

Architecture, the Building Site and Capital: An Introduction to *Dessin/Chantier*

Sérgio Ferro

The fundamental thesis behind my book *Dessin/Chantier* is rigorously Marxist. It considers the material production of the built environment as its foundation: it is the predominant, defining feature in the twentieth century, when capital historically came to rule over all. The subsumption of labour to capital, essential in the extraction of surplus value, is made possible when capital acquires the workforce but is made truly effective only through the process of material production.

The presentation will therefore begin by carefully characterising this process and its locus, the building site: a process of manufacture, not of handicraft, nor of simple cooperation nor of industry. At its core lies the 'collective labourer', not machinery. It remains today in a 'backward' stage due to external constraints and to its important role in the economy as a whole. The organic composition of capital invested in building production is of a special kind: the proportion between variable and constant capital is higher than in those sectors of production that are deemed more 'advanced'. As a result, an equal amount of capital invested can obtain more surplus value from construction than from other industries. Given its enormous bearing on national economies, the production of the built environment becomes one of the main providers of surplus value in the incremental accumulation of profit. Through the equalisation of sector-specific profit rates, it contributes to the slowing of the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. The huge amount of surplus value obtained in the production of the built environment irrigates the entire economy, which explains why the construction sector must remain 'backward'.

The subsumption of labour in manufacture is merely formal: production strongly depends on the workman's *savoir-faire*. In order to subsume labour, capital needs not only to strip it of all material means of production but also to eliminate all the inner ties that strengthen the 'collective worker': labour's horizontal internal cohesion can become a powerful resistance tool against subsumption. But once the production body is dispersed it has to be reconstituted, for without its totalising intervention there is no production and therefore, no surplus value. This reconstitution, however, operates externally, vertically, by means of the prescriptive power of capital. Architectural design is among the numerous instruments that become necessary for this operation to unfold. It provides the essential mould into which fragmented labour will be poured. Performing this role (amidst its many other roles), design can adopt any given form: it can be, as Lévi-Strauss put it, a 'zero type' form.

Biography:

Sérgio Ferro (b. 1938) was a professor of architectural and art history for over forty years, initially at the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo of the Universidade de São Paulo (1962-1970) and then at the École d'architecture de Grenoble (1972-2003). He was also the director of the Laboratoire de Recherche Dessin/Chantier of the Ministry of Culture in France.

As a researcher, Sérgio Ferro followed the lessons of Flávio Motta: other than the usual procedures of academic tradition, research must include practical experimentation. Accordingly, both his architectural work (in association with Flávio Império and Rodrigo Lefèvre) and his work as a painter have been devoted to testing his Marxist-grounded theory in disparate ways. In practice, however, his theoretical background has led to diametrically opposite results in each of these areas of activity, diversely positioned within social production. Consequently, *Artes plásticas e trabalho livre (Fine Arts and Free Work)* is the counterpart to *Arquitetura e trabalho livre (Architecture and Free Work)*, Cosacnaify 2006, Jabuti Prize 2007).

Sérgio Ferro's paintings are held in museum collections across the world, and works of architecture that have been listed as national heritage. In 1992 he was made Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government.

(translation by Ricardo Agarez)