

INTRODUCTION

For many years, ‘less is more’ has been the catchphrase of minimalist design. Instantly associated with the restrained work of the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who borrowed this dictum from a poem by Robert Browning,^[1] ‘less is more’ celebrates the ethical and aesthetic value of a self-imposed economy of means. Mies’s stripped-bare architecture, in which formal expression was reduced to a simple composition of readymade industrial elements, implied that beauty could only arise through refusal of everything that was not strictly necessary. In recent years, but especially since the 2008 economic recession, the ‘less is more’ attitude has become fashionable again, this time advocated by critics, architects and designers in a slightly moralistic tone.^[2]

If in the late 1990s and early 2000s architecture was driven by the irrational exuberance of the real-estate market towards the production of increasingly redundant iconic objects, with the onset of the recession the situation started to change. Those who had previously acclaimed (or even produced) the acrobatics of architecture in the previous decade now took to complaining about architecture’s shameful waste of resources and budgets.^[3] This change of sensibility has provoked two kinds of reaction. Some architects have tried to translate the ethos of austerity in merely formal terms.^[4] Others have advocated a more socially minded approach, trying to go beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture.^[5] It would be

unfair to put these positions on the same level (as the second may be more plausible than the first), but what they seem to share is the idea that the current crisis is an opportunity to do – as an Italian architect turned politician put it – ‘more with less’.^[6] It is for this reason that ‘less is more’ is no longer just an aesthetic principle but the kernel of the ideology of something else, something where economy of means is not just a design strategy but an economic imperative *tout court*.

Within the history of capitalism, ‘less is more’ defines the advantages of reducing the costs of production. Capitalists have always tried to obtain *more* with *less*. Capitalism is not just a process of accumulation but also, and especially, the incessant optimisation of the productive process towards a situation in which *less* capital investment equals more capital accumulation. Technological innovation has always been driven by the imperative to reduce the costs of production, the need for wage earners. The very notion of *industry* is based on this idea: to be *industrious* means being able to obtain the best results with fewer means.^[7] Here we see how creativity itself is at the very root of the notion of industry. Creativity depends not just on the investor finding ways to spare resources but on the worker’s capacity to adapt to difficult situations. These two aspects of industriousness and creativity are interlinked: the worker’s creativity forcibly becomes more pronounced when capital decides to reduce the costs of production and economic conditions become uncertain. Indeed it is creativity, as the most generic faculty of human life, that capital has always exploited as its main labour power. And in an economic crisis, what capital’s austerity measures demand is that people do more with less: more work for less money, more creativity with less social security. In this context, the principle of ‘less is more’ runs the risk of becoming a cynical

celebration of the ethos of austerity and budget cuts to social programmes.

In what follows I would like to address the condition of *less* not by rejecting it but by critically assessing its ambiguity. Both the ‘less is more’ attitude in design and the ethos of austerity politics seem to converge within the tradition of asceticism, which is commonly understood as a practice of abstinence from worldly pleasures. In recent years asceticism has indeed been identified as the source, both ideological and moral, of the idea of austerity.^[8] A major argument put forward in favour of cutting public spending is that we have been living beyond our means and that from now on we will have to lower our expectations of future wealth and social security. Only by making ‘sacrifices’ will we find the path to salvation and avoid economic armageddon. In an economy driven by public debt asceticism has a particular resonance, in the form of moral guilt. Debt is not only about economy but is first and foremost a moral contract between creditor and debtor. As Maurizio Lazzarato has recently argued, the neoliberal economy is a subjective economy that is no longer based – as classical economics was – on the producer and the barterer.^[9] A fundamental figure of the neoliberal economy is the ‘indebted man’ – that is, the indebted consumer, the indebted user of the welfare state and, in the case of nation state debt, the indebted citizen. To be indebted does not only mean owing something to someone; it is also the feeling of guilt, and thus of inferiority, towards the creditor. It is precisely the subject’s sense of guilt and longing for atonement that is often understood to constitute the meaning of ascetic practices.

Asceticism is here understood as abstinence and self-discipline, as a willingness to sacrifice our present in order to earn our future – something which goes beyond the religious meaning of the term and

has more to do with the ethics of entrepreneurial capitalism. In his famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber identifies two kind of asceticism: *inner-worldly* and *other-worldly*. [10] In the first instance, asceticism denotes withdrawal from the world, as in the case of hermits and monks; in the second case, asceticism becomes more secular and addresses the possibility of an existence that frees itself from mundane distractions in order to dedicate itself fully to the ethics of work and production. Weber sees other-worldly asceticism as one of the fundamental sources of the ethics of capitalism: with the advent of Calvinism, he notes, asceticism spread beyond the confines of the monastery and became a diffuse mentality within the city. Asceticism required the repression of natural instincts and adherence to a strict discipline of ethical rationality. For Weber this ethical rationality was both the foundation of the bourgeois life-style and the very ‘spirit’ of capitalism as later manifested in Benjamin Franklin’s economic utilitarianism, which was concerned not only with the rational acquisition of means towards an end, but was in itself a transcendental ethical goal.

Here Weber proposes that asceticism paved the way for a profound transformation of human subjectivity, giving it the capacity to undertake the continual adjustments of the inner self that are required by the economic processes of capitalism, which are never resolved – there is no end in sight, either in terms of satisfying personal needs or even in the mere process of accumulation. Although Weber’s argument remains one of the most powerful readings of asceticism, I have chosen a slightly different path in what follows. Precisely because the practice of asceticism addresses the transformation of the self, I argue that it can be both a means of oppression and also a form of resistance to the subjective power of capitalism.

When we talk about resistance to power we understand this concept

in terms of ideology or belief, but rarely as a matter of habits, customs and even the most humble aspects of everyday life. What is interesting about asceticism is that it allows subjects to focus on their life as the core of their own practice, by structuring it according to a self-chosen form made of specific habits and rules. This process often involves architecture and design as a device for self-enactment. Because asceticism allows subjects to focus on their *self* as the core of their activity, the architecture that has developed within this practice is an architecture focused not on representation, but on life itself – on *bios*, as the most generic substratum of human existence. As others have argued, the development of modern architecture itself, with its emphasis on issues such as hygiene, comfort and social control, has been driven by a biopolitical logic.^[11] However, it is especially within asceticism that the enactment of forms of life becomes explicit. This is evident, for example, within the history of monasticism, where the architecture of the monastery was expressly designed to define life in all its most immanent details. Although monasticism ultimately spawned such disciplinary and repressive typologies as the *Hôtel-Dieu*, the hospital, the garrison, the prison and even the factory, at the outset the main purpose of its asceticism was to achieve a form of reciprocity between subjects freed from the social contract imposed by established forms of power. And this is why this tradition still stands as a paradigm for our time, when capital is becoming not only increasingly repressive but also increasingly unable to ‘take care’ of its subalterns as it did in the heyday of the welfare state. We will see that asceticism is not the preserve of monks in cells but, on the contrary, suffuses everything from the logic of capitalism itself to the concept of ‘social’ housing and the ideological rhetoric of minimalist design. The question is, can it lead us towards a different way of life than the one forced upon us by the status quo?

PART 1.

The word ‘ascetic’ comes from the Greek *askein*, which means exercise, self-training. Asceticism is a way of life in which the *self* is the main object of human activity. For this reason the practice of asceticism is not necessarily related to religion. Indeed it is possible to argue that the very first ascetics were philosophers. In ancient times the fundamental goal of philosophy was to know oneself: to live was understood not simply as given fact but as an *art*, the art of living. Within asceticism life becomes *ars vivendi*, something to which it is possible to give a specific form. In the case of the ancient philosophers this meant a life entirely consistent with one’s own teachings, where there was no difference between theory and practice, between *logos* and *bios*. Philosophers were thus individuals who, through their chosen form of life, deeply informed by their thinking, inevitably challenged accepted habits and social conditions.^[12]

Asceticism is thus not just a contemplative condition, or a withdrawal from the world as it is commonly understood, but is, above all, a way to radically question given social and political conditions in a search for a different way to live one’s life. It was for this reason that early Christianity absorbed asceticism, in the form of monasticism. In the process, however, asceticism acquired a very different meaning. Its main goal was no longer to change the existing social order, but rather to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ: it was practised as a precondition for salvation. And yet those who embraced monastic life also did so as a way of refusing the integration of the Christian faith within the institutions of power. The origins of

monasticism in the West coincide with the recognition of the Catholic Church by the Roman Emperor Constantine and the beginning of a political and cultural alliance between Church and State. Although this alliance gave the Church immense power, it also eroded its ‘underground’ identity, which was crucial for its proselytism. [13] For many Christians, the institutionalisation of the Church put it on a path of fatal compromise and decline. Rejecting the new position of ecclesiastical power, the early monks not only chose a life of ascetic solitude (in fact the word monk comes from the Greek *monos*, alone), they also decided to live outside the law and the rights that defined social life. Monastic life began in the deserts of Syria and Egypt, places that gave the early hermits a cultural *tabula rasa* where they could start again from scratch. [14] From the outset, monasticism manifested itself as an inevitable and radical critique of power, not by fighting against it, but by leaving it: the form of life of the monk was to be homeless, to be foreign, to refuse any role within society. [15] While the Church, after its absorption into the apparatuses of state power, was at pains to give itself a strict institutional order, early monasticism manifested itself as the refusal of any institution and as a desire to live an ascetic life freed from social constraints.

In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche puts forward a fundamental critique of asceticism, attempting to demonstrate how the desire to refuse the world is not a mere withdrawal, as the hermits and early monks maintained, but a subtle manifestation of man’s will to power. [16] In doing so he rediscovers the original meaning of asceticism as control of oneself and, by extension, a necessary precondition for political power over others. Although he is critical of asceticism, he nevertheless understands this practice as paradigmatic of the more

general evolution of human subjectivity, a process he calls the *internalising of man*, in which the partial suppression and containment of primitive instincts such as hunting, cruelty, hostility and destruction made it possible for man to exist peacefully within a society. For Nietzsche the ascetic ideal of priesthood, with its hatred for the sensual, is the culmination of this process of internalising instincts, and as such is something to hate. At the same time he (reluctantly) acknowledges that it was precisely this process of self-repression that made humans human.

Asceticism is thus understood by Nietzsche as a radical form of reactive containment through which the human species preserves itself by negating itself, by suppressing its own vital forces. And yet he sees this process of containment not as a reduction of human potential but as the true source of man's will to power. In other words, for Nietzsche the life of asceticism reveals the fundamental datum of human existence that is the never-resolved tension between *desire* and *restraint*, where neither prevails over the other but both coexist in a constant precarious equilibrium. Monasticism and the forms of life that it engenders carry this aspect of human nature to its ultimate limit.

PART 2.

Monasticism has evolved through different forms, from the eremitic life of solitude away from communities; to the semi-eremitic, where hermits live together in an unprescribed way; to the cenobitic, in which the monks not only live in the same place but also share the same monastic rule. The early monks who decided to live together would occupy single huts loosely aggregated around a central space, which in many cases would be the church. As Roland Barthes has remarked, this condition allowed the monks to live together but apart, with each being able to preserve, as he put it, their own ‘idiorrhymy’ (from the Greek *idios*, particular and *rhythmos*, rhythm, rule).^[17] In this condition they would be both isolated from and in contact with one another, in idiorhythmic clusters. Within the clusters, living together did not wholly impinge on the possibility of being alone. Barthes was fascinated by this way of living, and noted that precisely this form of monasticism was the seedbed for what would later become a fundamental typology of the modern world: the single cell or single room. For Barthes the single cell is the quintessential representation of interiority: it is here that the single body finds its proper space, the space in which it can take care of itself.

The idea of a structure where individual and collective life are juxtaposed without being merged is also evident in Carthusian monasticism, which attempted to combine eremitic and cenobitic life in the same place. One of the most remarkable examples of this tradition is the Monastery of Galluzzo, near Florence, which had a

strong influence on Le Corbusier's idea of collective housing. In this monastery, the cloister binds together nine distinct houses, each of them equipped with a garden and basic facilities for individual living. The architecture is modest and austere, but the possibility of individual seclusion supported by the necessary equipment to live alone gives these lilliputian houses an air of luxury. Luxury not in the sense of possession: there is nothing to possess here apart from a few books and the food necessary to survive. Rather, in these houses, luxury is the possibility for the inhabitants to live according to their own proper rhythm. Aside from the duties of contemplation and silence, we have to understand that such a life could represent a fundamental liberation from a social structure that was very repressive towards individual life. Within the Carthusian monastery, the houses were accessible from the main cloister, which also gave access to the communal facilities. In this way the individual houses were not fully independent but were completed by more collective programmes. The concentration of collective facilities allowed the individual houses to be minimal spaces for living.

The balance between individual and collective life is the fundamental issue within monastic life, as became clear with the rise of the cenobitic monastery, when communal life became the dominant way of living. Initiated by the Coptic monk Pachomius, perfected by St Benedict, and radically reformed by St Francis, the common life of the cenobium can only be experienced through the sharing of a rule.^[18]

Like performing arts such as acting and dance, monasticism is an art that does not leave behind a product but coincides with the performance itself. Within cenobitic monasticism, life is formalised in minute detail. From the clothes, to the cell, to the daily rhythm of prayers and work, nothing is left to chance. Not only specific

moments, but all actions, even the most simple daily routines, are ritualised as an incessant *opus dei*. The cenobitic monastery provides us with the first instance of the management of time through strict scheduling. Bells give the hours a specific sound (which we can still hear in many Western cities), which regulates the sequence of activities with the same precision as a Taylorist factory. The body of the monk is also strictly regulated. The very idea of the habit, which describes both a personal attitude and a collective ethos, becomes within monasticism a specific object, the *habitus*, the clothing worn by monks and prelates.

And yet what is meant above all to condition the life of the monks is the architecture of the monastery. Within the monastery, form follows function in the strictest way possible. Like a functionalist building, the typical form of the medieval monastery is simply an extrusion of the ritual activities that take place within. If we observe the plan of the monastery we see a perfect coincidence of time and space: each segment of the day is ritualised through a specific activity that takes place in a specific part of the monastery. The introverted space of the cloister, the point of access to most of the facilities, gives a precise form to communal life and the sense of sharing, while the simple unobstructed rectangular plan of the chapterhouse defines the gathering together of the monks in the most essential way. The dormitories are large rooms divided into cubicles by fabric. The cubicles offer a measure of privacy but at the same time the light materiality of the walls, which can be removed, is a reminder that individual space is always the sharing of a larger collective space.^[19]

Rather than a generic container or a symbolic monument, the architecture of the monastery is an apparatus that obsessively frames and identifies living activities. It is not by chance that the first known architectural drawing is the famous plan most probably drafted as a

blueprint for an ‘ideal’ Benedictine monastery, preserved in the library of the Monastery of St Gallen. The plan is rendered as a series of clearly enclosed spaces defined through the activity that these spaces are meant to contain. The plan of the monastery suggests an architecture that is conceived to be completely self-sufficient, and self-sufficiency is central to the communal life. The monastery shows in clear terms that a truly communitarian life can only be achieved through a consistent organisation of time and space. This is the most controversial aspect of the monastery, because it shows how this institution is the progenitor of disciplinary institutions such as the prison, the garrison, the hospital and the factory. Moreover, it is not difficult to see how the scheduling of time and its management are the foundation of modern and contemporary forms of production.^[20] And yet the difference between the ascetic practices enacted by the monastery and the disciplinary power of these other institutions is as subtle as it is decisive. The strict organisation of the monastery was not intended to replace life with a rule, but to make the rule so consistent with the form of life chosen by the monks that the rule as such would almost disappear.^[21] This aspect of monasticism is made evident in the simplest monastic rule ever presented, which is the one drafted by Augustine: *dilige et quod vis fac* – love and do what you want. Unlike the logic of disciplinary institutions, the *ends* here do not justify the *means*; rather, means and ends perfectly coincide. What Augustine emphasised as the goal of monastic life was the practice of unconditional love for one’s neighbour, that is, a radical form of fraternal reciprocity where no one prevails over the other. Through a return to the ascetic principles of early monasticism, mendicant orders such as the Cistercians and the Franciscans would radically reform monastic life, opposing the entrepreneurialism and

ethos of production that plagued the Benedictine tradition. As has been noted, this reform gave rise to one of the most radical experiments in living, one that was completely antithetical to the principle that has regulated modern forms of power, namely the concept of private property.

PART 3.

Benedictine monasteries were highly productive, becoming centres of power and wealth to the point where the order's most famous monastery, Cluny, expanded into a city in its own right. Against this, the early Franciscans openly rejected the idea of private property, meaning not just individual possessions but, above all, the possibility of owning the work of others – of owning potential *capital*, in the form of land or tools. The desire to secure ownership of something is motivated not just by its use but by its potential to become an economic asset, to generate profit. If one refuses ownership of something one can still use it without possessing it. The concept of use, in this sense, is the antithesis of the concept of private property.

A fundamental tenet of the early Franciscan order was indeed the refusal to own things, as a way of refusing their potential economic value and thus the possibility of exploiting others. Rather than owning a robe, a house or a book, they would *use* these things. Here use was understood not as a value but as the act of sharing things, as the supreme form of living in *common*. Use implied the temporary appropriation of an object by an individual; after its use, the object would be released and thus shared with others. In its simplicity, this conception of use implied a radical *abdication iuris*, given that the whole modern conception of rights is fundamentally shaped by the individual's right to private property. The Franciscan concept of *altissima paupertas* (poverty as a self-imposed and thus desired form of life) was inspired by the life of animals, in which the concept of ownership does not exist.^[22] The early Franciscans proposed a radical

experiment: a form of life devoid of private property, in which coexistence and sharing would become the main object of an ascetic practice. Their *experimentum vitae* was short-lived, because the Church forced them to renounce it after a subtle but intense judicial dispute, and yet this failure reveals how private property – the very thing that the Franciscans wanted at all costs to avoid – had become the defining aspect of the modern way of living. The meaning of asceticism changed. With the rise of property as a fundamental social asset, it was no longer a self-chosen practice, but more an ethical and moral condition whose goal was to ensure social control and increase dedication to work. Private property and its accumulation became not simply a means of power, but a sort of transcendental instigation for people to become more focused, and thus dependent, on their economic condition.

PART 4.

The historical evolution of the modern city is unthinkable without the concept of private property. With the decline of feudalism, people acquired individual rights thanks to the rise of economic entrepreneurialism. In the reborn cities of the Middle Ages, owning private property was a precondition for citizenship. In this way, individual ownership became the foundation of modern political institutions. The house was no longer just a shelter, or the ancient *oikos*, the private household clearly separated from public space. It was now both a space of inhabitation and the economic and legal apparatus through which the rising modern state governed citizens by defining their most intimate conditions, that is their habits, customs and social and economic relationships. From the vantage point of governing institutions, property in the form of housing serves a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it binds the individual to a place and thus reduces the risks of social deviance. On the other, it allows subjects to use their minimum possession as an economic asset, with the capacity for investment. This is why housing became a fundamental project for modern architecture, a project focused not only on sheltering individuals but on making household management productive.

It was in the early modern period that rental housing started to become a diffuse practice within the city. Houses were built not only to shelter the family or the clan, but also to be rented to people outside the boundaries of kinship. The sixteenth-century architect Sebastiano Serlio devoted one of his seven books on architecture to

houses.^[23] What is novel about Serlio's treatise is its focus on the design of houses for all classes. For the first time in history, even the houses of the peasant and the artisan are considered as a design problem. For these subjects Serlio proposes a minimum dwelling unit which clearly reflects the ascetic character of the inhabitant. But here asceticism is not the inhabitant's choice. Serlio's little house is not for the hermit, or for those who have consciously chosen to reject private property. The poverty embodied by Serlio's minimal house is a 'productive' poverty because it makes living conditions for the poor a little more bearable, so enabling them to reproduce their labour and to become productive subjects, 'workers'. Here the ascetic restraint of architecture, which has characterised the evolution of modern 'social' housing from Serlio's house onwards, represents the ethos of sacrifice and hard work for the sake of production. And yet what is interesting is that Serlio applies the same restraint to his models of houses for professionals such as merchants, lawyers and clerks. Unlike his predecessors, who designed architecture only for popes, princes and cardinals, Serlio addresses society at large. Influenced by protestant evangelism, Serlio was what today we would call a 'socially minded architect', a designer who was not afraid to abandon the monumental form of architecture in favour of social amelioration. But for all of its good intentions, this tendency frequently reveals the most problematic aspects of architecture as a patronising apparatus.

Perhaps the best embodiment of this model for dwelling is Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-Ino (1914), a simple structural concrete framework that could be built by the inhabitants themselves with minimal resources and filled in according to their means.^[24] And yet, the very goal of the Dom-Ino model was to provide the lower classes with a minimum property that would allow them to become

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