

AR-418

Architecture and monasticism

Aureli Pier Vittorio

Cursus	Sem.	Type
Architecture	MA2, MA4	Opt.

Language of teaching	English
Credits	3
Session	Summer
Semester	Spring
Exam	Oral
Workload	90h
Weeks	12
Hours	2 weekly
Courses	2 weekly
Number of positions	

Summary

This course aims to give a general overview of the history of monasticism in relation to architecture.

Content

EPFL

School of Architecture

Spring 2026

Form(s) of Life

Architecture and Monasticism

Pier Vittorio Aureli

This course aims to give a general overview of the history of monasticism in relationship with architecture. Monasticism can be interpreted as a "form of life": an existence in which what is at stake is the inseparability of life and its form. For this reason, a crucial aspect of monastic life is the rule that monks decide to follow voluntarily. Unlike universal law, or a system of norms, the monastic rule is the approximation of 'a certain kind of life' chosen by the monk. As such, the rule can be revised or even changed, as long it supports the form of life for which the rule was formulated. Monastic architecture is thus the most tangible trace of the monastic form of life. Monasteries or other monastic facilities can be interpreted as spatial diagrams in which every moment of a specific forms of life is given its proper space. Of course, any architecture is, to a certain extent, the manifestation of a way of living. However, within monasticism, the relationship between form of life and built form is especially evident, explicit, and even emphatically expressed.

The common form of life of monastic traditions, both in the East and in the West, was a monk's renunciation of possessions and embracement of poverty. Another relevant aspect present in both Eastern and Western monasticism is the constant negotiation between the initial vocation of a life of solitude (the word "monk" derives from the Greek *monos*, which means "alone") and the necessity to live together as a community. It is precisely the tension between solitude and community that has made monasticism--especially in its earliest phase--a radical *experimentum vitae* in which the individual and the collective are not in antithesis, but, rather, are seen as two arms of the same body. Seen from this perspective, monasticism can be considered one of the most important contributions to modern domestic space, as its main concern was to negotiate the terms of individual and collective life.

The course traces the history of monasticism from its earliest known manifestations in the East to its development in the West. From the inception of Buddhist monasticism in India to the early Desert monks in Egypt and Syria, the course will examine the motivations and historical circumstances that gave origins to the monastic form of life. Each lecture focuses on specific case studies in which architecture has played a significant role, such as the Buddhist cave monasteries in India, the early monastic complexes in the Near East, and the Benedictine, and Cistercian monasteries in Europe. The course will expand the overview of monastic architecture to include the modern offsprings of the monastic influence, like the college and the missions that proliferated in Asia and the Americas under the shadow of Western colonial conquest. Rather than idealizing monasticism as a successful abandonment of society, the course will illustrate how the history of this form of life and its architecture was deeply intertwined with the social and political context that produced it.

1st session, February 19th

Form of Life: Introduction, Key Concepts and Rise of Buddhist Monasticism in India

2nd Session, February 26th

The Stupa, the Cave and the Cloister: The Architecture of Buddhist Monasticism in India

3rd Session, March 5th

Life in the 'Desert': Origins of Christian Monasticism in Egypt and Syria

4th Session, March 12th

The Rise of the Cloister: Monastic Architecture Before the 11th century

5th Session, March 19th

Collective vs. Individual: The Architecture of Cistercian and Carthusian Monasteries

6th session, March 26th

The Monastery and the City: The Architecture of the Mendicant Orders

7th Session, April 2nd

Resisting Patriarchy: The Rise of the *Beguinage*

8th session, April 16th

Institutionalization of Asceticism: The Hindu *Matha* and Monastic Architecture in Central India

9th session, April 23rd

Monastic Offsprings (part 1): The College

10th session, April 30th

Monastic Offsprings (part 2): The Mission

11th Session, May 7th

Monastic Offsprings (part 3): Le Corbusier's Monastery at La Tourette and Dom Hans van der Laan's Mariavall Abbey in Tomelilla

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the student must be able to:

- Interpret in a critical manner the concepts developed during the course
- Argue the relations between rationalism, architecture and class relationships
- Produce a reflection on the relationship between historical conditions and rationalist architecture

Expected student activities

Attendance to the lectures is obligatory.

Participation to the lectures with questions and comments is considered essential for the good working of the course

Personal study of a theme on which individual or group of students (max. 3) write a paper

Assessment methods

The main goal of the course is to provide students with a general knowledge that is fundamental in the history of architecture. This is why besides writing a paper on a specific topic; students are also expected to become familiar with the content of the course itself. Therefore, the main factor in the evaluation will be the student's capacity to assemble and read a relevant body of texts.

40% Specificity of the theme and reading relevant bibliography

40% Writing of the paper, especially referencing and footnoting.

20% Clear oral exposition

Supervision

Others

Assistant: Marson Korbi

Resources

Moodle Link

- <https://go.epfl.ch/AR-418>