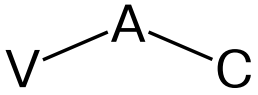
Non-Extractive Architecture

Vol. 1

On Designing without Depletion



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Toward a Critique of Labor in Construction

Swarnabh Ghosh

fig. III.2

I went from construction site to construction site looking for work. Finally, I offered to work for free for one contractor. I told him that he didn't have to pay me if he didn't like my work. He made me work for three weeks before offering to pay me half of what he paid the men, even though my work was cleaner and more efficient from the beginning.[1]

Introduction

In 2017, the US-based collective Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?) published a *Critical Field Guide* to the question it takes as its name.[2] In it, they introduced a number of concepts, terms, and questions that attempted to situate the discipline of architecture—and architects—within the vast transnational circuits of capital and labor that constitute building construction. Most significantly, the guide sought to locate architects and construction workers within the same system, one whose historical trajectories of institutionalization have progressively distanced the designers of buildings from the workers that actually build them; mental labor from manual labor; the design studio from the construction site.

WBYA? emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, an emblematic expression of the crisis tendencies associated with the intensification of financialization and of neoliberal capitalism more generally. In the Global North, the crisis inaugurated a conjuncture that saw the revival of ossified social struggles, the emergence of new

1. Unnamed Indian female construction worker quoted in: Bipasha Baruah, "Women and Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Construction Workers in Contemporary India," *Development in Practice* 20, no. 1 (February 2010): 42, https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520903436935. Thanks are due to Salma Abouelhossein, Neil Brenner, Will Conroy, Sammy Medina, and Khyati Saraf for their generous and incisive comments on earlier drafts.

2. "Who Builds Your Architecture?: A Critical Field Guide," 2017, http://whobuilds.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WBYA_Guidebook_spreads.pdf.

forms of solidarity, as well as the renewal of lively forms of "capitalism talk."[3] WBYA? was a product of this conjuncture and, like the Gulf Labor coalition that preceded it, expressed considerable skepticism toward the geoeconomic and geopolitical processes that had only a decade before been celebrated (if not wholly unreservedly) as globalization, not least by several luminaries of architecture and its allied fields. The group's critical attention to global building construction was catalyzed in turn by the publication of a series of reports by Human Rights Watch that shed light on the exploitative labor arrangements on construction sites in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including the sites of several "icon projects" associated with leading Western educational and cultural institutions, which were by prominent architectural firms headquartered in the US and Western Europe.[4]

Here, then, was the promise of the global architect—a figure unencumbered by the friction of distance and freed from the vagaries of national economies and regional business cycles—undone by its condition of possibility: the exploitation of a cheap workforce secured through the strategies of labor arbitrage that structure capital–labor relations in the global construction industry. Over the past decade or so, groups like WBYA? and Gulf Labor have powerfully illustrated the transnational geographies of construction labor in the Arabian Gulf.[5] They have highlighted, in particular, the forms of labor exaction that have underwritten the "construction boom" in the Gulf Cooperation

3. Nancy Fraser uses the expression "capitalism talk" to refer to the renewal of popular interest in capitalism as an object of discussion and criticism in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Yet much of this capitalism talk, she argues, "remains largely rhetorical—more a symptom of the desire for a systematic critique than a substantive contribution to it." She contrasts capitalism talk with longstanding, if relatively marginal, traditions of "Kapitalkritik": systematic critiques born of historically specific theorizations of capitalism and capitalist society. See Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," *New Left Review*, no. 86 (2014): 55. See also Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2018).

4. "Building Towers, Cheating Workers," Human Rights Watch, November 11, 2006, https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-united; Leslie Sklair, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5. For a collection of essays and artworks chronicling the creation and evolution of Gulf Labor, see Andrew Ross, ed., *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor* (New York: OR Books, 2015).

Council (GCC) countries since the late 1990s and have powerfully brought into relief the laboring existence that underpins construction activity in the region.

While this renewed activist focus on the state of construction labor in the Arabian Gulf during the twenty-first century has generated urgent discussions about labor in relation to "high-profile" architectural projects, it has not yet resulted in a systematic examination of modern construction and its peculiar production process from within the discipline of architecture. In this regard, the transition from "capitalism talk" to "Kapitalkritik" remains incomplete.[6] Moreover, groups such as WBYA? and Gulf Labor have tended to focus on high-profile architectural projects from a northern, often North American, standpoint, with a concomitant field of vision that emphasizes the ineluctable globality of elite architectural practice, typified by the profusion of "starchitecture" in the GCC countries. Consequently, much of this advocacy and activism has focused predominantly on *international* migrant workers—a spatially structured "class of labor" that has shaped and been shaped by the historical trajectory of capitalist development in the Arabian Gulf following the oil boom of 1973/74[7]—at the expense of workers who do not necessarily traverse national borders to work in construction.

Since the publication of the WBYA? *Critical Field Guide*, members of the collective have recognized the need for a "wider dialogue about

6. Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode," 55–56.

7. Adam Hanieh, *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230119604. I borrow the phrase "classes of labor" from Henry Bernstein, see Henry Bernstein, "Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century?," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 27, no. 4 (January 2006): 449–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2006.9669166.

the role of labor in architecture in schools, in architectural offices, and on construction sites."[8] In a subsequent essay, they ask:

> In what type of space might we imagine a conversation taking place between an architect, construction manager, construction worker, and historian? Would the conversation take place in an office, or a school, or an installation, or a construction site? What sort of questions would be raised? And how could one conversation lead to other conversations that begin to make connections and transform hierarchies to become part of a collaborative process that recognizes and protects the dignity of all forms of labor?[9]

This set of questions with which the authors conclude their brief intervention might be read as an injunction to forge new networks of solidarity and comradeship within and between the different "forms of labor" that constitute construction. At the same time, the radical political horizon implied by this injunction requires a reconceptualization of architecture—its social relations, institutions, and knowledge-practices—and construction as "internally related" parts of the same whole. A "philosophy of internal relations," Bertell Ollman explains, "treats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what it is, so that a significant change in any of these relations registers as a qualitative change in the system of which it is a part."[10] An internal

8. Laura Diamond Dixit et al., "Who Builds Your Architecture?," in *Asymmetric Labors: The Economy of Architecture in Theory and Practice*, ed. Aaron Cayer et al. (The Architecture Lobby, 2016), 39.

9. Dixit et al., "Who Builds Your Architecture?," 40.

10. Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 5; see also Bertell Ollman, "Marxism and the Philosophy of Internal Relations; or, How to Replace the Mysterious 'Paradox' with 'Contradictions' That Can Be Studied and Resolved," *Capital & Class* 39, no. 1 (February 2015): 7–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816814564128.

relations approach thus requires that (1) we treat the relations in which a "thing" is embedded as constitutive of the "thing" itself and (2) that we treat changes to a "thing" as an essential dimension and/or stage of what it is. Consequently, a *thing* is "itself both a 'process' and a 'relation,'" and only by "studying enough [...] of the more important relations that make up any whole can we hope to have an adequate understanding of what it is, how it functions, where it is tending, *and how we can affect it*."[11] In other words, an internal-relations approach enjoins us to consider architectural labor and construction labor as co-constitutive *and* co-determining of one another, within but also beyond the extents of the job site. Such an approach challenges us to situate the emergence of new divisions of labor in architecture, or the "globalization of design production," within broader trajectories of capitalist restructuring—including the restructuring of capital-labor relations—in the late-twentieth century.[12]

In its *Critical Field Guide*, WBYA? asks how architects "can be most effective in bettering the conditions of workers employed in building their designs."[13] Developing an adequate response to this question requires reckoning with a series of ethical, political, and normative questions that are analytically prior to yet dialectically entwined with it. Concretely, this means developing a systematic and reflexive *critique* of construction under modern capitalism, not just with regard to its most spectacular, exceptional, and mediagenic manifestations,

11. Ollman, "Marxism and the Philosophy of Internal Relations," 10. Emphasis added.

12. Paolo Tombesi, "A True South for Design? The New International Division of Labor in Architecture," *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (June 2001), https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135501001191.

13. "Who Builds Your Architecture?," 7.

but also in relation to its most banal, quotidian, and modest formations in the North and, perhaps more crucially, in those regions of the Global South—notably China, India, and the UAE—that now account for over 52 percent of the global construction market and where the majority of the world's construction workers labor.[14] While the spectacular object-hood of buildings in the Arabian Gulf offers a particularly evocative contrast to the squalid reality of laboring that underpins their production, the exploitative labor arrangements—wage suppression, racialized wage hierarchies, debt bondage, contingent employment, etc.—typified by this oft-cited example is increasingly the generalized condition of labor-in-construction under neoliberal capitalism.

Developing a critique of construction also entails evaluating architectural theory as it has been constituted over the past half-century in the Euro-American West, its analytical limitations, and its role in institutionalizing an indifference toward construction, that is, the work of building buildings.[15] Despite the epistemic importance accorded to "the site" in the architectural discipline, the *construction site* (or job site) has remained, surprisingly, if not accidentally, a "black box," rarely acknowledged let alone analyzed from within architecture and its associated disciplines.[16] Developing a critique of construction under modern capitalism thus requires contending with the complex configuration of work on the construction site including, but not limited to, the informal buying and selling of labor power, the complicated

14. Michelle Buckley et al., "Migrant Work & Employment in the Construction Sector," Report (Geneva: International Labour Organization, December 18, 2016), http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_538487/lang—en/index.htm.

15. For a brief overview of architectural theory and its complicated and tortuous relationship to Marxism, critical theory, and anticapitalism more generally, see Peggy Deamer, "Introduction," in *The Architect as Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*, ed. Peggy Deamer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), xxvii—xxxvi.

16. For a notable exception, see Kiel Moe, *Empire, State and Building* (New York: Actar Publishers, 2017).

chains of subcontracting that secure cheap labor, the coercive employment structures that enable labor control and discipline, the inextricable dependence of production on gendered forms of social reproduction; in short, the interdependent and mutually reinforcing forms of expropriation and exploitation that *make construction work*.

Characterizing Construction

As an "industry" or a "sector," construction is so volatile, complex, and diverse that it may be better understood as "several overlapping industries" that involve an extremely wide variety of services, occupations, and labor arrangements.[17] This is reflected in the persistent difficulty in quantifying the construction industry and, in particular, the workers who participate in it. According to a recent estimate, construction employs between five to ten percent of the formal sector workforce of most countries.[18] In developing countries such as India—where construction is the largest employer after agriculture—this number is significantly higher—over twelve percent—according to one recent estimate.[19] Yet figures such as these reflect only a fraction of the actual workforce in construction due to the highly informalized nature of its labor process, which typically involves the recruitment of casual labor at multiple stages through a complex chain of intermediaries including subcontractors, agents, and recruiters. In a report published in 2001, the International Labour Organization (ILO) observed that: "The

17. Steven Groak, "Is Construction an Industry?: Notes towards a Greater Analytic Emphasis on External Linkages," *Construction Management and Economics* 12, no. 4 (1994): 289, https://doi.org/10.1080/01446199400000038.

18. Buckley et al., "Migrant Work & Employment in the Construction Sector," 3.

19. Figure extrapolated from Ravi Srivastava and Ajit Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India: A Study Based on Fieldwork in the National Capital Region of Delhi" (Jawaharlal Nehru University: Center for the Study of Regional Development, April 2016).

outsourcing of labor through subcontractors and other intermediaries is now the norm in most countries. This means that work in construction has become increasingly temporary and insecure, and workers' protection (where it existed) has been eroded as large numbers are excluded from social security schemes."[20]

The rapid increase in the informalization of work in the neoliberal phase of global capitalism has exacerbated the flexible and casual conditions of work in the construction industry globally. If informality, as Jill Wells argues, "is now the norm [...] in the construction industry throughout much of the developing world," it is also increasingly common in the construction sectors of rich, developed states.[21] For instance, a study found that since the 1970s, the construction sector in California has made a turn toward informalized work, with informal workers accounting for nearly seventeen percent of the total construction workforce in 2012.[22] This racialized informal workforce—comprising undocumented migrant workers as well as workers (mis)classified as "independent contractors"—is subject to severe wage disparities, and thus higher rates of exploitation compared to the "formal" unionized workforce. Stepping outside the confines of WBYA?'s critical apparatus, it becomes clear that the depredations of labor exaction in the construction industry extend far beyond the urban agglomerations of the Arabian Gulf. Indeed, the condition of possibility for construction under modern capitalism is *the systemic overexploitation of labor power*.

20. International Labour Organization, "The Construction Industry in the Twenty-First Century: Its Image, Employment Prospects and Skill Requirements" (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2001), 1–2, https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/ilo-bookstore/order-online/books/WCMS_PUBL_9221126226_EN/lang—en/index.htm.

21. Jill Wells, "Informality in the Construction Sector in Developing Countries," *Construction Management and Economics* 25, no. 1 (January 2007): 91, https://doi.org/10.1080/01446190600601339; see also Jill Wells and Arthur Jason, "Employment Relationships and Organizing Strategies in the Informal Construction Sector," *African Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 2–3 (2010): 107–24.

22. Yvonne Yen Liu, Daniel Flaming, and Patrick Burns, "Sinking Underground: The Growing Informal Economy in California Construction," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, September 1, 2014), https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2772783.

Labor-in-Construction

While the informalization of work, the growth of the "informal economy," and the persistence of wagelessness—as a vast and growing body of scholarship shows—are structural features of capitalist development in the second half of the twentieth century, construction has historically occupied the leading edge of these transformations in the political economy of labor. This is due to several interrelated and contradictory characteristics of construction that result from its functional centrality to the urbanization of capital:

1. Construction is an intrinsically "labor-intensive" sector due to the relatively low rate of growth in mechanization and automation in its production processes. Productivity gains through labor-saving technologies have remained elusive, and production has continued to rely upon large supplies of specialized *and* unspecialized ("skilled" and "unskilled") workers, as well as complex functional divisions of labor. The consulting firm McKinsey & Company, a reliable gauge of capitalists' preoccupations, lamented that construction has "an intractable productivity problem" with labor-productivity growth averaging a paltry one percent since the late 1990s compared with 3.6 percent for manufacturing.[23]
2. The production of the built environment, as David Harvey has long argued, is one of the principal mechanisms through which capital

23. McKinsey Global Institute, "Reinventing Construction: A Route to Higher Productivity," 2017, 15.

counteracts or postpones crises of overaccumulation.[24] Since the 1970s, the state-backed financialization of the world economy has lubricated a "huge flow of excess liquidity into all facets of urbanization and built environment construction worldwide."[25] At the same time, debt-fueled overinvestments in the built environment over the past three decades have become both triggers as well as epicenters of crisis formation in the world economy.[26] As a set of production processes that mediates and materializes the capital-urbanization nexus, construction tends to be acutely sensitive to the vicissitudes of regional, national, and global economies.

3. Unlike traditional forms of industrial manufacturing, construction operates according to the temporal logic of a "project" that grounds it in a specific place for a relatively short period of time. Once a project is completed or a building built, construction operations typically relocate. The ability to recruit and dispose of labor, to sequentially reorganize divisions of labor *within* a project, to consolidate and manage commodity chains, to move machinery, materials, and people around—namely *flexibility*—has long been a *sine qua non* of the construction industry. For this reason, construction has historically depended on casualized forms of employment and "temporary" workers. Some scholars of construction have argued that the "flexibilization" of construction underwent a phase shift with the creation of an "international construction system" in the 1970s.[27]

24. David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006).

25. David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 85.

26. Michelle Buckley, "From Kerala to Dubai and Back Again: Construction Migrants and the Global Economic Crisis," *Geoforum* 43, no. 2 (March 2012): 250–59, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.09.001.

27. See, for instance, Jill Wells, "Labor Migration and International Construction," *Habitat International* 20, no. 2 (June 1996): 295–306, https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-3975(95)00064-X; Stephen Drewer, "A Perspective of the International Construction System," *Habitat International* 25, no. 1 (March 2001): 69–79, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975(00)00027-8.

While this was closely connected to the building boom—itself an outcome of the geopolitically mediated oil boom—of the 1970s in the oil-exporting states of the Arabian Gulf, the consolidation of a flexible international supply of construction labor had a significant impact on the wages and working conditions for construction workers in several countries, including those that "exported" cheap labor to the Middle East.[28] In this regard, the construction sector has been a vanguard of the "flexibilized" production processes and contingent employment structures that have come to characterize labor-capital relations under contemporary "supply chain capitalism."[29]

4. A consequence of construction's "labor-intensive" nature and endemic volatility is its systemic reliance on a reserve army of labor—a large pool of flexible (i.e., disposable) workers "on which to draw in boom times, and shed at the end of a project, or during times of market contraction."[30] While this reliance on a reserve army of labor (or in Marx's original formulation, the "industrial reserve army") is an inherent tendency of construction in the North as well as in the Global South, the dynamic of employment/unemployment/underemployment in construction manifests in regionally specific ways. For instance, the origins of contemporary labor relations in construction in the Arabian Gulf lie in the creation—through the strict circumscription of citizenship rights—of a massive, historically mutating reserve army that includes hundreds of millions of people

28. Wells, "Labor Migration and International Construction."

29. Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 2 (April 2009): 148–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690902743088.

30. Buckley et al., "Migrant Work & Employment in the Construction Sector," 15.

in parts of North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.[31] "The value of labor power in the Gulf," as Adam Hanieh writes, "is not measured by the cost of reproduction in the Gulf States themselves, but relative to the cost of labor power in the home country of the worker."[32] The size and geoeconomic diversity of this "potential pool of workers" thus enables greater rates of exploitation as the Gulf States are able to adapt their geographical configuration to exploit lower costs of labor power (wage differentials) in order to lower the wages of workers in the Gulf itself.

5. A recent ILO report notes that capitalist urbanization often creates "the migrant workforce needed for its own production."[33] Nowhere is this truer than in contemporary India. While it is a leading exporter of construction labor to the Gulf States, the volume and intensity of this international migration pale in comparison to the internal migration that underpins construction activities in India, where a majority of the estimated fifty million people employed in construction are domestic migrants. The mutually constitutive waves of urbanization and depeasantization unleashed by the liberalization of the Indian economy have swelled the ranks of the dispossessed—those smallholders and marginal farmers who, having lost access to their land and their means of subsistence, rely upon the sale of their labor power *elsewhere* to survive.[34] This "footloose" army of un- and underemployed labor constitutes the bulk of the construction

31. Adam Hanieh, "Overcoming Methodological Nationalism: Spatial Perspectives on Migration to the Gulf Arab States," in *Transit States: Labor, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, ed. Abdulhadi Khalaf, Omar AlShehabi, and Adam Hanieh (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 67.

32. Hanieh "Overcoming Methodological Nationalism," 66.

33. Buckley et al., "Migrant Work & Employment in the Construction Sector," 10.

34. For the relationship between urbanization and depeasantization, see Farshad Araghi, "The Invisible Hand and the Visible Foot: Peasants, Dispossession and Globalization," in *Peasant and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation and the Agrarian Question*, ed. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay, Routledge ISS Studies in Rural Livelihoods 2 (London: Routledge, 2009), 111–47; Swarnabh Ghosh and Ayan Meer, "Extended Urbanization and the Agrarian Question: Convergences, Divergences and Openings," *Urban Studies* (August 2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020943758.

workforce in India.[35] Yet, because it has access to an "ever-increasing pool of labor from rural areas," the construction industry routinely drives up the rate of exploitation by lengthening the workday and depressing/withholding wages. Indeed, a 2016 study found that in Delhi, over 95 percent of workers received wages that were below the legal minimum of approximately Rs. 279 (approximately USD 3.79) for eight hours of work.[36] Thus, if Jan Breman's "wage hunters and gatherers" convene in the construction sectors of India's largest and richest cities, they do so only temporarily; as disposable and "rapidly replaced" bodies laboring under conditions of extreme precarity.[37]

Production and Social Reproduction

The foregoing discussion has briefly characterized the specificities of the labor process in construction. In this penultimate section, I will focus on a dimension of laboring that has largely been neglected not only by architectural research on construction labor but even by analysts and scholars of construction: the role of social reproductive labor in making construction work. Social reproduction comprises those processes directly involved in the production of labor power—that is, the maintenance, replenishment, and regeneration of the workforce on a daily and intergenerational basis. Since the late 1970s, Marxian feminists have argued that gendered forms of work in the realm of social

35. Jan Breman, *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108687485; Srivastava and Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India."

36. Srivastava and Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India," 52.

37. Jan Breman, *Wage Hunters and Gatherers: Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of South Gujarat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books in association with *New Left Review*, 1990), 380.

reproduction constitute the essential "background condition of possibility" for capitalist production.[38] Yet much of the work of reproduction is "necessarily" unpaid and occurs outside the zone of commodity production and exchange. As Jason Moore explains: "To sustain the full costs of household reproduction within the commodity system would quickly bring the [capital] accumulation process to a halt. [...] Historically, even in the heartlands of proletarianization, the reproduction of labor-power has depended on all manner of unpaid work, or work remunerated at a level insufficient to reproduce labor power *on its own*."[39]

This fundamental insight—built upon from the pioneering work of Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Maria Mies, among others—analytically internalizes reproductive activities within the process of capitalist production. Similarly, Alessandra Mezzadri has argued that the growth and intensification of informalized labor arrangements in tandem with the evisceration of collective bargaining have heightened the role of social reproductive activities in capitalist value generation.[40] On this account, direct and indirect control over social reproductive arrangements play a crucial role in processes of exploitation and surplus labor extraction in several distinct ways. These include:

1) the extension of labor control beyond the workplace and the working day by instituting employer-controlled accommodation that blurs

38. Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode"; see Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

39. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015), 223.

40. Alessandra Mezzadri, "On the Value of Social Reproduction: Informal Labor, the Majority World and the Need for Inclusive Theories and Politics," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (2019): 33–41.

the spatio-temporal separation between work and nonwork. Under these conditions, the workplace is often the same as the worker's domestic space, and work time bleeds into reproductive (or non-waged) time, enabling greater rates of exploitation;
2) the systematic externalization of the cost of social reproduction by "offloading" reproductive work to individual workers, their families, kinship groups, community networks, homesteads, etc. This unpaid reproductive work, including gendered forms of domestic labor, thus serves as a subsidy to capital that further enables higher exploitation rates through wage theft, wage depression, and the curtailment of social protections;
3) the "formal subsumption of labor" by global supply chains as disparate smallholders, home-based workers, and domestic production units are incorporated within decentralized production networks obliterating the distinction between the time of work and the time of nonwork (life).[41]

Production, according to this perspective, relies on the systematic expropriation of unpaid reproductive work or, conversely, on the systematic externalization of social reproductive costs. This integration of (unpaid) reproductive labor within the production process is particularly extreme in the construction industry in India, where women make up as much as fifty percent of the total workforce.[42] Here, construction in the

41. Mezzadri, "On the Value of Social Reproduction," 39.

42. Susan Moir, "Building Bridges: A Comparative Study of Women Working in the Construction Industry in India and the US," *Labor and Development* 23, no. 2 (2016): 1–17; Baruah, "Women and Globalization."

late twentieth century has come to rely upon a consistently expanding pool of "unskilled" migrant workers, a vast majority of whom are driven to construction work in cities as a means of escaping, however temporarily, the "reproduction squeeze" brought on by the long-simmering agrarian crisis of the post-liberalization era. A key characteristic of this circular distress migration is its increasingly "family-based" nature, where the entire household migrates to cities in search of employment, often as casual or seasonal workers on construction sites.[43] At the same time, these migrants are denied the rights, benefits, and protections of urban citizenship in the destinations to which they migrate, for it is precisely the growth and persistence of this mass of "footloose" labor that ensures the availability of a cheap labor pool for the construction industry. This growing supply of migrant labor enables employers and local governments to "divest themselves of the responsibility of meeting the full costs of social reproduction of the laborers" and maintain low wages.[44]

Even as circular migration enables dispossessed peasant households and erstwhile agricultural laborers to gain access to employment, the nature of this employment is dialectically bound to the ready availability of a migrant workforce in the first place. As a result, the jobs that await distress migrants tend to be low-paying, informal, and precarious, while the spaces they inhabit—sidewalks, slums, squatter settlements, shantytowns, and work sites—limit their access to even the most basic needs of daily reproduction. Thus, the reproduction

43. Isabelle Guérin, G. Venkatasubramanian, and S. Kumar, "Debt Bondage and the Tricks of Capital," *Economic & Political Weekly*, no. 26–27 (2015): 11–18.

44. Srivastava and Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India," 69.

squeeze that pushes them out of the agrarian hinterland is displaced to and replicated in urban metropolitan regions, which in turn locks migrants into an unending, inescapable spiral of migration. The spatial displacement and temporal deferral of social reproductive pressures constitute a central contradiction of informal work in modern India; one whose resolution often falls squarely on the shoulders of women, who bear the "double burden" of performing "productive" work *and* social reproductive labor—often at the same time and in the same place. Thus, "the difficulty of securing the conditions of social reproduction even after migration makes the 'subsidy' provided by the unpaid reproductive labor of women critically important."[45]

Construction in India runs on this "subsidy." As Marx famously wrote:

> Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labor-power. What interests it is purely and simply the maximum of labor-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labor-power, in the same way as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility.[46]

On Indian construction sites, the exhaustion that issues from the drive to maximize labor time is mitigated, in the short run, by the inten-

45. Smriti Rao and Vamsi Vakulabharanam, "Migration, Crises, and Social Transformation in India Since the 1990s," in *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, ed. Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190856908.013.49.

46. Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 376.

sification of the unpaid labor of women workers who are, at the same time, subject to the very same imperatives of capitalist production as their male counterparts. On the work site, women are confined to the lowest rung of the work hierarchy and "engaged almost exclusively as casual manual laborers [...] mostly head-load workers, who carry bricks, cement, sand, and water from one place to another."[47] Even in this realm of so-called "unskilled" work, women are generally paid lower wages than male workers with almost no possibility of moving up the job ladder. In addition to this literally back-breaking work, women continue to perform the unremunerated reproductive labor required to maintain themselves and their families on a daily basis. Much of this reproductive labor is performed in their place of work, specifically the active construction site, which, consequentially, also doubles as their place of residence. Indeed, a 2016 survey conducted in Delhi found 62 percent of women with children cared for them "on or near the [construction] sites during work hours."[48] Housing workers on or in close proximity to construction sites is institutionalized in the *Building and Other Construction Workers Act* of 1996, which states that "the employer shall provide, free of charges and within the work site or as near to it as may be possible, temporary living accommodation to all building workers employed by him [*sic*] for such period as the building or other construction work is in progress."[49] Typically, these "accommodations" take the form of sheds or hutments situated within the limits of the work site, often lacking basic amenities

47. Baruah, "Women and Globalization," 32.

48. Srivastava and Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India," 65.

49. "The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act," § VI (1996), https://clc.gov.in/clc/acts-rules/building-and-other-construction-workers.

such as running water, sanitation, and drinking water.[50] In Indian cities, it is therefore common to witness entire families, including infants and young children, inhabiting construction sites. This housing arrangement enables employers to exert control over the lives of workers even as they offload the costs and responsibility of providing the most basic conditions of social reproduction. This reproductive burden is carried by women workers, the intensification of whose unpaid labor—collecting water and firewood, cooking, washing, and caring for their children—becomes integral to the maintenance and reproduction of labor power.

Coda

The purpose of this brief intervention has been to outline the rudiments of a critique of labor-in-construction. In order to do this, I have characterized the specificities of the capital-labor relation that underpins construction as a process of production. WBYA? describes the job site as "the place where increasingly ephemeral drawings and abstract forms of labor become identifiable and concrete."[51] I have tried to show, using the example of India, how the construction site ("the job site") constitutes a peculiar space where capitalist production and social reproduction, paid and unpaid labor, *work* and *life* are increasingly imbricated. This essay, then, is both an extension of the important activist-scholarship initiated by WBYA? as well as a preface to a broader, purposive, and systematic critique of construction under modern capitalism.

50. Srivastava and Jha, "Capital and Labor Standards in the Organized Construction Industry in India," 69.

51. "Who Builds Your Architecture?: A Critical Field Guide," 53.

The purpose of such a critique is not simply to prescribe "solutions" to the vexing contradictions attendant to construction under capitalism, but also to decipher the actually existing relations of exploitation, expropriation, and domination that make construction possible. These relations remain largely unexplored in the discipline of architecture, due, *inter alia*, to the persistence of theories of "architectural autonomy" and the ascendance of "post-critical" and "post-political" modes of theorizing in North America and Western Europe.[52] In addition to its obvious analytical limitations, this disciplinary lacuna has also meant that incipient struggles around the working conditions of architects have remained at a distance from the struggles of construction workers in the North as well as the South. By treating the work of *designing* buildings and the work of *building* buildings as internally related parts of the same whole, we might yet find that the fate of the architectural designer in a New York studio is always already entwined with that of the head-load worker on one of Delhi's construction sites.

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52. For a powerful critique of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century architectural theory, see Douglas Spencer, *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), Chapter 3.