

**University of Michigan**

**Lori Smithey**

**Decadent by design: interplays between architecture and decadent literature**

Abstract:

This paper examines the architectural dimensions of fin-de-siècle decadent literature through the lens of architectural theory in order to expand our understanding of the operations of the genre and its relationship to a larger tradition of decadence. It begins with a cursory overview of theories linking literature, design, and decadence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it analyzes literary works by Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, and Joris-Karl Huysmans; and it concludes with a closer look at the correlations between decadent themes and architectural space in texts by Edmond de Goncourt. Ultimately this paper argues that the built environment is as involved in the staging of decadent design as much as it is a register of design born of decadence.

Biographical note:

Lori Smithey is a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her research examines intersections between concepts of decadence and design. Her recent work has been published by the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand and has been presented at the Architecture Humanities Research Association and the College Art Association. She holds a Bachelor of Architecture from the Cooper Union in New York and a Master of Science in architectural history and theory from the University of Washington in Seattle.

Keywords:

Creative writing – architecture – Decadence – Flaubert – Goncourt – Huysmans – Zola

## Introduction

In his controversial neo-decadent novel *Submission*, Michel Houellebecq writes, ‘A giant, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus cloud hovered over the north of Paris, all the way from the Sacré-Coeur to the Opéra, its sides a dark, sooty gray’ (2015: 95). The novelist’s figurative cloud casts a shadow that stretches not only geographically from the whiteness of the Sacré-Coeur to the golden top of the Opéra, but also sweeps trans-historically from the decadence of fin-de-siècle France to today’s globalized social anxieties. It offers a reminder that fin-de-siècle decadent literature pursued the art of decadence while rooted in a social context cast as morally, economically, and politically decadent. Nevertheless, an important criticism of Houellebecq’s novel is that it lacks aesthetic innovation. Lurking behind this lack is a distinction between the appearance of decadent themes and the active stylization of a decadent sensibility. This paper argues that an examination of the architectural dimensions of such a distinction may shed new light on the operations of fin-de-siècle decadent literature.

For Houellebecq the architectural allusions suggest a larger decadence. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century in Paris, buildings such as the Sacré-Coeur basilica were ripe polemical symbols in the ongoing conflict between Republicans and Catholic royalists that continued from the time of the French Revolution to at least the 1905 separation of church and state in France. The socio-political debates of the late nineteenth century were steeped in the rhetoric of decadence. From the streets of Paris, one could see the elongated profile of Sacré-Coeur’s dome, its Byzantine style and white travertine, which resists discoloration of weather and pollution, as evidence of its attempt to atone for the decadence of modern culture. On those same streets, one might also see a poster depicting a vampire-like cleric gripping the basilica and casting its own decadent shadow over the white stone of the church (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Eugene Oge, poster for *La Lanterne*, 1902

For those interested in the curious fact that one building might serve two sides of the same decadent coin, the opening lines of Jules Laforgue's poem 'Complainte litanies de mon Sacré-Coeur' further complicates the matter. He casts the cult of the sacred heart with a sensibility that grows out of the decadent literary movement rather than political polemics, stating, 'My heart, heartless cancer, gnaws itself' (1909 [1885]: 182). The self-irony of decadent writing that Laforgue overlays onto the most visible monument of cultural decadence reveals a distinction between objects identified and categorized as decadent and an operative decadent sensibility.

Scholars of decadent literature have drawn similar distinctions between a passive decadent label and a more active decadent stylization (Reed 1985, Calinescu 1987, Weir 1995). These works helped to define decadence as an aesthetic of rejection and retreat set apart from negative connotations of decadence. Conversely, recent scholarship has explored the architectural and urban settings of decadent texts (Sicotte 2006, Pety 2010, Bourgeois 2015, Weir 2018). The fact that decadent authors had an interest in the built environment is well known, but the legacy of the concept in the field of design is less studied. In architectural discourse decadence operates largely as a disparaging term. This paper contributes to the growing work on the architectural framing of decadent literature, but from the other side of the interdisciplinary exchange. This essay will trace formative theories linking literature, design, and decadence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it will consider how the literary works of Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, and Joris-Karl Huysmans engage with disparate modes of decadence as it relates to architecture and design; and it will conclude with a more in-depth examination of the role of architecture in works by Edmond de Goncourt.

### **Decadence in architectural theory**

One important link between decadence as a derisive label and a creative practice is a divergent conception of style that sits at the crossroads of classical literary theory and the modern discipline of art history. To better understand the ways in which this shift affects the field of architecture and simultaneously informs the decadent literary movement, we can examine the end of the eighteenth-century when the architect Charles-François Viel wrote a polemic against modern technology and engineering titled, *Décadence de l'architecture à la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (1800). Viel's thirty-page fulmination pits architecture as a liberal art against design as a mechanical art and frames the latter as decadent. He opens:

Never has the general and specific causes of architectural decadence advanced with more activity than today; it has never been more necessary to disseminate architecture's true principles, to oppose them to a spirit of fashion, which for some years has dominated the practice and inflicted a powerful and harmful influence on the art of architecture. (5)

The essay represents an early use of the term decadence, predating its meteoric rise in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Here there is no connection between decadence and literature, in fact the exact opposite is the case. For Viel, the decadence of mechanized architectural production, heralded by the opening of the École Polytechnique in France, marked the deterioration of a classical architectural relationship to literature. The architect was writing in a French tradition that theorized the long-standing concern about the relationship of a building's parts to its whole through literary terms. For example, Germain Boffrand argued in his *Livre d'Architecture* (1745) that 'the sections of moldings and the other parts which make up a building, are, in architecture, what

words are in discourse' (quoted in Forty 2000: 18). Jacques François Blondel, in his seminal *Cours d'Architecture* (1771-77), relies on similar analogies linking architecture to literature and poetry, stating that 'architecture is like poetry; all ornament which is only ornament is excessive. Architecture, by the beauty of its proportions and the choice of its arrangement is sufficient unto itself' (quoted in Collins 1965: 180). Viel argues along a related line in his 1797 tract, *Principes de l'ordonnance et de composition des batiments*:

However the word style is used in literature, one makes equal use of it in our present subject. It consists, in relation to literature, in that arrangement of words, that disposition of phrases which render diction pure and elegant... this word and its different qualities are applied with as much truth to the other arts and singularly architecture. (quoted in Forty 2000: 96)

When Viel writes his polemic, framed through the concept of decadence, it is yet another articulation of his commitment to an alignment between architecture and classical literary theory. Decadence in this context is the displacement of communicative capacity, a theme that decadent authors will explore at the close of the following century. For architecture, Viel's decadence marks the loss of a long-standing literary metaphor.

### **Decadent styles**

Unlike literary history, in which the decadent movement can be delineated by seminal texts and critical discourse, architecture's intersection with the concept of decadence is largely tangential to philosophical, historical, and aesthetic theories. Thus, while decadence was strategically used as a polemic against the introduction of the Polytechnique, in the revolutionary context of late-eighteenth-century France, its strongest disciplinary import comes through art historical discourse. In this setting there is a significant tension between decadence as a term born of ostensibly detached historical observation and a term of judgment, often politically loaded. The ways in which decadence comes to designate a late-style categorization within art history exemplifies this dual aspect.

What was a rhetorical weapon against modernization for Viel could also be applied with scholarly distance in translations of the discipline's founding classical text. The 1914 Morris Hicky Morgan English translation of Vitruvius' treatise *De Architectura* remains one of the most influential and longest running editions. It designates the fifth chapter of the treatise as 'The Decadence of Fresco Painting.' In this section, Vitruvius criticizes the popularity of fantastical imagery in wall paintings that depict oddities such as candelabras upholding shrines and floral motifs mixed with statue figures, both growing from reeds and stalks. The type of composition he describes would, in the Renaissance rediscovery of classical antiquity, become known as the grotesque. The same kind of imagery would later be categorized as Third Style in nineteenth-century art historical periodization. In his work on the grotesque, Geoffrey Harpham describes the Vitruvian passage on wall painting as having no descriptive name and violating all categories. He traces the influence of this chapter in the history of aesthetics from Vasari's disapproval of the Gothic to Wincklemann's attack on the Rococo. Wincklemann references Vitruvius directly, stating that the ornateness of the Rococo has 'no more of Nature about it than Vitruvius' candelabra, which supported little castles and palaces' (Harpham 1982: 27). Wincklemann's evocation of nature indicates an important shift in his conceptualization of style. Here style is formulated through

metaphors drawn from natural science rather than literary theory. Indeed, Winckelmann's landmark art historical text *Geschichte der Kunst Alterthums* (1763) drew inspiration from Georges Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749). From this connection architectural historian Amy Kulper reveals that Winckelmann acquired 'a meticulously historicised sense of nature and natural species, which he developed into an equally historicised sense of style' (2006: 392). For Winckelmann, decadence is both a biological phenomenon and a value judgment that is now conceptualized as part of a cyclical process of origin, flowering and decay, and a basis for criticism, such that the full bloom of classical antiquity is preferred over later styles theorized as being in a state of decline. The demise of style as an operating literary metaphor for architects and the birth of style as a biological metaphor arguably comes with Viollet-le-Duc's adaptation of Georges Cuvier's theory of the fragment: as a scientist might reconstruct the whole animal from a single bone, so might an architect reconstruct an entire building from a few fragments of masonry. Its corollary in art history is the proper classificatory period designation based on fragments of visual evidence. Here the part-to-whole relationships of classical literary style, based on employing the appropriate affect suitable for a given rhetorical context, gives way to a universalizing project of period reconstruction.

This cursory examination of the oscillations of decadence, between polemical assault and as period designation, within the production and translation of architectural texts offers some background for understanding the ways in which the term was applied as a label in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scholars studying decadent literature are careful to distinguish between the appearance of decadent themes, such as exoticism, perversity, or degeneration, and decadent style. For example, Matei Calinescu separates what he terms decadent 'rhetoric' from decadent style, which in effect privileges the textual innovations of decadent literature over the polemical punch of the concept (1985: 157). John R. Reed extended the distinction by differentiating between 'novels of decadence' and 'decadent novels,' whereby literary works that signal decadence thematically, but do not embody a decadent literary style, remain novels of decadence and do not rise to the occasion of the decadent novel (1985: 20-21).

### **Framing decadence through design**

Architectural works, from the heavy symbolism of Sacré-Coeur to the bombast of C.-F. Viel, and the ultimate evacuation of literary based conceptions of style would seem to fall squarely into the 'rhetoric' of decadence category. Nevertheless, literary authors who engaged with decadence both thematically and stylistically frequently utilized an architectural dimension in their works. This came in the form of representing glass and wrought iron modern architecture, as well as recalling the Rococo, which suggests that decadent authors were as aware of a historicized sense of style that came along with the biological metaphors of the nineteenth century as much as they were engaged with styling prose. Examining the ways in which these authors employed the built environment textually is another step towards reading architecture as participating in decadence as a creative practice. Doing so nuances the landscape of decadent literature. For example, under a literary definition of decadence Zola's naturalism is distinct from Huysmans' decadent aesthetic. However, through an architectural lens Zola is engaged with the systematization of design that Viel theorized as the source of contemporary decadence.

Decadent authors had a pronounced interest in the visual arts: Baudelaire wrote art criticism and Huysmans studied painting in his youth and also wrote art criticism. This attention to art, coupled with the movement's ties to *l'art pour l'art*, have impelled expanding Reed's distinction between novels of decadence and decadent novels to drawing a division between the art of decadence and decadent art. An exploration of the architectural engagements of decadent novels widens the metaphor one step further. Distinguishing between *decadent design* and *design of decadence* separates works that operatively utilize decadence and works that passively belong to a social-historical *milieu* of decadence. The difference in framing has implications in the two conceptions of style discussed, whereby one is closely aligned to artistic production and the other a taxonomic categorization afforded through historical distance. Furthermore, the terminology of decadent design, as opposed to decadent novels, exposes the agency afforded, via the creative practice of designing decadence, over the production of a distinguished type of novel. While built works have in large part been read as either products of decadence or as oppositional to decadence, the promissory note of decadent literature is that creative practice can produce decadent designs that exceed their decadent times.

## Flaubert

The exoticism of Gustave Flaubert's second novel *Salammbô* (1862) stands in stark contrast to the realism of his more well-known first novel *Madame Bovary* (1856). Where the interior emotions of Emma Bovary color every aspect of the first novel's representations of reality, the landscape of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Carthage is described with an objective detachment in the second. An account of the palace provides an example:

Far in the background stood the palace, built of yellow mottled Numidian marble, broad courses supporting its four terraced stories. With its large, straight, ebony staircase, bearing a prow of a vanquished galley at the corners of every step, its red doors quartered with black crosses, its brass gratings protecting it from scorpions below, and its trellises of gilded rods closing the apertures above, it seemed to the soldiers in its haughty opulence as solid and impenetrable as the face of Hamilcar. (1: 2)

Both the categories of decadent design and design of decadence are at play in this passage as well as throughout the novel. Anne Green has argued that '*Salammbô* contains this same sense of the inevitability of Carthage's collapse, describing a civilization which has passed its peak and is moving into the period of religious fanaticism, excessive luxury, immorality and decadence which Gobineau believed to be symptomatic of the last stages of national decline' (1986: 115). The opulence of the building in this sense belongs to a larger decadence, but the sumptuous details of the building are also the vehicle for Flaubert's own decadent design, namely his stylization of elaborate and extended descriptions.

The degree to which the objects being described accord with their setting or environment becomes another line for distinguishing between design of, or belonging to, decadence and decadent design. Georg Lukács characterizes Flaubert's ancient Carthage as a 'frozen, lunar landscape of archeological precision.' The critic gives an insightful reading of the novel that carefully stages this issue of accordance, which is relevant to the discussion of stylistic accounts of decadence:

He [Flaubert] chooses an historical subject whose inner social-historical nature is of no concern to him and to which he can only lend the appearance of reality in an

external, decorative, picturesque manner by means of the conscientious application of archeology... In describing the individual objects of an historical *milieu* Flaubert is much more exact and plastic than any other writer before him. But these objects have nothing to do with the inner life of the characters. When Scott describes a medieval town or the habitat of a Scottish clan, these material things are part and parcel of the lives and fortunes of people whose psychology belongs to the same level of historical development and is a product of the same social-historical ensemble as these material things. This is how the older epic writers produced their 'totality of objects.' In Flaubert there is no such connection between the outside world and the psychology of the principal characters. (1983: 188-89)

Where Lukács contrasts the decorative flatness of Carthage with a modern psychological depth, literary scholar David Weir argues that 'the same exterior, objective technique prevails throughout *Salammbô*,' ultimately suggesting that, 'Salammbô's "despair" is a label imposed on her from without' (1995: 40). In this radical flattening of the novel to surface quality, the labeling that is part of the operations of decadent 'rhetoric,' as well as art historical stylistic designation, is taken up in the service of poetically stylized decadent prose. The social-historical rift of decadence, the occasion of not belonging that periods of decadence afford, opens the door to decadent design. In other words, the crisis of stylistic cohesion that occurs in moments of decadence here paves the way for decadent stylization.

## Zola

Émile Zola's massive Rougon-Macquart series maintains the epic form that Flaubert abandons. The eleventh novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), utilizes an architectural motif throughout. The text is set in the world of a department store and follows Denise, an orphaned shop girl who moves from the country to Paris for work. Mouret, the owner of the department store attempts to attract Parisian women by employing modern techniques to build what is consistently described as his 'machine.' The machine metaphor unifies the architectural, decorative, and social aspects of the store as a whole commercial apparatus. The image is articulated early in the narrative:

Denise began to feel as if she were watching a machine working at full pressure, communicating its movement even as far as the windows. They were no longer the cold windows she had seen in the early morning; they seemed to be warm and vibrating from the activity within. There was a crowd before them, groups of women pushing and squeezing, devouring the finery with longing, covetous eyes... quite a nation of women passing through the force and logic of this wonderful commercial machine. (16)

In this opening description, Zola presents a totalizing image in which the built environment is but one aspect of the larger operation of the store.

Later in the text, he describes the edifice as an infinite landscape: 'His gaze did not even turn towards the triumphal façade of The Ladies' Paradise, *whose architectural lines ran as far as the eye could see...*' (344, my italics). The implications of the passage continue as this new totalizing commercial perspective and its representation in advertising obviate older structures that previously ordered the landscape:

As it was now represented in the engraving of the advertisements, it had grown bigger and bigger...spread out immoderately, as if to make room for the customers of the whole world. Then came a bird's eye view of the buildings themselves, of an exaggerated immensity, with their roofings which described the covered galleries, the

glazed courtyards in which could be recognized the halls, the endless detail of this lake of glass and zinc shining in the sun. Beyond, stretched forth Paris, but Paris diminished, eaten up by the monster: the houses, of a cottage-like humility in the neighborhood of the building, then dying away in a cloud of indistinct chimneys; the monuments seemed to melt into nothing, to the left two dashes for Notre-Dame, to the right a circumflex accent for the Invalides, in the background the Panthéon, ashamed and lost, no larger than a lentil. The horizon, crumbled into powder, became no more than a contemptible framework.... (348)

The description of the monuments of Paris as accent marks on a page diminishes them to the level of a single syllable. If decadent style reduces compositional logic from the page to the phrase, or even the word, Zola offers even less syntactical play. Despite this poetic vision of decadence that links monuments to textual notation, Zola's engagement with decadence never affects the style of his narrative prose, which is fully invested in realism. Therefore, the author remains resolutely in the domain of depicting designs born of decadence rather than creating decadent design. He gives us the 'contemptible framework' of a fading regime and its systematic replacement by a new order. As A. E. Carter suggests, the link between literature and the scientific view that contemporary society was decadent was deeply embedded:

Most of the doctors accepted without question (as Nordau says) the idea that nineteenth-century man was decadent. Zola did not simply find a theory of heredity in the medical works he read to plot the Rougon-Macquart family tree: he found a theory of decadent heredity. Literature and medicine were in agreement on contemporary decadence, and they borrowed from each other. (1958: 69)

Indeed, the decadence of the Rougon-Macquart characters belongs to the same social-historical ensemble as the material structures and things described in Zola's portrayal.

## Huysmans

Neither set in ancient Carthage nor in the urban context of Paris, J-K. Huysmans' seminal decadent novel *À rebours* (1884) is staged entirely in the suburban home of its protagonist Des Esseintes. There is little question that this work falls into the category of decadent design, as it is the specimen that defines the species. While Huysmans deploys both decadent rhetoric and decadent style, it is the well-honed craft of his stylization that makes him a central figure for the decadent literary movement. As with Flaubert's *Salammbô* and Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, the architectural dimension plays a significant role in Huysmans' decadent engagements.

Huysmans' *À rebours* is neither as fully arrested as Flaubert, nor as fully instrumentalized as Zola. The plot, which is forgone in Flaubert and mechanized in Zola, is here positioned to bracket what is an otherwise atemporal and encyclopedic account. The action of the story, now pushed to the edges, consists of explaining Des Esseintes' relocation to and retreat from his Fontenay home in the southwestern suburbs of Paris. Between the carefully framed edges, one might expect to find an account as flat as Flaubert's. Indeed, as in Flaubert's *Salammbô*, there is no psychological depth and no plot, and the exquisite prose is on proud display. But unlike the exacting distance of Carthage, Des Esseintes *occupies* his home, and the building in turn structures the work, in the absence of both dramatic arc and character development.

The architectural framework as well as the disposition of the interior are a part of Huysmans' decadent design, rather than an occasioning of decadent style or an apparatus for national decline. For example, in the Fontenay dining room Des Esseintes

constructs a ship's cabin within the existing room: 'Like those Japanese boxes that fit one inside the other, this room had been inserted into a larger one, which was the real dining-room planned by the architect' (33). Huysmans took cues from his close friend Edmond de Goncourt, whose writings raise many of the same issues: diverging conceptions of style, decadent themes versus decadent design, and, ultimately, within the enterprise of decadent design, the creation of compositional depth as an alternative to the mimetic psychological depth of naturalism, constructed through an architectural dimension within the text.

### **Goncours' historical approach**

Brothers Jules and Edmond de Goncourt worked in dialogue with Flaubert, Zola, and Huysmans. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that they too engaged with historically based texts, as well as naturalism, before turning to what might be more properly described as a decadent novel, though this work would be executed by Edmond alone following the death of his younger brother in June 1870. The Goncourts' history books were among their most popular published works and included histories of France, such as *Histoire de la société pendant la Révolution française* (1854) and *Histoire de la société française pendant le Directoire* (1855), and biographical portraits, such as *Sophie Arnould* (1857) and *Portraits intimes du dix-huitième siècle* (1857), which were based on personal letters and other historical documents that the brothers collected. But their most influential historical work was their essays on eighteenth-century artists. These were first published in periodicals such as the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* between 1857 and 1870, before being gathered by Edmond in two volumes under the title *L'Art du dix-huitième siècle* (1873-74).

The work reflects the Goncourts' own collections, draws from the same research that they employ in their art criticism, and, eventually, informs the elder Goncourt's fiction. Unlike the alien historical and geographical distance of Flaubert's Carthage, the Goncourts' focus on eighteenth-century France was a closer subject. The questions of history writing and the novel were discussed between the Goncourts and Flaubert. The brothers asked their colleague, while he was working on *Salammbô*, 'Why do you tell us in your letter that you are working on nothingness?' And they go on to suggest that 'history... is perhaps the real nothingness because it is death' (*Correspondance* 1991: 1093). Flaubert responds that '*reality* is an almost impossible thing in such a [historical] subject... In order to be real, one would have to be obscure, talk about gibberish and stuff the book with notes; and if one sticks to literary and properly French tone, one becomes banal' (94-95). From this exchange, Charles Bernheimer concludes that Flaubert's stylistic perfectionism and the notorious difficulty of his writing are in fact minor aspects of the author's work, arguing instead that 'more importantly, Flaubert's torment arises from the fact that his sensibility as a writer and thinker fractures the aesthetic, cultural, and epistemological paradigms of his age' (2002: 37). The Goncourts' history work does not yet manifest the fracture of Flaubert. Their historical texts were more novelistic in that they rendered their subjects as emotive. Moreover, they highlight literary stylization in their historical accounts; however, these works do not yet take up decadent themes. Instead, they highlight a non-historicized sense of period-style and attest to a practice of intertextuality that works across genres of history, art criticism, and fiction.

The Goncourts' novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) arguably extends the historical methodology of detached observation from period documents to a contemporary

investigation. The story of the novel has its origins in their servant Rose Malingre who maintained a secret life of sexual and alcoholic debauchery – parts of her character that were only revealed to the brothers after her death. The novel takes up decadent themes by following the degeneration of an individual based on Rose’s secret vices, and, as such, serves as a model for Zola’s naturalism. But critics identify the heightened aesthetic nature of the Goncourts’ *Germinie Lacerteux* as complicating its classification as a naturalistic novel (Auerbach 1946, Carter 1958, Weir 1995, Ashley 2005). In addition, the morality of Zola’s decadent depictions stands in opposition to the aesthetic pleasure that the Goncourts derive from exoticizing working-class life. Furthering the distinction is the brothers’ self-identification as ‘artists’ of fiction, or *écriture artiste*. David Weir argues that the Goncourts composed their artistic prose style ‘to demonstrate the same sensitivity to light, color, and form as achieved by the fine art of painting’ (1995: 54). Passages where the environment is described with terms like mass, lines and density, and is depicted with attention to color, such as, ‘The sky was grey below, pink in the middle and blue above’ (61) all suggest an attention to painterly techniques. *Germinie Lacerteux* presents decadence thematically and advances the brother’s stylistic approach, but it is arguably in Edmond’s later works that a true decadence by design appears.

### **Maison d’un artiste, building and text**

Katherine Ashley contrasts these later works with the earlier novel arguing that ‘Although *Germinie Lacerteux* does elevate a base subject to the status of art, and does treat literature in a painterly fashion, it is with the advent of new, more aristocratic subjects that the elder Goncourt truly consecrates his works, both stylistically and thematically, to the cult of art’ (2005: 30). However, her review of the later solo novels does not include Edmond de Goncourt’s two-volume text *Maison d’un artiste* (1881). Perhaps this is because, as Pamela Warner points out in her study of the Goncourts’ interiors, the six-hundred pages of *Maison d’un artiste* ‘are an odd hybrid that belongs to no established literary genre – part interior design manual, part art history catalogue, part autobiography’ (2008: 37). Coming from the field of art history, Warner makes a thorough visual analysis of the photographs that Edmond de Goncourt commissioned to record his home. She argues for reading the photographed interiors as visual compositions that reflect the design principles of framing, symmetry, and contrast, rather than as period reconstructions. The remainder of this paper examines Edmond de Goncourt’s later texts and the questions of compositional approach, but it does so by reading the physical layout and setting of Goncourt’s Villa Montmorency alongside its textual representation. Rather than focusing on a relationship between visual and literary composition, this lens aims to set the work in a broader history of decadence and design.



Figure 2. Anonymous photograph of the destruction of the Auteuil station

In 1868, Jules and Edmond relocated from their shared apartment in the center of Paris to a house just outside of the city walls in the suburb of Auteuil. Their home sat in a private garden community, laid out in the 1850s as part of a development along a new commuter light railway. However, what promised to be an aesthetic retreat (Periton 2004) came to be marked by significant personal and political crisis. The brothers only lived together in their new home for two years before the younger sibling died of syphilis, and, within less than a year of his brother's death, Edmond had to relocate all of their collections in advance of the Paris Commune (1871). The Auteuil station was severely damaged during the Commune (Figure 2).

Within this decidedly decadent and personal context, Edmond began the process of reassembling and rearranging his collections of Rococo and Japanese art. Indeed, there is no representational stability between the literary and photographic depictions of his home – the pages of the text do not always depict the same objects nor the same interior arrangements as the photographs. Nevertheless, the architectural dimension does remain as a structuring device across both modalities. The work is structured by the floors and rooms of the house, with volume one comprising the ground floor and volume two the upper floors. Additionally, each chapter is titled as a room. Furthermore, these same room labels are used to identify the photographs in Goncourt's personal folios. The question of period rooms suggests the labeling aspect of decadence that grows out of a historicized sense of style, and the presentation of the rooms as textual compartments is not too far from reading them as categorical containers that collect and organize historical evidence based on type. This of course is disrupted by the intermingling of both the Rococo and Japanese objects in the decorative scape of the rooms. Moreover, there is a symmetry in the plan of the second floor of the house between the Cabinet de l'Extrême-Orient and the Cabinet de Toilette, as well as between the Chambre à Coucher and the Boudoir. Textually the chapter versions of these rooms take up the majority of volume two and are presented in succession. Spatially they group together into two contrasting suites: the Cabinet de Toilette and the Chambre à Coucher make up a unit, while the Cabinet de l'Extrême-Orient and the Boudoir together create a mirrored component (Figure 3).

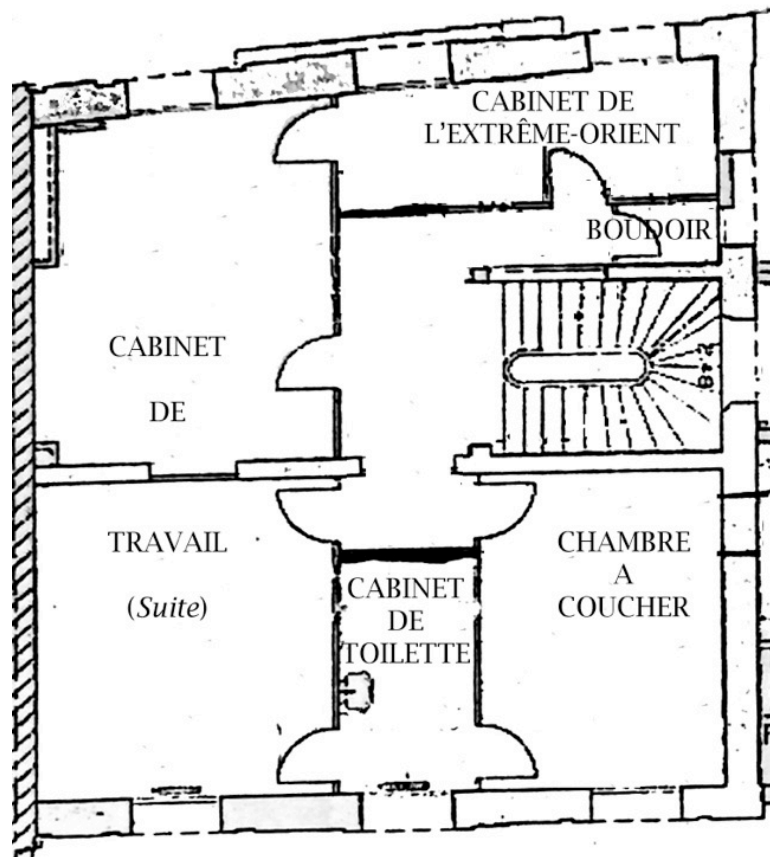


Figure 3. Plan, second floor of Goncourt's home

This cluster of rooms, and their paralleled relationship to one another, suggests both correlation and contrast. A spatial and textual relationship is drawn between the dressing of the house and the dressing of the self. However, there is also a juxtaposition of spatial organization from the miniature cosmology composed in Goncourt's Rococo bedroom and the organizational logics of display in his miniature museum of Asian artifacts.

In the chapter, *Chambre à Coucher*, Goncourt describes his bed, which occupies most of the space of the room, as an eighteenth-century space. This passage is central in the debates about the degree to which Goncourt is engaged in a practice of reconstructing period style. In her analysis of Goncourt, Debora Silverman (1992) uses the textual description of this room to argue for the author's commitment to the Rococo, while Warner reads it as a space of nineteenth-century fantasy and convincingly argues against reading Goncourt as invested in the scientific reconstruction of period style more broadly. Goncourt's focus on the bed as a kind of miniature architecture casts a slightly different lens on the debate. The novel describes the bed as filling the room, 'A bed, a huge bed, a bed taking up the whole room...' and then goes on to ascribe it as a cosmological function beyond both the utility of rest and the pleasure of fantasy, '...one of those monumental beds in which the eighteenth century was put at ease and situated the birth and death of man' (197). The word choice is significant; the bed is monumental not just relative to the scale of the room, but also suggests the decorum and stylistic hierarchy ascribed to monumental buildings in the classical tradition. This is underscored by Goncourt's use of the verb *mettre*, which means to place or arrange, as in setting a table, as well as to put on clothes – both actions that were once embedded

in richly symbolic systems of decorum that in the modern era are flattened to decoration, whereby the rhetorical function of literary style as the deployment of a genre appropriate to its situation is reduced to style as bourgeois fashion.

The bed is also figured as resisting the flattening and abstraction of style by mediating between ground and sky, or at least the representation of it in the form and décor of the bed's canopy. Goncourt says that his bed 'makes the happiest miniature room on the retreating design of the bed's sky' (197). The author then characterizes this miniature cosmology of the bed as the taste for the collective architecture of furniture [*'le goût de l'architecture générale du meuble'* (197)], which is in turn described in compositional terms as a combination of shapes, a play of decorative moldings, and the contrast of straight and curved lines. He concludes by likening this furniture architecture to an engraving (198), with the double sense of carving, material cut out from the plate, and printing, the flatness of the image produced by the plate.

The chapter devoted to the Cabinet de Travail articulates many of the same themes. It opens, 'After the chimney, the wall resumes with literature, with poetry' (1). There is an emphasis in the original French on a sense of interruption, whereby the utility of the fireplace is but a disruption in a larger poetic project comprised of the literary and visual arts. However, the wall, unlike the hearth, is afforded a place in the poetic environment. The next chapter, Cabinet de Toilette, stages a similar contrast between function and aesthetic delight. Goncourt describes how when performing the boring operations of brushing his teeth or combing his hair, he likes to be distracted by colorful drawings and porcelain plates hung on the wall. He describes these with decadent inflections, such that the art works are merely bits and pieces of rubble or shards of broken glass. This contrast of the art works with their material status is striking. The decadent theme is extended by juxtaposing the terms of light, used to describe the art objects with the clarifying term *éclairé*, bracketed by the more reflective and dynamic phrases *chatoie* and *réflète de la lumière* (189).

In the text, Goncourt privileges the previously polemical views of the architect C.-F. Viel, whose own Rococo interest would later be labeled decadent. Indeed, Goncourt's bed serves as a diminutive model of Viel's theory of style, while also playing on a historicized sense of style linked with a disciplinary modernization that arguably undermined it by shifting to concerns for functionalism. Architectural composition is a significant part of the decadent author's poetic construction, though utilitarian aspects do interrupt the arrangements. Thus Goncourt's *Maison d'un artiste* refracts the forms of decadence. As such, the work moves beyond both the presentation of decadent themes and the execution of a decadent prose style. And it is only through the architectural form of the house that this refraction is captured. The pictorial analogies drawn from Goncourt's work focus on Impressionism and as such are kept on the level of the surface, be it the page or the canvas, with words having an impastic quality. Explorations of spatial and temporal fracture in painting, such as in cubist and collage representational practices, were not yet developed. Therefore, the picture plane, like Zola's advertisement image of The Ladies' Paradise, still coheres to the social-historical ensemble. It is through literary representations of architectural dimensions that decadent authors such as the elder Goncourt explore a complex layering of decadence and, ultimately, construct their decadent designs.

## Conclusion

The self-conscious engagement with decadence that occurs in literature in the second half of nineteenth-century Paris is not wholly removed from architectural design, which suggests that the role of architecture in decadent discourse and the role of decadence in architectural practice need not be relegated to a passive register of varying conceptions of decadence. While literary scholars have increasingly read links between decadent texts and both the modernist and postmodernist novel (Calinescu 1987, Schor 1987, Weir 1995), architecture remains relatively unaware of its decadent genealogy. Decadence, as a literary style, does not conform to a singular model, and reading the genre through the lens of architectural conceptions of decadence adds further gradations. Ultimately, decadent literature offers architecture approaches for compressing and refracting varying forms of decadence that range from stylistic to compositional techniques.

## Works cited

- Ashley, Katherine 2005 *Edmond de Goncourt and the Novel: Naturalism and Decadence*, Amsterdam: Rodopi
- Bernheimer, Charles 2002 *Decadent Subjects*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press
- Bourgeois, Bertrand 2015 'When the reader wanders through the house-book: From Goncourt's *La Maison d'un artiste* (1881) to Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000)', *Les Espaces du Livre / Spaces of the Book*, Oxford: Peter Lang
- Calinescu, Matei 1987 *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham: Duke University Press
- Carter, A. E. 1958 *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Collins, Peter 1965 *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950*, London: Faber and Faber
- Flaubert, Gustave [1862] 1904 *Salammô: A Romance of Ancient Carthage*, 2 vols. New York: M. Walter Dunne
- Flaubert, Gustave 1991 *Correspondance* [vol. 3] ed. Jean Bruneau, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
- Forty, Adrain 2000 *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson
- Goncourt, Edmond de [1865] 1984 *Germinie Lacerteux* trans. Leonard Tancock, New York: Viking Penguin
- Goncourt, Edmond de 1881 *La maison d'un artiste*, Paris: Charpentier
- Green, Anne 1986 'Salammô and Nineteenth-Century French Society' in L Porter (ed) *Critical Essays on Gustave Flaubert*, Boston: G. K. Hall: 104-120.
- Harpham, Geoffrey 1982 *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Houellebecq, Michel 2015 *Submission*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux
- Huysmans, J.-K. [1884] 1959 *A rebours* trans. Robert Baldick, Baltimore: Penguin
- Kulper, Amy 2006 'Of stylised species and specious styles' *The Journal of Architecture* 11 (4) Winter, 391-406
- Laforgue, Jules 1909 [1885] *Oeuvres complètes: de Jules Laforgue*. 4. éd. Paris: Mercure de France

- Lukács, Georg 1983 *The Historical Novel*, trans. H and S Mitchel, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press
- Periton, Diana 2004 'The interior as aesthetic refuge: Edmond de Goncourt's *La maison d'un artiste*', in C Hermanses and M Hvattum (ed) *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*, New York: Routledge: 137-155
- Pety, Dominique 2010 *Poétique de la collection au XIXe siècle: du document de l'historien au bibelot de l'esthète*, Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest
- Reed, John R. 1985 *Decadent Style*, Athens: Ohio University Press
- Schor, Naomi 1987 *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York: Methuen Geneviève
- Sicotte, Geneviève 2006 'La Maison-texte de Goncourt' *Image & Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative 'House/Text/Museum'* (16) n.p.
- Silverman, Debora 1992 *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siecle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Viel, Charles-François 1800 *Décadence de l'architecture à la fin du dix-huitieme siècle*, Paris
- Vitruvius, Pollio 1914 *Vitruvius, the ten books on architecture*, trans. M. H. Morgan, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Warner, Pamela J. 2008 'Framing, Symmetry, and Contrast in Edmond de Goncourt's Aesthetic Interior' *Studies in Decorative Arts* (15) 36-64
- Weir, David 1995 *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press
- Weir, David 2018 *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Zola, Émile [1883] 1895 *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. E Vizetelly, London: Hutchinson