

# Ornamentation as a tool of social architecture

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## Article information

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**Abstract:** Given the complex challenges of social architecture, this article examines ornamentation as a deliberate architectural tool that can strengthen integration processes, shape architectural identity, and foster the long-term success of social institutions and networks. The research is based on an inter- and transdisciplinary approach that links architecture with social sciences and highlights the importance of context-sensitive architectural methods. The focus is on interconnected levels of integration: the embedding of buildings and institutions within their local environment and the connection of target groups to the surrounding community. These processes are interdependent and both rely significantly on the creation of an authentic architectural identity that reflects locality and shared values. By tracing the historical development of ornamentation and its social and cultural significance, the study investigates how decorative elements in architecture have historically functioned as a means of communication, expressing belonging, familiarity, and collective identity. Based on selected historical and contemporary case studies, this article demonstrates that ornamentation can be reinterpreted within a modern architectural language that addresses current societal needs. Beyond its aesthetic function, ornamentation is presented as a mediator between architecture and society, fostering a sense of place and supporting social integration. The study also includes design-based research experiments developed in collaboration with social institutions and communities, employing participatory and qualitative methods such as observation, interviews, and co-design processes. The experience shows that ornamentation, when used consciously and contextually, can become a communicative and integrative tool that strengthens both the spatial and social dimensions of architecture. The article concludes that the rediscovery and recontextualisation of ornamentation in social architecture offers a progressive and inclusive approach—one that unites aesthetic expression, identity formation, and social cohesion in contemporary architectural practice.

**Keywords:** social architecture, ornamentation, architectural identity, social integration

## INTRODUCTION

Working in the field of the Hungarian social architecture, it quickly became clear how important it would be to approach the complexity of the field with an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective. The problems and challenges that are arising during the development of a project are often solved with isolated or partial solutions. However, with broader collaboration, a more comprehensive and consciously applied toolkit, much more holistic solutions could be found. My purpose is to explore that toolkit from as many angles as possible, so that the architectural profession itself can support the long-term work of social institutions and professions. As an architect, conducting my research in the social field, I strive to have that holistic view on the many aspects of social architecture. I have found that locality is an essential factor in architectural language, so my main goal is to find tools and solutions that are fitted to the context of my research. In this article, my goal is to present ornamentation as such a tool that can be used in social architecture and social housing, specifically in the Hungarian environment that contributes to architectural identity and facilitates social integration.

## 1. ROLE OF ORNAMENTATION IN SHAPING ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

In terms of its history, ornamentation is an architectural tool that has undergone periods of rise and decline, seasoned by very different styles and techniques, like motifs, patterns, shapes, textures, and colours. Owen Jones created a comprehensive collection of motifs entitled Grammar of Ornament. In his book, he also discusses regularities and paradigms interpreted in the context of cultural background. To highlight just a few of the 37 items he lists:

*“1. Proposition: The Decorative Arts arise from, and should properly be attendant upon, Architecture.*

*2. Proposition: Architecture is the material expression of the wants, the faculties, and the sentiments, of the age in which is created. Style in Architecture is the peculiar form that expression takes under the influence of climate and materials at command.*

*13. Proposition: Flowers or other natural objects should not be used as ornaments, but conventional representations founded upon them sufficiently suggestive to convey the intended image to the mind, without destroying the unity of the object they are employed*

to decorate. Universally obeyed in the best periods of Art, equally violated when Art declines." (Jones, 1856/2019, pp. 5–6)

Despite the variety of ornamentation, two things can be stated with certainty, which are also clearly evident in Owen Jones's approach: (1) the pattern cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it was created, and (2) the motif carries this underlying meaning. There are many examples in architectural history of the conscious use of ornamentation, where patterns were placed on buildings not only with an artistic sense of proportion, but also with an intended purpose based on their meaning. When all this is applied authentically, the image of the building, and with it the image of its function, is shaped.

The image and architectural identity of a building can be shaped in many ways, but a crucial and inseparable aspect of it is the reflection of its environment and the attachment to its location. However, the organic application of arts (ornamental forms, patterns) that authentically emerge from the cultural environment not only encompasses and reveals the context of their source, but also provides a unique experience for the users of the space, evoking emotions and strengthening their connection to the place (Nilam, 2023). The development of attachment to a place is crucial in the development of community and individual identity (Proshansky et al., 1983) and in the long-term life of a building and institution. All of this is essential for edifices' social function to work successfully.

## 2. ROLE OF ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETY, THE COMMUNITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Architectural identity plays a complex role in the life of a social institution: (1) in terms of communication with the community and the wider residential environment, (2) in shaping the identity of occupants (residents), and (3) in shaping public thinking.

### 2.1. Connection to the context

During field research, I have observed social isolation from the surrounding environment on several occasions, whether it is an institution of the social network or a clearly defined, concerned area. The design and appearance of buildings often play a role in this, which is frequently influenced by necessity (use of existing buildings) or minimum financing conditions. Even if the wider community agrees with the social objectives in principle, it often displays a dismissive attitude in its own immediate environment, and hostility towards groups receiving social assistance may arise (Schofield and Butterworth, 2015). This is a complex social issue, but architectural tools can play an important role in helping to address local problems and build relationships with local communities.

Participatory planning can create bonds within local communities, and having a function that serves the wider community can help to foster social encounters and a positive attitude. The architectural image itself also influences the perception of the environment, even if not on a conscious level. A subtle architectural response to the location promotes local identity and integration. This can be achieved in several ways and on several levels, but the use of ornamentation can highlight cultural aspects that give the building or institution a reflective uniqueness, and the local community can even be involved in its creation.

For a social function, it is crucial to establish the best possible relationship with the wider community. After all, whether we are talking about a target group that has been pushed to the economic or social periphery, facilitating integration processes is an essential part of their support. This can only be done successfully if the environment for the integration is also addressed and participates in the process in some form.

### 2.2. Identity

Architectural identity and a sense of belonging to a particular place contribute significantly to the development of a sense of community, and thus to the formation of a healthy and cohesive individual identity. An irreplaceable part of the successful integration of the target group of social institutions is socialisation and integration into the community, whether it be contact with the broader environment described above or connection and mutual support with others in similar situations.

The individual identity of groups in social care is damaged, as even according to our most fundamental concepts, our self-esteem is linked to our successes and the expectations we set for ourselves (James, 1890). When an individual finds themselves on the economic or social periphery, they are unable to fulfil at least one of their social roles "properly," which can have an impact on their other tasks and roles as well. The assistance provided by the social network, in addition to physical support (e.g., financial and housing assistance), also extends to the restoration of self-esteem and individual identity through the promotion of integration. Community belonging and strengthening the collective sense of identity have been successfully used in the development and social integration of several disadvantaged groups to build a healthy self-image (Aviram and Rosenfeld, 2002; Frings and Albery, 2015; Haslam et al., 2016). In addition, active participation in support groups during the formation of communities has also had a very constructive effect on individual development (Raineri, 2017).

Various architectural tools can also be used to support the formation and effective functioning of such communities and groups (e.g., emphasising communal or public-private transitional spaces in floor plan design). Architectural identity created through ornamentation fosters local attachment and identity, gives a clear image to connect to, which can serve as a common point of belonging and provide a good basis for group cohesion.

### 2.3. Shaping the mindset of society

The conscious application of aesthetic design and unique architectural identity on social buildings also has a more abstract layer. Sophisticated design and form also convey a social message that can help sensitise the wider society towards those facing social problems.

In Hungarian language and public consciousness, the conceptual definitions of social architecture and housing support are generally interpreted much more narrowly than the terms used in the international context. This has a layered historical and structural background. However, this way of thinking can be a barrier to understanding complex problem-solving paradigms and only reinforces the social stigma.

The design of institutional buildings conveys a message. Designs that focus solely on functionality and "quick-fix" solutions reflect the attitude of society as a whole: the problems themselves are pushed to the periphery. However, architectural design should also communicate to society the values of a (relatively) broad social network that should be preserved, represented, and supported. The use of ornamentation appears to be a well-rationalised architectural tool for this purpose.

## 3. ORNAMENTATION IN SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE

### 3.1 Period of Hungarian Secession

These theoretical considerations are historically grounded in the early 20th century, when ornamentation served both social and

cultural aims. The period following the turn of the century stands before us as an example of ornamentation used with conscious intent in general, but also in social architecture. The spirit of the age that gradually developed in European countries simultaneously shaped thinking about the fine arts, architecture, social, and national issues.

The regionally diverse names given to the styles of the turn of the century clearly demonstrate that the pursuit of renewal not only provides space for but also supports the development of local and national voices. By abandoning adherence to art historical styles, a freer form of self-expression and individualism can emerge, in which national characteristics can be detected. With the emergence of this characteristic, the society and the people from which it originates and for which it is created become important. (Bunker, 1908)

*"It demands freedom to individuality, to pursue new artistic ideas and forms, to create art that is appropriate to the era and to the people among whom it arose." (Lyka, 1902)*

The social roots of Hungarian Art Nouveau lie in the post-1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise era, shaped by national resistance and the search for renewed identity. Folk culture—preserved in rural and peripheral communities—became a source of inspiration amid rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. After the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, the conscious use of folk motifs gained further urgency, as ornamentation derived from folklore became central to expressing national and collective identity. Architecture, as a direct and public medium, uniquely embodied these cultural aspirations.

Urbanisation also redefined architectural challenges: industrial growth and migration toward Budapest caused the population to soar from 370,000 in the 1880s to 880,000 by 1910 (BSSE, 1948). Housing shortages and rising rents (László, 1926) led to slum formation on the city's outskirts, prompting state intervention in housing policy. Within this context, a state intervention became necessary. The Bárczy housing program produced significant examples. In these, ornamentation served not merely aesthetic aims but as a deliberate social and cultural tool.

### 3.1.1 Wekerle settlements

Perhaps the best known and only housing construction program of the era to join Howard's suburban movement was the Wekerle state workers' colony. Based on Act XXIX of 1908, the government planned to build 10,000 workers' apartments in stages, with the aim of improving public welfare and living standards (WK, 1908). Ottomár Győri was commissioned to develop the land purchased on the outskirts of the city, but renowned architects of the time, such as Róbert Fleiszl, Antal Palóczy, Schodits-Éberling, Károly Kós, and Aladár Árkay, influenced the appearance of the settlement.

Construction began in 1909, with 48 house types designed to ensure both social diversity and architectural variety, including several unique residential and public buildings (WTEE, 2010) (Fig. 1). Responding to the needs of rural migrant group adapting to urban industrial life, the goal was to create a familiar environment that supported integration. The resulting architecture maintained a human scale and drew from vernacular traditions. Wooden facade elements, doors, and windows feature folk-inspired ornamentation that remains a defining characteristic of the housing estate to this day.



Fig. 1. Houses on the main square of Wekerle. (Source: Szócs, 2009)

### 3.1.2 Népszálló – Workers' hostel

Also constructed under the Bárczy program in 1912, the Népszálló on today's Dózsa György Road was modelled after Western European precedents. It offered rentable sleeping cabins, a few private rooms, and shared facilities including a library, reading room, and writing room. Despite a limited budget, aesthetic quality remained a priority, with interiors designed to meet the period's standards of refinement (Győri and Sass, 2003).

*"Perhaps the size and furnishings of the rooms, which are overly luxurious and elegant compared to the concept of a hostel, will invite criticism... but they serve the purpose of making the hostel warm and homely, which is more in tune with its vocation and thus more of a real home for the poorest people than if the furnishings were cold and barracks-like." (Bárczy, 1912, free translation)*

Art Nouveau decorations were used on both the exterior facades and interior spaces. In addition to Zsolnay ceramics and murals depicting Hungarian folk life, stylised ornamental patterns adorn the walls (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Decorative paintings of Mariska Undi in the common areas of Népszálló (Workers' hostel). (Photo: Vasárnapi Újság, 1912; Source: Wágner, 2024)

The examples mentioned above show that sophisticated architectural design and the conscious use of ornamentation were not alien to social functions. In fact, in certain cases, they carry a meaning that makes them a real tool in integration processes. The use of materials and the motifs applied with them, with their closeness to nature and folk life (Süle, 2010), brought familiarity and

attachment to the changed living spaces of the working class flowing into the city.

### 3.2 Contemporary ornamentation

As styles change, ornamentation takes on a completely different role. In the rapidly changing life of the 20th century, the role of motifs and decorations fluctuated, often becoming divisive, leading either to their absence or to their "overuse" without context. It is difficult to define its contemporary role simply, as it seems to be searching for its new place in materials and technologies; its meaning and conceptual framework are changing; and various progressive and experimental directions are emerging (Saglam, 2014). Although it has been transformed from its historical definition, it is still present in modern architecture today, and thus also in social areas. In the following examples, I will attempt to illustrate the layered forms of ornamentation used in contemporary social buildings through case studies that adapted and implemented this tool successfully.

#### 3.2.1 Identity – Dar Lamane housing, Morocco

The housing estate, consisting of more than 4,000 units, was built on the outskirts of Casablanca between 1984 and 1986. The aim of the investment was to provide housing for low-income people moving from rural or nomadic environments to the city, and to support the formation of new communities and integration processes. In line with this, the design was carried out in layers: from community functions and transport networks to private and public spaces, a well-designed neighbourhood was created (TWPR, 1987). Knowing the social background of the target group, they created more closely knit building units, clusters. These were intended to replace the closer bonds that families had lost in their social network with leaving the tribal culture. Accordingly, they wanted to give the groups a separate identity, which they achieved with motifs and colours borrowed from Moroccan vernacular architecture and folk culture. The arcades of the transitional spaces and the window frames were given a unique appearance, granting authentic identity to the buildings and the community living in it (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** The life in Dar Lamane's streets, ornaments on the background facades, 1986. (Source: ARCHNET, 2025)

#### 3.2.2 Locality – Social medical facility, Argentina

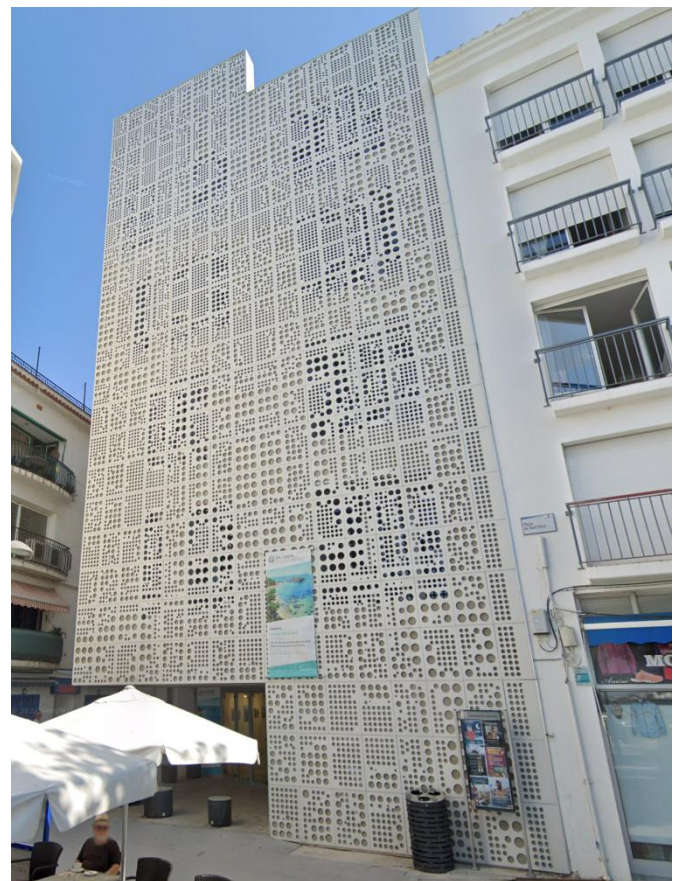
Following the development of a health care facility in Las Toscas, where the design presented architects with several challenges: not only the extreme climate conditions, but locality and community involvement also generated questions.

*"We wanted to achieve a vernacular building in the sense we wanted a discrete interaction with the context. Our oeuvre sensitivity to context does not result in a nostalgic historicism or critical regionalism. It is rather a unique approach to a universal language transformed to respond to a specific local situation."* (ArchDaily, 2016)

The town's community spaces were created by adapting the traditional chorizo house type. Using brick—rooted in the region's vernacular architecture—ensured local identity through both materials and craftsmanship. The perforated double facade moderates the climate while introducing a lively rhythm by subtle shifts in brick placement that generates a dynamic pattern. That feature links interior and exterior, giving space for social interaction. This modern reworking of a familiar element shows the inseparable bond between material, motif, and meaning, reflecting both local authenticity and the architects' sensitive approach.

#### 3.2.3 Historical context – Ca L'Anita, Spain

Established in 2013, the Ca L'Anita Social and Cultural Centre stands out in this small Catalan town with its modern ornamental facade. Located in the historic city centre, the site once housed the beloved Punta de Anita tobacco shop. After the building was donated to the city council, in the new design it became important to preserve the site's historical connections—honouring both its unique location and social function (Garcia, 2020).



**Fig. 4.** Perforated facade of Ca L'Anita with the motifs of the old tiles. (Source: Google Street View, 2025. Location: Plaça Sant Pere, 17480 Roses, Girona, Spain © Google, 2018)

The centre supports the local community through various courses in its classrooms while promoting regional culture in its exhibition spaces. Combining these functions with the site's identity, the architects used ornamentation to reinterpret the former tobacco shop in a contemporary way. The perforated polymer

concrete facade reflects the patterns of the shop's original floor tiles, extending them across the whole surface (Fig. 4). This gesture balances history and modernity, turning the centre into a sophisticated space for urban memory and social, cultural life.

### 3.2.4 Transformation – Roche Fatale social housing, Belgium

Connected to Brussels' green space, the renovation and conversion of the three blocks of a social housing complex was completed in 2024. The old structure underwent several minor renovations, where it lost its original character and distinctive architectural features. The architects were tasked with renovations while restoring its original character (UNI, 2025). The restoration of the unique brick architecture of the main facades preserves the historic character of the buildings without leaning towards extreme historicism or modernity. The interplay of traditional facade bricks complements the larger horizontal and vertical divisions with subtle plasticity and patterns. This allows the entire facade and its close-up details to remain proportionally aesthetic in accordance with the scale of the building (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** The renovated sides of Roche Fatale housing with detailed brick work. (Source: Google Street View, 2025. Location: Rue Montagne des Cerisiers 2, 1200 Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Belgium © Google, 2024)

On the side facades new cladding was installed during the renovation, which echoes the original in terms of material, but its shape and design give the building a modern and distinctive exterior. To enlarge the apartments, new volumes were built onto the side facades and roofs, bringing a third yet harmonious architectural language to the complex. The three-layered materials and forms create a balanced composition that reflects both the site's history and its renewed social purpose.

## 4. DESIGN STUDIES AND EXPERIMENTS

Building on the theoretical and historical foundations outlined above, the following design studies explore the practical application of ornamentation as an integrative architectural tool. I had two experimental design tasks where, with the help and support of the Social Housing Research Group of the Technical University of Budapest (Hungary), I had a direct connection with local communities and social network. In both of these cases, I studied the role of ornamentation fitted into a layered and structured system of architectural tools in order to support physical and social integration.

The first design study was in the town of Gyöngyös (Hungary), where the task was to give a new purpose and a fitted attachment to secessionist villa. The house belonged to a winemaker's family; the ornaments and adornments reflected on that with a grape leaf motif. The historically rich building went through decades of degradation; the town had no public knowledge of its values at all. With a highly needed social (family apartments in the newly planned, attached wing) and a public function (in the original house) the essential meetings between communities could get a place, and the secessionist villa could regain its reputation among the locals. The newly attached building operated with perforated facade that used the pattern of a modernised version of grape leaves (Fig. 6). In this case the motif symbolised not only the historical continuity, but also the traditional meaning of plant leaves in the folklore: family and belonging.



**Fig. 6.** Design study in Gyöngyös, perforated facade with grape leaf motifs. (Source: own design, cons.: Zsófia Mádiné Dankó DLA, 2023)

The second design study was based in a part of Miskolc (Hungary), where a revitalisation of an old neighbourhood has started. The workers' flats belonged to a former factory, where well-equipped infrastructure had been built in its era. This neighbourhood is connected to the largest slums in Hungary, and the clear purpose of the present social network is to include this population into the revitalisation plans. The task itself concentrated on a plot with formerly demolished worker's houses, where new settlements have been designed for the residents of segregation nearby. The low, intensive structure of the plan operated with structured clusters to restore the target group's lost connections (Fig. 7).

All clusters received a motif that has been carefully selected from an exhibition of local folk artists. This motif has been used in a

playful fence wall that has provided a common area for the group of buildings (clusters), a transitional space between public and private functions. The structures and materials (both for the settlements proper and for the ornamental elements) have been selected in a way that the involvement and participation of the residents and communities in the execution was easily supported. By means of the ongoing contact with the local community through an actively present civil association, it was ensured that both the planning process and the outcomes received a positive response and acceptance.



**Fig. 7.** Design study in Miskolc, transitional spaces between clusters. (Source: own design, cons.: Zsófia Mádiné Dankó DLA, 2024)

The third design involved in the research study and building experiment refers to a small school in Budapest. The ground quality of the Carl Rogers School's does not allow any greenery in the courtyard besides few bigger trees. The task of this design was to create small installations for the children to have space to play, sit together, hang out and chill—as they themselves told us during the participatory design sessions (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8.** Participatory design event with the students at the Carl Rogers School. (Photo: Zsófia Mádiné Dankó, 2023)

The design proposal made by Réka Tóth and me, was to introduce mobile elements that can be placed around the courtyard easily. The shape of them allowed the creation of a conversation hub, climbable fabrication, private nook, and a compact storage. The project was selected for execution and was implemented in September 2023. The glass fibre reinforced composite structure and resin materials required a laboratory environment, but refinement of the elements included the children, teachers, and parents of the school. Stylised natural shapes and logos of the school and faculty were painted on to the surfaces—resembling the outside

function and the collaboration of the project. The community actively and enthusiastically participated in the design and implementation, which shows good results in current use.

## MATERIALS, DATA, AND METHODS

Recognising the need for more effective integrative processes—both within social institutions and among their target groups—I began my research with secondary methods to identify alternative architectural instruments. This phase included statistical analysis, a literature review, and broader case studies aimed at understanding successful models of integration within both social and architectural contexts. During this process, and through the design task in Gyöngyös, I became particularly engaged with the Secession era and its approach to aesthetics, meaning, and social challenges. Its emphasis on liveability and architectural identity, often articulated through ornamentation, reinforced my hypothesis regarding the integrative potential of expressive design.

The second phase consisted of qualitative primary research focusing on this period. I examined several case studies that exemplified meaningful relationships between design and function—two of which were discussed earlier—while exploring their historical contexts and contemporary relevance. Additionally, I also had the chance to meet the descendent of one of the greatest secessionist architects and explore his way of thinking through the eyes of a close relative.

The third phase of the research was to find modern examples of the conscious use of ornamentation, to make a collection of the coeval language of this tool. This became a convenient toolbox that has the most direct influence on the adaptation phase in the design studies. In the design studies described above, I found qualitative research essential for achieving in-depth adaptation and design insight. Through observation, I was able to understand space and its usage, while interviews provided me with a more personal understanding obtained from the participants involved in social projects. The most significant element, however, was the participatory planning phase. During this process, roundtable discussions brought together professionals and stakeholders from various fields, complemented by co-design sessions with clients and users. This ongoing process seeks to identify the most effective architectural and non-architectural tools for communication—whether through drawings, models, or interactive methods such as design games—to foster collaboration and shared understanding.

## RESULTS

The research revealed close connections between architectural identity, ornamentation, and social integration. The examination of historical examples showed that ornamentation is deeply rooted in Hungarian architecture not only as a means of decoration, but also as a medium of cultural self-expression and social communication. Its folk motifs and its language, based on vernacular traditions, reflected familiar and shared values by shaping architectural identity and fostering the connection of communities to the place and to each other.

Contemporary case studies confirmed that this connection remains relevant. In projects where ornamentation has been consciously integrated into the design—through shapes, textures, colours, or perforated surfaces—an authentic architectural language has emerged, and the success of the projects demonstrates that this can actively support both physical and social integration. Research-based design experiments have provided practical evidence for these findings. Participatory design and qualitative methods have highlighted how community participation deepens

the meaning and acceptance of architectural identity. Reinterpretation of local motifs and materials has strengthened users' identification with the space and enhanced communication between the social institution and its environment. Overall, the results show that ornamentation, when understood as a communicative architectural tool, contributes to both architectural identity and social integration. It connects the physical form of the building with the cultural and thus emotional environment of the users, offering an effective tool for creating contextual, socially sensitive, inclusive, and long-term social architectural solutions.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research examined how ornamentation can function as a tool of social architecture by strengthening architectural identity and supporting social integration. The results confirm that ornamentation, when used as a conscious tool, goes beyond aesthetic values and becomes a communicative medium.

The study, based on research and architectural experiments, also aims to promote the method—using ornamentation as an example—it shows how a general architectural toolbox can be adapted with interdisciplinary (through continuous communication and cooperation between academic branches), transdisciplinary (through qualitative research of professions working in the field, joint work), and participatory tools (design and construction). The design projects embedded in the above-mentioned architectural practice served as strong practical evidence that the tool of ornamentation can stand its ground both in the historical and contemporary Hungarian environment, if we consciously implement it in the given situation.

Ultimately, the research demands a reinterpretation of ornamentation as an active, meaningful, and context-sensitive component of architectural practice. As societal challenges continue to evolve, the rediscovery of this tool offers new directions for creating inclusive, enduring, and identity-bearing spaces that contribute to the cohesion of both community and place.

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