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Reviving the Joy of Decoration at Nike's New SoHo Building

By Blake Gopnik

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I am as devoted to modern style as anyone. I type on an Eames chair, eat with Arne Jacobsen cutlery and rest tired eyes on the colored squares of Josef Albers. But when I step out from my white-cube apartment, I find a different kind of pleasure that's equally thrilling: My New York neighborhood is full of Victorian tenements covered in a riot of decoration, from carved heads and scallop shells to flower garlands and twisting columns that don't hold anything up. I dare anyone to resist their splendor.

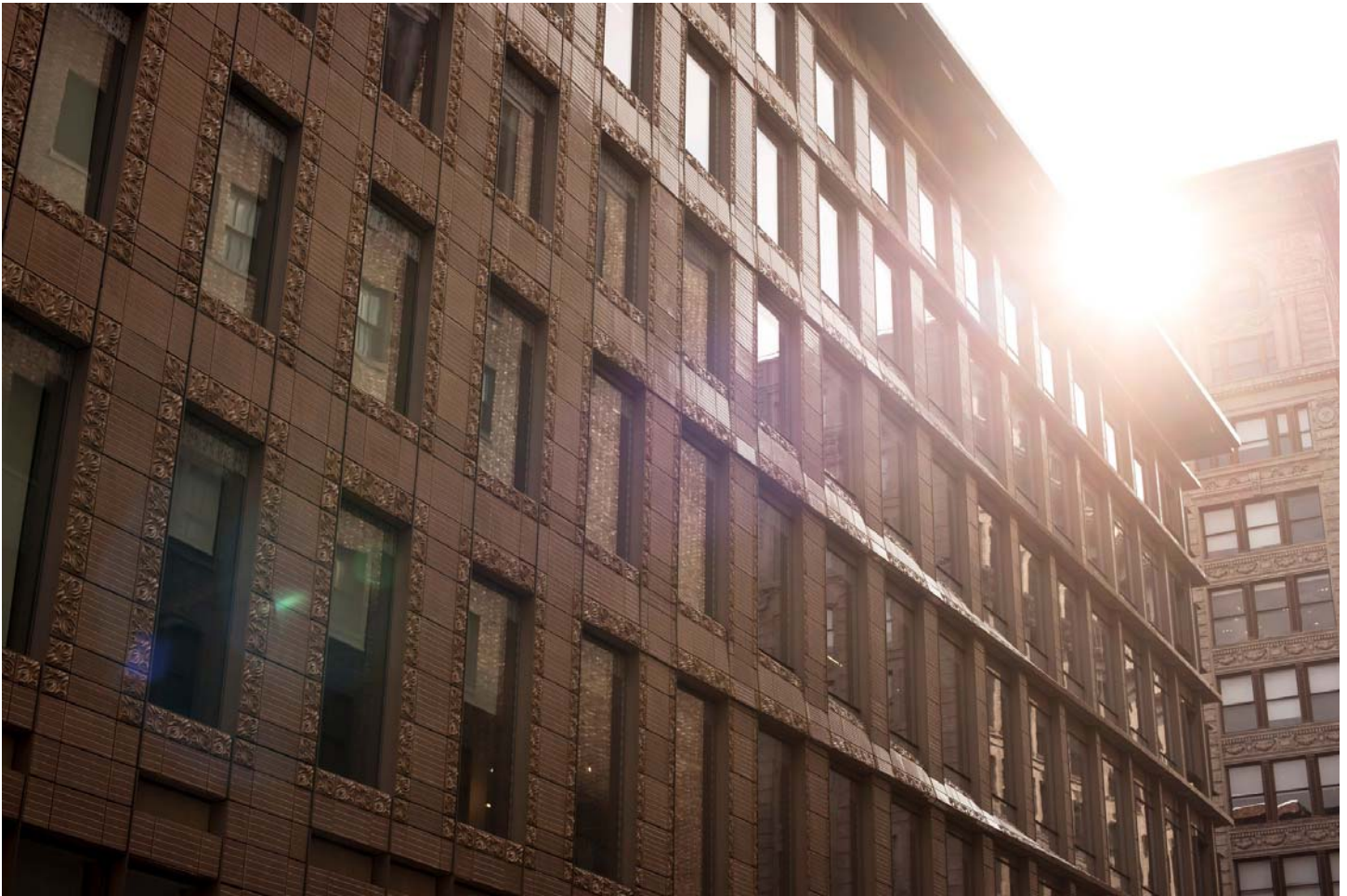
I also dare anyone to find that particular joy on any of the newer streetscapes being built in New York, or across the planet. It's true that Hudson Yards, almost finished on the Far West Side of Manhattan, has no shortage of eccentric buildings – Shanghai on the Hudson, you might call it. Stairs that go nowhere make one structure look like an image by M. C. Escher; angled roofs and slanting facades turn office towers into steel-and-glass origami. But all this flamboyance has almost nothing to do with the kind of decoration that makes old tenements and brownstones such a pleasure.

Instead, it belongs to what I call architecture's New Ornamentalism, a movement committed to visual play at the level of entire structures and whole facades, which appear to sway and swoop.

Buildings become giant baubles plopped into an otherwise dull cityscape, like extravagant “Jetsons”-age sculptures. Several books that celebrate this trend take pains to say that it is absolutely not about “decoration” – “mere” decoration, they mean, of the kind that almost no one can resist when they walk down a Victorian street.

Right here in New York, however, in the middle of a landmark 19th-century district, there is one recent, rare example of a structure that dares to embrace its neighbors' surface

ornateness and buck the trend toward bauble buildings.



Bands of terra cotta that go from sitting flat on the facade to becoming a protruding cornice. Unlike many so-called “bauble buildings” that are popping up in the city, the Nike building sits in the middle of a landmark 19th-century district, and seeks to fit in its surroundings and embrace the styles that inspired it.

Karsten Moran for The New York Times



Left, one of countless 19th-century tenements in Hell's Kitchen adorned with flamboyant details. Right, a detail of

ornamentation on the Nike building. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“It was a real struggle to allow ourselves to use decoration,” said Todd Poisson, a partner at BKSK Architects. Sitting in the firm’s sleek, ornament-free offices in the Flatiron district, he was recalling the early stages of work on a building the firm recently designed at 529 Broadway in SoHo.

Sneaker fiends may know it as Nike’s grand new home, but design fans should soon be recognizing it as one of the most exciting and intelligent structures to be built for decades, anywhere. It is also one of the few that revives the old, pre-Modernist joy that we find in the ornate.

The new building sits on the site of the long-demolished Prescott House, a wildly decorative hotel built in 1852, when masonry was still what held a building up and windows pierced it at their peril.

Next door stands an equally ornamented building from 1872 that used that moment’s new cast-iron construction to make facades that were almost wall-to-wall window. (The building is now best known as the home of the Judd Foundation.)

Rather than ignore those precedents, BKSK decided to make the new structure into a visual essay on the varied flamboyance that had come to the street before it.

One end of the building’s wide facade is built around the kind of narrow window openings that had been required by the Prescott’s brick construction; they have elaborate terra-cotta surrounds that pay homage to the Prescott’s ornate lintels and sills.

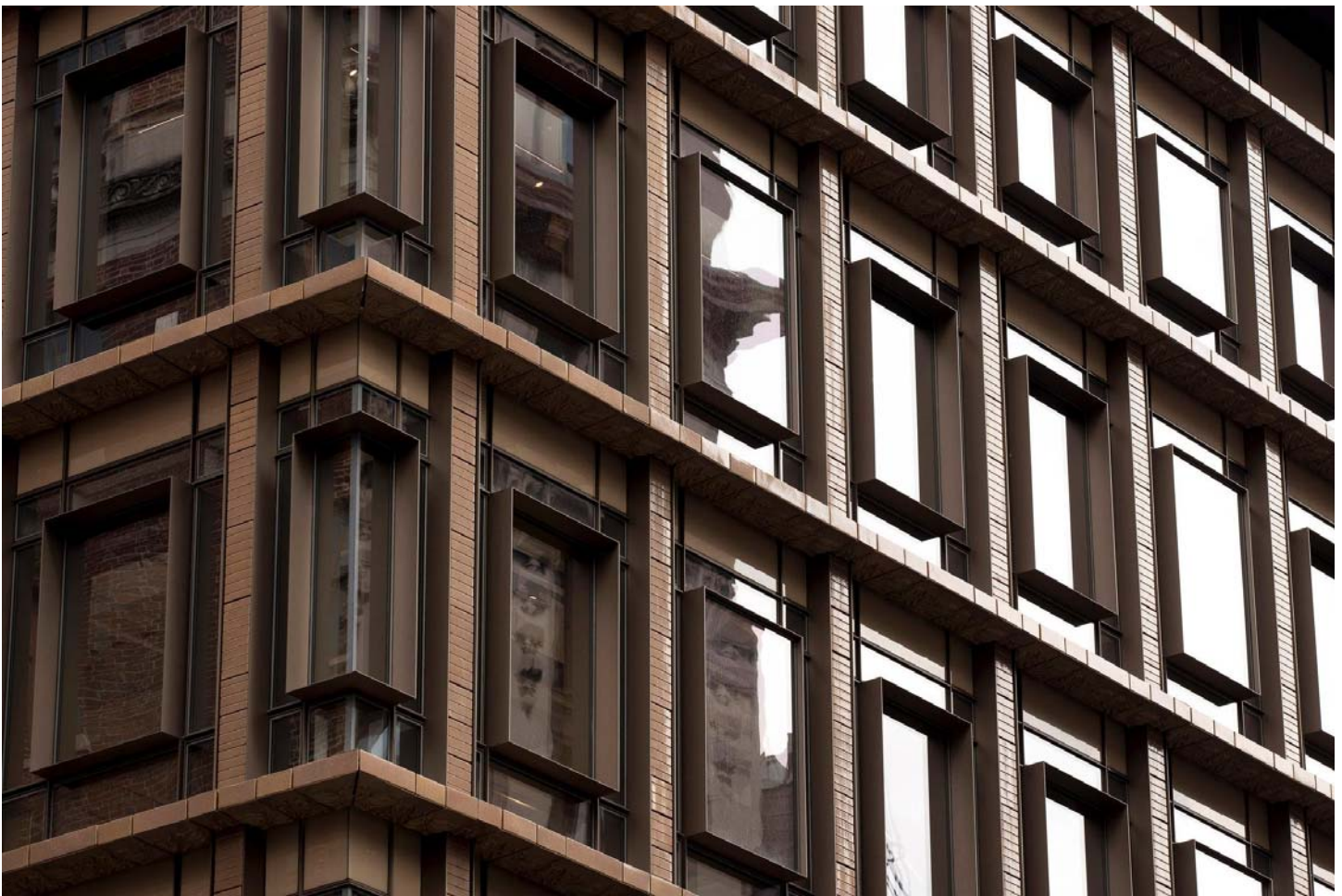
The other end of the same frontage has the much wider piercings that were the goal of SoHo’s cast-iron architecture. And in the 16 rows of windows in between, BKSK lets us watch the facade’s openings as they transform from the ones used in 1852 to the ones from two decades later.

The surrounding decoration stretches and compresses to suit the ever-changing fenestration. Halfway down the building, that decoration even turns a somersault as a band of ornate terra cotta goes from sitting flat on the facade above the narrow

embrasures to becoming a protruding cornice over the wider ones.

Like any of the greatest old tenements, the new building has more details than can be cataloged; its plenty recalls the abundance of the natural world. Casting the facade's terra-cotta panels demanded 1,380 different molds; the lacework patterns baked onto its windows look just as varied, like anemones on a reef.

But maybe the most notable thing about BKS's nod to a more decorated past is that the result belongs entirely to the present. The facades of 529 Broadway feel novel — not retrospective — in their exuberant detailing.



Windows on the Broadway side of the building. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Alina Payne is an architectural historian at Harvard known for her deep research into ornament. But when I reached her to talk through the possibility of a revival in surface decoration, even she took a minute to take in the idea.

“You’re talking about excrescences,” she said with a laugh, using a word more likely to apply to tumors or warts than to appealing detailing. Her language made clear how hard it still is, in her world, to see Victorian-style fripperies as legitimate.

In 1910, as the Victorian era was passing into history, the pioneering Modernist Adolf Loos published an influential essay titled “Ornament and Crime,” contending that a love of decorative detail, such as architects had deployed since ancient Greece and before, was actually a sign of a weak, disordered, “primitive” – even felonious – mind.

Professor Payne explained that those ideas still have sway, at least subconsciously, among many of today’s most serious architects. She imagines that most 21st-century studios may still not have enough distance from Victorian models.

Professor Payne also suggested that Modernism may have truly come of age only quite recently, with new technologies and materials that have allowed it to realize its full potential. Today’s computers permit flights of modern form that a Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe – even an Alvar Aalto or Oscar Niemeyer – could never have achieved.

A New Ornamentalism, Professor Payne explained, may in fact be limited by the same software that has allowed it to flourish. The standard tools of digital design seem better suited to warping an entire building or texturizing a whole facade than to adding a flood of unique, tantalizing decorations.





The architects borrowed software from filmmaking and video gaming to guarantee the complexity of the building's terra-cotta adornments. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

That's why BSKS did not deploy just the standard computer assisted design programs that form and deform bauble buildings. The firm also borrowed software from filmmaking and video gaming to guarantee the complexity of the building's terra-cotta adornments. Programs often used to manipulate images of people and possessions put BSKS's architects in a "mind-set," said Mr. Poisson, to treat their decorations as characters in a story or actors on a stage – not a bad metaphor, as well, for how Victorian ornament functioned.

But the most important thing to recognize in the decoration at 529 Broadway is that it isn't "wry or tongue-in-cheek," said Harry Kendall, a partner at BSKS. Architects had tried to revive ornamentalism once before, in the 1980s, with postmodernism. But that movement's decorative gestures – a modern skyscraper topped with a neo-Classical pediment; a concrete library shaped like the Roman Coliseum – were clearly ironic, with a wink and a nod to past pleasures in ornament rather than with a true commitment to updating those pleasures for modern use.

Postmodern architecture had something about it that could seem condescending, maybe even snide – at very least insiderish – and this kept the movement from flourishing. If it had an afterlife, it was in the reactionary, pseudo-Victorian housing developments that have been ringing our cities for the last several decades. Those may reflect the true pleasure that nonexperts take in ornament, but they don't acknowledge that the best decoration has always managed to speak of its era.

"There's rote decoration – but this is un-rote decoration," said Mr. Kendall, as he clicked through slides of his firm's Broadway building.

Nineteenth-century developers were hardly compelled to cover their facades in ornaments. Mr. Kendall imagines instead that they were subject to a social compact that

was all about adding “tactile pleasure to the civic fabric” – garland by garland, building by building and street by street, until the whole city seemed to come alive. That “fractal” quality is just what has been lost with the New Ornamentalism, according to the Harvard professor Antoine Picon. By treating each new building as its own “heroic surge,” he told me, “we’ve impoverished, in some sense, the various scales at which cities function.”

Although 529 Broadway is a joy to look at, its decoration runs more than skin deep. In its fine, thoughtful and varied detail, the building speaks to passing New Yorkers at a scale that seems to respect them as individual, embodied citizens.

It conveys a sense of generosity, with each ornament conjuring up the moment when one human being made the decision to put it there, as an aesthetic offering to others. The facade’s details invite a closer approach and a dialogue about what they’re up to; they ask for interpretation and understanding, like letters in an alphabet you only just grasp.



The new building sits on the site of the wildly decorative and long-demolished Prescott House, which was built in 1852 when masonry was still what held a building up and windows had to be narrow.

Karsten Moran for The New York Times

As Professor Picon has pointed out, that's in contrast to bauble buildings that are meant to appeal to our precognitive selves by overwhelming the senses. Such buildings are conceived as a stimulus meant to produce an instant response – a conception, Professor Payne has noted, that is particularly suited to a globalized consumer culture that prefers that everyone react the same way.

Today's technologies turn whole buildings into ornament, at costs that only the mighty can bear, whereas the new technologies of the 19th century let mass-produced ornament spread to every stratum of society.

BKSK would like to see that model revived. “We feel really liberated by the successful composition of 529 Broadway,” Mr. Kendall said.

“It has us looking for new opportunities to use decoration. I'd love to learn that we were part of a movement.”

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