

Introduction:
Towards Mutual Highlight of Praxis
Philosophy and Construction

This book deals with interactions between the philosophy of praxis and construction site histories. Using philosophy as a companion, it seeks to contribute to the study of architecture from a social perspective. It does so by considering historical cases in which architecture was responsive to philosophical ideas about production that were present in societies and picked up by citizens, triggering their involvement in construction as a collective endeavour. The focus of this work, therefore, is on the practices of collective production of architecture that involve makers in the building process. The overarching question asks how a collective comes into being through the praxis of making. It is a relevant one because it contains aspects of both architectural production (making) and of theoretical reflection (praxis philosophy). The question heralds an exchange between the social aspirations of architecture and arguments by which operative philosophy can contribute to them. While there is a lot written about the former, architectural studies still lag behind when it comes to active exchange with social theories. In what sense can dialogue between disciplines be established without distorting the arguments of each? How can theories be more spatial and architectures more social? Can the building process contribute to a better understanding of social theories by offering a canvas for one of their possible interpretations? From another side, can reflecting on theories while performing building work assist in the emergence of socially informed spaces? In order to unpack these concerns, the study explores housing construction during social modernization in the second half of the twentieth century in largely peripheral geographies. It explores the stories of anonymous protagonists who were able to build with public prospects, and for whom participation was linked to the process of making.

The method of microhistory promises to be relevant and helpful in reflecting the abstract concerns of praxis philosophy onto the documentary analysis of construction projects. Charles Joyner's characterised this method as addressing the general by observing the small.¹ The concept was afterwards developed and further established by Italian historians, gaining international acclaim through Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976, in English 1980). In this work, deviant characters including an Italian peasant and a declared heretic were used to give voices to people who had hitherto been silent.² However, merely promoting the agency of their subjects was far from the overall aim of such microhistories. In addition to doing so, they opposed the establishment of general patterns and instead were eager to test and refine standing generalisations. As Giovanni Levi, another of its proponents, maintains, this approach believes »that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved«, and that »by altering the scale of observation new meanings« will emerge. Only after this treatment will it be possible »to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments«.³ It is as though historical episodes contain social and cultural DNA that, when tested, inform the understanding of the overall design of past society and culture.⁴ Ginzburg also gave credit to the use of testing in historical analysis when he recalled praxis philosopher Antonio Labriola's argument that history, as a process, implies discovery through experimentation; but that historical knowledge implies experiment as well.⁵ Relying on experimentation, the power of microhistory lies in reconstructing past events by connecting a wide range of data

to create a three-dimensional analytic narrative in which people and abstract forces shape events. As such, it can serve to illuminate events in political, social and cultural history for which definitive truths cannot be produced, only empirical research into past episodes carried out in order to make the overall argument more persuasive.⁶

The method of microhistory appears to be compatible with the efforts of praxis philosophy. We can even say that praxis philosophy can only become complete by being accompanied by microhistories of making. This work, therefore, suggests that praxis philosophy is extended by means of a praxis of construction, and that we must consider both building and social theories in order to understand the social capacity of architecture. For this, the intention is to establish their montage by highlighting the connected philosophy and in-depth histories of particular construction sites. Bearing in mind the importance of this method, it makes sense to introduce it before the historical cases.

Montage

The question of how a collective comes into being through the praxis of making is developed through three narratives, each consisting of two parallel stories. One of these stories refers to developments in the philosophy of praxis in Yugoslavia and internationally in the second half of the twentieth century. The other covers construction episodes starting in Yugoslavia and eventually reaching the Global South. These two threads are used to narrate one alongside the other historically and theoretically. Only with the employment of narrative as a method can gaps and connections between different fields be shown. In this sense, there is an artificial attempt to reconstruct parts of narratives by which an exchange can be established and new learnings emerge. The hypothesis to prove is that construction was able to mediate collective production because it was based on praxis. This means that mediation was possible while construction and philosophical discussion existed in intensive proximity to the point of their being able to influence each other historically. Working from this historical condition, I further reinforced the theoretical links to additionally establish the existence of mediation. To explore this premise, the narratives adopt a questioning approach: a dialogue between philosophy and architecture. On one side are the voices of praxis philosophers who offer a different view of praxis and its relation to materiality. On the other is the history of construction, traced through documentary material such as newspapers, photographs, contracts, records, oral histories and books. These two sides are assembled in such a way that there is always a degree of approximation. Documentary material is a source that can be asked questions about the means of collective production and the possibility of praxis as a basis for it. This overlap allows us to better understand the legacies of societal modernization in making modern architecture, with the Yugoslavian case being one of many. A few general insights can be expected from our existing understanding of this particular