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Every Force Evolves a Form by Alessandro Bava

Much has been written on the Protestant ethics of capitalism, but what are the underpinning ethics of communism? Do they also originate in religious ideas? It is well known that Marx and Engels looked at the experiments of Quakers and the proto-socialism of Robert Owens in the early days of their formulation of an alternative model to capitalism. They also looked at the United States, where the contrast of communist experiments versus the most advanced liberal democracy was starker.
In particular they examined the Shakers, a religious group best known for their practical and meticulously crafted furniture and minimal interiors. I'm interested in the links between this proto-communist experiment, its ethical dimension, and its resulting design ethos—but as viewed from a contemporary context in which we're seeing an explosion of spiritual practices such as mindfulness (and their ambiguous purposing) that have arisen in response to the extreme demands of cognitive work and the commodification of affect and emotion. A new minimalistic material dimension is emerging that defines new habits and habitats, yet distinctly recalls much older kinds of minimalism. It is evident for example in California, a laboratory of sorts where technologies are pushing new forms of adaptation. How do these contemporary minimalisms measure up against older examples? And is it possible to make a different use of them?

89 Historic American Buildings Survey, Lester Jones, and Shakers. *Interesting arches, second floor, Shaker Centre Family Dwelling House Third, North side of Village Road, North of Route 68 & State Route 33, Shakertown, Mercer County, KY*. Kentucky Mercer Mercer County Pleasant Hill Shakertown, 1933. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ky0033/

90 91 Historic American Buildings Survey, Lester Jones, and Shakers. *Double stairway from second floor, Shaker Centre Family Dwelling House Third, North side of Village Road, North of Route 68 & State Route 33, Shakertown, Mercer County, KY.* Kentucky Mercer Mercer County Pleasant Hill Shakertown, 1933. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ky0033/

93 Historic American Buildings Survey, N. E. Baldwin. *Beam construction in attic, Shaker South Family Sisters' Workshop, Watervliet Shaker Road, Colonie Township, Watervliet, Albany County, NY*. Albany County New York Watervliet, 1933. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ny0078/

94 95 Historic American Buildings Survey, N. E. Baldwin. *Detail of ceiling beams, Shaker Church Family Brethren's Workshop, Shaker Road, New Lebanon, Columbia County, NY*. Columbia Columbia County Mount Lebanon New Lebanon New York, 1933. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ny0526/

96 *Concerning Superfluities: Shaker Material Culture and Affinities* installation view at ESSEX STREET, New York, 2019. Courtesy: the artists and ESSEX STREET, New York

99 (Top) Shaker "Tilting" Ladderback Side Chair, c. 1850. Courtesy: the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York
(Middle, from left to right) Wade Guyton, *Untitled*, 2019; Shaker Double Desk, c. 1840. Courtesy: the artists and ESSEX STREET, New York
(Bottom, from left to right) Shaker Livestock Gate, c. 1850, New Lebanon, New York; Sarah Rapson, *Modern Art Banner*, 2011. Courtesy: the artists and ESSEX STREET, New York

100 101 Historic American Buildings Survey, W. F. Winter. *Sewing room, Shaker South Family Sisters' Workshop, Watervliet Shaker Road, Colonie Township, Watervliet, Albany County, NY*. Albany County New York Watervliet, 1933. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/ny0078/

The Shakers were one of many groups of Europeans who migrated to the North American continent to escape emergent industrialization and its supporting economic model. Reacting against the capitalist pursuit of freedom through work and the promise of social mobility, they sought to organize life through personal relationships to Christ with the aim of preparing for a Second Coming and the establishment of a New Jerusalem. Much has been written about Shaker practices, but an aspect of great importance in my discussion is the seeking of a precise balance between order and disorder. Shaker life was rooted in the management of rational and irrational forces, a set of ordered movements and thoughts that led to the building of community and the rational fulfillment of tasks, each to their own ability, following the architectural metaphor of the community as a building and each person a brick supporting it. Their Millennial Laws even prescribed how to lie in bed at night. Countering the order of daily labor was the highly ritualized singing and dancing that gave the community its name—"shaking"—a movement practice connected to a psychological mechanism.

These protocols of life management were designed to support an economic model that drew from the experiments of English Quakers and the proto-socialism of Robert Owens. Shakers sustained a circular economy based on the absence of private property. Nevertheless, their economy could only properly function thanks to the production of surplus goods to be sold to the outside world, and what made these goods particularly attractive and expensive was their impeccable manufacture, supported by a labor culture that aimed for perfection as "making the way of God your own." Thus Shaker communism was possible only as an island immersed in a market economy perceived as a necessary outside evil.

This specific economic model contributed to and informed the Shaker design ethos in both furniture making and architecture—although in this context such terms are already an ideological mystification. The Shakers firmly rejected any specificity to the crafts of making tools for life and their habitat. We must make a clear distinction between Shaker functionalism and the subsequent appropriation of this ethos by modernist ideology: Shaker functionalism is thoroughly inserted in a transcendental ordering of human activities, particularly because each member of the community directly enjoys the benefits of the smooth functioning of the overall machine, down to each and every tool necessary for life. In this sense production is not alienated. Conversely, modernist functionalism is regulated by a strictly capitalist labor model. We can perhaps say that modernism inserted ideas of transcendental functionalism in the ordering of working-class life.

The Shaker saying that "every force evolves a form," despite disciplinary readings of Shaker design,[1] offers an insight into a design methodology that is comparable to—yet profoundly different from—the modernist mantra of "form follows function," and reveals the nuances of a methodology based on the idea of "force." The Shaker phrase seems to express awareness that a "function" might be something more complex than the accomplishment of a task. In drawing a parallel with form via evolution, it seems to naturalize form as inherent in the forces shaping reality, and positions design as a form of augmentation of human spiritual and material life.

This evolutionary approach obviously excludes the idea of design as a way to express individual creativity and artistic sensibility. In fact, the very idea of art never belonged in Shaker society, at least in the beginning. Given the reduced complexity in maintenance of their communities afforded by a non-market-based economy, their ideas of creativity and public morality, or even the expression or sublimation of conflict (modes of contemporary art within a capitalist society), were subsumed by spiritual practice and harmonious coexistence with nature. The Shakers did produce drawings, but these were once again intended as a craft aimed at visualizing symbolic themes and didactic content, and were referred to as "sacred sheet drawings." Art was not tasked to reach for any "outside," as the lives of the members of the community were imbued with purpose and divinity, so any idea of the artist-philosopher-hero who ventures beyond the dominant modes of production to craft a highly specific life that manifests a critique of the dominant *Lebensformen* (life form), a historical product of capitalism akin to a secular religion (when it's not pure entertainment), was completely redundant.

Likewise in urban planning, creativity was limited to solutions rather than expression. Shaker villages were a synthesis of symbolic and functional forms: as I have discussed extensively in an essay on the origins of U.S. cities,[2] the Shaker model for planning towns was directly drawn from measures derived from the Bible. Given that no Shaker had any architectural training, buildings devoted to spiritual, social, or productive practices were arranged in such a way as to promote ease of navigation and intelligibility as an allegory of the Garden of Eden. Colors and building types were immediately associated with functions.

Building interiors presented a complete absence of decoration, and even the use of varnish and colors were prescribed. Light was always maximized because it was seen as a God-given gift and source of all natural beauties, thus buildings were oriented to the movement of the sun, and large windows framed the rural landscape outside. Shakers were not experienced in stonecutting, so they mostly used wood, and followed as much as possible the rule of symmetry, which also reflected their strict gender binary: men and women, although seen as equal members of society, had separate entrances and paths inside buildings, and their presence was regulated throughout the day so that they would meet only at precise moments and always under the watch of the elders. Extensive use of built-in furniture and cupboards freed floor space to allow for easier cleaning and storage of objects. The cupboards were managed by a precise sorting system that concealed, behind a homogeneous and sparse appearance, a complex system of organization.

Most twentieth-century commentary on Shaker material culture focused on the beauty of these interiors and their "warm" functionalism and proto-modern sensibility, which was often instrumentalized to ground modernism within the American tradition. The market for Shaker objects saw a boom in the twentieth century, perhaps arising from the desirable paradox of high craft and minimal aesthetics, which pandered to both a modern aesthetic sensibility and the luxury of craft in an industrialized society. The equation of beauty with austere functionalism is at the root of the ambiguity mentioned at the beginning of the text regarding the common religious roots even within opposing ideologies.

What makes relevant the current re-emergence of interest in these objects is its apparent focus on the *Lebensform* which shaped them, rather than simply be

another instance of object fetishism. Can we put this revival in line with contemporary practices that counter the hyper-commodification of things like food, social life, creativity, housing, and natural resources in general? Somewhat like political agendas in the West (for instance the campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and Bernie Sanders in the United States) are recuperating instances of historical socialism that seemed dead after decades of rampant neoliberalism, perhaps new readings of minimalist practices can be made?

Many political theorists are once again asking if it is possible, based on selective commoning, to imagine new minimalisms that are not rooted in disciplinary practices. To substantiate the current pleas for sustainable economies, it is necessary to draft material cultures based on the idea that "less is enough."[3] If sectors of the economy could be subtracted from the market and deliver only what's necessary, perhaps starting from basic needs (food, health), the making of shelter would be invested with a novel set of preoccupations and agendas.

This new minimalism is thus the result not of an ideology of scarcity and imposed austerity, but of more sustainable use of resources and the care for emotional well-being expressed also through space. This minimalism is not an aesthetic, but in fact a "maximalist" ethos based on plentitude and good management of intellectual, emotional, and material resources. It is grounded in joy and expression rather than repression. It might be possible to escape what Massimo De Angelis has identified as the cycle of commoning and de-commoning at the heart of capitalist cycles, in which "people do reconstitute commons anew, and they do it all the time. These commons help to re-weave the social fabric threatened by previous phases of deep commodification and at the same time provide potential new ground for the next phase of enclosures."[4] Can these strategies of re-commoning be made permanent? As it's now evident that a global market-based economy by design erodes systems of public governance that stand in its way and cannot manage natural resources, new equilibriums must be found, and I believe we must start from the fundamental pillars of human reproduction to imagine alternative models. But of course this cannot be achieved simply by design, because also in politics *every force evolves a form*.

1 For instance Julie Nicoletta, *The Architecture of Control: Shaker Dwelling Houses and the Reform Movement in Early- Nineteenth-Century America* (Tacoma, WA: UW Tacoma Digital Commons, 2003).
2 Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici (eds.), *Rituals and Walls: The Architecture of Sacred Space* (London: AA Publications, 2015).
3 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Less Is Enough: On Architecture and Monasticism* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2014).
4 Massimo De Angelis, "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides," *e-flux* 17, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/.

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