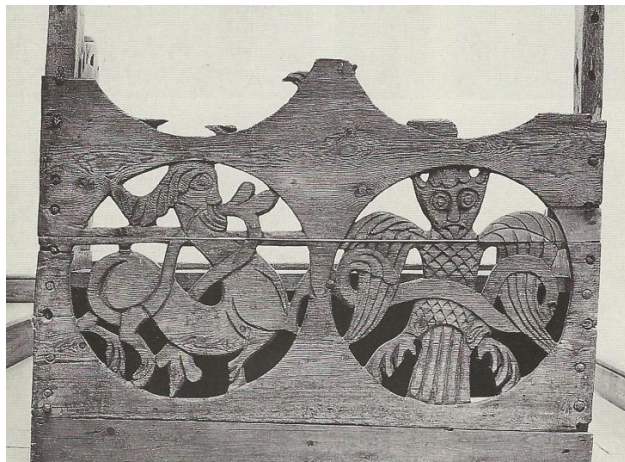


Fig. 30: Stave church wooden carvings



Fig. 31: Egyptian Bes

It is a task of each culture and each time to reinterpret these symbols through a material metamorphosis; to form a new ornamental grammar able to communicate contemporary experiences, as Mari Hvattum pointed out in relation to Semper's theory.⁵⁶ Sheela is thus in our case transformed into Julie. (Figure 32)

⁵⁴ Rowan Moore. ‘‘Grayson Perry's A House for Essex: a Stonking Shrine To a Fictional Woman,’’ *The Guardian*, May 10, 2015, accessed January 7, 2016). <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/10/grayson-perry-a-house-for-essex-stonking-shrine>.

⁵⁵ ‘‘London: Grayson Perry The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman,’’ accessed January 7, 2016, <http://artobserved.com/2012/02/london-grayson-perry-the-tomb-of-the-unknown-craftsman-at-the-british-museum-extended-through-february-26-2012/bes-egyptian-tomb-of-the-unknown-craftsman-british-museum-2/>.

⁵⁶ Mari Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73.



Fig.32: Julie tile prior to firing

Julie tile fits within the larger surface composition by incorporating a quarter of a circle in each corner, thus forming wheels associated with her death. Her relationship with the whole story is also expressed by the scattering of the remaining symbols already depicted on the triangular tiles. (Figure 33)



Fig.33: Detail of a David Bowie cassette

When it comes to the formal distribution of ornaments on the tile, we can again turn to Semper and his chapters on textiles and ceramics. The motif depicts Julie standing in the archway. In the decoration on the arch above her head, there is a resemblance to a string of pearls symbolising “loose connection” or “independence”.⁵⁷ We could also read it as a series of eggs which, according to Semper, signified the “world as will” or the “absolute,” as it were. These were often discovered in Etruscan tombs.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Semper, *Style*, 115.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 470-71.

Textiles, as he pointed out, can serve two basic functions. Firstly, “to string and to bind” and secondly, “to cover, to protect, and to enclose.”⁵⁹ The protective function is translated into a tile cladding/dressing of the whole facade. Stringing and binding are expressed in the arch and columns respectively. Semper observed, that ‘string’ always attempts to communicate unity by the multiplication of its elements. However, such notion contradicts the interpretation of unity as a single element, or unit.⁶⁰ This principle can be detected both in the Julie tile itself and in the whole facade, where strings of multiple Julie and triangular tiles are created. In the picture of an ornamented ceramic vessel, the string motif enhances the form of the object. (Figure 34) It seemingly acts as a counter force against the forces pushing from inside and symbolizes “processes of making rows, lacing, pinning, twisting, braiding, weaving, sewing and hemming.”⁶¹

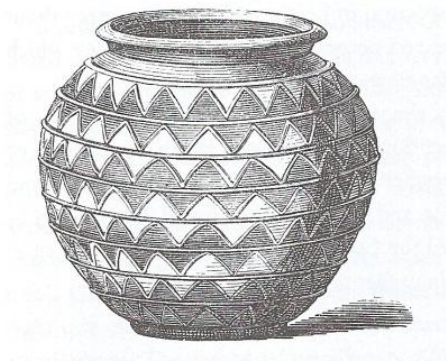


Fig.34: Earthenware vessel

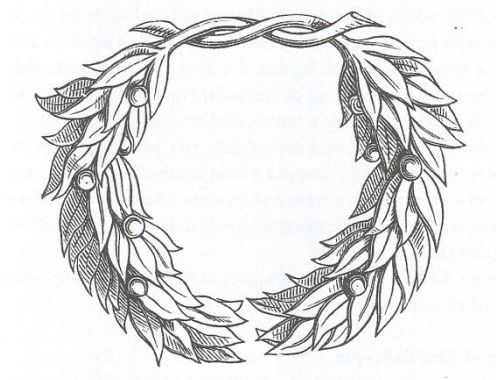


Fig.35: Wreath of leaves

The string also marks a distinction between what is above and what is below and is often expressed through an egg-and-dart motif.⁶² In case of the Julie tile, this indication is facilitated through the use of triangles with apexes pointing outwards and inwards, creating a zig-zag pattern already detected on the facade. Another association the string in this composition creates, is that of a ‘wreath of leaves.’ Due to its emphasis on two different directions, the arch about Julie can be perceived as this ancient crowning object.⁶³ (Figure 35) While the string works from left to right, the band, a binding motif, runs vertically.⁶⁴ It exaggerates a force needed to hold a particular object together.⁶⁵ To compare, the ‘band’ motif spiralling around the columns on the Julie tile is in its force demonstration equivalent to the ‘string’ motif applied to a vessel on figure 34.

Thus we can see that just as Julie’s poem provides insight into her life, a formal analysis of ornamental composition can uncover further layers of meaning when it comes to history and cultural framework this feat of architecture sits within. It is a visual poem with a very rich vocabulary, interpreted or misinterpreted, but always keen on telling a story.

⁵⁹ Semper, *Style*, 113.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁶¹ Ibid., 530-31.

⁶² Ibid., 116.

⁶³ Ibid., 114-15.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 116.

5. Conclusion

In an article on A House for Essex, Edwin Heathcote brought our attention to a divide between “ornament and morality,” which has been discussed in architectural profession since the era of modernism.⁶⁶ Ornament was in the twentieth century modernist circles considered not only immoral but even unhealthy as demonstrated in the quote by Adolf Loos: “The modern, intelligent person must have a mask for other people...only the mentally handicapped...need to scream out to the world what and how they are.”⁶⁷ One of the triggers for this reaction was a Secessionist ornament, we have been dealing with in relation to Otto Wagner’s Majolikahaus. Herman Muthesius also warned against it because of its link to unstable moral values and uncontrollable emotional expression.⁶⁸ For Gottfried Semper, whose eyes we used for our analysis, this ornamental mask had the ability to communicate important meaning. Thus we can ask ourselves which notion A House for Essex justifies.⁶⁹

Effects of ornamental dressing can be, however, by no means generalized. Their quality largely depends on design, meaning, materials and manufacture. The lack of either of these factors results in cheap-looking decoration rather than architectural ornament, as Heathcote warned us while stating examples such as

“Birmingham library by Mecanoo, Leicester’s John Lewis store by Farshid Moussavi, the Nottingham Contemporary gallery by Caruso St John.”⁷⁰ Subsequently, due to many failed attempts in ornamental application on an architectural level, this approach is often considered kitschy, while minimalism, by contrast, becomes an indicator of good taste. Grayson Perry, however, disagreed and proclaimed: “I think that minimalism has become kitsch.”⁷¹ In both cases the word ‘kitsch’ brings a negative connotation and A House for Essex, despite being colourful and ornate, avoids it by honouring the art and craftsmanship. It incorporates a complex story meaningful for the inhabitants of the region, uses expensive materials and specifically designed manufacturing techniques. The house is thus the opposite of cheap and trivial on many levels.⁷²

From the material point of view, the use of ceramics places it amongst the innovators, who are trying to redefine the application of this durable and easily sourced material on an architectural scale. Even Semper in nineteenth century already noticed its decline when compared to antiquity.⁷³ Le Corbusier, a modernist architect in agreement with Loos’s ideas on ornament, would criticize this material choice for its seeming ability to hide manufacturing faults. According to him, ornamentation equals corruption and is equivalent to values of a “dressed-up shop girl”, while white walls and simple clothing symbolize honesty.⁷⁴ For the polemic on ‘minimalist versus maximalist’ and ‘white versus colourful’ from the moral point of view, let us illustrate Le Corbusian rhetoric in relation to Grayson Perry’s female alter-egos and A House for Essex. (Figures 36, 37, 38)

⁶⁶ Heathcote, “Architecture Explained.”

⁶⁷ Moravánszky, “The Aesthetics of the Mask,” 204. Originally in Adolf Loos, “Von der Sparsamkeit,” in idem, *Die Potemkin’sche Stadt: Verschollene Schriften, 1897-1933* (Vienna: Prachner, 1983), 206.

⁶⁸ Pintarić, *Vienna 1900*, 25.

⁶⁹ Heathcote, “Architecture Explained.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Moore, “Stonking Shrine.”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Semper, *Style*, 575.

⁷⁴ Isabelle Frank, *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2014-15.



Fig.36: Perry as Julie in front of *A House for Essex*



Fig.37: Perry as Claire in a minimalist interior



Fig.38: Austere woman in front of a modernist villa

Even though Le Corbusier would at first glance dismiss Perry's dresses and *A House for Essex* as corrupted, they are revealing a story from ordinary life. Does a white rendered wall express honesty or is it only a camouflage, a white curtain thrown over *The Picture of Dorian Gray* hiding decay? Is it a reference of idealized society, a piece of fiction?

Semper, as Hvattum pointed out, did not accept the notion of architecture being self-referential despite such conclusion by Goethe and Botticher.⁷⁵ He insisted that it resulted from a human need to bring order by deciphering the world.⁷⁶ This would bring satisfaction and joy. Looking at our case studies, Majolikahaus was characterized as "an expression of joie de vivre."⁷⁷ And *A House for Essex*? Shortly after its completion one of the construction workers expressed this joy by saying: "I haven't stopped smiling for about 2 weeks."⁷⁸

In spite of the reservations towards the notion of taste and the predetermined patterns of right or wrong every era brings, there is always space for doubt. Therefore 'Doubt' is depicted in the middle of the title page and represents one of Grayson Perry's favourite philosophical quotes: "Doubt is the essence of civilization."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper*, 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷⁷ Pintarić, *Vienna 1900*, 31.

⁷⁸ "Grayson Perry's Dream House."

⁷⁹ Klein, *Grayson Perry*, 162.

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