

From Reductionism to Simplicity: Against Modernist Minimalism and Towards a New Monastic Minimalism

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Figure 1: Courtyard of the St. Benedictusberg Abbey, designed by Dom. Hans van der Laan.
Photograph by author.

1. Modernism and Minimalism: Reductionism as Paradigm

If you have been a design student at some time during the last 70 years, there is no way that you could have avoided minimalism of some sort. Usually, it amounts to an *aesthetic minimalism*: a visual language of simple geometric volumes, clear lines, and smooth surfaces. Ever since the early 20th-century, CIAM-centred architectural modernism adopted the “machine aesthetic” of the airplane, the grain silo, and the ocean liner during the 1920s and 1930s, there has been a tendency to reduce our visual world to its barest bones (Banham, 1970: p. 328).

20th-century modernists like Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Richard Meier, and I.M. Pei championed a technocratic and bold style of architecture that was not “cluttered” with ornament, and that would be free from any superfluous elements. Instead, exact and icy functionality would determine the physical form, a doctrine summarized in the pithy modernist slogan

“form follows function.” It turned out that “functionality” resulted in physical environments that were almost universally clean, white, rectangular and strangely devoid of Life itself.



Figure 2: Atrium of the The Hague Town Hall, designed by Richard Meier. Photograph by author.

Otherwise, these spaces showcased raw material and concrete in a gesture of “honesty towards the materials and the construction.” On the modernists’ view, ornamentation only served to hide the honest elements, or the purity of the construction. That there existed an entire modern strand of Expressionism that developed new forms of ornamentation and spatial division is often seen as a phase— a mere stepping stone towards the aesthetic of untarnished purity. But take a look at the work of, for example, Behrens and Berlage, Frank Lloyd Wright, the Amsterdam School, Dom. Hans van der Laan, and the Scandinavian modernists, and then one can see that a robustly humanist and yet also fully modern architecture was at some point a real-world possibility.

Often, architectural history is written as if certain developments were unavoidable. Usually, the most recent developments are regarded as the necessary outcomes to which everything up this point led up. However, often, we forget how multifaceted and layered cultural phenomena like modernism were. Marshall Berman was in this regard completely right when he wrote that compared to 19th-century modernism, 20th-century modernism was a “flat totalization” of the many currents of thought prevalent in the previous century (Berman, 2010: p, 24). If anything, it is not unreasonable to point out that the project of modernity flattened out and became reduced to a kind of functionalist, sterile, and above all technocratic modernity.

This is not to argue that we should have never left behind Neoclassicism, the Wiener Secession, or the Jugendstil. The 20th century demanded new forms of artistic and architectural expression, suited to the predicament of the modern mind, as well as facing up to the unease set in motion by Existentialism, the seemingly increasing speed of life, the emergence of the modern *polis*, the horror of two world wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the Gulag. In literature, we find James, Proust, Baudelaire, Kästner, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats; in music, we encounter Bruckner, Mahler, Webern, and Prokofiev; in the visual arts, Klee, Delvaux, Picasso, Moore, and Malevich. All of them wrestled with modernity, and while some experiments were more successful than others, the attempt to convey and shape the cultural climate of late modern times through artistic means seems authentic. At least, one could discern a common set of cultural concerns underneath all them, against which this artistic output could be read, understood, and valued. Apart from the specifics of these cultural concerns, it is clear that in some form or the other, the human condition is at the heart of all early 20th-century artistic exploration. As I've argued elsewhere, the Second World War created a massive black hole in the middle of the 20th century, and after this catastrophic event, the sociocultural landscape had changed forever, as had the overall direction of the modern project itself (Hanna and Paans, 2020).

The “flattening out” of the modern project that Berman so acutely observed might well be principally due to the traumatic existential impact that the two World Wars inflicted, as well as to the role that technology came to play as a way of controlling the battlefield. Both wars enormously contributed to the development of almost all modern combat and communication technologies, ranging from chemical warfare, radio, sonar, ballistics, and civil engineering to the logic needed to develop the Internet and the computing power needed for today's AI. The line of research and thinking that unfolded in the post-war years amplified the technological, control-oriented strand of the modern project at the expense of other latent possibilities.

One can imagine a 20th century without the Second World War, in which the many currents of artistic thinking during the 1920s and 1930s merged into a wholly alternative modern project. This project would fully incorporate the humanist view of the polis, as we can discern it in Baudelaire and Benjamin; it would incorporate Expressionism in painting and poetry, falling prey neither to naïve realism nor to soulless abstraction; it would continue the architectural expressionism of Behrens; the humanist urban visions of Frank Lloyd Wright; the tension-laden musical composition of Gustav Mahler; the fascination for the dynamics of the new world that we find visually expressed in Russian constructivism; the neo-romantic uptake of modern ideas into the idioms inherited from the 19th century; and even the CIAM-style fascination for urban sanitation, mass emancipation, a new world, and liberating technology. In short, it would be a rich biotope of the modern mind searching for its position in the world without either anachronism or technocratic control.



Figure 3: The expressive, yet also fully modern brickwork of Peter Behrens' 1909 AEG-turbine hall in Berlin. Photograph by author.

But of course, history actually unfolded differently. After the Second World War, artistic minimalism amplified and intensified the reductionist, purity-oriented line of thinking that was inherent in the modern mind, but which could have branched out in any number of directions. Artists like Donald Judd, Robert Serra, Richard Long, and Carl Andre resorted to an extremely reduced artistic language as they followed in the pioneering footsteps of Malevich and Mondrian. Extreme reduction and extreme simplification: those are the themes that underlie minimalism and to some degree land art in its various guises. Not coincidentally, this line of artistic production coincided with artistic conceptualism. The artist-at-work became a trope, as became the idea of the artistic "concept." Spectators looking at two bent pieces of metal had to be informed of their transcendent artistic value and the elaborate story behind them. No, dear visitor, you are witnessing an earth-shattering artistic event, and not merely wondering why two rusty pieces of metal ended up in a museum exhibition.

One could write a gloomy history of how this esoteric visual language and the accompanying, explanatory linguistic gymnastics were fused together with the mechanistic, Fordist view of the world, resulting in cityscapes and highways that are bleak, cheap, repetitious, lifeless, and generally un hospitable. The destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe complex in 1972 seemed to seal the fate of the minimal, modernist paradigm and functionalist city planning alike. However, like the living dead or zombies, both ideas took on a more horrible form of existence and continued to plague the living.

During the 1980s, in the wake of the so-called “death of modernism,” postmodernity gradually conquered the artistic and architectural professions, and ornament as well as ironic citation of historic styles and playfulness returned to the architectural scene. At least, that was the theory. In reality, postmodernity was just modernism with a more colorful wrapping, not unlike the vividly colored packages of the multiple brands of potato chips and soaps you can find in supermarket aisles. In a world where Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol had already both made their artistic statements about mass production, the critical content of their works was disembodied from its critical context and became the lived norm of everyday life.

But amplified on a commercial scale, their once original artistic gestures morphed once again in something different: a disorienting, yet colorful flatness extending towards the horizon. The very act of repetition that in the hands of Warhol amounted to a sharp critique of mass-consumer society and its aesthetics became a suffocating blanket of feel-good artistic consumerism, brought to the customer by cultural institutions, and invested with high-brow rhetoric by curators wearing imposing designer glasses.

Emerging computer technology allowed for a certain sleekness to creep into architectural shape, a development explored by—amongst others—Bernard Cache and Greg Lynn. Interesting as these developments were, once again they coincided with the powerful thought-shapers of the mechanist worldview, but this time enabled by new technology (Hanna and Paans 2020, 2021). The result were environments that exhibit flow, and a kind of curvy, sleek, digitally-drawn dynamicism, but that also curiously lack meaningful detailing and a tangible relationship to materiality. When I visited the then-completed Arnhem railway station designed by UNStudio some 7 years ago, I could not help thinking that I was walking around in one of their diagrams. A curious lack of detail and humanity created a space of flows that was so abstract that one cannot easily relate to it. The idea was there, sure, but the architecture wasn't.

This new, digitally powered minimalism co-existed with the more classical, composition-oriented minimalism of, for instance, John Pawson and David Chipperfield. This type of minimalism exhibits a superficial luxury and studied

restraint, so as to appeal to the well-cultivated aesthetic sensibilities of the higher classes. Somehow, cultural institutions, rich organizations, luxury hotels, corporations, and wealthy business owners all prefer a style of intentional aesthetic reduction. In a gesture of studied and pretentious minimalization, one showcases one's level of cultivation through restraint. Don't be fooled, however, because the materials and the fine, invisible joining mechanisms that are used to create seamless transitions between walls, windows, ceilings, and floors will cost you a small or large fortune, as will that smooth concrete and white plaster.



Figure 4: David Chipperfield's minimalist design for the James Simon gallery in Berlin.
Photograph by author.

The self-conscious restraint devoid of any ascetic acumen is the most infuriating feature of such properly commercial minimalism. It amounts to the creation of an intentional class difference, relying on the notions of purity, simplicity

and cleanliness. The modernist versions of these ideas are expressed in a studiously sterile architectural language that only breathes one message: we are more sophisticated than you are, so walk softly. If you can't appreciate this sterility, you don't belong here, as you are clearly not cultivated enough. Do you like ornamentation that is not overtly ironic and postmodern? This is a transgression against the sensibility of the age! To be cultivated is to shun the superfluous and prefer the essence. Not unlike Loos's main thesis in *Ornament and Crime*, those preferring non-minimalism are regarded as lacking in cultural finesse. Loos went further and suggested that only a criminal and uncouth mind could come up with base ornamentation and superfluous *Schmuck*.

But not all minimalism is of the sleek, upper-class, marketable variety. We should take note of the fact that *modern minimalism* took its cues from the early modern version of a clean, sanitized world, co-opting the early modernists' particular versions of simplicity, material honesty, and clean walls. One idea in particular is quite damaging in modern minimalism: the notion that through extreme reduction, a kind of new architectural essence emerges that only the well-cultivated can grasp. It is for this reason that the modern movement glorified the idea of an *avant-garde*, a vanguard of excellence, not unlike the party cadre in Bolshevism, Ivy League universities, or even "cutting-edge research institutes" in the contemporary professional academy. Nevertheless, there are other types of minimalism that took broadly "aesthetically minimal" ideas in a different direction, well before modern minimalism even came along.

2. Monastic Minimalism: Six Defining Features

I shall give the alternative minimalism a different name, namely *monastic minimalism*, because we experience and witness its application and characteristics most closely in monasteries and generally in traditional religious buildings. This does not mean that such minimalism can be found *only* in a monastic or broader religious context. Instead, it means that in such settings, we can most clearly *discern* its characteristics in a setting that intends authentically to convey the feeling of the numinous in the broad sense.

1. First, let's start with the utterly pernicious idea that a reduction of visual variety or ornament leads to the emergence of an otherwise hidden or obfuscated architectural essence. Let's also immediately draw attention to a contrary idea: over against the gesture of studious minimalist reduction, let's posit the idea of *simplicity*. Confusing the notions of reduction and simplicity easily happens, but it is a grave mistake. Reduction as an aesthetic strategy is a method for arriving at an aesthetic language of cultured restraint. However, this restraint is skin deep, since it still relies on the utilization of luxurious and costly materials—and fully in tune with the modernist love of vanguards—cutting-edge technology as well as costly detailing.

There is in principle nothing against pushing the technology to the limits of its capability, but to do so in a self-conscious mannerism in which technology and technocratic progress are glorified as the ultimate form of architectural essence is just intellectual posing.

In particular, it reduces the idea of architectural essence to something that can only be achieved by the most expensive means. But what is the notion of essence if not the notion of something fundamental? If it can be achieved only by the most advanced procedures of material processing and by heavy reliance on technological progress, I doubt that we are talking about architectural essences at all. Instead, we are talking about a deliberately touched-up image of carefully showcased simplicity that is in reality no simplicity at all: on the contrary, it is simply haughtiness displayed as cultural refinement.

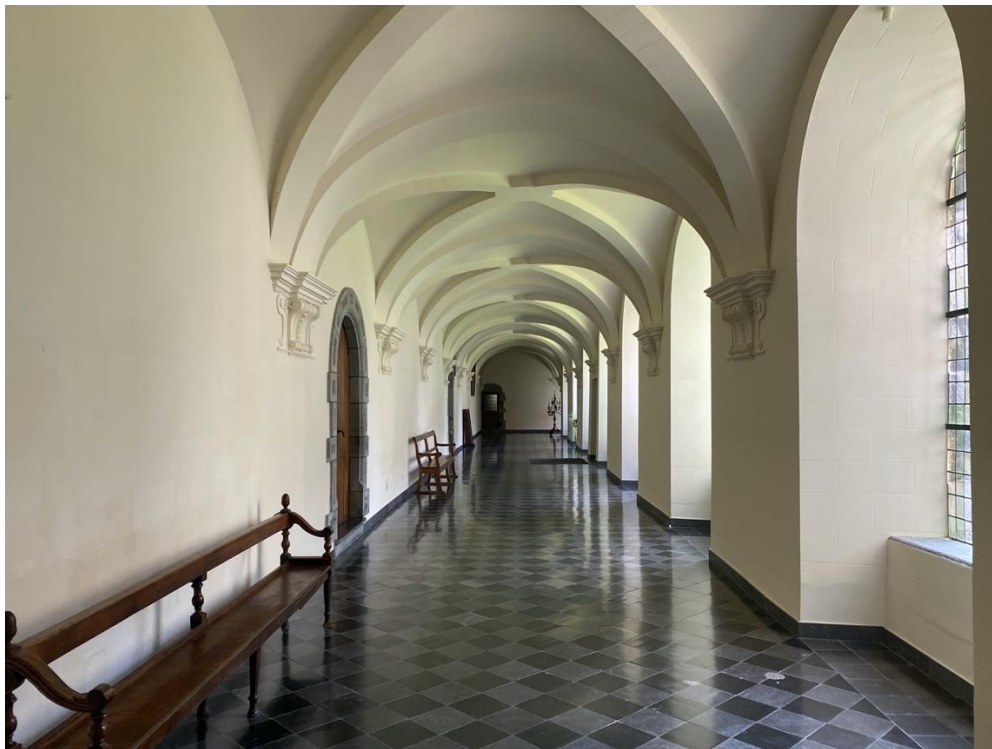


Figure 5: Length-wise view down a corridor lining the central garden in Val-Dieu Abbey, Aube, Belgium. Photograph by author.

Before delving into the aesthetic characteristics of monastic minimalism, it should be noted that both types of minimalism sometimes peculiarly clash. In a particularly strange case, a Cistercian abbot who viewed images of John Pawson's Calvin Klein retail store in New York City was so smitten by the futuristic, minimalist aesthetic that he proposed that Pawson should redesign a part of his order's monastery in Novy Dvur, Czech Republic. Pawson accepted the commission in 1999 and realized a redesign in collaboration with the Czech Atelier

Soukup. In doing so, high modern minimalism touched monastic simplicity, yet the result is something rather strange. The intention is clear: a monastic setting devoid of any superfluousness. Yet, the result is an inappropriately fashionable religious expression that aims to be timeless, but through its self-conscious posing achieves the exact opposite. In an astute critical commentary on this case, architectural theorist Pier Vittorio Aureli notes:

Here we see how easy it is to turn asceticism into a disingenuous caricature. Ascetic restraint is easily interchangeable with marketing, especially in times of recession, when there is a rush to embrace the rhetoric of anti-consumerism and the return to core values. (Aureli, 2010: p. 43)

Not only does it become an architectural icon that drifts effortlessly along on the high modern and ultimately materialist currents, but it adopts also a spatial strategy of visual reduction. This strategy is executed in such a way that a new, strangely luxurious image ensues. The detailing would not have been out of place in a luxury resort or a cosmopolitan fashion boutique, exactly because it betrays a sleekness and finishing that defies the very simplicity it intends to convey.

Still, the monastery's spaces have been laid out and designed tastefully. That cannot be disputed. However, the reduced aesthetic suffusing them is precisely not that of a monastic minimalism, but once again of a kind of easy-going retail variety. This peculiar borderline case serves as point of our analysis, if only to showcase how easy reduction is mistaken for simplicity, and how a truly simple aesthetic cannot be achieved without a structuring context.

2. Second, monastic minimalism—in contrast to its modern minimalist counterpart—thrives on *frugality*. The limitations on material use, building layout, and ornamentation came naturally as part of the monastic typology. After all, many of these places started as communal spaces for contemplation and a simple life. In such circumstances, one must “make do” with what one has. And even if there are sufficient funds, the religious values that underlie the entire monastic lifestyle forbid or at least inhibit tendencies to indulge in extravagant ornamentation or superfluousness. In a particularly striking example, the Russian monk Nil Sorsky ordered a number of his fellow monks to twist and contort the columns of their newly-built abbey, because he deemed them too beautiful and therefore immoderate and impious. We don't need to follow Sorsky's example with similar rigor, but it shows something of the mentality that colors the monastic mindset.

This frugality appears in everything: in simple details, repetitive elements, a limited palette of materials, simple geometric structure, a rational, optimized layout, and an absence of anything than one could deem luxurious. Moreover, the entire physical monastic template is oriented towards a highly structured lifestyle. The sung

masses, dedicated religious services, hours and spaces for personal study, and hours and spaces for simple manual labor, all impose requirements for accessibility, for the organization of both solitude and communality, and for the presence of symbols, and jointly constitute a general reflection of the community's hierarchy and underlying aims and values.

All this provides a kind of *inner, spatial coherence* that suffuses the entire building, from the entire orientation to the floor tiling, functional layout, and the details, and in particular, the ornamentation and presence of symbols like crosses, statues, altars, candles, and so-on. The higher goal or purpose of the monastery as a social institution can be derived from each item, each choice, and each configuration and distribution of spaces.

The ornamentation is such that it fulfils the classical role that it had in architecture: to highlight the proportions and tectonics of the spatial configuration, as well as underlining its hierarchical layout and the logic of its structure. Here, we encounter a second mistake: the idea that ornamentation is an impurity in the architectonic space. If anything, it makes far more sense to think of ornamentation as punctuation in a text. We don't regard signs that are not letters as "not contributing to the text." Indeed, it is through the interplay of words, sentences, and punctuation that meaning emerges and can be directed and emphasized. For anyone who doubts this, try to read a text in majuscule script to see what punctuation adds.

3. Third, we can make a similar point about ornamentation. The combination of structure and ornamentation adds to the precise articulation of an idea. It adds accents, directs the attention, determines the rhythm with which one moves through a building, and guides the eye and the mind alike. Moreover, in its articulation, it makes an aesthetic order visible: an aesthetic order, that is, which is intrinsic to the logic of the building, but which is also simultaneously externally expressed. The external order embeds the building in a larger, encompassing cultural logic or worldview, whether philosophical, religious, or economic. The interplay between structure and ornamentation adds a spatial punctuation that makes this order perceptible—indeed, readable—and also architecturally conveys a spatially expressed logic.

The idea of a logic that is spatially expressed can maybe be found in its purest and most tangible form in the work of Benedictine monk and architect Dom. Hans van der Laan (1904–1991). Van der Laan developed a metric system centred on the plastic number, which he used for the design of the St. Benedictusberg Abbey in Mamelis, the theory of which he worked out in his treatise *Architectonic Space* (Van Der Laan, 1983). For Van Der Laan, the metric underpinning was not just a means to achieve for the ideal shape, but a generative method for reaching a spatial consistency between the largest and the smallest elements that constitute a building. Walking through the

building, this consistency pre-reflectively makes itself felt pervasively. All spaces are curiously harmonious, although the material use is extremely simple. Ornamentation highlights some spaces, but more often, it is the consistency of the composition that translates a hidden order into stone, making for a peaceful and tranquil architectural setting.



Figure 6: Chapel of the St. Benedictusberg Abbey in Mamelis, Dutch Limburg. Photograph by author.

The logic that is expressed spatially punctuates life, adding details without necessarily being classifiable as ornamentation. At the same time, edges, steps, construction beams, and pillars create a truly artificial order that is as simple as possible, yet without becoming either bland, stylish, or marketable. The details of a few steps meeting a corner and a column show how much consistency can be achieved with so little (see figure 7 below).

4. Fourth, we can extend this line of thinking towards the intrinsic order of the building: it is a logic that is implied and allusively articulated rather than expressed propositionally. Just in the same way that the meaning of a text has to be read “between the lines,, the implied logic that governs monastic minimalism is one in which a seamless bridge is built between the values of a worldview and its coherent application in the cultural products of those values. We cannot think about the phenomenon of monasticism without simultaneously incorporating the material

aspects of its ascetic, rigorous, and simple lifestyle. So, everything in a monastery points to the devotion, seriousness, severity with which that lifestyle is practiced. There is virtually no gap between the community's values and the way of embodying these values in the manifestly real world.¹



Figure 7: Detailing of the corner, column and steps. Photograph by author.

It is on this point that I diverge from Aureli's otherwise compelling critical analysis of asceticism in modern design. In discussing the lay-out of monasteries, he has the following to say:

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 regulates the sequence of activities with the same precision as the 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. (Aureli, 2010: p. 22).

That the monastic rule orders and structures life is a given. In some cases, monastic discipline is even taken as the very paradigm of daily discipline and routine. But to confuse the rhythm of a monastery with a factory is to miss a very crucial point about such practices: they are not aimed at soulless repetition and mechanic rhythm, but the

¹ Of course, in some cases, such a gap does exist. The very opulence of Renaissance and Baroque cathedrals introduces an enormous gap between that the modesty which is supposed to be expressed religiously, and its exuberant material expression. To be sure, an advocate of such artistic expression might invoke the argument that humanity has received its creativity and material abundance from God in order to express divine glory in the most complete manner.

subtly vary, modulate and morph through the religious year. Besides that, the time not spent participating in religious activities is devoted to personal cultivation – exactly the feature that is lacking in mechanized, Fordist production. The toll of the bell announcing a mass is not a sign to start producing again: on the contrary, it is the demarcation of a spiritual exercise that has no instrumental value as such. A little further on in the text, Aureli appears to touch on a similar point:

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 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. (Aureli, 2010: p. 23)

The strict organisation of the monastery was not meant 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. This aspect of monastic life is made evident in the simplest monastic rule ever presented, which is the one drafted by Augustine: *dilige et quod vis face* – 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. (Aureli, 2010: p. 24)

The Augustinian rule is the diametric opposite of the Taylorist factory. It is an encouragement to discipline, because through practice, freedom ensues. It takes hard work to remove oneself from an instrumental rationality mindset and open oneself up to the formidable task of making means and ends coincide. In effect, this means to put Kant’s Categorical Imperative fully into action. In a time of ecological degradation, this demand is more necessary than ever, as is a radical departure from the Taylorist paradigm towards forms of personal and collective cultivation (Hanna and Paans 2022; Paans 2023c).

We should also pay attention to the notion of *habitus* as Aureli introduces it. The habit is the clothing worn by monks, and it determines their appearance as people engaged in personal cultivation. But likewise, the range of possibilities is limited by donning it: to become a monk is voluntarily to forego some of the possibilities that life has to offer. This choice engenders a new set of habits structured by the monastic rule. In turn, taking these up thought-shapes and mind-shapes the practicing subject (Hanna and Paans, 2021). But over time, those habits become an integral part of oneself. One has acquired literally a new *habitus*—literally the natural shape into which a tree or shrubs grows if it is left to the elements. Likewise, through discipline and (creative) piety, the mind acquires a new *habitus*.

The personal aspect in all this is enormously important, as this allows each individual to instantiate and embody their communal values in ways that they are best equipped to do. Roland Barthes describes this as *idiorrhymy*—from *idios* or

“particular,” similarly to *idiosyncrasy* (Barthes, 2013: p. 8). Everyone must be able to retain some penchant of individuality in order to serve to a collective goal optimally. Correspondingly, he also notes how institutions like the prison or the mental health wards are set up in diametric opposition to this tendency.

If we compare the material expression of modern, reductionist minimalism with the values it is supposed to represent, we encounter a conflict that is deeply ethical. The very spatial language of simplicity is used as a means to express the highest cultural refinement. However, it is not merely refinement that is expressed, but cultural achievement as well. To be cultured is to have achieved a level of aesthetical acumen for which all cluttering, all ornamentation is but a vulgar distraction. Only the pure inhabit the minimalist heaven. The underlying value is arrogance and disdain. Especially disdain for Life itself – it is as if the modern mind cannot deal with the world as it is.

To be sure, there are places on the Earth that the modern, Western person cannot deal with, ranging from the squalid living conditions of the 19th-century city, to contemporary refugee camps in war-torn areas, to slums. But to retreat into a world of cultured reduction so as to keep the clutter out, is a form of escapism fuelled by contempt. This statement might come across as brazen or needlessly hyperbolic, but I believe that it is fully implicit in the modern idea of the avant-garde.

The avant-garde is an elite of (artistic) pioneers who chart the course of (material) progress for the masses to follow. This very image already divides society in those who chart the course, those who follow it, and those who refuse to go along with it (i.e. conservatives). The problem with the avant-garde is not that there are pioneering spirits who try out new modes of expression or design. Such individuals have always existed, and a great deal of progress is owed to them, even to the point that the figure of the Bohemian became almost synonymous with artistic capability during the 19th century. The problem with the avant-garde is the fact that a self-conscious, self-appointed elite claims to lay out the course of progress for the great (and ignorant) mass to follow and obey. The avant-garde presents itself to itself as the producer of the culture. This self-presentation comes, however, with a demand: it requires a kind of aesthetic and cognitive acculturation that sets the members of the elite apart from the rabble. There is something curious proto-authoritarian and even rabidly elitist about this conception. It draws dividing lines between those who are “in” on the demands of avant-garde cultural refinement, and those who are “out” and can never hope to aspire to it.²

² In a curious dialectical reversal, it is the cultural elite itself that promotes the notion that art and design ought to be democratized—and carefully curated, of course—so that everyone can have their Warholian fifteen minutes of world fame. This has led to a strange paradox that those in charge of cultural institutions profess allegiance to a cultural climate which approvingly nods while the masses

Yet, the cosmos is our home. But, as opposed to what Anthony Vidler has so aptly called the “modern unhomely,” a sense of disorientation, displacement, and unease has always accompanied the modernist project (Vidler, 1992). This is readily understandable if we take into account the fact that the Industrial Revolution encompassed the introduction of machine-working, factories, the emergence of the modern polis, and new blights like environmental pollution and subjective alienation on a massive scale. But the very fact that we are fundamentally at home in the cosmos is what fuels our fundamental hunger for meaning, and also our fundamental need for beauty. Like ornament, beauty is not something inessential that is added later on for decorative purposes. It is the very foundation upon which our entire interaction with the physical environment rests. The mechanistic landscapes of advanced or late capitalism, the widespread destruction, and the art that is all about the “concept,” represent just an empty husk, devoid of anchorage and footing. To “orient oneself in thinking” as Kant wrote, can only succeed by having a “ground of subjective differentiation” (Kant, 1786/1996: p. 9). We may understand this as the pre-reflective, essentially embodied insight that one reasons from a certain point of departure, a base, so to speak, from which the wider environment is encountered.

5. Fifth, and now returning to the characteristics of monastic minimalism, we can see that the very idea of *functionality* is worked out along different lines than the functionality that came to determine architecture, industrial design and urbanism during the 20th century. To have a function is to serve a purpose. The monastic building serves those inhabiting it, those staying in it, those who seek refuge, those who rely on its religious character. As a social institution, the monastery (and by extension, the order) serves the world or at least their direct environment. We can extend this thought and see how the entire monastic building and its organization is set up once again in full agreement with the underlying values, which are intended to serve the Church or the divine more generally. All this puts the idea of functionality in a new light: it has no longer to do with determining the dimensions of spaces based on the activities taking place in them, but it demands (i) that only material necessities should be included, and (ii) that these are determined by a sophisticated picture of human life, theologically expressed the core values of the monastic order.

There is an enormous difference between including only material necessities and the reductionist form-language of modernist minimalism, although the latter claims to accomplish the former. In reality, these two things are not at all alike. The material necessities that we find in a monastery distil the very essence of a lifestyle, bring it all back to its very core. The items, objects, and tools one finds in a monastery reflect the choices of its inhabitants. But simultaneously, against this background of

are allowed play in the artistic sandbox. Not surprisingly, this exploitation of the everyday in modern art has made any informative discussion on good taste and the value of the classical arts impossible, because here as elsewhere, a deadly cultural relativism has cast its pall over everything.

austerity, there are small indications of life itself, small excesses that show that the sacred space is inhabited by human beings who brings some of the affirmations of Life into the strict monastic structure. This can be seen in the adjacent workshops or personal items in the monk's cells. Life cannot be aesthetically reduced: it affirms itself against such dogmatic puritanism. Compare this to the touched-up image of the modern minimalist home. One would be afraid to put even a book on the table. If anything, the modern minimalist world promises a generic eternal in which life, cultural customs, and personality don't have a place (Paans, 2019).



Figure 8: What are we looking at? Conceptual art and sterile white exhibition space in the Antwerp Museum of the Arts. Photograph by author.

The form-language of modern minimalism is indeed thoroughly reductionist, not merely in the sense of favouring geometric simplicity, but in enforcing an aestheticized way of life that strips the fullness of human being in favour of a soulless, aestheticized caricature of it.

Paradoxically then, it is over against the imposed (religious) strictures of monastic minimalism that life itself comes to the fore all the more forcefully. It appears all the more vividly because the social-institutional structure of the monastic setting is inherently sensitive to the fact the world is imperfect. This translates into the feature that the very imperfection of human life is accepted as an integral part of its structure. This point cannot be emphasized enough. If one sets up social institutions with a perfect human subject in mind, the result will always be a series of attempts to chop down, maim, or reduce the subject in order to conform to whatever ideal the social institution projects. In short, the social institution is regarded as an instrument for

producing perfect, uniform subjects in large quantities, be it the perfect productive subject, the perfect cultural subject, or the ideal subject for manipulation.

The idea of the “cultural elite” is just such a destructive, deforming social institution, as is its enforced language of formal purity, its aestheticized reductionism, its obsessive whiteness, its cleanliness, and its merciless order. This artificial order breathes the spirit of purification and elitism. It claims to be simple only to turn out to be arrogant; it claims to be pure only to turn out to be elitist. Once again, this is a world away from many of the ideals of the early modernistic architects and planners who—often with good intentions—imagined a clean and hygienic world where epidemics, poor living conditions, filthy air and streets, and pollution would all be remedied by technology and engineering.

6. The sixth and concluding element is emergent, in the sense that if conditions 1-5 are all satisfied, the spatial configuration almost of its own breathes and radiates a kind of spatial stillness. As I have argued elsewhere, stillness is a quality that one can individually develop, and that makes one fully aware of one’s existential agency (Paans, 2023b). Stillness has nothing to do with passivity, but instead everything to do with attentive and tranquil focus, the quality that in Zen Buddhism is often referred to as “an empty mind.” Our world seems focused on driving out stillness. And, in the wake of this cultural tendency, there is little room for stillness in the modern minimalist spaces. At best, they aim at relaxation, but always there is a carefully aestheticized element that disturbs inner peace. The devil is once again in the details: to inhabit a modern minimalist space is to be involuntarily dragged into an aesthetic performance, a set of cultural expectations that is suggested with a subliminal force which disturbs true stillness.

I should stress that any space that is designed with simplicity in mind can be conducive of fostering stillness, even the most everyday backyard or living room. The sublime, after all, can be experienced in many ways. However, I singled out monastic spaces because the qualities of true simplicity are often so clearly on display in such settings.

3. Against Mechanistic Materialism

However, in this project of improvement, the ideas of (i) aesthetic purity, (ii) valueless materialism or materialism-without-morality, and (iii) aspirations of planned perfectionism, gradually came to dominate the properly ecological and humanist potentials of the modern project. How this unfolded would deserve a history of its own, as simple contingency may have played an important role, and may well be underestimated as contributing factor. Nevertheless, I would like to propose that underneath these three ideas lurks a single issue: the modern mind cannot deal with

contingency and unpredictability, and continually turns to mechanistic materialism in some form or another in order to remedy its insecurities, while at the same time it keeps recreating the very problems it attempts to solve.

These three ideas tie into each other, producing a Gordian knot of cultural decline the consequences of which grow more catastrophic with each epicycle. The idea of a mechanistic materialism without morality amounts to the institutionalization Max Weber's fact-value distinction. The very (Logical Empiricist or Positivist) idea that we can dispose of the world as we please has led to many examples of outright exploitation of natural resources. In the case of modernist minimalism, there has even an entire aesthetic edifice grown up around it. The very cultural image of modernist minimalism is predicated on a sort of luxury showcased through apparent restraint. But the technological requirement of this kind of aesthetic, its ecological footprint, and its often contextless implementation makes for an anti-ecological architecture *pur sang*. The processing required to mass-produce the sleek products of high modernity amount a moral failure on a global scale.

To think about material progress, material conditions or living standards without invoking some kind of moral framework is an impossibility. All too often outright exploitation has been ignored by ascribing it to the "functioning of supply and demand" mechanisms, thereby essentially avoiding the moral questions surrounding the actual material cost of progress.

Nature—the very concept of which is unduly ridiculed nowadays, even by those who ought to know better—is the ultimate context of our existence. Put more broadly, the cosmos is our shared home. However, the aesthetic ideal of purity keep nature at arm's length, opting for a human-nature relation that is blatantly exploitative, destructive, deteriorating, and ultimately domineering. The inability of the modern mind to truly engage with nature has led into a kind of spatial sterility that permeates its architectural output (Paans, 2019, 2023a). The very spaces of modernity take the sanitized world as point of departure and remove all those pesky elements that do not belong in it. Luckily, we can see the tide shifting here and there, but even then, the high modernist mind has not internalized the lesson that we must entangle with nature. Every attempt to drive a hard wedge between nature and culture is bound to reproduce and aggravate the worst tendencies of the mechanistic materialist worldview.

The illusion of control is fully present in modern minimalism and its functionalist offshoots all over the globe. The project of global urbanization is not even thinkable without the high modern mind, its search for control the replacement of nature by concrete and the emergence of an urban society. How fragile this way of inhabiting the Earth is demonstrated daily. Pandemics, rampant wildfires, devastating floods, tragic crop failures, the disastrous effects of pollution, and the

alarming scarcity of clean air and water all show the tremendous impact of humanity's efforts to keep its modern space fully under control. But the *habitus* of modern space is at odds with any harmonious or generative relation towards nature.

All this exploitation, industrialization, and urbanization is pursued in the interest of a vindictive perfectionism that cannot deal with difference, entanglement, and contingency. The very social institutions and their accompanying culture that arise out of this mindset leads to a glorification of technology as the next best thing to be had. But even worse, it leads to a fundamental disdain for our evolutionary origins and our "human, all-too-human" nature. The modern world is made for the machine, not for human inhabitation. Likewise, the sterile, luxurious villa overlooking the landscape that suffers from the consequences of climate change represents an isolated microcosmos of fragile perfectionism, even at the cost of moral failure and the illusion of control.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, monastic minimalism is built on different foundations. It embraces (i) simplicity, (ii) frugality, (iii) its embedding in a larger (cosmic) order, (iv) the direct expression of values in architecture, and (v) a functionality that is fully aligned with these values. Taken together, these five factors allow the existential quality of stillness to emerge. All these elements provide us with the possibility of developing a fully modern, yet also sustainable and conducive way of inhabitation. We should not be blind to the achievements of the modernist minimalist project; and neither should we easily discard the honest emancipatory impulses within that project. However, even the best of intentions are thought-shaped by prior enculturation. The tragedy of the 20th-century "flattening-out" of the modernist minimalist project was perhaps located in its all-too-willing acceptance of reductionist, technocratic premises and an exaggeration of the promises that such an allegiance could realize.

The task for modernity and our future lies once again in deepening, exploring, and interweaving the best of its achievements with the elements that it lost track of. I would argue that these elements have to be brought into a new aesthetic constellation that fully includes nature and culture, entanglement and engagement, as well as negotiating the impact of climatic circumstances. One of the themes that the modern mind (and is mind, that Cartesian ego, not the modern category *par excellence*?) should discover again is corporeality, that notion so crucial to appreciate essential embodiment. The idea that the mind conquers the uncertainties of physical reality by inventing technology is both a truth and a pitfall. Pushed too far, this mindset not only removes contingency and unpredictability, but also creates new problems that it attempts to counter with the same attitude that created them. One of the most persistent problems is the denial of processuality and its accompanying corporeality

and essential embodiment. From the points of view of physics, chemistry, biology, and ecology, we cannot think process without matter. Every process in the world involves bodies and physical transactions of some kind, whether it concerns fungal growth, photosynthesis, gene expression, supernovas, mining rare earth elements, biomass production, or combustion engines. But modernist minimalism is aiming more and more towards a relation to the cosmos by which the very physicality of these processes is regimented and regulated in regular, repetitive patterns. But all these processes create intensities, instabilities, and thresholds that render them unstable, and that make them tip at some point.

This is not a problem by itself, since it is the very mechanism by which nature establishes homeostatic relationships. But for a modern world predicated on the static, generic eternal, all forms of processuality pose a potential threat, because they introduce qualitative differences that undermine the premises on which the modern world is built. Instead, we should take our cue from Peter Hasdell's and Patrick Harrop's artistic practice *Pneuma* (they describe it as a "milieu"), which approaches spatial environments from an evolutionary point of view. Through rapid digital prototyping, various spatial configurations are tried out in succession and involve both form and metabolism (Hasdell, 2010). No architecture is disentangled from the world, and so the very flows that enter and leave any configuration constitute an integral part of how the form develops. Put differently: form is not the consequence of a prior dogma, but the outcome of a multivalent formative process that fully includes climatic factors. But without much effort, we can expand this creative strategy, and see how a truly modern architecture grounded on simplicity beyond high modernism could fully involve fungal, animal, and plant life. Architecture could truly become part of the Earth's body—or, alternatively, an extension of our essential embodiment instead of a mere protective shell.

A different example in which we can truly entangle with the environment is Patrick Beesley's evolving installation *Hylozoic Ground*. This strange installation is an ontological short-circuit from the twilight realm where biology, chemistry, machines of all kinds, and digital technology meet. It is an installation that respond to passers-by and possess its own metabolism. In its current form, it functions as a kind of responsive entity that is not yet an ecosystem, but that unites various elements of it. Its form language is not strictly speaking minimal, but it exhibits a simplicity of some kind, reminding one of lush rainforests and the primitive, prehistoric allure of tree ferns. The strange encounter staged by the *Hylozoic Ground* ensues because it possesses a corporeality and even a kind of agency of its own. But it is precisely natural agency that the modernist minimalist mind is not prepared to deal with. For this reason, it insists on imposing static, Procrustean grids of uniformization and group-think—and no wonder, given its aim to produce the perfect subject in large quantities.



Figure 9: Hylozoic Ground installation by Philip Beesley (2010). Photograph by author.

All this brings us finally to an important moral implication that sharply distinguishes modernist minimalism from monastic minimalism. I have stressed earlier that the notions of difference, individual agency, processuality and its implied variability, and even a kind of cultural deviation all present threats to the stiffening socio-institutional culture of high modernism. However, monastic minimalism, with its emphasis on the transcendent in the everyday, the importance of daily routine, and a functional order based on a larger organicist worldview erects a social-institutional environment in which not perfection, but self-cultivation claims centre stage. To be sure, almost all religious doctrines emphasize that the human condition is certainly not perfect, but they also stress compassion, restraint, stillness, and above all the possibility of change and growth. The imperative of self-cultivation is often couched in a larger, cosmological narrative in which individual lives are existentially situated in a wider context that serves as home, but therefore also as a place where one's existential agency can be responsibly exercised.

Modernist minimalism and its high modernist ideology represent a diametrically different picture: that of the individual on the road to progress, but always on the lookout for impurity and cultural deviation. Moreover, it views human beings as imperfect, but not as an agent of its own salvation, rather as a project to be engineered, manipulated, nudged, and ultimately digitized. The very striving for

perfection inherent in the modernist minimalism of the past 70 years is not the culmination of a process of essentialization, but a symptom of the modern mind. In this essay, I have indicated a few ways beyond the confines of this paradigm, and towards an *ecological civilization* (see, e.g., Gare, 2017): a civilization that will grow and develop in a new, entangled, and above all genuinely simple and sustainable *habitus*.

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