



# SÉRGIO FERRRO

ARCHITECTURE  
FROM BELOW



**Sérgio Ferro**

**Architecture from  
Below: An Anthology**

**Dedalus-Acervo-IAU**



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# Preface

For the architect, theorist, and historian Sérgio Ferro, to look at architecture from below means putting the building site and building workers at the centre of architectural enquiry:

We left to one side the conventional, supposedly autonomous history that recounts the transition from architect to architect, trend to trend, style to style. We tried instead to develop a history that enables one to see both head and feet at the same time — the magnanimous ideal and the muck down below. A history of architecture seen from the building site.<sup>1</sup>

If at first an apparently obvious move, it will soon strike readers of this collection how rarely the process of building features in architectural history and theory. When it does feature, as Mark Jarzombek has shown with respect to Filarete's *Libro Architetonico* amongst other well-known treatises, these will be the sections that are overlooked and disregarded by later commentators.<sup>2</sup> This persistent dismissal and neglect of building labour is no mere oversight, Ferro argues. It is a structural necessity of capitalist development which serves to deny labour as the source of value, make capital's command appear mandatory, and maintain the profession's capacity to act 'on' and 'over' the building site. The processes and techniques of design which constitute architecture and separate it from the building site also elevate it — relegating the know-how and cooperative work of building to 'the muck down below', not to mention materially altering and disempowering building workers and their collective knowledge.

The impact of these insights is extensive. Taking the building site as the essential determinant — and not just an annoying contingency halfway between thought and the finished object —

1 FERRO, *From Strasbourg to Paris*, [2004] below pp. 47–72.

2 Cf. JARZOMBEC, *Architecture Constructed: Notes on a discipline*, 2023, in particular pp. 187–193.

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makes so-called high architectural culture appear in a different light. Instead of eternal values, abstract formal qualities, or fictitious users, the focus will be on real people, materiality, class struggle, production and reproduction of life, social domination, and the possibilities of emancipatory practices. This collection of Ferro's writing offers English readers access to such a theoretical approach, which was initially mobilised by the author's experiences in Brazil and on the supposed periphery of our global society and then increasingly engaged with European sites and histories.

This anthology, the first of three volumes, introduces Ferro's research on architecture and the fine arts. Its ten chapters, written between 1967 and 2019, are organised into sections: 'Structuring the Approach' provides a theoretical framework on architecture's material and social production, and its role in capitalist societies; 'Cases of Critical History' are texts that further elaborate this framework, showing how European architecture and arts have changed in line with capital; 'On Politics and Potentials' brings together manifestos for transforming our practices and research; and 'Revisiting a Context' looks back at Brazil's architecture of the mid-twentieth century, that is, the historical and geographical context where Ferro's critical thinking emerged. This anthology will be followed by *Design and the Building Site and Complementary Essays*, which centres on Ferro's seminal text from 1976 dissecting the objective and subjective structure of building sites as capitalist production units and of design as their dialectical counterpoint. The third volume of the collection, *Construction of Classical Design*, is a historical analysis that begins in the late Gothic period and critically traces the emergence of the figure of the architect and corresponding design and building practices.

Ferro's work has been published in Brazil and partly in France, but has until now been hardly known in the English-speaking world. A few words about his biography may therefore be useful. Ferro was born in the Brazilian city of Curitiba in 1938 and raised in São Paulo, where he studied architecture at the University of São Paulo's Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism (FAUUSP) from 1957 to 1961. While still an undergraduate, he joined the Brazilian communist party and started an architectural office with his childhood friend Rodrigo Lefèvre. After some small commissions, the pair worked on projects for the new capital Brasília, including the design of two high-rise buildings. This was where they had, as Walter Benjamin would put it, their 'awakening from the collective dream'.

In view of the working and living conditions on those large construction sites, the dream of social development and justice that inspired the architectural discourse of the time seemed like

sheer mockery. When in 1961 Flávio Império joined their office, completing the group which would later become known as Arquitetura Nova, they tried to counteract those conditions, namely by claiming for the concrete production of architecture a share of the relatively free labour they themselves experienced in other fields. (For Ferro, painting provided the experience of free labour — he has painted prolifically and successfully throughout his life.) But they also became aware of the structural nature of the constraints they were fighting against, that is, constraints that apply to any architectural production under capital. This realisation was further developed by Ferro's immersion in the study of political economy and its critique. At the same time, he was drawing insights from the history of architecture, a subject which he started to teach at FAUUSP in 1962.

In 1964, the military staged a coup and took power in Brazil, overthrowing the leftist president João Goulart and gradually tightening repressive measures. Ferro left the communist party for groups undertaking harsher forms of resistance, which finally resulted in his arrest in December 1970. Any hope of another kind of production seemed buried at that point. But over his twelve months of political imprisonment, with all their horrors, Ferro met a number of construction workers who were also imprisoned, getting to know them and their views much better than architects usually do.

When he decided to self-exile in France shortly after his release he found the spirit of 1968 still very much alive. He was able to begin anew, this time on the academic front because — paradoxically — his Brazilian diploma allowed him to teach architecture but not practise it. As a professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble, he finished the Portuguese version of *Design and the Building Site*, and went on to establish the Dessin/Chantier laboratory together with colleagues and students, engaging in extensive historical, theoretical, and technical research. The laboratory's name, with its dividing slash, expresses the approach: discerning building processes and their social relations 'under' the design logic that rules 'over' them since the late Middle Ages. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Dessin/Chantier members collectively and individually produced a number of publications and exhibitions. Ferro's contribution was recognised with several awards, including the title of *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 1992. Despite retiring from teaching in 2003, he continues to research and write.

We first realised the demand for English translations of Ferro's work when in 2014 Ferro was invited as a keynote speaker to the 11th AHRA International Conference 'Industries of Architecture' (IOA), held at Newcastle University. The excitement and



interest in his talk (published here as 'Dessin/Chantier: An Introduction for Newcastle') was palpable amongst delegates. Over a number of years we three — Katie Lloyd Thomas, one of the organisers of IOA, and Silke Kapp and João Marcos Lopes, both friends of Ferro's and scholars of his work — put together a project to translate some of Ferro's key texts into English and explore the potential of his insights for consolidating the research area of Production Studies as a much needed approach to architecture and any discipline where there is a separation between mental and material work. The resulting four-year project *Translating Ferro / Transforming Knowledges of Architecture, Design, and Labour for the New Field of Production Studies* (TF/TK) launched in October 2020, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP). João Marcos de Almeida Lopes (Institute of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo, Brazil) and Katie Lloyd Thomas (School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University, UK) co-ordinated TF/TK, and Silke Kapp (Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil) led the translation work. TF/TK brought together over fifty scholars and practitioners from Brazil, the UK, and around the world, including doctoral students, independent researchers, and academics from a range of institutions — a large team for a large challenge.

Together, as the English translations of the texts collected in this volume became ready, the TF/TK team developed our understanding and discussions of Ferro's work through monthly online reading groups (one in English, one in Portuguese) open to anyone interested in participating. With these discussions we recognised the disappearance of the construction site, or any reference to the work undertaken in the production of architecture: mentions here and there, among the writings of Vitruvius, Palladio, Benevolo, Giedion, or Tafuri — but few enough to be counted on one's fingers.<sup>3</sup> In general, it seems that historiography and theory of architecture end up building for themselves a kind of high observation tower: looking from above, they are able to see architecture as a cultural field, to follow the movement of its protagonists, and to pay attention to exceptional outputs. All of this favours heuristic autonomy and philosophical status, while ignoring millions of other characters, as well as the broader context of capitalist production of which this field is part. The silence about the amount of human labour invested in the production of built space is embarrassing. Even authors focused on production rather than reception — such as Henri Lefebvre or David Harvey — dedicate themselves more to the macrostructural relations determining the dynamics of value reproduction than to the mechanical minutiae linking the production of space to

3 Cf. LOPES & LIRA, *Memória, silêncio, duração*, 2013.

daily work on construction sites. Such an historical silence is of course in tune with the erasure of the conflicting relations between capital and labour.

We find it necessary therefore to question this gap. It is time to end this silence and look at buildings and cities from the perspective of their material production. The work of Sérgio Ferro, starting with the breadth of writings collected here, is a unique first step in this project. Together with the volumes *Design and the Building Site and Complementary Essays* and *Construction of Classical Design*, these texts provide the most sustained and precise companion we know for our tasks of analysis, critique, and change — for an architecture from below.

Katie Lloyd Thomas, João Marcos Lopes, Silke Kapp  
Newcastle, São Carlos, Belo Horizonte, August 2023