My proposal for an article entitled “Gottfried Semper’s Perplexity Before the Crystal Palace: Stoffwechsel as Osmosis between Decorative Objects and Architecture” has been selected by the committee of the journal FACES. My article will be published in the forthcoming 77th issue of FACES.

Gottfried Semper’s Perplexity Before the Crystal Palace: Stoffwechsel as Osmosis between Decorative Objects and Architecture

This paper examines how Gottfried Semper’s approach triggered the shift from an understanding of ornament as artefact to an experimental model. In parallel, it reveals the implications of such a reorientation of the concept of ornament for both design and architecture. Pivotal for this shift was Semper’s “On the Formal Principles of Adornment and Its Meaning as a Symbol in Art” (1856), which marks, firstly, a relocation of the quest for demonstration to theorisation, and, secondly, an intensification of the interaction between graphic illustration and abstract speculation. What is argued here is that Semper’s cosmological inquiries on ornamentation enacted a comprehension of ornaments as non-autonomous objects, upgrading them into reflective devices.

Semper was in exile in London between 1850 and 1855, after his escape from Dresden on 9 May 1849 when Prussian and Saxon troops defeated the revolt in which he had participated in support of democratic rights and the unity of the German state. The presentation will focus on Semper’s comments on the 1851 Great London Exhibition, and especially on his critical remarks regarding Sir Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace whose design for the Great Exhibition had been accepted in the summer of 1850. Some months later, in February 1951, Semper drafted a school programme including lessons for engineers and architects. In March of the same year, Edwin Chadwick invited Semper, on behalf of Paxton, to become an assistant of the latter while working on the Crystal Palace. Semper rejected this offer, presenting as an excuse his involvement in the establishment of a school for architects in London, which, as he stated, had garnered publicity in the German and Swiss newspapers. Despite the fact that Semper interpreted the Great London Exhibition as a “world phenomenon” representing contemporary cultural conditions, he described the sentiments that a walk through it provoked as a “Babylonian confusion”, claiming that the perplexity it induced prevented an intelligible perception of the exhibited objects, making the impression they instigated non-compatible with his aspiration for a “practical heuristics” system.

My objective is to examine whether the questions that arose in Semper’s mind when experiencing the Crystal Palace pushed him to question the understanding of architecture that he had previously developed in The Four Elements of Architecture, which was published shortly before his arrival in London, according to a distinction into four elements: the hearth, the roof, the enclosure and the mound. Additionally, I will investigate the extent to which his encounter with the Crystal Palace played a role in his use of the concept of stoffwechsel, which Semper introduced from biology in order to describe the material transformation of artistic forms. The elaboration of this notion allowed Semper to argue for replacing the conception of ornament as artefact by its understanding as architectural element. In other words, it is through this concept that Semper defended his integration of the decorative object into the history of architecture. These questions will be discussed in relation to an analysis of why Practical Art in Metal and Hard Materials (1852) was pivotal for the re-invention of decorative objects’ meaning.