

# Superthickness: A Genealogy of Architectural Control from Surface to Volume

*“A whole generation of remarkable architects...produced hyper-interiors that enveloped their occupants in a single, seamless multimedia garment...they would implode design to create environments with an extraordinary density of sensuous effects”.<sup>1</sup> - Mark Wigley*

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The interior wall surface is the most fundamental element of architecture, due to its immediacy in the mediation of space, volume and user lifestyle. There is a contemporary resurgence of architects pushing the disciplinary boundaries of what they do through interior surface experimentation. The genealogy and comparative analysis presented in this essay examines origins in movements such as Art Nouveau, as well as Postmodernism, but is non-dialectical. As a nuanced contemporary current in disciplinary production, architects are doing more with interior surfaces than purely dividing spaces. In this practice of activating surfaces volumetrically, different designers are enhancing the scope and definition of architecture.

One such opening for interior experiment is a current interest in volumetric and graphical surface projects. In this study, I will examine a trajectory of this emergent surface focus through three different points in modern history: first in the *ornate graphics* and wall patterns of the late 19th century Victorian and early modernism circa 1900; secondly, in the *total graphic* of Art Nouveau's Gesamtkunstwerk during the beginning of the 20th century; and lastly, in the popular Postmodern practice of *supergraphics* in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although these points are not the first instances of graphic laden interiors in history, they do provide a modern foil to discuss an attitude towards contemporary architecture and the place of interior practice.

These links will show how the development of graphic techniques, used by interior decorators in the Victorian era, in the early-20th century *total graphic* by Arts and Crafts architects and mid-century *supergraphics* created by interior and graphic designers, influence the development of autonomous and highly stylized interior surfaces that attempt to emulate architectural effects through creating new ways to affect the overall interior volume. Ultimately, this study will lead to a contemporary focus on volumetric graphic strategies in the interior practiced

predominantly by architects that are engaging in transdisciplinary exchanges with interior design, graphic design, furniture design and technology.

### ORNATE GRAPHICS (1890-1900)

*Ornate graphics* find their origins in the middle to late 19th Century. This occurred at the intersection of interior decorating and architecture, but was practiced predominantly by the decorator and their domestic clientele. These interiors were known for their ornate and repetitive surface patterns, yet differ from postmodern *supergraphics* in their high level of detail, as well as not being super in scale or abstract in intention. *Ornate graphics* allowed decorators to create highly involved environments defined by their graphical takeover of every nook, cranny, molding, or protrusion, an immersion that gets re-originated throughout the history of the interior, thereafter.<sup>2</sup>

In 1897, interior decorator Francis D. Kramer's "Modern English Dining Room" published in *The Decorator and the Furnisher*, shows highly detailed wall surfaces and ornate vaulted ceiling planes<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1). Every conceivable space from 60" and up is covered by large symmetrical motifs with offset moldings and intricately centralized patterns that begin to protrude past the confines of the flat surface, shifting to volumetric effects albeit two to three inches at a time. The 'Dining Room' achieves undulating surface planes that represented an early documented moment where patterns and images are used as visual markers on walls that projectively contributed to the development of volumetric surfaces. The 'Dining Room' shows *ornate graphics* becoming semi-thickened, through frames and non-flat surface treatments.



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These thickened frames express the importance of the *ornate graphic* within the interior, in the way one would frame art, although the hierarchical separation between the painted graphic and surface is eliminated. *Ornate graphics* in Kramer's Dining Room celebrate the traditionally superfluous wall graphic finish as a fundamental element of architecture. The position, density and location of the *ornate graphic*, dictates the placement of interior elements such as furniture and cabinetry against walls. The addition of semi-thickened parts to this *ornate graphic* strategy lays out a clear framework of interior practice for architect decorators to develop in the years to come.

Figure 1: *Modern English Dining Room, PA* - Francis D. Kramer, *Decorator* (1897).

Kramer's interior employs *ornate graphics* as a then popular design trope and an important commercial publicity tool. The more developed wall surfaces of the late 1890s showed an over-saturation through pattern, formal moments of ornate framing protruding off the wall and ceiling planes that literally made interior surfaces thicker. This approach exposed an intention for *ornate graphics* to be more than supplemental, secondary and/or flat. While this thickening occurred only marginally, the formal inklings of a graphically informed volumetric manipulation of interior surfaces began to emerge.

#### TOTAL GRAPHICS (1900-1910)

As interior practice developed, influences from the Baroque and Rococo that were popular in the commercial Victorian era subside during the domination of Modernism in the 20th century. The interior became defined through high-modern style versus consumer proliferation. However, this does not mean that the *ornate graphics* of the earlier moments cease, yet the transition from the flatness of pattern as supplemental to the interior, does. *Total graphics* complete the spatial intention of *ornate graphics* by guiding the design of architectural elements such as exposed structural elements, moldings, building details and furniture, to name a few.

The totalizing surface effects of Art Nouveau were extended to every conceivable part of the interior space, with an emphasis on a visual effect of control. *Total graphics* from this era differ from the *ornate graphics* of the previous one in their complete cohesiveness with the totality of the interior. As architectural theorist Mark Wigley described in relation to "Total Design", *total graphics* take over a space, subjecting every detail and surface to an overarching vision where the architect supervises, if not designs, everything: structure, furniture, wallpaper, carpets, doorknobs, clothes and flower arrangements."<sup>4</sup> Such patterns and graphics were not solely additive or decorative, specifically being argued against by architect-decorators of the time such as Adolf Loos.<sup>5</sup> *Total Graphics* were integral for a total interior experience and were established as a visually readable and viably thicker design tactic.



Figure 2: Interior at the Paris Exposition, Henry Van de Velde, architect(1900).

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In Henry van de Velde's 1900 Paris Exhibition, he deployed his trademark repetitive organic patterning on walls that stretch across all vertical planes above eye level.<sup>6</sup> This *total graphic* influences the curvaceousness of all interior furnishings and decor, from the desk to the rounded chairs, from the rug pattern to the door handles – graphics direct the physical manifestation of formalized volumes (Figure 2). The control over the curvilinear wall graphic only exemplifies the totalizing effects of this era. Up to this point in the development of immersive visual techniques in interior environments, *total graphics* come closest to creating volumes or space through geometry being implemented into the form(s) of the interior.

The boomerang graphic pattern on the walls of van de Velde's exhibition are the basis for many of his formal moves. The desk is a filleted version of the pattern, using the angles of the curve to guide its bending. The chair in front of the desk is a more semi-circular boomerang shape, but still invoked the logic set forth by the wall pattern, while the chair to the right of the desk is closer to the actual obtuse curve. The wall pattern even finds its way into curvaceous shapes on the rug and the door handle is detailed through its shape. The graphic application is total and the interior reads as cohesive because of it.

The dominance of *total graphics* stemmed from the intention by architects to regain control over architecture – in this case back from, “home decorators whom they believed to be ignorant of architectural principles and driven solely by the dictates of fashion.”<sup>7</sup> As design historian Penny Sparke argued, *total graphics* were architect's answer to the decorator's *ornate graphics* of years past, instead showing how to implement a graphic sensibility and create space, through an overwhelming control.<sup>8</sup> The appropriation of *ornate graphic* tactics, like wallpaper and organic forms, from interior decorating into the *total graphic* of Art Nouveau explicitly shows how architects incorporated extra-disciplinary techniques into disciplined propositions. The *total graphic* is the definitive thickened surface tactic, in its extending a graphic logic onto a formal, seemingly volumetric, manipulation of the interior.

### **SUPERGRAPHICS (1968-1980)**

In his 1977 book *Supermannerism*, on the development of post-modern architecture, American art and architecture critic C. Ray Smith popularized the term *supergraphic* to describe images and graphics that were meant to activate the surfaces of spaces, creating optical and organizational effects, outside of the simply decorative. As an architectural element they became popular because of the relative ease of their installation and their ability to effect interior/exterior surfaces. They were characterized by their flatness, becoming a painted surface strategy, similar to how *ornate graphics* were applied, but not in how they were perceived.

Smith delineates what actually makes up the material components of *supergraphics* in nascent post-modern architecture and makes abundantly clear that they are not “decorative devices”.<sup>9</sup> Smith defines *supergraphics* as, “gigantic, superscale designs painted or otherwise applied to architectural surfaces, in order to produce an optical effect of expanding space or volume”.<sup>10</sup> The striking distinction by Smith that *supergraphics* are not decorative, coupled with the definition of how they operate, illustrates the difference between them and the *ornate graphics* of the late 19th century – mainly in their scope as ornamental supplements to wall surfaces to achieve immersive effects, while *supergraphics* were a way to create abstract interiors and organizational moments associated with the formal qualities

of the architecture. In terms of their relationship to *total graphics*, they reoriginate Art Nouveau’s volumetric intention into abstract large-scale graphics.

“*Supergraphic* designs can be abstractions of two-dimensional typefaces, flat outlines of solid geometric forms – spheres, cones, or cylinders – or fragments of representational photomurals from billboard advertising...(and) generally they create optical effects” states Smith.<sup>11</sup> Smith’s language suggests a volumetric emphasis on *supergraphic* techniques, as well as an inability to achieve physical effects beyond tricking the eye. This is a central distinction in the development of graphic techniques directing volume in architectural space.

Another facet of *supergraphics* was their visual assault on the spaces they were housed on. Smith states that they, “always destroy architectural planes, distort corners, explode the rectangular boxes that we construct as rooms, and consequently change architectural scale”.<sup>12</sup> In this way, *supergraphics* looked to project past the confines of the interior surfaces in which they were painted on, to fundamentally distort, even by illusion, the overall effect of the interior. By dealing with the interior at an abstract and organizational level, *supergraphics* do not immerse the subject, as much try to combat surfaces, through adversarial and autonomous elements working in their own graphic logic’s expressed optically.



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An iconic example of abstract *supergraphics* comes in architect/artist Barrie Briscoe’s Toronto Hillcrest Church.<sup>13</sup> The large *supergraphic* employs geometrical patterns of circles, the Christian symbol of Pax Romana, as well as straight bold lines flowing into and out of circular elements at the central wall of the church’s foyer. This served to tie together the three main religious symbols of the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Canadian Church in a gigantic superimposition.<sup>14</sup> The color of these graphics also contributed to the overall effect – purple, red, and yellow gradients all moved seamlessly and fluidly on the wall, disregarding the edges and surfaces in their way, metaphorically destroying the structure of each independent faith and in turn creating a true collective bound by the new symbolic *supergraphic* (Figure 3). Briscoe’s Hillcrest Church achieves a visual marriage between symbols, creating moments of architectural and visual importance through their monumentality, without physically manipulating the surfaces on which they are projected.

Figure 3: Toronto Hillcrest Church, Barrie Briscoe, Architect/Artist, 1968-1972.

As an ambiguous point in *supergraphics*, French architect Jean Phillippe Lenclos was actively engaged in *volumetric supergraphics* between 1967-1970. As publicized by *Domus* magazine in 1968, he attempted to literally thicken graphics in his

interiors. In his 1967 Auditorium project in Paris, Lenclos started with very similar techniques to create the layers and eventual volumetric enclosures that worked with and against the base graphics.<sup>15</sup> His use of the pink, red and purple concentric circular patterns on the flat part of the wall, show this perfectly, while the white rectangular protrusions show the aforementioned technique of destroying the interior or in this case its base *supergraphic* background. In turn, the result is an almost disorienting space that flanks, envelopes, creates possible furniture-like moments, and ultimately thickens the interior surface into volumetric *supergraphic* projections. The eventual enclosure on all sides take cues from the base *supergraphic* on the back wall, while using volume to protrude and almost assault the interior, as a *supergraphic* would intend.

While the popular definition and practice of *supergraphics* in the 1970s showed volumetric intentions from destroying space to moving past the limits of wall surfaces to being supplemental way finding, they did not achieve their ultimate goal to be spatial. *Supergraphics* start with two-dimensional forms that become three-dimensional explosions”, states Smith.<sup>16</sup> In the years that followed, the more dominant tropes of Postmodernism, as practiced by Venturi Scott-Brown, turned to more-or-less purer architectural techniques to achieve volumetric effects. When compared to the flat and cost-effective surface strategy of *supergraphics*, the eventual end to its popular reign came sometime during the 1980s.

As time passed and practices looked to different origins and eras, *supergraphics* got a makeover and in some ways are now achieving their ultimate goal of volumetric presence by becoming thickened. While *supergraphics* were thin, they aimed for optical effects, in other words, a virtual thickness. The visually intricate immersions of *ornate graphics* in the 1890s became perfected by the *total graphics* of the Art Nouveau. Organizational, abstract and *volumetric supergraphics* are translated by architects today to be all-encompassing interior experiences, yet are also influenced by the ornate and *total graphic* aesthetically; and accomplish the volumetric intentions of *supergraphics*.

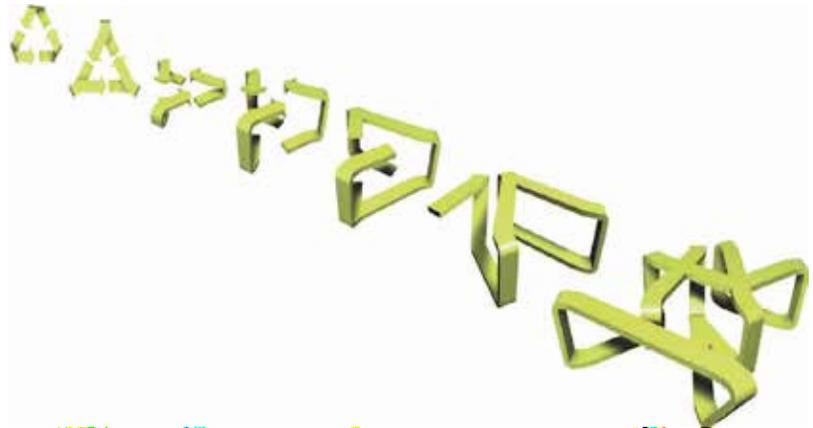
### **SUPERTHICKNESS (2007-PRESENT)**

*Superthickness* is what happens when a few millimeters of paint became a few feet of volume. As an exclusively architectural operation, practitioners appropriate and synthesize strategies, techniques and tools from interior decoration, graphic design and furniture design to create volumetric interiors. The practice can be defined as a conflation of graphics, patterns, images and signs into architectural elements that exerts past the flat surfaces, out of the wall and become an essential element of spatial experience.

German architect Jurgen Meyer H.'s more recent work illustrates *Superthickness*. Indebted to *total graphics*, as well as abstract and *volumetric supergraphics*, most visibly through his use of bold signs and symbols, Meyer achieves a very stylized index of volumetric form. This body of work makes use of several components of graphic design (type, vector, lines, curves, signs, etc.) and composes them in volume, as interior design would do with the common givens of furniture and enclosure.<sup>17</sup>

In the 2009 exhibition, Level Green – The Concept of Sustainability, in Berlin, Meyer uses the popular recycling symbol with the collaboration of graphic designers Art+Com (Berlin), to create the volumes that dictate the perception and flow of the space totally. The formal design operations of extension, extrusion, folding and wrapping of form are developed through his use of the recycling

logo, blown-up to the scale of architecture and paste *supergraphics* on the floor to create the limits, as well as the furniture within the space. The reflective bright yellowish green columnar structure is detached from the wall and wraps into and out of the base organizational graphics on the floor/ceiling, creating an unmistakable graphic transformation into volume from flat logo<sup>18</sup> (Figure 5). At once, the ability for *superthickness* to interject – a logo becoming spatial and volumetric – his disciplined appropriation of the recycling symbol to become architectural expression shows his ultimate intention with graphics – to actively affect how architects practice within the interior. In this instance, Meyer’s *superthickness* advances the flatness of a sign into a volume manipulated and autonomous of all interior surfaces, making his installation the interior.

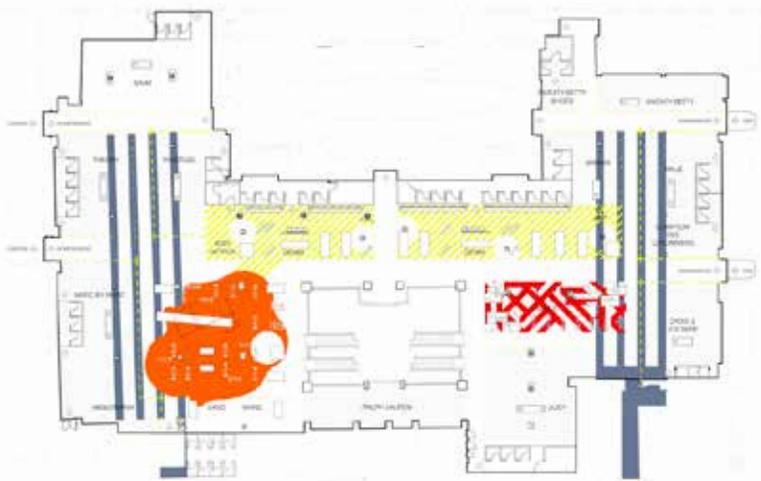


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Figure 4: *Level Green- Berlin, germany - exhibition - Jurgen Meyer H.(June 2009).*

In his 2002 project, Stylepark Lounge for the UIA congress in Berlin, Meyer used a different approach that also dealt with using a graphic projection on the ground to create a volumetric logic for his striated undulating benches. Meyer states that, “the integral concept of the stand, programs the linoleum floor surface into an undulating topography for different functional requirements...communication areas, lounge zones, video projections and interactive elements fuse into each other and connect all programmatic elements into a homogenous, but spatially structured configuration”.<sup>19</sup> The resultant wave of benches and program vary from band to band, but inhabit a singular graphic that is extruded.

Another visible typology of *superthickness* employs numbering, way finding, and signage, not as autonomous elements, but as integral spatial parts of rooms, circulation and program. They are closely related to the *organizational supergraphics* of the 1960s. In effect, this type of *superthickness* creates a graphically perceived physicality to space.



5

In 2010, FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste) used highly saturated *supergraphics* on the floor of their Selfridges Womenswear Store in London. These superthick effects create phenomenal boundaries, instead of physical ones, for program, circulation and way-finding. The zoning quality of their plan creates distinct graphic boundaries between different sections of the retail store (Figure 6). The yellow 45 degree hatching calls out a specific area of shopping where women’s outerwear is situated; the orange amoeba on the other end of the space separates a larger public area organized around the other more commercially loaded ones; finally the linear gray bars working as circulatory signage. Each of these graphics are distinguished through color and shape, in turn creating a graphic boundary that is central to dividing and/or delineating movement and perception in space.

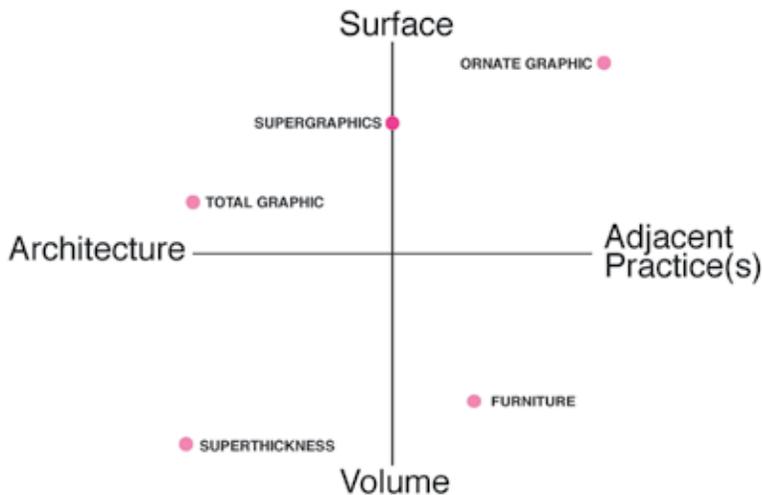


Figure 5: Selfridges Womenswear Store - Floor Plan - London - FAT(2010).

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Figure 6: Expanded Field of Superthickness.

In contrast to the purely organizational supplements of the 1960s, these graphics occur on a level of experience where the effects associated with them, such as understanding circulation and program differentiation are central to their volumetric presence. *Superthickness* incorporates the visual immersion of the *ornate graphic*, but explodes it to the level of abstraction without being physically active. These instances of *superthickness* are just a few possibilities of a graphically oriented practice in architecture, where the promise of volume emphasizes a discipline on the interior that is secondary at best in the profession today.

### BEYOND THICK

As an effect of contemporary architecture, *superthickness* is a current manifestation of practitioner's interest in graphics and occurs at the intersection of architecture, interior, graphic and furniture design. The sequence of appropriated strategies and techniques from the last 120 years finds origins in the highly decorative *ornate graphics* of the Victorian era, in the expressively flat material surface *total graphics* of the Art Nouveau and the implicit spatiality of mid-20th century *supergraphics*. *Superthickness* now seamlessly incorporates all three types of graphics along its contemporary manifestations to produce a purely architectural product.

In the contemporary practices of Jurgen Meyer H. and FAT, *Superthickness* has epitomized a specific aesthetic intention that is undoubtedly architectural, while at the same time being tactical in how it is deployed – through graphics becoming volumes or through ambiguous, large, palpable and abstract boundaries becoming suggestively spatial. Regardless, it embodies a new era obsessed with overturning firmly held notions of formal manipulation in architecture, instead opting to find new origins and create new worlds.

*Superthickness* today provides an experimental space for architects to practice alternative forms and new design processes, but also a legitimate space for them to be a part of the popular discourse over the interior. *Superthickness* is the motivated product of transactions with other design practices. Aside from what these actions do to the disciplinary identity of architecture, appropriations that occur transdiscipline, and cross-temporally, open up new design opportunities for architecture to project itself through. As a contemporary focus, *superthickness* has emerged to become a visible trope of interior architecture, through spatially embedded program, circulation/information graphics, as well as graphic extrusions that have spatial qualities. *Superthickness* shifts the popular focus of the interior from the surface to the volume and back into the realm of architecture.

### ENDNOTES

1. Wigley, Mark. "What ever Happened to Total Design?" *Harvard Design Magazine* (Summer, 1998): pg. 18.
2. Benjamin, Walter, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008): 96
3. "Modern English Dining Room" *The Decorator and Furnisher* vol. 29, no. 6 (1897): 178.
4. Wigley, Mark. "What ever Happened to Total Design?" *Harvard Design Magazine* (Summer, 1998): pg. 18
5. Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime" *Programs and Manifestos of 20th century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT, 1970): 60 In Viennese architect Adolf Loos' *Ornament and Crime, from 1908, he critiques interior decoration's use of ornament to achieve relevant aesthetic effects. Loos states that, "I don't accept the objection that ornament heightens an a cultivated persons joy in life, don't accept the objection...but if the ornament is beautiful!...Ornament does not heighten my joy in life or the joy in life of any cultivated person". Aside from the defensive position of anti-ornament, Loos is critiquing the superfluous nature and commercial practice of ornamenting any surface or object in the modern interior.*
6. Interior at the Paris Exposition, Henry Van de Velde" *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*. (Fall, 1900): 44
7. Sparke, Penny, "The New Interior" *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion, 2008): 38
8. *ibid* Wigley: 19
9. Smith, C. Ray, *Supermannerism* (New York: Dutton, 1977): 269
10. *ibid* Smith: 269
11. *ibid* Smith: 269
12. *ibid* Smith: 270
13. "Superscale Frescoes" *Progressive Architecture* vol. 51, no. 9 (1970): 96-99.
14. *Ibid* Smith: 285
15. "Colori A Parigi: Un Auditorium". *Domus* vol. 458, no. 4 (1968): 462-465.
16. *Ibid* Smith: 269
17. Meyer H., Jurgen, *J. Meyer H.* (Germany: Hatje Cantz: 2009): 155
18. *ibid* Meyer: 155
19. *ibid* Meyer: 155