

THE REALITY OF ARCHITECTURE

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In the last years I have been carrying on a research on spectacular architecture in a few global cities of Europe, Asia and the United States. To the exception of some lucky cases, I deal with projects that have been criticised by many for their excessive formalism, incongruous scale and total indifference to the place they are located, remarks that I share and that, however, make them attractive to me. It is just these kind of buildings that, observed during construction as veritable heterotopias, thanks to the spectacularisation provided by photography, are able to reveal fundamental aspects of architecture that are not visible in their completed state, but are part of their reality and become a key to their multilayered meaning.

To the exception of projects where technical-constructional issues make the critical and innovative content, usually designers and the media always prefer to interpret the finished work, leaving the building phase as a documentary record. A reading of architecture that highlights its outline and originality, that is its formal principle, is usually preferred to one that shows it as part of an evolving context and as a result of a process where construction becomes an unavoidable phase. Construction sites, often invisible, are a concrete moment in the life of a building that forecast and unveil ongoing changes in the social, cultural and economic context in which design takes shape. In his famous 1925 book *Amerika* where he portrays the U.S. townscape, Erich Mendelsohn includes images of skyscrapers taken during construction. Mendelsohn describes an efficient and complex labor structure, sees in the new

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**View of Al
Sowwah
Island by day**
Abu Dhabi 2010
below
**View of Al
Sowwah
Island by night**
Abu Dhabi 2012

building sites and typologies an exemplary demonstration of the profound ongoing changes in American society that he compares with European culture with mixed feelings. To depict the highlights of the new cities, he entitles two chapters of his book *Das Gigantische and Das Groteske*, introducing typical Expressionist categories that, reconsidered nowadays, could outline the main features of the current architectural production. The photographing of a modern building site cannot overlook, in every photographer fantasy, the Manhattan of Lewis Hine and Charles Clyde Ebbets who, at the beginning of the Thirties, captured the rise of some archtypical towers such as the Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Center. At a second glance, their photographs emerge as promotional media, born out of the Depression to promote an optimistic view of America, an image of its dynamism and progress. They created a veritable building epic by narrating the extreme conditions and efforts that shaped these large structures. It is, after all, an engaged form of photography: Hine, a sociologist by training, had started taking pictures because he believed that documentary images could be employed to promote social reform. Throughout his career, his photographs, commissioned by magazines, institutions and foundations for social studies, exposed the working conditions of the weakest classes and denounced child labour. With regard to the building sites, some of his pictures have become famous for their portraying a spectacular daily routine in which the workers eat or sleep on a suspended beam. They appear as the residents of a new kind of setting and disclose a different use of urban space. A similar atmosphere could emerge nowadays by photographing buildings under construction in some cities of China or the Arabic Gulf where totemic projects rise

in front of a desertic background in a surreal juxtaposition. When I approach a large building site to photograph it, and keeping in mind the aforementioned icons, I am always impressed by the familiarity of the workers with such inhospitable places. I tend to look at these everyday workplaces in deference, as if I am entering someone else's house: here, workers spend days and years in contrast to my being in permanent transition. In selecting photographs of places whose image has been shaped by years of promotional renderings, I do not look at buildings and the city only, but at the overheated climate, the crowding, the inner migrations, the working conditions, etc... that is at another kind of scenery not always acknowledged by architects. I believe these pictures expose the absurdity and the fragility of some commonplaces of contemporary architecture; they give back a little bit of consistency to the abstract and self-referential perception that often characterizes designers. I will try now to give a real example to what I just said. The unfair treatment of workers in large scale building sites of some of the world's more renowned architects in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, has been reported by groups such as *Human Right Watch* already in 2006. It has been picked up again by institutions such as NYU and by artist groups in relation to the new Abu Dhabi museums to promote better working conditions in these places. However, apart from a few exceptions, only since 2014 architectural magazines have started to cover these issues, following the controversy raised by Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid statements about architects' involvement in these issues. Other cases are personally related, having I had first-hand experience on how much a construction site could be a potential harm for those handling the public image of an archi-

tect or a developer. Many times i have been denied to publicize photos of bulding sites where workers show up not to harm the sleek play of finished architecture. Other times I have not been allowed access to sites that were already covered by photographers and film crews hired by the developers, or, in a few cases, the permit has been allowed provided that I would not publish the photos earlier than a few years, given that construction was late on schedule. Even in Milan I was asked to refrain from any reference to ongoing construction and to show only the completed parts even if they were a minor portion of the project. The photographs of cities underoing transformation displayed in these pages fulfil the need to broaden the viewpoint of architecture, to see it in relation to the places it shapes and to the global themes it is tied to, in a way to give it back a stronger sense of reality. Just like Foucault heterotopias, large construction sites have, with regard to the built work we live in, “a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On the one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is located. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state.”













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New York 2008 – View of Bank of America Tower

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New York 2008 - Eight Avenue

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Paris 2010 - Le Frigos, Francis Soler

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