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02
Dreadful Design
Jennifer Sigler

06
Wide Open
Nancy Etcoff

08
**Fortress London: The New
US Embassy and the Rise of
Counter-Terror Urbanism**
Oliver Wainwright

14
Feeling Invaded
John Kuo Wei Tchen

16
**Gimme Shelter:
Refugee Architecture
in Germany**
Niklas Maak

24
**Phobia and the City:
Rome**
Lars Lerup

33
Holding Fear
Sonja Dümpelmann

34
Unsettling Unsettlements
Marianne F. Potvin

36
**Anthropocenophobia:
The Stone Falls on the City**
Renata Tyszczuk

43
Solitary in Solidarity
Daniel D'Oca

44
**Fear Ebbs on the Skyline but
Rises on the Ground**
Blair Kamin

46
**Get Me Out of Here:
The Solemn Geography of
Women in Horror Film**
Caryn Coleman

52
**Reading Jane Jacobs in the
Era of #BlackLivesMatter**
Stuart Schrader

54
Un-War
Krzysztof Wodiczko

57
**Animal Eyes & Invisible
Hunters**
Eugénie Shinkle

64
**Fearful Asymmetry:
Insurgency and the
Architectures of Terror**
Joshua Comaroff

72
Die Noctouque
Enrique Ramirez

74
A Certain Darkness
Demdike Stare &
Robert Gerard Pietrusko

79
**Who's Afraid of the
Covered Face?**
Maryam Monalisa Gharavi

80
Artifacts of Exclusion
Interboro Partners

86
Fear Is in the Detail
Francesca Hughes &
Gergely Kovács

94
**The Iconic Ghetto and the
Stigma of Blackness**
Elijah Anderson

97
A Toxic Patrimony
Dan Borelli

98
**The Green Zone: Architec-
tures of Precarious Politics**
Amin Alsaden

104
How to Draw Medellín
Alejandro Echeverri &
Alejandro Valdivieso

114
Mortal Cities
Arna Mačkić

116
**Bringing Back the Front:
Relieving the Great War**
Justin Fowler

123
Home Safe
Geoff Manaugh

124
**The Fall of Postmodernism
and the New Empowerment**
Michael Murphy

132
**Building for the Total
Breakdown**
Jacob Lillemose

138
A State of Emergency
Léopold Lambert

146
Conflict Urbanism, Aleppo
Laura Kurgan

148
Nuclear Pillowcases
Andrew Wasserman

151
The Real Move
Elizabeth Streb &
Chelsea Spencer

160
**Fear, Faith, and Disaster
Preparedness**
Arif Khan

162
**The House of One:
Facing Fear**
Lara Schrijver

170
Pastiche of Ghosts
Metahaven

173
Second Nature
Ralph Gloche

174
**Suspunk: Thinking with
Suspicious Packages**
Javier Arbona, Bryan Finocki,
Nick Sowers

180
The Horror, the Horror
Bart Lootsma

182
**Robert Smithson,
Evel Knievel, and the
Landscape of Reclamation**
Edward Eigen

194
Kites
Reginald Dwayne Betts

197
**Feared Spaces,
Feared Bodies**
Toni L. Griffin

198
**Fear, Fire, and Forty-One
Snakes: Notes on the Burning
Theater**
Thomas A. P. Van Leeuwen

207
Ambiguous Thresholds
Nuttinee Karnchanaporn



Left: Georges Farcy, interior of the architect's house on rue Villaret-Joyeuse, Paris, 1904. Right: Hector Guimard, Paris Metro, detail, 1899.



Imagine these bizarre garlands detached from the wall they are decorating and laid out on a table like a real object. It would send a shiver up one's spine.

— Paul Souriau, *L'Imagination de l'artiste* (1901)

The 19th-century eye abhorred abstractions. The most taciturn of figures—a simple line—could bring to mind a legion of objects and resemblances. “Form is always the form of something,” the philosopher Victor Cousin was known to repeat. For the aesthetician Paul Souriau, even an object as impassive as a couch had an “expressive attitude, a physiognomy.” He believed that ornamentalists could capitalize on the mind’s propensity to animate objects, transforming, for example, the leg of a table into the claw of a predator. But he cautioned his readers: accidental patterns in wood or marble can easily transform into hallucinatory nightmares, unwittingly giving life to “a profusion of deformed and frightening monsters.”

Fear played a critical part in conceptions of ornament in the 19th century. In aesthetic circles, fear of ornament was matched only by the fear of lack of ornament—by what art historian Alois Riegl termed a “horror vacui.” By most accounts of the time, ornament first emerged as a response to a primitive terror of nature. It was a recoiling from the external world, a way to bring order to the dizzying chaos. Primitive man was seen to be possessed by an ornamental impulse that impelled him to adorn every available surface, from his own skin to objects of daily use.

But the theorists who established these originary narratives were no doubt writing history in their favor: no moment in time produced

as much ornament as the 19th century. Architecture, the non-mimetic art form par excellence, was overwhelmed by vividly figurative forms: fleshy shoots, corpulent flowers, and coiled fronds. The “parasitic vegetation,” as Souriau termed it, took root most invasively in the dimly lit interiors of the bourgeois home, where the plush verdancy of furniture and wall coverings were made to contrast with the alienating surfaces of the modern metropolis.

But if these interior decors had emerged to provide refuge from the street, they soon were seen as equally menacing. An important faction of designers perceived ornament as a special locus of vitalist disclosure, a conduit for a wholly new and potentially disruptive kind of metaphor. Ornament was a second nature, one that captured and focused the animate forces more potently than the living world itself. Ornamentalists quickly recognized that once mobilized, these forces inevitably took on demonic grimaces; they looked fearsome, unsettling, and they stared back. This is especially true when given three-dimensional form. The viscid coil of an unfurling leaf could be carved to appear so real it seemed wet to the touch. And so too the tongue, as Salvador Dalí implied in his 1933 essay “The Terrifying and Edible Beauty of Fin-de-Siècle Architecture.” “Eat me,” Dalí captioned a photograph of one of Hector Guimard’s columns in the Paris Metro. Ornamental flesh was as delectable as it was repulsive.

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