Architecture’s Franciscan turn: ‘forms of life’ and pre-critical theory

‘Asceticism’, writes Pier Vittorio Aureli in *Less is Enough*, ‘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.’

1 Asceticism also presents the self with the means and the opportunity to achieve ‘autonomy from systems of power,’ a process that ‘often involves architecture and design as a device for self-enactment.’

The paradigm of this possibility is to be found in monastic life and its architecture, particularly that of the early Franciscans: ‘From the outset, monasticism manifested itself as an inevitable and radical critique of power, not by fighting it, but by leaving it’

1 Drawing on Barthes’ *How To Live Together*, Aureli argues that the monastic 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 mendicant order of the Franciscans best exemplify a critique of power since they eschew the concern of other orders with entrepreneurialism and production. Above all, their rule of voluntary poverty enables them to escape corruption from the economic order emerging in the towns and cities of thirteenth century Europe. The Franciscan ‘refusal to own things’ is a refusal of their ‘economic value and thus the possibility of the exploiting of others.’

10 Contained in its cells, or cloistered in its common spaces, the architecture of the monastery holds the monks in protective isolation from the economic powers circulating beyond its walls. Aureli, following the arguments of Agamben’s *The Highest Poverty*, maintains that the form of the monastery sustained a ‘form of life’ in which one’s life and the habits through which it was lived were in perfect agreement, the one becoming indistinguishable from the other through the sharing of a common rule.

1 Aureli’s argument in *Less is Enough* builds upon that put forward in his *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*. Architecture becomes ‘resolutely itself’ only when, through its formal autonomy, it separates itself from the managerial paradigm of urbanization associated with the rise of capitalism.

10 An absolute architecture that achieves formal autonomy from the economic forces that surround it is, in its very essence, a political architecture: ‘[t]he very condition of architectural form is to sepa-

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2 Ibid., p.12.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 5.


10 Ibid., pp. ix-x.
rate and be separated. An architecture of formal autonomy and separation is political because politics is, in its very essence, ‘agonism through separation and confrontation.’ The architectural and the political are defined through formal categories in which the one serves to realize the essence of the other. In combination they constitute a project that escapes urbanization with its ‘economic logic of social management.’ In Less is Enough Aureli adds a third term to this schema. To the essential form of architecture and the essential form of the political is added the essential form of life. ‘Human nature’ is identified with ‘its most generic substratum’, that of ‘life itself’ — bios — and human subjects are argued to be properly themselves only when allowed to ‘focus on their self as the core of their activity.’ What are held to be the essential properties of the architectural, the political and the human, are perfectly aligned in Franciscan monasticism. This is proposed as a paradigm of resistance-through-escape from the economic and the managerial. And this, in turn, is how Aureli arrives at his concluding argument concerning what is proper to the conduct of the contemporary architect. Whereas architects and designers today often concern themselves with a social agenda ‘they rarely,’ Aureli laments, ‘look at their own existence, which is what really constitutes the main source of their production.’ They would do better, and be more effectively political, were they to focus on their own lives, as formal projects, rather than concerning themselves with an architecture of good intentions. This is Aureli’s Franciscanism. Through asceticism the self might realize its properly autonomous essence, a project, in Aureli’s words, of ‘fundamental liberation from [the] social structure.’

Aureli’s Franciscanism, however, constitutes an effectively pre-critical turn in its insistence on fundamental essence and normative identity. No less so than the now near-hegemonic and post-critical architectural discourse of emergence, self-organisation and complexity, it identifies life and architecture with form, and the redemption of their essence in restoring the absolute consonance of the one with the other. What Aureli sets out to oppose is only inverted. The extroverted and the open, the blended and the flexible, the intensively networked and the hyper-connective, are challenged by an opposing set of morphological principles — the introverted and the closed, the separate and the fixed, the cloistered and the bounded. Each party — the party of the post-critical and the party of the pre-critical — stakes a claim to what is ‘proper’ to life and to architecture, and each articulates this claim in morphological terms. But neither party concerns itself with the conditions under which the ‘proper,’ in terms of life, architecture and the political, is itself produced, historically, politically, economically. Their respective positions, that is, are not critical but dogmatic. Neither party, though for quite different reasons, seems willing to acknowledge the ways in which architecture and life, and what is supposed to be proper to them, are mediated by the economic. Indeed for Aureli the redemption and realization of the essential forms of architecture and life are held to be the very means by which both, together, escape the economic. Here the terms of the concept of a ‘political economy’ are prised apart so that the political is seen as the means through which autonomy from the economic can be achieved. As David Cunningham has recently remarked of this project, ‘there

11 Ibid., p. ix.
12 Ibid., p. ix.
13 Ibid., p. x. Emphasis in italics mine.
14 Aureli, Less is Enough, p. 4.
15 Other examples are also considered, however, such as the work of the Israeli artist Absalon, the architecture of Le Corbusier’s, and Hannes Meyer’s Co-op Zimmer project.
16 Ibid., p. 22.
17 Ibid., p. 7.
is something profoundly formalist about this definition of “the sphere of the political” itself, which in rendering “separation and confrontation” solely internal to politics, merely brackets off the central “context” of actual, historical capitalist social relations themselves. I would add that this bracketing off of the economic also serves to obscure the ways in which the seemingly redemptive project of the autonomous self is also mediated by the economic and managerial imperatives of neoliberalism.

I’m arguing here, then, that Franciscanism doesn’t elude the economic and its managerial operations, it elides them. In fact it even obscures the relationship between capitalism, architecture and religion at work in the case of the early Franciscans. Looked at from a different perspective than that presented by Aureli, the relationship between the Franciscans and their architecture reveals precisely the ways in which this was mediated by, and indeed contributed to, the emergence of an urban managerialism driven by the rise of capitalism.

Giacomo Todeschini writes, in his *Franciscan Wealth: From Voluntary Poverty to Market Society*, that ‘the Franciscans’ approach to the market reveals that it was the most rigorous Christian religiosity that formed a large part of the vocabulary in western economics...the Christian world was never extraneous from the market...nor was there a clear separation between morality and business.’ Todeschini isn’t alone in arguing that the Franciscans were implicated in the development of the market society emerging in thirteenth century Europe. In *Money and the Middle Ages*, Jacques Le Goff remarks that the early Franciscans ‘were better integrated into the new money economy than into the old rural economy.’ Caroline Bruzelius reports, in her recent *Preaching, Burying, and Building: Friars in the Medieval City*, that ‘Economic historians have noted that in time the orders that adopted the idea of evangelical poverty came to have an intimate acquaintance with wealth.’ ‘Indeed,’ she continues, ‘Franciscans were among the first economic theorists of the Middle Ages.’

The implication of the Franciscan order in the economy of the emerging market society derives in significant part from the fact that it tended, in contrast to the rural setting of earlier monastic orders, to locate itself in relation to the urban environment, sometimes at its periphery, more often at its core. In the early decades of the thirteenth-century the order began to insinuate itself into gaps in the built environment, often occupying abandoned buildings, in towns and cities experiencing rising population growth and the rapid development of mercantile trade. From these initial footholds it grew its monasteries piecemeal, taking further urban territory building by building. As Bruzelius

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22 Ibid., p. 183.
suggests, 'We can think of mendicant architecture, like cities, as in a constant state of “becoming”.'

The architecture of the Franciscan friary wasn’t derived from a logic of isolation internal to the Order. It wasn’t the expression of a plan generated, straightforwardly, from the rituals it was supposed to accommodate. It resulted from the order’s ongoing tactical manoeuvres in the urban environment in which it was embedding itself. The Franciscans fought for space in the city through which to save the souls of its citizens. Their activities were oriented outward, not inward, towards engaging with the public, the emergent bourgeoisie in particular. Rather than preaching to the choir they evangelised amongst the urban laity. As C.H. Lawrence notes in his *Medieval Monasticism*, ‘[t]he Mendicant Orders broke free from one of the most basic principles of traditional monasticism by abandoning the seclusion and enclosure of the cloister in order to engage in an active pastoral mission to the society of their time.’

Bruzelius writes that ‘[o]ne of the radical aspects of the mendicant movement was the externalisation of religion into the open spaces of cities as well as into the private spaces of homes.’ Not only did the Franciscans build large conventual structures in the town and cities, but they projected their message out into the surrounding urban environment. Their pulpits were sometimes placed on the outside of their buildings so that they could preach to those in the street below. They built piazzas from which to proselytise. Most controversially, they visited the laity in their homes — ‘usurping the traditional role of the secular clergy’, as Bruzelius notes — in a practice decried by their contemporary, Saint-Amour, as a *penetrans domus*.

The extroverted and expansionary practices of the Franciscans were driven by their rule of poverty, meaning that that they had to evangelise in order to receive donations to sustain themselves, as well as to expand their built presence in the city. In return for donations the laity were offered salvation, the assurance that their passage through purgatory in the afterlife would be hastened. What they left in their wills bought intercessionary prayer on their behalf, even a space for their burial within the Order’s convents. Bruzelius observes that the architecture of the Franciscans ‘came to resemble…“warehouses” or “hangars” for tombs and other kinds of interventions of the faithful: paintings, banners, coats of arms, and other paraphernalia.’ Death, as Le Goff argues, was ‘monefariized.’ In burying the bourgeoisie within its convents death was also, as Bruzelius argues, newly ‘democratized’. The monastic architecture of the Franciscans, then, is not ‘simply an extrusion of the ritual activities that take place within,’ but one shaped through financial exchange. The area it occupies registers the extent of their economy, the success of their entrepreneurial habits.

Trading between donations and services, between life and the afterlife, the Franciscans become, Todeschini argues, socially esteemed for their abilities in calculating value and the management of

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26 Ibid., pp. 181-182.


28 Ibid., p. 380.


exchange and wealth.\textsuperscript{31} The Franciscans themselves, in turn, positively evaluate the emergence of the market society, seeing trade as kind of evangelical social glue: the 'dynamics of evangelical poverty, experienced again in the climate of economic ferment of the thirteenth century, led Franciscans to discover the logic of the market as a keystone of Christian relationships. From the center to the suburbs of the system of cities and territories concretely forming this market society, trading professionals appeared to friars as possible mediators of a life in common that was recognizable both as a common good and as belonging to the Christian world.\textsuperscript{32}

Rather than offering a critique of power by leaving it, the Franciscans, and their architecture, are implicated in exactly the kind of economic and managerial powers that Aureli seeks autonomy from, and precisely at the historical locus of their emergence. This case, in particular, points to a broader issue in any theory premised on the belief that salvation lies in the excision of, or secession from the economic in order to realise a notion of the political transcendent to history. Positing life and architecture as essential, and essentially formal, categories, it then seeks to locate what will stand as exemplary of these across the history of architecture. This is a theory sustained by identifying those instances, ranging across the centuries, where architecture momentarily realises its potential to provide protective enclaves in which the economic is held at bay, and where the self is thus able to focus on its self, and on a life lived in common amongst a small and isolated community. The appearance and reappearance of the same form, where architecture and life achieve their ideal resolution, in becoming properly themselves, is tracked across history. The possibility of an absolute architecture appears as a sequence of beacons, always illuminating the same promise to be redeemed. There appears no need to be concerned with the ways in which these instances, and thus the forms of life and the forms of architecture with which they are concerned, might be mediated by a history of the economic, the managerial or the governmental. These historical, if not absolute, determinants, are unconsidered because it is supposed that they can be eluded through the redemption of an absolute architectural essence. These determinants are, ultimately, not matters of concern other than in their role in constituting the eternal antagonist of a project of autonomy. But this project of autonomy too is itself inescapably mediated by economics, by managerialism, by governmentality, and this is what is troubling about Aureli’s insistence that architects might be more genuinely political in focusing their attention on themselves as the source of their own production. It resonates all too well with the doxa of neoliberalism, with the imperative to make of one’s own life an ongoing project, with the dissolution of the political in the absolute economisation of the self. As Nick Dyer-Witherford has recently written: ‘the insistence that the world be understood only as a set of individual projects, is one of the most powerful and destructive weapons’ for the current economic system in a ‘class war’ waged from above by capital.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{31} Todeschini, \textit{Franciscan Wealth}, pp. 103, 110.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 134.