

ProBE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

fABE – FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

WBS – WESTMINSTER BUSINESS SCHOOL



SYMPOSIUM:

ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDING LABOUR:

AFTERWORD OR PROLOGUE?

DATE: **Friday 15 July 2016, 10.30am-5.30pm**

VENUE: **Board Room**, University of Westminster Regent Campus,
309 Regent Street, London W1B 2UW
(Oxford Circus underground, then Regent Street, north west side)

ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

This symposium seeks to discuss the changing relationship between the role of the architect and building worker, as well as the role of labour in the production of architecture. How is it possible for construction to be a truly collaborative process in which building labour is included from the very early stages of design? Is there any consensus that this is a state that should be aimed for? Are there historical examples of collaborative design and build projects? Does collaborative architecture look different and have a recognisably different aesthetic or are architectural aesthetics unrelated to the building process? And surely such collaboration is essential for low energy construction to combat climate change?

10.30-11.00	REGISTRATION AND COFFEE		
11.00-11.10	Welcome: Symposium theme and housekeeping		
SESSION 1: SOCIAL & HISTORICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN BUILDING WORKERS AND ARCHITECTS CHAired BY			
11.10-11.30	Labour and architecture	Christine Wall	ProBE/University of Westminster
11.30-11.50	The example of Qatar	Fran Tonkiss	London School of Economics
11.50-12.10	The socially engaged architect	Geraldine Denning tbc	Architects for Social Housing/ DeMontfort University Leicester
12.10-12.30	Design as part of the construction process	Jörn Janssen	European Institute for Construction Labour Research
12.30-13.00	Discussion	All	
13.00-14.00	LUNCH		
SESSION 2: DIVISIONS BETWEEN ARCHITECTS AND BUILDING LABOUR CHAired BY:			
14.00-14.20	Disputes and divisions between building workers and architects	Linda Clarke	ProBE/University of Westminster
14.20-14.40	The gap between site and design office	Colin Gleeson	ProBE/University of Westminster
14.40-15.00	Producing the West Bromwich temple: cultures of work and querying 'history'	Megha Chand Inglis	Cardiff University
15.00-15.30	Discussion	All	
15.30-15.45	TEA		
SESSION 3: A FUTURE COLLABORATIVE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS CHAired BY			
15.45-16.05	Breaking down barriers	Tessa Wright/ Kath Moore	Queen Mary, University of London Women into Construction
16.05-16.25	Low energy construction for design: the need for collaboration	Fran Bradshaw	Anne Thorne Architects
16.25-16.45	The changing role of labour	Denis Doody	UCATT/Unite
16.45-17.15	Panel Discussion		
17.15-17.30	Summing up		

To reserve a place please contact: please contact:

Christine Wall c.wall@westminster.ac.uk or Linda Clarke: clarkel@westminster.ac.uk

ProBE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM



Although architects are part of the overall construction process, relations between architects and building workers and recognition by architects and architectural historians of the importance and significance of the construction labour force to fulfilling their design intentions have often been weak. There are frequent laments over the lack of skills to be found in the workforce, while at the same time adversarial positions between building workers and construction professionals are often the norm on building sites. Labour, when mentioned at all, is usually added to accounts of architecture and construction as an afterword as in ‘after all, if it wasn’t for the builders it would not get built’. This is perhaps not surprising, as from the perspective of the final building product, the actual process of production is obscured as buildings become objects of consumption, unrelated to specific labour processes.

But what might architectural writing and architectural history or criticism look like if consideration of the welfare of building workers, their know-how, training, wages and origin were the starting point for discussions on the quality of architecture? Would this be the impetus for a shift to the ethical and sustainable production of architecture, as envisaged in the 2015 Construction Design and Management Regulations which place responsibility for the management and co-ordination of health and safety issues at the heart of the design team, with the architect as the natural choice for the role of principal designer on most building projects. And what in turn do these regulations imply for Foster and Partners, architects for the Qatar 2022 World Cup, whose construction has meant the deaths of over 1,200 building workers and an estimated 4,000 altogether before kick off? Any building inevitably displays the labour process employed in its production, including the divisions between the different construction occupations, whether the bricklayer, the carpenter or the concrete worker. It might even be argued that a poor quality product implies poor conditions for the building workers concerned.

Paul Jaskot’s ground-breaking work on the intersection of Albert Speer’s architectural designs, the ideological goals of the Third Reich and the development of the SS forced-labour concentration camps provides an extreme and brutal version of the relationship between architecture and labour. This deliberate exploitation of labour as part of a wider system of extermination necessitated the complete dissociation of the architect from any responsibility or empathy towards the labour force. While we cannot equate the role of the architect as an oppressor in a fascist state with that of the architect’s role in neo-liberal late capitalism, questions still need to be asked of the architect’s responsibilities, as a designer, towards the workforce.

An example of the abuse of these responsibilities coming from the currently fashionable architecture of the late twentieth century is the Brutalist, in-situ concrete structure of the Barbican and in particular the massive bush-hammered pillars. Piers Gough on the Barbican blog (blog.barbican.org.uk) writes, ‘The bush-hammered stuff is amazing – you can see where the point of the hammer went in, ‘Yes. It’s a bit dirty. But it’s a piece of craftwork.’ Is it? Without even entering the debate on the definition of craftwork, both historically and in a contemporary sense, it is important to examine the actual process that delivered the finish specified by the architects. In the 1960s the average electrically powered bush hammer delivered between 1300 and 2000 blows per minute to the face of the concrete and weighed between 15 and 23 lbs. The person holding a heavy, juddering bush hammer, horizontally for hours on end, risked muscle strain and the occupational injury of nerve damaged ‘white finger’. This observation is not to belittle the overall architectural magnificence of the Barbican scheme as a noteworthy addition to the City of London, from the internal detailing of individual flats to the landscaping of the gardens. At the same time we should, ask whether the aesthetics of the scheme would have been compromised if bush-hammering had *not* been used to expose the aggregate? And, why did the Barbican architects specify the extensive use of asbestos, particularly in the light of the increasing awareness of its dangers, the campaign against it, and above all the 1976 strike by construction trade unionists to have it banned on the site – the first strike of its kind in the world - led by Jim Franklyn, later founder of the Construction Safety Campaign?



ABOUT ProBE

ProBE (Centre for the Study of the Production of the Built Environment) is ideally placed to organise this symposium, being a joint research centre between Westminster Business School (WBS) and the School of Architecture and the Built Environment (ABE), one committed to the development of a rich programme of research and related activities, including projects, oral history, film, exhibitions, and seminars. ProBE provides a research hub, a forum for debate and discussion, and a focus for interdisciplinary and international activity related to the production of the built environment, as a social process, and its members have long experience of research on VET in the construction industry in Britain and abroad.