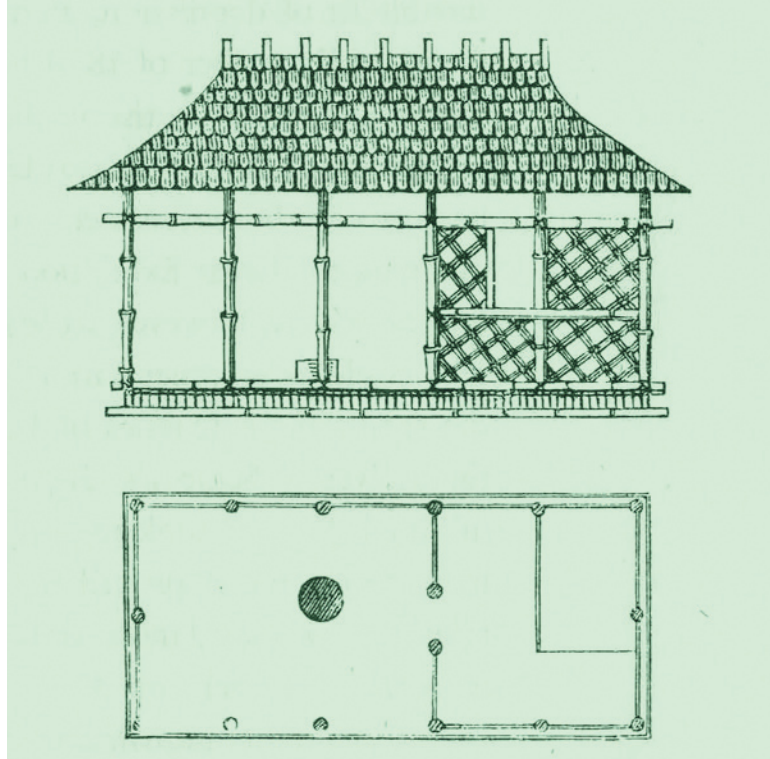


The Dressing Of Appearance

“A room or space does not end with the Mauer (load-bearing wall), which is often obscured from view, but with the Ge-wand (screen, partition, surface), that is, with the visible covering or Bekleidung.”



Style and the Four Elements

In 1851, the German architect Gottfried Semper, then living in exile in London, proposed his theory of the four elements of architecture, which he held as formative motives: the hearth, the wall, the mound and the roof. Rejecting the simplistic notion of formal development from quasi-mythical origins, Semper instead concentrated his theory on the development of these four motives through their corresponding material-functional categories: ceramics (the hearth), textiles (the wall), stereotomy (the mound), and tectonics-carpentry (the roof). The development of these elements, or motives, was central to Semper’s magnum opus, *Der Stil*, which was published in two volumes, in 1860 and 1863. Semper’s biographer Harry Mallgrave has written “The principle aim of *Der Stil* was nothing less than to delineate and explain the origin and transformation of the formal motives of the technical and tectonic over the course of their historical development.” As for the subject itself, “Style (was) therefore the emergence of the basic theme raised to artistic meaning, and all the inner and outer coefficients that cause its embodiment to be modified in a work of art.” Inner coefficients were such influences as use, material and means of execution, whereas external coefficients included local, temporal and personal influences. While Semper himself was never able to formulate his theory in terms of the architecture of the age of iron (whose members he found too slim to hold the monumentality he espoused) his text was central to the genesis of modern architecture.

Wand and Ge-wand

In the case of the wall, Semper took this motive back to its origin as a hanging textile, a colourful weave providing vertical enclosure. In the case of the Assyrians, “Hanging carpets remained the true walls; they were the visible boundaries of a room. The often solid walls behind them were necessary for reasons that had nothing to do with the creation of space; they were needed for protection, for supporting a load, for their permanence.” “The dressing had evolved from the motive of the textile enclosure, and thus only the dressing symbolized the original spatial idea contained in the enclosure.” Therefore the formal development of the wall traces itself in reference to the original motive of spatial enclosure and not the tectonic function of load-bearing rigidity. By his proposition, Semper shifted the wall from its weight-bearing capacity as “mauer” to that of the “wand”, the partition, the screen. As separator, the woven wall in its original iteration was “a means of dividing the “home,” the inner life from the outer life, as a formal construct of the spatial idea. It preceded the simple wall made from stone or another material. Scaffolds that served to hold, secure or support this spatial enclosure had nothing directly to do with space or the division of space. They were foreign to the original architectural idea and were never form-determining elements to start with.”

Bekleidung and Appearance

From his belief that “it is certain that the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles,” Semper turned to linguistics to confirm his theory of dressing as the essential prearchitectural condition. “Decke (cover, ceiling), Bekleidung (clothing, dressing), Schranke (barrier, gate), Zaun (hedge, fence) (similar to Saum)hem, fillet)), and many other technical expressions are not linguistic symbols applied to building at a later stage but clear indications of the textile origin of these building elements.” According to Harry Mallgrave, “Semper’s initial point was that there is a close connection between clothing and fine arts, or rather – nearly all symbols, as well as the members used in architecture, are motives borrow from the realm of costume and finery.” Not only did this concept of Beikleidung support Semper’s notion of the primacy of textiles (and thus the wall), it also leads to his belief in “The festival apparatus – the improvised scaffold with all its splendor and frills that specifically marks the occasion for celebrating, enhances, decorates, and adorns the glorification of the feast, and is hung with tapestries, dressed with festoons and garlands, and decorated with fluttering bands and trophies – is the motive for the permanent monument, which is intended to proclaim to future generations the solemn act of event celebrated.” As Mallgrave has noted, the monumentalization of architecture was for Semper the making permanent of the festival stage.

The Veiled Scaffold

Finally, the idea of Bekleidung brought Semper to the notion of veiling, to the covering of structure and the destruction of material in search of proper appearance. Harry Mallgrave writes: “Through his description of this “veiling” structural parts Semper attempted to overturn, as it were, the tectonic basis of nearly two thousand years of architectural theory. Monumental architecture, as he viewed it, is no longer the construction of an edifice, but rather the masking or veiling of constructional parts in a dramatic conundrum of artistic play.” Returning to his theatrical inspirations, Semper wrote “I think that the dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization and that the joy in both is identical to the joy in those things that led men to be sculptors, painters, architects, poets, musicians, dramatists – in short, artists. Every artistic creation, every artistic pleasure, presumes a certain carnival spirit, or to express it in a modern way, the haze of carnival candles is the true atmosphere of art. The destruction of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous human creation.” In other words, whether in architecture, drama or music, the material of the mask must itself be masked for artistic creation to be supreme.