

Modern Architecture and Asceticism

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With the latest economic recession, many critics and architects have called for a return to the discipline of form, criticizing the exuberance of architecture in recent decades. This architecture of excess is represented by the iconic buildings built over the last twenty years by such starchitects as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. Flourishing of these iconic buildings is made possible by the economic boom that started in the 1990s.

As one critic put it, in these projects the mantra of zealous modern architects of the 1930s "form follows function" gave way to a new mantra "form follows fancy."¹ In the context of advanced capitalism, the sheer quantity of production and waste has increased constantly. The parallel development in architecture is excess and exuberance. It is not only the formal excesses of these buildings that has been criticized, but also their lack of a social agenda. In the New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff's words, as luxury residential high-rises, high-end boutiques and corporate offices in cities like London, Tokyo and Dubai multiplied, "more socially-conscious projects rarely materialized. Public housing, a staple of 20th-century Modernism, was nowhere on the agenda. Nor were schools, hospitals or public infrastructure."² These critics argue that after having been dazzled by the economic boom, the architectural discipline will be once again sober during the recession. Their reference to twentieth-century Modernism is significant because like many others, in their call for a new modesty they tap into a discourse of architectural asceticism that runs throughout the twentieth century as epitomized in Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum "Less is more."

Architectural asceticism first emerged as a reaction to the remaking of architecture in the image of commodity at the dawn of industrial capitalism. Architects and critics called for shedding the excesses of the so-called historical "style-architecture" of the nineteenth-century. This desire to strip architecture down to its bones intensified with the impact of economic contraction followed by the catastrophe of the First World War. Architects used the postwar poverty to promote an austere aesthetics and cost-efficient architecture. This paper analyzes the concept of poverty in architectural texts in relation to the modern architectural aesthetics and program at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The modern interest in asceticism was not confined to architecture, but part of a wider discourse in philosophy, literature and arts. It was, in fact, a cultural criticism that targeted the pretentious world of contemporary bourgeois culture. Recent scholarship has analyzed the broad range of meanings of asceticism and poverty in relation to modernism. In his 1998 book *The Saints of Modern Art*, Charles Riley analyzes the ascetic ideal in modern arts, architecture, music, literature and philosophy. He argues that Modernism has always depended on asceticism as a foundation for its various types of formalism and Classicism.³ In his 2008 book *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*, Patrick Graeney examines the concurrence of misery and promise of a posthumanist future in French and German literary and philosophical texts on poverty.⁴ These include writings by Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Stephane Mallarme, and Rainer Maria Rilke. In both studies, asceticism occupies a central position in the de-

velopment of key concepts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE

In his undated notes, Walter Benjamin imagines a vessel casting off from the shores of "Europe of Humanism" manned by Paul Scheerbart, Adolf Loos, Paul Klee, Bertolt Brecht, and others. These artists, architects, and writers abandon their culture with all its artefacts. They are headed for "the promised land of cannibalism," where man will start from scratch. Benjamin names the ship Poverty.⁵

The term poverty surfaces again in Benjamin's well-known article "Experience and Poverty." Writing in 1933, on the brink of World War II, he regards poverty of human experience to be at the heart of modern life. He sees the causes of such poverty in positional warfare, the inflation, hunger, the ruling powers, economic, physical, and moral experiences. Benjamin fuses material poverty with poverty of experience. Yet aside from the misery it creates, Benjamin also invests hope in poverty. He observes that people long for a world in which they can make use of their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty. One has to begin anew with a few resources, he declares. A new conception of culture can only be achieved by abandoning the old cultural traditions.⁶ Benjamin's notion of poverty signifies an ascetic attitude.

The names of Loos and Scheerbart come up again in Benjamin's 1933 article, this time in relation to glass architecture. He sees the new poverty in glass and steel modernist dwellings by Loos, Le Corbusier and Bauhaus. He writes:

A neat phrase by Brecht helps us out here: 'Erase the traces!' is the refrain in the first poem of his *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner* [Reader for City Dwellers]... This has now been achieved by Scheerbart, with his glass, and the Bauhaus, with its steel. They have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces. 'It follows from the foregoing', Scheerbart declared a good twenty years ago, 'that we can surely talk about a "culture of glass." The new glass-milieu will transform humanity utterly.'⁷

In the 1930s, modernist architecture came to be identified with large spans of glass and scarcely furnished interiors featuring simple unadorned furniture with plain light surfaces. "Glass is,

in general, the enemy of secrets," Benjamin continues, "It is also the enemy of possession."⁸ In other words, glass architecture signaled the end of privacy and property both of which were the hallmark of the nineteenth-century bourgeois dwelling. For Benjamin, the modern dwelling was the antidote to the delusion of the nineteenth century bourgeois interior.

Although "Experience and Poverty" is an oft-cited article, the genealogy of Benjamin's notion of poverty is not traced in architectural histories. Benjamin was not the first to associate poverty with modernist architecture. Poverty in broader terms came to prominence in modern texts starting from the nineteenth century.

The modern interest in poverty was an outcome of social, economic and political changes. The nineteenth century was characterized by new forms of impoverishment and wealth brought about by industrialization and the accumulation of capital. Industrial capitalism created new social classes, namely middle and working classes. While middle classes enjoyed a new-found prominence and wealth, the latter were identified with the urban poor. The misery of the rapidly expanding working classes became a concern for the upper classes who feared their revolutionary potential. According to sociologist Georg Simmel's 1908 definition, it is not a person's lack of economic means that places him in the category of the poor, but the social response to his deprivation.⁹ Thanks to the efforts of the nineteenth-century social reformers, the urban poor gained increasing visibility among the middle classes hence the modern interest in poverty.

The middle-class reformers were concerned for not only the urban poor, but also people with new money. These concerns were voiced in an entry titled "Poverty and Wealth" in *Moderne Kultur* (1907), a two-volume book on the middle-class cultural pedagogy. The author presented poverty and wealth as the two extremes which had corruptive effects. While poverty disgraced, wealth had a flattening effect, especially on those with new money. Because such people had an exaggerated admiration of the external comforts money provided.¹⁰ In order to show their wealth, they fell for the gaudy and the pompous. Wilhelmine reformers believed that aesthetics would play a key role in modernizing the nation. Accordingly, the increasingly wealthy middle class had to be

educated in matters of taste so that they could fulfill their cultural role.

Starting from the 1880s, an increasing number of artists and architects recognized a causal relationship between a capitalist economy and extravagance in arts and architecture. Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage assigned what he dubbed sham architecture to the commercialization of architecture brought on by capitalism. He wrote in 1905: "In the long list of sins resulting from the domination of finance capital, one sin is preeminent: the attachment of value to appearance rather than reality."¹¹ Reform-minded artists and architects gravitated towards simplification under the banner of realism and later *Sachlichkeit*.¹² They waged a war against surrogates, the cheap machine-made reproductions of luxurious materials and handcrafted objects. Historicist buildings were also surrogates because they were covered up with "historicizing masks."¹³ In art historian Fredric Schwartz's words, they were "the bid of new money to look old."¹⁴ In other words, surrogates represented the newly-formed middle classes' pretentious aspirations to look like the aristocracy.

The nineteenth-century bourgeois dwelling became the target of criticism. A well-known example is the Ringstrasse apartments in Vienna, which were widely criticized by such reform-minded architects as Otto Wagner and Loos for screening with historicist facades the hollowness and corruption of Austrian society. Not only the exterior, but also the interior created a false identity reflecting the insecurity of the newly-formed middle-classes. In Benjamin's words:

If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, 'You've got no business here.' And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark—the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire.¹⁵

The interior was the bourgeois' refuge from the "inhuman character of the metropolis."¹⁶ It was cluttered by an abundance of commodities and spatial envelopes layered over one another. Walls, floors, windowpanes, furniture, fireplaces were all covered. In its enclosure and accumulation of objects, it gained a phantasmagoric character that was, in Benjamin's words, "a stimulus to intoxication and dream."¹⁷ According to a nineteenth-century writer, the delusion of the interior:

constitutes, for civilized man, an insurance against the inclemencies of fate, as necessary as insurance against the perils of fire and impoverishment. In this magic circle, into which a good education can bring us and [in which] our own efforts can make us feel at home, the artistic design of our domesticity should to a certain degree, form the center, the warming hearth.¹⁸

As Christoph Asendorf has pointed out, the agent of this faculty of delusion was the fear that the interior space was vulnerable to impoverishment. This fear was closely related to capitalism, because impoverishment was seen as a product of the advanced money economy. Simmel wrote in 1900:

Poverty, like avarice and greed, appears in its purest and specific form only at a certain stage of the money economy. In natural conditions which are not yet regulated by a money economy, and as long as agricultural products do not circulate merely as commodities, that is as money values, the total destitution of an individual is less common.¹⁹

The capitalist economy was both the source and remedy of this fear of poverty, for the fear could be only countered by the compulsive overstuffing of the interior with surrogates.

If the fear of poverty resulted in the screening and layering of the exterior and the interior, the praise of poverty stripped off both in modern architecture. Architect Heinrich Muthesius, a leading figure in the Applied Arts movement (*Kunstgewerbebewegung*), claimed that a bourgeois dwelling should have the simple, modest stamp that is found in the bourgeois dwellings of the past.²⁰ The true burgher should acquire a modest taste. Simplicity was the hallmark of the new bourgeois aesthetics.

From the turn of the century onwards, an increasing number of critics and architects referred to the notion poverty in their efforts to simplify design. In 1903, architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg contrasted the contemporary "imitated luxury" to the simplicity of old furniture, which was reduced to its functional parts. "In today's standards, even the whole composition is on the verge of poverty," he wrote, "there is a pleasant simplicity in its authenticity and clarity."²¹ The unadorned traditional furniture evoked the fears of impoverishment. However, this was better than the pretentious image of the surrogates. It was a small price one has to pay for a distinct middle-class identity.

Yet in the pre-war architecture circles, poverty could not be widely embraced as a moral virtue. While advocating simplicity, reform-minded architects were cautious to disassociate it from poverty. For example, architect Heinrich Tessenow wrote in 1916, "Occasionally it seems that simplicity is related to poverty, in practical terms these do not yet have anything in common with each other; our simplicity can certainly be just as much a great richness as our richness can be the greatest poverty."²² It is likely that Tessenow was responding to Erich Haenel's 1911 criticism of his houses in Hellerau Garden City, which stood out from the rest for their radical simplicity. They were simple grey-stucco houses with pitched roofs (Figure 1). They lacked the familiar vernacular elements that marked the rest of the houses. Haenel claimed that these houses were not favored by the inhabitants for they had a "poor people smell."²³ Haenel's claim was supported by writer Paul F. Schmidt, who lived in Hellerau between 1909 and 1912. He recorded that because of Tessenow's sober architecture, it was very hard for him to find a tenant that would take over his lease when he moved out:

[The house] was shortly called "the barn." It was lacking many beautiful oriels, podiums, dormer windows, and brushing angles, from which the middle-class houses (and not less the exclusive villas) mostly gained their loyal German coziness. Noone wanted to live in "barns."²⁴

By removing all the class markers from the exterior, Tessenow created a neutral container for the domestic life. For that reason, some critics even defined his houses as being "devoid of architecture."²⁵ Yet, this utmost simplicity was an uncanny reminder of poverty for the bourgeois which considered the façade of his house as his public mask.

Only after the war, poverty could be widely embraced as a moral virtue in reformist circles. In 1920, the concept of poverty resurfaced in the book, *Lob der Armut* (In Praise of Poverty) edited by German League for the Protection of the Homeland (Deutscher Bund Heimatschutz) with an introduction from Werner Lindner and texts by Will Vesper and Paul Fechter. Lindner wrote in the introduction that the Heimatschutz praised poverty for its simplicity. He declared that poverty carried with quiet pride is the basis to the postwar rebuilding of Germany, a process which included building housing. The Heimatschutz advocates called for using the long-standing poverty of Germany in its favor in order to create "an architectonic virtue." Vesper went further declar-

ing wealth a disease that spread not only to the body of the nation, but to all occidental people. As Germany became poor, he claimed, it can perhaps heal itself from that sickness.²⁶ In the aftermath of the war, the animosity towards the excessive wealth the industrial capitalism created became more visible.

According to critic Fechter, the new poverty would force architects to *Sachlichkeit* and sobriety, "Who can build something at all, will be happy to build a basic simple house with four walls."²⁷ The prospective tenants will be drawn to dwellings not because of their extensive decoration, but because of their spatial qualities, clean conditions and comfort they provide. Those were the qualities that would free the country from generations of bombardment of ornament. Fechter claimed that in the pre-war era, Loos was a pioneer who argued in vain for a voluntary renunciation of excessive decoration and ornament. Thanks to the post-war economic meltdown, this target could be finally realized out of necessity.

What Fechter predicted came true with austerity measures that created general depression after 1924. In order to stabilize the economy, the new Weimar Republic undertook rationalization programs that focused on efficiency and austerity in factory and home. The government initiated low-cost public housing programs to elevate the living conditions of the urban masses in a bid to prevent them from getting marginalized. The theme of the C.I.A.M. (International Congress of Modern Architecture) held in Frankfurt in 1929 was the "Dwelling for minimum existence." The existence-minimum housing was at the center of an austerity-minded public program of worker consumption.²⁸ The architects involved at the congress advocated reducing domestic life to functions regarded essential for survival. To cut the costs to the absolute minimum, the houses would be designed as standardized units featuring minuscule spaces sufficient enough to perform functions efficiently.

In the 1920s, state-subsidized public housing estates flourished in the outskirts of major German cities. Ernst May, the architect in charge of the housing settlements in Frankfurt, likened standardized dwellings to the mass-produced articles. In Frankfurt settlements, standardization encompassed everything from floor plans to furniture. Specially scaled, mass-produced furniture was designed to fit small spaces. A colleague of May proclaimed that modern

architecture was “fighting against prestige designs, against excess and for the human scale.”²⁹ In other words, the existence- minimum dwelling was an outcome of scaling down the excessive proportions of the nineteenth-century house back to the human scale. Such scientific methods as Taylorism and motion studies facilitated the design of small efficient domestic spaces. Thus, a contemporary American critic compared the houses to Ford’s assembly line.³⁰ Architectural asceticism, which emerged as a cultural criticism that railed against the excesses of capitalism ended up facilitating this emerging regime of rationalized capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

CONCLUSION

A world war later, in 1961, the Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler recalled his days of poverty in the aftermath of the World War I. Echoing Fechter, he explained functionalist architecture as a mandatory outcome of that poverty:

We had nothing to eat. I recall very well my own situation: after the war I lived on the dole for many years; I got about seven Kronen a week, which would be the equivalent of seven dollars per week now. But one could live on that monastically; I had rice, chiefly, and mushrooms. I remember only too well the mushrooms, which I dried and reheated again just as I did with tea leaves. As in our living habits, we started to clean off everything that was surplus in design -ornamentation, certain luxurious materials, moldings, this and that. Everything became, over the years, simpler, cleaner, whiter, and ... you know, what we call functionalism was on its natural way.

So functionalism was really a reaction to the overstuffing of the Victorian age. Architecture had to be put on a diet. And the rectangular style did it. Now the period of diet is over and we can eat normally again. However, that does not mean that we should overeat, stuff ourselves with whipped cream, ice cream -or with architecture either.³¹

Following the economic boom, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of iconic architecture. The surplus in the nineteenth-century design was a result of the resistance to expressing new structural technologies, hence the “historicizing masks.” The surplus in contemporary iconic architecture is an outcome of indulging in new technologies such as computational design that breaks architecture free from old building principles. The belief that almost anything can be designed and built has resulted in amorphous buildings and blobs by Frank Gehry and like-minded architects.

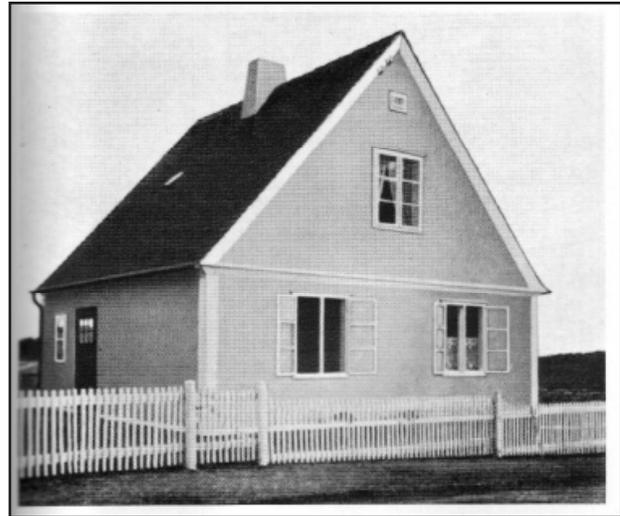


Figure 1: Patenthaus designed by Heinrich Tessenow, Hellerau, 1911. From Erich Haenel, *Die Gartenstadt Hellerau bei Dresden* (Munich, Bruckmann, 1911)



Figure 2: Nottingham Contemporary, 2009. Photo by the author.

Today there are once again calls for putting architecture on a diet and there is no doubt that there will be such calls each time the capitalist machine breaks down. Critics have given different names to this latest recession-fueled diet: the New Modesty, the New Puritanism, Radical Traditionalism, slow architecture etc. The last name dubbed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor is a wordplay on the phrase ‘slow food’ conspicuously referring to a healthy diet. Zumthor explained it as “tradition, but with a modern twist,” more like “Paul Smith, not Jean Paul Gaultier.”³² Zumthor’s remark resonates not only with Kiesler’s statement, but also with Loos’ praise of the discrete

clothing of the English gentleman versus that of the dandy a century ago.³³ Whatever name they take, today's calls resemble the early twentieth-century calls to simplicity and modesty.

Writing in late 2009, London *Times* critic Tom Dyckhoff regarded Zumthor and like-minded architects' buildings as the anti-icons that "play a more discreet game."³⁴ One such building is Caruso St John Architect's austere Nottingham Contemporary museum for which Dyckhoff wrote: "Values are changing. Two years ago you could propose a revolving skyscraper bedecked in golden columns and purple unicorns and be taken halfway seriously. Now, like long-haul flying, architectural excess is sniffed at with a disdain approaching distaste"³⁵ (Figure 2). The question is though, how long this change of heart will last. Today, architecture is more than ever linked to financial markets. Hence once the economic stability is restored, we should expect the return of iconic architecture commissioned by new economic powers and wealthy patrons.

ENDNOTES

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- 4 Patrick Greaney, *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 6 On Benjamin's notion of poverty see *Ibid.*, 147-152.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), 734.
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- 9 Georg Simmel, "The Poor," *Social Problems* 13, no. 2 (1965): 138.
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- 12 On architectural realism in Germany see Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 207-11. On Sachlichkeit, see also Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory*, 209.
- 13 Architectural critic Sigfried Giedion wrote "The nineteenth century draped all new creations in historicizing masks." Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 1.
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