

Pomp and Palettes

EMMANUELLE BORNE

Is it out of place to be talking about ornament and pattern while every Saturday for the last four months a yellow wave has swept across France, crying its rejection of icons? It certainly would be had ornament remained the distinctive mark of opulence. But since those days it has been democratised by the industrial revolution, then condemned by the Modernists, before being exalted by the Postmodernists... and what about today? When it is not just being used as a cover-up, it is a means of communicating with the public, increasingly as an expression of a creativity held in contempt. Listening to architects, ornament —too often limited to the repetition of a single pattern on a flat surface— is all that remains to them when their client, having appropriated the right to mess up their plans, “concedes” carte blanche on the design of the façade, which consequently becomes the last chance for creation. Thus it becomes an act of resistance, the last bastion against standardisation —of housing, of cities. It is so politically correct in this time of social unrest to condemn buildings that cry out, in favour of simple architectures. But should we really be comparing iconic constructions with an architecture of pallets, while championing the latter? Architect Roger Anger, erstwhile champion of detail, said that beauty in architecture has “the power to awaken the conscience”. The last resort against standardisation, ornament is also a weapon of choice in the fight against intellectual impoverishment.