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# The Architect as Worker

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Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class,  
and the Politics of Design

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Edited by  
Peggy Deamer

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B L O O M S B U R Y

# **The Architect as Worker**

# Praise for The Architect as Worker

*The Architect as Worker* is completely relevant to understanding the architect's current professional and political predicament. At once historical, theoretical, practical and clear-eyed, it should start urgent conversations across the design disciplines, not just architecture. **Simon Sadler, University of California, Davis, USA**

Architects, students, academics — workers of all kinds — concerned with the question of how the fragmented, homogenized, financialized, blind field that is architecture can simultaneously exploit and allow us to produce new forms of knowledge, need this book. It represents a point of departure for research and a call to act. **Nick Beech, Oxford Brookes University, UK**

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and the Politics  
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Peggy Deamer

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I would like to dedicate this book to the members of the Architecture Lobby who have supported, enhanced, and focused the thinking that lies behind the assembly of this book. I owe you my ongoing thanks.



# Contents

List of illustrations	xi
List of contributors	xiii
Acknowledgments	xx

Foreword	xxi
<i>Joan Ockman</i>	

Introduction	xxvii
<i>Peggy Deamer</i>	

## **Part I The commodification of design labor**

1

<b>1</b>	Dynamic of the general intellect	3
	<i>Franco Berardi</i>	
<b>2</b>	White night before a manifesto	13
	<i>Metahaven</i>	
<b>3</b>	The capitalist origin of the concept of creative work	30
	<i>Richard Biernacki</i>	
<b>4</b>	The architect as entrepreneurial self: Hans Hollein's TV performance "Mobile Office" (1969)	44
	<i>Andreas Rumpfhuber</i>	



## **Part II The concept of architectural labor** 59

- 5** Work 61  
*Peggy Deamer*
- 6** More for less: Architectural labor and design productivity 82  
*Paolo Tombesi*
- 7** Form and labor: Toward a history of abstraction in architecture 103  
*Pier Vittorio Aureli*

## **Part III Design(ers)/Build(ers)** 119

- 8** Writing work: Changing practices of architectural specification 121  
*Katie Lloyd Thomas and Tilo Amhoff*
- 9** Working globally: The human networks of transnational architectural projects 144  
*Mabel O. Wilson, Jordan Carver, and Kadambari Baxi*

## **Part IV The construction of the commons** 159

- 10** Labor, architecture, and the new feudalism: Urban space as experience 161  
*Norman M. Klein*
- 11** The hunger games: Architects in danger 171  
*Alicia Carrió*
- 12** Foucault's "environmental" power: Architecture and neoliberal subjectivization 181  
*Manuel Shvartzberg*

<b>Part V</b>	<b>The profession</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>13</b>	Three strategies for new value propositions of design practice <i>Phillip G. Bernstein</i>	<b>209</b>
<b>14</b>	Labor and talent in architecture <i>Thomas Fisher</i>	<b>219</b>
<b>15</b>	The (ac)credit(ation) card <i>Neil Leach</i>	<b>228</b>
	Afterword <i>Michael Sorkin</i>	<b>241</b>
	Index	<b>249</b>



# List of illustrations

3.1	Friedrich Jakob Tromlitz after Karl Moritz Berggold.	34
4.1	Mobile Office, 9'21".	45
4.2	Mobile Office, 9'40".	45
4.3	Mobile Office, 10'11".	45
4.4	Mobile Office, 10'20".	46
4.5	Mobile Office, 10'33".	46
4.6	Mobile Office, 10'55".	46
5.1	<i>Casual Fridays, Table Top</i> , 2002, Maureen Connor.	62
5.2	<i>Casual Fridays, Exhausted</i> , 2002, Maureen Connor.	71
6.1	Comparison between nominal fee scale structures and fees actually charged or due, all indexed at 2011 construction costs.	86
6.2	Example of the surface-based Tariff of Fees for Architectural Services recommended by the Architectural Institute of British Columbia (AICB).	87
6.3	The time-based logic of the contract agreement for professional services (1002/2003) of SIA, the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects, where construction budget is translated into "average time required in hours" (Tm).	89
6.4	International comparison of percentage differences in building costs in PPP dollars per square meter of internal area in 2013.	92
8.1	"Articles of Agreement for a Town House for Sir William Heathcote at St James Square, London," (1734–6).	126
8.2	"The particulars and estimates of the several works," Tendring Hall, (1784).	128
8.3	Joiner title block, <i>Specification</i> (1898).	130
8.4	Contents page, <i>Specification</i> (1898).	131
8.5	Cover, <i>National Building Specification</i> (1973).	137

<b>9.1</b>	Aerial view, Doha, Qatar.	145
<b>9.2</b>	Education City Central Library, Doha, Qatar, designed by OMA.	146
<b>9.3</b>	Foreign national workers in Qatar from Amnesty International <i>Dark Side of Migration</i> .	150
<b>9.4</b>	Case study Ras Laffan Emergency and Safety College from Amnesty International <i>Dark Side of Migration</i> .	153
<b>13.1</b>	Basic practice business model.	210

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## Foreword

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# Acknowledgments

I am indebted to all of the contributors to this book. Many are writers admired from afar now brought close by the work on these chapters; I have learned from all of them. Others already close have moved beyond positions previously digested to produce surprising and ever-informative speculations. Phil Bernstein and Paolo Tombesi are past collaborators to whom I am particularly and consistently indebted, Phil for his insights into building information modeling (BIM) and new structures of practice and Paolo for demonstrating the advantage of calling all buildings agents “designers.” In addition, Reinhold Martin, and Keller Easterling, not represented here, provide ongoing provocations to my own thinking on how architecture operates in the current global economy. The Vera List Center for Art provides an inspiring model of politically engaged aesthetics currently lacking in architecture. Students in my seminars and my studios at Yale School of Architecture have always made me see architectural design and what it takes to work at it in a new and often inspiring light. The members of the advocacy group The Architecture Lobby (to which I belong and which picks up where the AIA leaves off in advocating for architectural value) have drawn my attention to the full gambit of traumas faced by architecture workers and inspired me as both a thinker and an activist. The members of the women’s group ArchiteXX (“We ask how, not Y,”) and its leaders Lori Brown and Nina Freedman have been at the forefront of identifying the indignities architecture offers most harshly to women but that are experienced by all. And finally, I am beholden to my Assistant Editor, Dariel Cobb, who has made the work of editing this book shared, fun, and consistently provocative. She deserves a great deal more than my thanks.

# Foreword

*Joan Ockman*

A bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.<sup>1</sup>

*Karl Marx*

Marx wrote the above in 1867 in the first volume of *Das Kapital*. Today, according to the post-Marxist concept of “immaterial labor,” the old divide between mental and manual labor has been transcended. Under the currently dominant economic regime known (among many other names) as “cognitive capitalism,” new technologies of design and communication and new forms of work involving the creation of symbolic products and intangible services have short-circuited traditional relationships between conceptualization and realization. Architecture, for its part, understood as a production of not just physical objects but also social relations and images, is deeply implicated in these processes. With the advent of digital fabrication, BIM, and the (eventual) robotized building site, the hive and the idea of the hive are being integrated as never before. At the same time, the architect’s performance can now be stretched geographically over thousands of miles, thanks to new affordances of computerization and sophisticated long-distance control.

So we are all worker bees now... Well, sort of. While some have hailed the most recent transformation of capitalism for its potential to engender new subjectivities, new socialities, and also new, emancipatory politics, others have seen the collapse of the distinction between older forms of labor and knowledge-based work as vastly expanding the realm of capitalist oppression, from the sweatshop to the office cubicle and beyond. As architects fly from job site to job site, as they restock their 3D printers with wax, they may resemble Marx’s drones more than ever. As many commentators have pointed out, intellectual labor has become increasingly arduous and stressful today by virtue of the expansion of the workday to the 24/7 cycle, “flexible” hiring and firing policies, insecurity with respect to healthcare and other social benefits, and—in the particular case of young, highly educated architects—low compensation and unpaid internships.

In fact, in the same chapter where the passage about bees and architects appears, titled “The Labor Process and the Valorization Process,” Marx himself writes in a note,

The distinction between higher and simple labor, 'skilled labor' and 'unskilled labor,' rests in part on pure illusion or, to say the least, on distinctions that have long since ceased to be real, and survive only by virtue of a traditional convention; and in part on the helpless condition of some sections of the working class, a condition that prevents them from exacting equally with the rest the value of their labor-power.<sup>2</sup>

What Marx is suggesting here is that certain workers have historically been incapable of demanding the worth of their labor power from their bosses, whether because of their inferior position or because the value of their labor is difficult to measure or because it is subject to economic fluctuations and changes in the mode of production.<sup>3</sup> These problems are compounded today in the context of a disorganized global "precariat" that has to market its own skills as "entrepreneur of itself." Yet what all forms of labor share under conditions of capitalism—high- or low-skilled, blue-, white-, or pink-collar, at all stages of development and in every part of the world—is the condition of exploitation for the sake of profit. And although theorists across a wide political spectrum have celebrated the immaterialization of work—from neoliberal apologists, to technopians and end-of-work prophets, to post-Workerist militants—the fact is that "real people with real bodies have contributed real time" to the development of the new "weightless" commodities on offer today; and that this labor, despite its cyborg prosthetics and fleetness, does not escape being subsumed by capitalist power.<sup>4</sup> As George Caffentzis has argued in "The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery?" capitalism thrives precisely on uneven development. "The very capital that owns 'the ethereal information machines which supplant industrial production,'" he writes, "is also involved in the enclosure of lands throughout the planet, provoking famine, disease, low-intensity war and collective misery in the process."<sup>5</sup>

As far as architecture is concerned, the focus by theorists like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt on the most advanced sector of capitalism obfuscates a deeper understanding of the contradictions between—and interdependencies of—the different forms of labor that go (have always gone) into the physical realization of buildings. Today both the actual construction site and the factory where—hardly weightless—building materials are produced continue to be hazardous places, particularly when they have moved offshore and out of the range of enforceable safety codes. Just as the glass panels for Joseph Paxton's 1851 Crystal Palace in London emerged out of a smoke-belching factory near Manchester that employed child labor, so the metallic shingles that clad Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao originated not only from the

aerospace-derived software subsequently patented by Gehry Partners in Los Angeles but also from the *terra incognita* of titanium mining in central Russia, where the raw material was extracted.

Today the issue of architectural sourcing and outsourcing is more than a banal matter to be relegated to the business of construction management. More than ever before, it is clear that not very many degrees of separation exist between “here” and “there.” A recent book by Mark Schapiro connects the dots between the greening of the once polluted city of Pittsburgh and the blackening of Guangzhou, an industrial hub in China’s Pearl River Delta of over 15 million people whose population has more than quadrupled since the 1960s. Whereas Pittsburgh’s economy used to be based on greenhouse-gas-intensive manufacturing, the emissions that formerly spewed from its factories have now been replaced by “one of the highest concentrations of green buildings in the United States” and a “greenwalk” running alongside its once toxic rivers. Meanwhile, jobs in the steel industry have migrated to China, and American cities are purchasing that steel to construct their buildings. “The Chinese, in short, are producing greenhouse gases on our behalf,” Schapiro writes.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth recalling that at certain moments in the last century architects sought—however quixotically—to involve themselves directly in questions of labor and production. In 1968, striking architecture students at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris took as one of their rallying cries “three deaths a day on the construction site,” demanding the amelioration of dangerous practices in the French building industry. Further back, after the Bolshevik Revolution, Productivist designers in the Soviet Union, including Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Liubov’ Popova, strove to reform working conditions in the factory. They not only dressed in and designed factory uniforms to express their solidarity with the new proletariat, but in the case of the two women, went directly into textile plants to collaborate with female workers on the production of mass-consumer goods. A new category of “worker-inventor” was put forward at this time to stimulate Soviet workers’ creativity and to help reduce alienation in the Taylorized workplace.<sup>7</sup>

In architecture today, despite the proclaimed integration of all phases of the building process through high-tech management techniques, the rhetoric of immaterial production contributes to absolving architects from accountability to material bodies and places, not to mention provides an alibi from legal liability. In the countries of the Persian Gulf, in the context of one of the largest construction booms in history, migrant workers, mostly from South Asia, are treated by government-sanctioned private construction companies as indentured



servants, housed in miserable camps, and forced to labor under brutal conditions. Western architects, hired to design the spectacular monuments that are transforming this region into a twenty-first-century showplace, have for the most part washed their hands of responsibility. Apropos of his current commission to design another satellite for the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, scheduled to be completed in 2017, Gehry notoriously declared in an interview with *Foreign Policy* magazine that he preferred working for “benevolent dictators” who “have taste.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, amid a mounting storm of condemnation of building practices in this part of the world by groups like Human Rights Watch, he hired a human rights lawyer to vet the situation. Most recently—and in the wake of the hornet’s nest stirred up by Zaha Hadid’s even more unfortunate comments on the architect’s responsibility to concern herself with such matters<sup>9</sup>—Gehry, who is also fond of flaunting his own working-class origins, has released a statement asserting that his firm has had “a substantial and on-going dialogue over many years now [concerning labor conditions on his building sites] that has involved government, the construction industry, architects, project sponsors and NGOs.”<sup>10</sup>

With such high-profile attention being paid, as well as the appearance of books like the present one, perhaps a paradigm shift is at hand. Certainly serious reflection on labor in architecture today must entail a recognition that buildings begin in *both* embodied and disembodied—material and immaterial—production, not just in architects’ designs but also in raw materials from the ground and bodies on the construction site; and they also end there, in physical objects located in actual places as well as in images or “effects” that enter into a cycle of future reproduction and commodification. Nor is the architect’s labor just a finite moment in this chain of production; it is implicated in both immediate and deferred ways at every stage of the building’s existence.

Ultimately what we are talking about with respect to present-day architecture is a division of labor that exists at a planetary scale, an expanded “construction site” that encompasses all the far-flung but environmentally interconnected actors and factors involved in bringing a building to fruition. If material and immaterial processes have always been intertwined in the production of architecture, what is unprecedented today is the degree of interconnection. As far as the architect-as-worker—that is, the architectural worker as a producer of culture<sup>11</sup>—is concerned, we would like to pose the following questions:

How can the architect both *represent* and *embody* the historical conditions and contradictions of architecture’s coming into being?

How can the architect think *all at once* material resources, manufacturing technologies, laboring bodies, the fetish of the commodity, and the production of real, habitable space?

How can the architect give creative and imaginative expression to ideas about how people might live—and the planet might thrive—in the future while also making manifest the collaborative, social nature of all architectural work? If individual signature is a reactionary mark of the marketplace, can the architect be a *de-signer* today as well as a *designer*?

## Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 284.
2. *Ibid.*, 305.
3. Marx goes on to say in the same note that the work of a bricklayer may, through market-related circumstances like labor shortages, come to be valued as highly as that of “men of letters, artists, schoolmasters” and other middle-class workers.
4. For a critique of the concept of immaterial labor, see, among others, Ursula Huws, “Material World: The Myth of the ‘Weightless Economy,’” *The Socialist Register* 35 (1999); quoted phrase, p. 44; and Steve Wright, “Reality Check: Are We Living in an Immaterial World?” *Mute* 2, no. 1 (2005), online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/reality-check-are-we-living-immaterial-world>. Notably, after initially embracing the concept of immaterial labor in their 2000 book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri shifted their vocabulary to “immaterial production,” and also acknowledged that workers involved primarily in this sphere of activity represent only a small fraction of the global workforce. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 65. Yet in insisting on the inexorable hegemony of immaterial production and downplaying the continued existence of older forms of labor, their theory both serves to reinforce the traditional binary, privileging those in the more developed economies of the world, and converges with mainstream capitalist ideology.
5. George Caffentzis, “The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery? A Critique of Rifkin and Negri,” *Common Sense* 24 (1999), 34; the quote within the quote comes from Antonio Negri and Félix Guattari, *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1985), 21.
6. *Carbon Shock: A Tale of Risk and Calculus from the Front Lines of the Disrupted Global Economy* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2014). See excerpt in *The Nation*, “A Tale of Three Cities: How Pittsburgh’s Pollution Became Guangzhou’s Problem—and Manchester Found a Solution,” 27 October 2014, 22–25.
7. See Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), esp. 167–78.
8. Benjamin Pauker, “Epiphanies from Frank Gehry: The Starchitect on His First Project in the Arab World—and Why It’s Hard These Days to Find a Benevolent Dictator

with Taste," *Foreign Policy*, 24 June 2013, online at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/24/epiphanies\\_from\\_frank\\_gehry](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/24/epiphanies_from_frank_gehry)

9. See the contribution to this volume by Mabel O. Wilson, Jordan Carver, and Kadambari Baxi, "Working Globally: The Human Networks of Transnational Architectural Projects" (Chapter 9).
10. See Anna Fixsen, "What Is Gehry Doing About Labor Conditions in Abu Dhabi?" *Architectural Record*, September 25, 2014, online at <http://archrecord.construction.com/news/2014/09/140922-Frank-Gehry-Works-to-Improve-Worker-Conditions-on-Abu-Dhabi-Site.asp>
11. Despite the fact that it was written in the context of an industrial rather than postindustrial society and by a committed socialist, Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Author as Producer" (1934) has not lost its relevance. While Benjamin does not mention architects specifically, what he demands of any artist or intellectual who does not wish to be branded a hack is a radical engagement with the processes of production. His concept of authorship is shorn of romantic notions of autonomy and suspicious of celebrity, but it does not deny the artistic producer a degree of agency.

# Introduction

*Peggy Deamer*

In 1995, I watched a subcontractor plastering the rooms of a house my partner and I had designed. It was clear that he knew every corner of the house in a way we never would. Whose contribution mattered more, his material labor of construction or our immaterial labor of thinking, drawing and model-making? I also felt it clear that if the owners ever gave up the house, they would not be able to sell it to just anyone; they'd be forced to donate it to my partner and me, the only ones who loved it as they did. (Yes, they have since sold it, and no, we weren't its recipients.) Which of us—designer, builder, owner—could rightly say this house was “theirs,” I wondered? What value—emotional, monetary, social—could be placed on our particular role as designers?

Writing about detail in an article for *Praxis* a few years later,<sup>1</sup> when computer-aided manufacturing and prefabrication became hot, the relationship between design, production and ownership was again weighing on me. Who determines the design of the prefabricated house, the fabricators or the architect? And without a patron, could the architecture of prefabrication be commission-free? In factory-based production, design not only could not be distinguished from construction, but the definition of “detail” expanded from the joining of materials in an object to the joining of steps in the production process. Theoretically, I felt it was important to rescue the appreciation of detail from the hands of the phenomenologists who too easily, it seemed to me, equated good design with the sentimental craft attached to the handiwork of beautiful drawings, the traditional product of architectural work.<sup>2</sup> Not only did their conservative position reject digital production and paperless outputs (which just weren't going to go away), but it also kept design in the realm of the elite, since the crafty, one-off buildings they so admired could never find an underprivileged, urban audience. Surely architectural work could move through these procedural changes and still keep alive the flame of detail, craft, and quality design.

My article for *Praxis* in turn led to two “a-ha” moments. One was reading, in Edward Ford's *Details of Modern Architecture*, this quote:

Insofar as twentieth-century architects have concerned themselves with the social consequences of their work, they have focused on the way in which buildings affect the behavior of their occupants. Insofar as 19th century architects concerned themselves with the social consequence of their work, they focused

on the way in which buildings (and particularly their ornaments) affect those who build them. There is perhaps no greater difference between the architects of the 19th century and those of the 20th than that each group was so indifferent to the social concerns of the other.<sup>3</sup>

Why did we architects give up on the worker? And didn't the present emphasis on the intricacies of environmental façades and material performativity invite a reconsideration of the fabricators' essential role in design? In addition to this, the outsourcing of drafting, rendering, and model-making to distant countries implied that even the craft of representation was not an intimate, office-based activity. Shouldn't the larger family of building-makers—fabricators, factory workers, engineers, HVAC consultants, energy specialists, drafters—be consulted about their creative, social, and monetary satisfaction?

The other such moment occurred during research initiated by the *Praxis* article that led to the symposium (2006) and eventual book entitled *Building in the Future: Recasting Architectural Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010) that Phil Bernstein and I organized and edited. A grant from Yale University allowed me to interview engineers, metal and glass fabricators, steel and aluminum factory workers, architects, and software developers to determine their role in the current chain—or was it now a network?—of design command. Besides confirmation of the thought that building work was no longer linearly handed down from architectural auteur, to staff, to contractor, to subcontractor, the interviews indicated the importance of new software supporting building information modeling (BIM) and new contracts allowing Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), frameworks with the potential to change the old design/construction hierarchies for good.

Beyond these explorations into the material and social nature of architectural design, seminars I taught at Yale School of Architecture—"Architecture and Capitalism" and "Architecture and Utopia"—continued the exploration of architectural work and, as a not-too-subtle aside, responded to architectural theory's pathetic avoidance of issues raised by 9/11 or the 2008 financial crisis. "Architecture and Capitalism" examined an alternate historiography of architecture that looked beyond the standard focus on formal, stylistic progression, and attempted to link those changes to transformations in capitalism. Issues of labor are not always paramount in this history, but labor is certainly an important ingredient. The book that this seminar research yielded, *Architecture and Capitalism: 1845 to the Present*,<sup>4</sup> can be seen as the precursor to this more contemporary book. Likewise, "Architecture and Utopia" (a more optimistic alternative to "Architecture and Capitalism") examined societies with varying

attitudes about work: societies like Robert Owen's New Lanark made the work day short so pleasure and leisure could follow. Other societies such as William Morris's in *News from Nowhere* and Charles Fourier's *Phalanstere* promoted work as inherently creative and pleasurable. Marx's utopian society freed the worker from the alienation imposed by capitalism—alienation from one's fellow workers via job competition, from one's products by the division of labor, and from oneself by the false needs of consumption. These latter utopias not only offered a glimmering view of work that many of us entering architecture thought we would experience (designing is fun!), but indicated how work was integral to society in general: how one felt about one's work and how it was assigned value formed the basis of social relationships.

While none of these utopian societies addressed architectural work per se, it became impossible to feel good about the architecture profession. It had become commonplace to see architecture graduates with \$100,000 in debt begging for internships that paid little more than minimum wage, honored to be working 15 hour days, seven days a week as a sign of their being needed; principals of firms working almost exclusively for the rich, trying to prove that their meager fees weren't paying for hubristic self-serving experiments; young architects hoping to move beyond bathroom renovations to possible suburban additions.

Things came to a head on two separate occasions during the last three years. One was an architectural symposium where a young audience member asked the panel what to expect from a career in architecture, to which one prominent, intelligent speaker fervently answered, "Architecture isn't a career, it is a calling!" What? How had we fallen into the same ideology that Christianity used to make the poor feel blessed for their poverty? How could architecture have become so completely deaf to the labor discourse that it could so unself-consciously subscribe to the honor of labor exploitation?

A few months later I was part of a "Who Builds Your Architecture?" panel at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School in New York. Organized by Kadambari Baxi and Mabel Wilson in collaboration with Human Rights Watch monitoring the labor abuse of indentured workers building projects in the Emirates, South Asia, and China, they hoped to initiate pressure on architects designing these buildings to in turn put pressure on their clients to monitor construction protocols. Not a single architect working in these geographic areas would concede to participate in talks, sign a petition, or consider interfering in labor issues. This response was in contrast to the many artists who refused to have their work shown at the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, possibly the most infamous of these questionable projects. How could artists, with less