

*Preaching, Building, and Burying: Friars and the Medieval City.*

Caroline Bruzelius.

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This book is the fascinating story of the friars' journey from poverty to riches and power. It describes this journey in full and interesting detail and highlights the contradictions of the mendicant orders and foundations. Their original function, as dictated by their founders, was the vow of poverty and to enter into the community to preach, begging for food and accommodation — in marked contrast to the norm of enclosed monastic life. They soon became, however, institutionally rich through means that would now be highly suspect, acquiring land and buildings and becoming prodigious builders in their own right. The book takes us through this process, introducing us to the mendicant orders and their arrival in the Italian city (the study concentrates mainly on Italy).

Essentially, the work is a study of friars through their building practices as well as the “social lives of buildings” over decades and in the throes of change and incompleteness. In chapter 3, “Mendicant Construction Strategies,” this theme is given full analysis, concluding that in the friar's way of doing things, incompleteness was actually an advantage. As they moved into the city — the subject of the next chapter — the friars not only developed buildings, both existing and new, but also opened space, or exploited open space as open space. The piazza became central to the friars' function of preaching, turning the church inside out. The friars' influence on urban and town planning is therefore of particular importance and given full scope throughout. The funds to build and develop, and how they came about them, is given no less attention. The journey from humble beginnings in towns and cities and eventually into private lives and homes — and through this their ability to turn teaching, preaching, devotion, and confession into money — was the crux and fundamental vehicle of mendicant success. In chapter 4, “Money, Social Practice, and Mendicant Buildings,” the full force of these practices are cogently described and explained. Some of them, such as the selling of indulgencies and negotiations of reduced time in purgatory in return for cash — there is no nicer way of putting it — often involved money being handled by third parties, to keep the friars' hands clean. Although normal for the times, these practices would now be considered thoroughly suspicious. Another source of finance was the mendicant order's deep involvement in the rapacious violence of the thirteenth-century Inquisitions. There is also much on burial and the creation of cemeteries — both of which became an extremely lucrative business, especially given the belief that where one was buried had a direct influence on one's chances of going to heaven or the time spent in purgatory. The friars thus engaged in selling burial space and raised considerable funds doing so.

*Preaching, Building, and Burying* is, in sum, centered on the mendicant order's buildings and architecture, together with its procurement methods and funding. Unfortunately, there is very little on the mechanics of building construction or how the orders contracted with builders or employed labor. The illustrations are good,

particularly the photographs, and are clearly referred to in the text; however, of the nine full-page plates, no less than six are duplicated elsewhere in the book, with the exception of one, which is half page, while the other five are near full-page illustrations. This is a strange oversight on the part of both author and publisher, since there surely could have been six further illustrations. There are also many plans, both of buildings and localities, which is good for a book on buildings. But they too fail on many counts: many are small and could have been increased at the expense of the duplicated plates; many are not scaled, which is a must for architectural plans; one shows a plan with a section, but it is not shown on the plan where the section is taken, nor is it clear if the scale is the same; and nearly all lack adequate annotation and clear, succinct, and explanatory captions.

Still, this is a thoroughly good read as well as an important piece of academic writing and research, fully referenced with copious notes. The introduction includes a useful overview on literature in the field, leading to a thorough thirty-eight-page bibliography. It is of clear value to architectural historians and construction historians, as well as those engaged in research on monasticism and the mendicant orders.

Michael Tutton, *Independent Scholar*