Functionalism as a Modernist Principle

What is ornament?

Ornament is the term used to describe superimposed detail enhancing structures.

Structural decoration is a clearly expressed part of the framework and includes; the shaping and placement of the buttress, cornice, moulding, ceiling, roof, capital and other elements of the column, as well as the use of building materials of contrasting colour or texture. These elements are used to articulate (visually organise) the building.

Both can function as decoration.

Two distinct approaches.

Architecture has always involved the debate concerning which comes first in creating architectural changes in style; structure or formal inventions. In Modernism (contrary to Classical formulation) decoration is not simply replaced by structure, rather the structure itself becomes the major decorative aspect. The structure is now clearly revealed as the general decorative scheme of the building. Applied ornament is seen in the adornment of structural members of buildings with non-functional elements; statuary, carving, moulding, paint, inlay, mosaic and facings. It is seen in Art Deco during the development of Modernism.

The assumption of functional efficiency as an aesthetic

During the last quarter of the 19th century the full impact of the industrial revolution began to make itself felt in thinking about the arts; in particular, architecture. As the world changed under technological progress, the relevance of the old established conventions of the Beaux Arts was challenged. As some architects searched for a new architecture to suit the times they turned their attention to the structures of engineering. These were characteristic of the new age and had the added advantage of freshness. They had not previously been considered “architecture” at all, being considered purely functional in purpose and design. This “functionalism”, stripped of all decorative intent was their defining characteristic, and became considered a “style”.

Louis Sullivan, Wainwright Building, 1890-92

It is important to remember it was people’s perception of these structures that changed, not the design of the structures themselves. Functional efficiency became visually notable and interesting. Within 15 years of the “White City” of the Great Chicago Exhibition the tide of critical taste was turning and functionalism was the new aesthetic driving the development of a “modern” architecture.
The idea that “form should follow function” is often attributed to American architect Louis Sullivan. It is important to remember that he was involved in designing new kinds of buildings.

The first high rise commercial buildings of the modern age were made possible by the new technologies of steel and glass, and their invention, along with transport buildings, power stations and factories, was driven firstly by the need to house their functions. Sullivan’s buildings in Chicago were considerable commissions, expensive and representative of the growing status of the modern urban business class. Their rise demanded they be treated as “architecture”, just as the churches, town halls and palaces of the previous age had been. Cost efficiency drove their function, so functional efficiency became the hallmark of their structure and decoration.

**Adolph Loos**

Adolph Loos was famous for his dictum, “ornament is crime”. Loos approach was to strip back the design of architecture to the fundamental structural characteristics. This reflected the contemporary thinking of the philosopher Nietzsche, who suggested that modern European man needed to “strip away the mask” to find the Truth beneath. Best seen in the Steiner House of 1910, Loos was influenced by his observations of the “unconscious style” of everyday practical objects, which had no pretensions, and were therefore more “truthful” or “honest”. Included amongst these were objects of modern engineering, such as the structures of bridges and commercial buildings he had seen in America in the 1890s.

Loos was trying to find a way towards a genuine culture built on the basis of the age of mass production. For this reason he rejected the formal approach of applying ornament to structures to express personality or aesthetic taste. He wished to find forms that were more universal. He was searching for a “pure architecture” freed from the influence of other disciplines and didactic conventions. He favoured unadorned forms and archaic forms to be free of non-functional decoration. He thought architectural forms should be based on functionality. An extension of this logic was his idea that architecture was not art in three dimensions, but the organization of functional spaces.

After an early allegiance to the Jugendstil, he became a critic of ornamentation and promoted the thesis that a lack of ornamentation was a sign of spiritual strength. He sought to strengthen the authenticity of architecture by removing it from association with the other arts. He felt that “the evolution of culture implies the removal of ornament from objects of use”. This links him to the growing functionalism of design in the modern age, and to the movement to revisit the minimalism of the primitive as a means of achieving a direct and unfiltered expression of ideas.
Loos spent three years studying in the United States (1895-98), where he visited the Worlds Fair and became acquainted with the ideas of Louis Sullivan in Chicago. Sullivan (who was also Frank Lloyd Wright’s mentor) suggested as early as 1885 in his essay *Ornament in Architecture* that the decorative elements of architecture should be removed to identify the organic relationship between function, form, material, and expression.

*Adolph Loos, Villa Moller, 1927-28*

Loos went a step further by making a connection between ornament and social and economic wastefulness. Ornamentation was regarded as “wasted labour and spoiled materials”. Loos preferred to base his architecture around the idea of “spatial planning”. This was the idea of working out the dimensions of rooms based on their functional and display roles. The result was buildings that were sets of boxes within boxes, joined by staircases. He also used expensive materials as noble decorative features in themselves.

*Adolph Loos, Goldman and Salatsch Building, Vienna, 1909-11*