

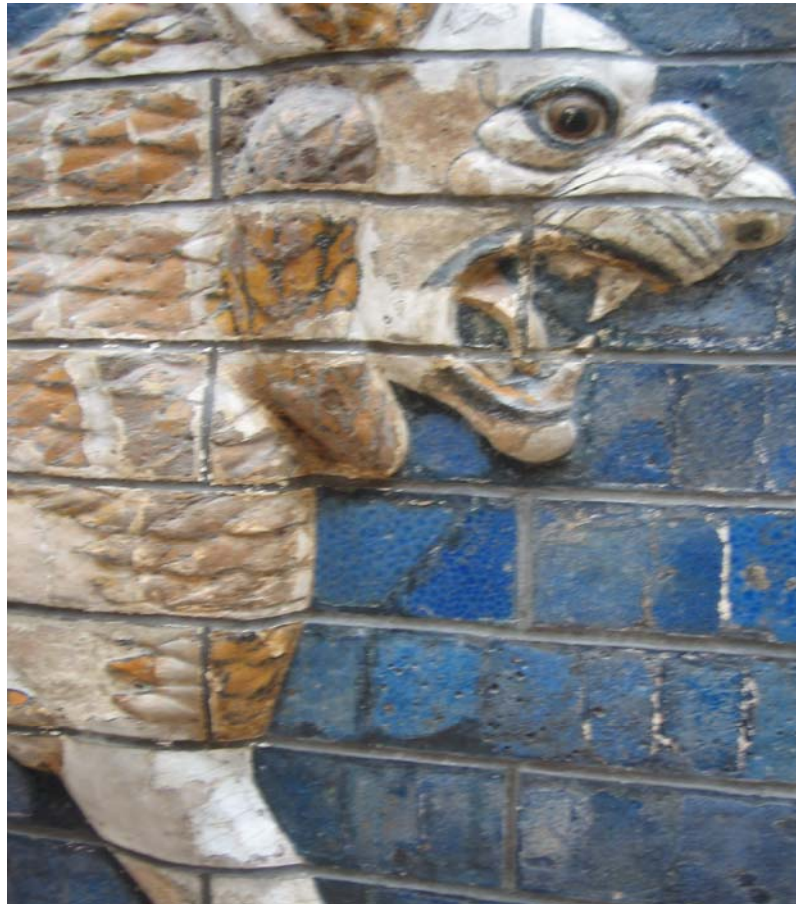
DECORATIVE BRICKWORK – PAST AND PRESENT

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SUMMARY

Decorative brickwork has been used for centuries. Some of the finest examples are some of the earliest (500 BC). This paper presents examples from the past and questions whether such splendour can be revived in modern competitive times



“Figure 1. Glazed and sculptured brick from Babylon (605 –562 BC.)
Istanbul Archaeological Museum, Turkey.”

INTRODUCTION

Decorative brickwork refers to the aesthetic combination of brick type and shape, mortar colour, joint thickness and bond patterns. To be successful, it requires artistic design flair and high workmanship standards.

Given the passage of time since the above spectacular example at Susa and Babylon was created, and the improvements in material and construction technology, there is surely a challenge for the industry to promote decorative brickwork to the standing of its past glories.

Whilst motivations for some of these past glories were the egos of conquering rulers or the influence of the particular religion at the time, today the barriers may seem to dwarf the benefits.

These barriers include the following:

- Brick design – do architects embrace brick as more than a structural element
- Brick manufacture – do brick manufacturers have the clays, glazes and capacity to produce special shaped and glazed bricks
- Decorative brickwork demand – will the market pay for artistic brickwork
- Skills availability – do current training methods cover such techniques
- Industry awareness – how many have heard of brick sculpture or diaper bonds

Such barriers can either be a challenge or an obstacle – the will of all stakeholders in the industry shall decide. I hope this paper acts as a trigger to view the obstacle.



“Figures 2 & 3. Modern and ancient examples of decorative brickwork in Shiraz, Iran.”

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The following timeline briefly outlines developments in decorative brickwork (Cambell, 2003):

10,000 – 8,000 BC – mud brick

5,000 BC – moulded brick

3,500 BC – fired brick

600 –500BC – glazed brick (Susa, Babylon)

500BC – 1,000 AD – monochrome Islamic, Roman brickwork – mass construction

1,000 – 1,450 AD – Middle Ages – development of ‘brick gothic’

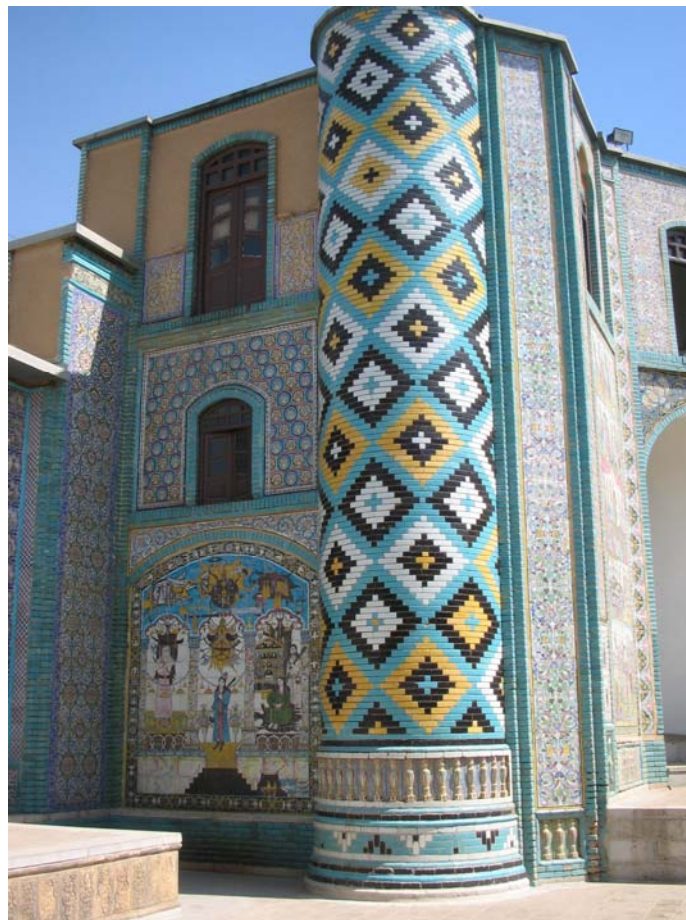
1,450 – 1,650 AD – Renaissance – diaper bond and twisted chimney

1,650 – 1,900 AD – rubbed, gauged and polychromatic brickwork (Gaudi)

1,900 – current – 1920’s – Art Deco brick skyscrapers

1980’s - Pop Art inspired mixed coloured brick buildings

2,000’s – renewed use of brick sculpture and glazed bricks



“Figure 4. An early and outstanding example of glazed brickwork, patterning and complimentary use of ceramics in Kermanshah, Iran.”

CURRENT TRENDS IN DECORATIVE BRICK

In Australia, beyond restoration work and one off commissions, most decorative brickwork tends to be merely a row of capping bricks or a different coloured window sill. Either the unavailability or the cost of special shaped and glazed bricks primarily accounts for this situation.

Overseas, primarily in England and the United States, there has been a resurgence in the art of brick sculpture. This often involves the artistic talents of a sculptor and the craft of a bricklayer to lay the completed sculpture.

Unfired bricks are carved in a workshop, fired and then laid on-site. Some brick manufacturers have a design studio and workshop as part of their brickworks (Ibstock – UK; Endicott Brickworks – US). Brick sculpture is a relatively unexplored avenue to use brick as a medium in public art in Australia. It helps to bridge the gap between art and craft and is a useable medium for promoting the versatility of brick.



“Figure 5. Sculptured brick wall outside Berlin Zoo, Germany.”



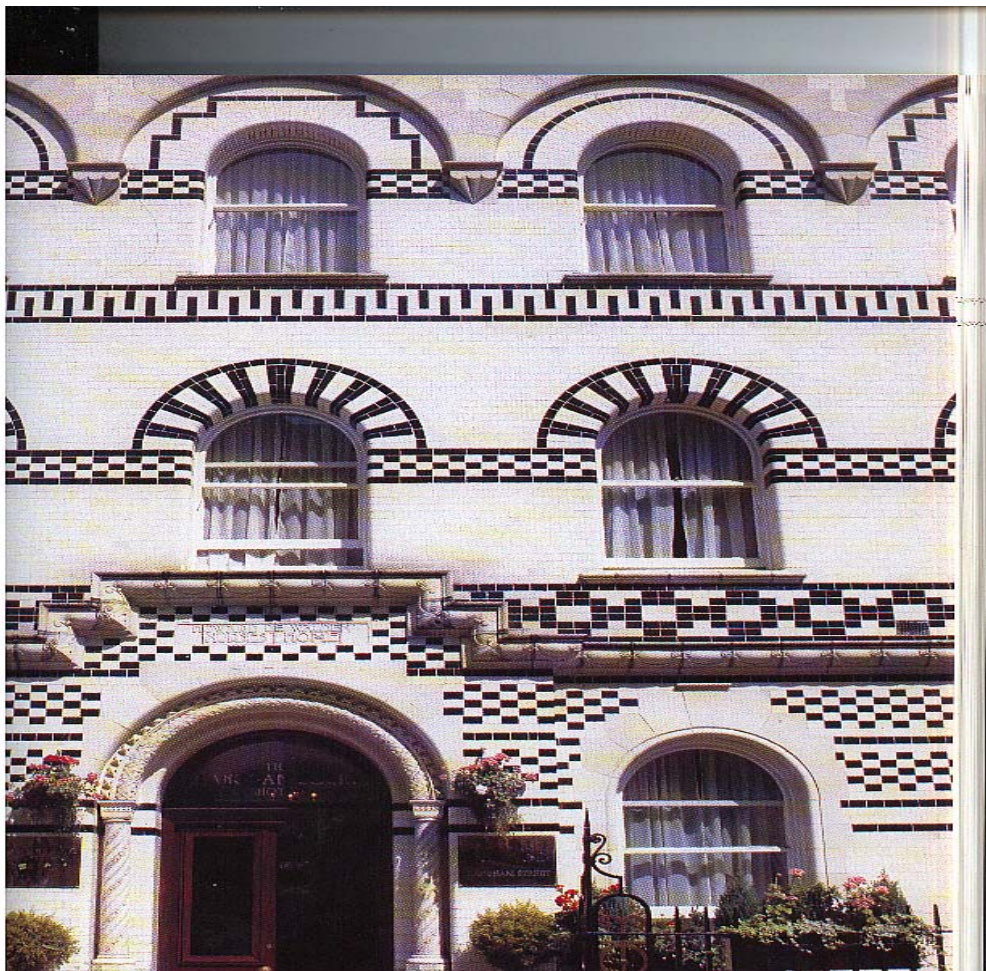
“Figure 6. A creative example of sculptured brick”

CREATING DECORATIVE BRICKWORK

Every aspect of the construction of a brick wall has variables that can help to make the wall decorative. These variables can be used in many combinations – black coloured joints in Flemish bond, glazed bricks used in diaper pattern.

Variables include:

- Brick – standard shape, glazed, special shaped
- Mortar – grey or coloured
- Joints – thickness and jointing method
- Bond – English, Flemish
- Pattern – banding, diaper, honeycomb
- Colour – polychromatic
- Vertical alignment – plumb, projections, stepped
- Horizontal alignment – straight, curved, zig-zag
- Inserts – tile, stone, glass bricks
- Finish – plastered, face brick, sculptured



“Figure 7. A striking use of colour and architectural detail in London, England.”

All the best of design intent can come unstuck with poor workmanship. It extends to the degree that very neatly laid bricks can still look plain to unattractive if not jointed up in a similar manner of neatness (bricklayer lays, labourer joints up).

At the same time, it can be surprising how on a broad scale the selective use of colour, bonding and inserts can detract the eye to less than ideal



“Figures 8 & 9. Less than ideal workmanship on the left, but visually impressive when this building in Yazd, Iran is viewed on a broader scale.”

ISSUES CONFRONTING THE INCREASED USE OF DECORATIVE BRICKWORK

This paper has attempted to renew an interest in decorative brickwork. As a bricklayer, I can attest to the boredom and back pain of trying to lay as many bricks as possible to make a living. I can also attest to the personal and client pleasure in

building a neat, creatively designed brick wall using many of the variables of decorative brickwork.

Many bricklayers I have known became firemen or real estate agents due to ‘burn-out’, back pain or inability to make a profit. My fear is that today’s apprentices may face the same possibility.

Apprentice training has changed over the years with pre-apprenticeship, traineeships and RPL’s being all the buzz. Is there enough time devoted to the use of and methods involved in decorative brickwork?

I feel that at least one lecture should outline the huge range of options for decorative brickwork and include some pictorial review of early examples. Unfired bricks could also be used to allow the apprentices to carve something, get it fired and expand their own awareness of the possibility of brick.

The biggest challenge lies with the brick manufacturers. Many may already have reduced their range of special shaped bricks. This may have occurred due to feedback on costs, but standard bricks are also under cost pressure from alternate materials. As such, surely it is worth a concerted industry effort to place brick as a product with decorative options that the other materials don’t offer.

Decorative brickwork deserves to continue to be part of the built environment, and not a crumbling relic of the past.



“Figure 10. A small panel of glazed bricks and coloured mortar shows that decorative brick can be easily incorporated at a feasible price.”

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PHOTO CREDITS:

Photos 1 –5, and 8 –10 (Jim McMurchy); photo 6 – www.StrangeCosmos.com;
Photo 7 - Plumbridge A., Meulenkamp W., 'Brickwork – Art and Design', Seven Dials, London, 2000.