



Building Praxis and/or Practicing Building

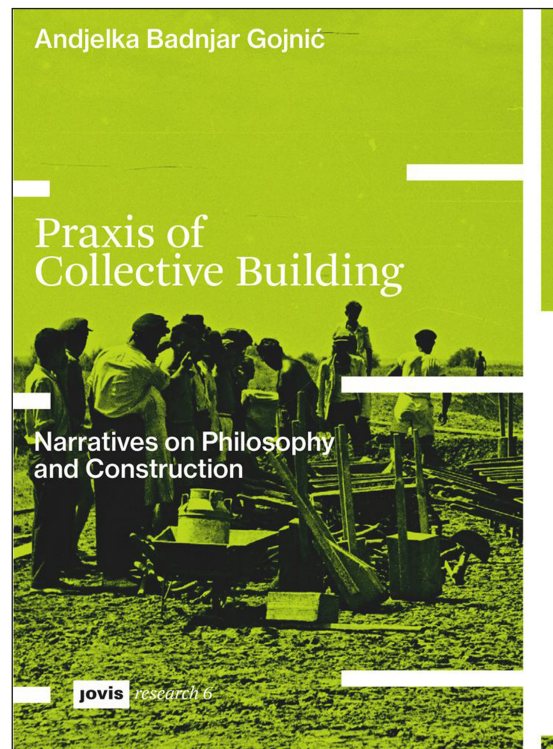
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A review of Andjelka Badnjar Gojnić, *Praxis of Collective Building: Narratives of Philosophy and Construction*, Berlin: JOVIS, 2023, 200 pages. ISBN: 9783868597721. Badnjar Gojnić's book presents an alternative narrative of Yugoslavian post-war modernization within its national and transnational context positioned at the intersection of praxis philosophy and the history of collective architectural production. The book meticulously documents how such a collective came into being through a trial-and-error dialogical philosophical-architectural mutuality that is reflected in the author's methodology. The book offers the reader multilayered microhistories of anonymous workers, virtuosic philosophers, and data, often prioritizing theory over history.

Keywords: architecture and labor; theory of practices; philosophy of praxis; production studies; microhistories; Yugoslavian modernism; Cuban modernism; transcultural encounters



Praxis of Collective Building proposes an alternative historiography of Yugoslavian post-war modernization, a ‘heritage’, that as Andjelka Badnjar Gojnić notes, has been described ‘as a laboratory of politics, economics and culture’ (158). Specifically, the author delves into what we may identify as a laboratory within the laboratory, where architectural construction is entangled with the complex, multifaceted, and — at times convoluted — philosophical discourse of national and international theorists known as the Praxis school (‘praxis’ in the movement’s name is not exactly synonymous with dictionary definition of praxis and not even to that theoretical concept that spans from classical to contemporary times) that explored, in real-time as it unfolded, the emergence of collective production and an architectural social perspective.



While the Yugoslavian laboratory has been the subject of recent studies (Blagojević 2003; Djurić and Šuvaković 2006; Kulić, Mrduljaš, and Thaler 2012; Medosch 2016; Moravánszky, Lange, Hopfengärther, and Kegler 2016–2017; Stierli and Kulić 2018; Stanek 2020), the background of the Praxis school and collective building production, which amounts to the movement’s theorizing-by-practicing dimension, has rarely been scrutinized, nor has philosophy as a tool for studying the theory of architecture received much attention. The book also brings to light microhistories of anonymous workers who, behind the scenes, participated in practices of collective building.

The book draws on a mix of established and less conventional architectural research methods. Badnjar Gojnić builds upon an extensive, detailed — and at times convoluted — philosophical and architectural literature, using microhistory as dialogical method rooted in the mutuality and reciprocity between philosophy and architecture. One of the book’s most innovative contributions is precisely this craftily recreated methodological laboratory that implements the same trial-and-error approach of the subject it studies, using it not only as a research tool but also as a narrative strategy.

Badnjar Gojnić processes an enormous amount of data culled from private correspondences, documentary films, novels, daily newspapers, accounting, drawing

materials, governmental reports, fieldwork, and not least oral history through the mediation of Marxist theory, articles published in the journal *Praxis*, and the writings produced during the summer school run by the Praxis group, a method that allows both the author and the reader together to listen directly to the sources, whether anonymous individuals, renowned philosophers, or material objects.

Badnjar Gojnić narrates two parallel stories that reflect practices of collective architectural production that engaged makers in the building process, one that explores the developments in the philosophy of the Praxis school nationally and internationally and one that traces ‘construction episodes’ that began in Yugoslavia and eventually extended to the global South.

The book’s focus is the pragmatic aspects of construction, construction carried out by three collective actors (i.e. volunteers, self-governed enterprises, and ‘microbrigades’) to each of which one of the book’s three chapters is dedicated. In each chapter, Badnjar Gojnić extracts a specific notion from praxis philosophy that is used as a litmus test to both theoretically interpret architectural construction and to analyse theories of praxis philosophy through the lens of the architectural history of construction. The author’s dialogical methodology puts praxis as a concept in dialogue with action, imagination, and *Lebenswelt*.

Each of the three chapters also offers microhistories of construction sites, an aspect of that the Yugoslavian laboratory that is often overlooked. The participation of citizenry in these building projects reflects their responsiveness to the socialist project. Badnjar Gojnić uncovers grassroots processes in everyday life that created realities not entirely aligned with nor absorbed by mainstream political agendas. While a thread connects the narratives into a single story set in a given place and time, owing to Badnjar Gojnić’s constant shifting between philosophical and architectural positions, these realities appear isolated from one another. The book also proposes that the collaboration between architecture, industrial production, and societal modernization was positive, challenging the canonical interpretation that this collaboration merely led to sprawl and mono-functional large-scale settlements of experimental ‘construction episodes’.

The book’s introduction outlines the main arguments, methods, and research questions, positioning the book within Yugoslavian studies and work on social productivity in architecture. Most of weight of the introduction is on contextualizing microhistories as a method, presenting praxis philosophy as multifaceted, and defining the theoretical key concepts of the book. This necessary glossary at the beginning as well as the literature review at the end help anchor the reader in — at times — rough philosophical waters.

The first chapter covers the early post-war period and the reconstruction undertaken in the wake of the heavy destruction the country had suffered, exploring this effort through the dialogical relationship between praxis and action. People migrated from the countryside to the cities at this time, and over the next forty years, at least two million people contributed to the effort by doing unspecialized work, volunteering, and testing building techniques, answering the call of Yugoslavia's socialist youth group and bringing collective production into construction. Among them were laypeople, peasants, workers, and students with little expertise who were organized under national and international brigades tasked with building the new cities. It was a trial-and-error open-air laboratory where people were encouraged to learn as they built. The chapter informs the reader about the daily organization of work, the tasks the people carried out, and the plans guiding the work, such as the five-year plan for the development of New Belgrade and also theoretically explores solidarity and ideology.

The second chapter focuses on a shift that occurred when intensive voluntary labor decreased and early industrialization joined the construction effort, which still relied mainly on unspecialized work, focusing on the *za ispitivanje materijala* (Institute for Materials Testing), an 'early' building company and the entanglement of praxis and imagination. The chapter documents how the institute's prefabricated open system, seen as the answer to the housing crisis, was imagined, produced, and tested dynamically, with the institute switching back and forth between planning and building.

Collective production whose goal was to create cooperatives shared by all enterprises and to ensure housing for all that would be built by new construction firms featured scientific expertise in the form of Mirko Gottfried Roš, an ETH retired professor of material science, and Branko Petričić, an architect who had collaborated with Le Corbusier, along with skilled and unskilled workers who were employed at the building sites. Badnjar Gojnić includes five sets of photographs with accompanying commentary that contributes to the material culture and enriches the microhistories.

The third chapter moves from Yugoslavia to the *Institut za ispitivanje materijala*'s (Institute for Materials Testing) export of building practices worldwide. Destinations included mostly newly 'liberated' global South, countries such as Egypt, Angola, Philippines, Ethiopia, Cuba, Iraq, and Iran. The chapter covers Yugoslavian transnational engagement with Cuban microbrigades made up of laypeople who participated in a collective building project that was informed by an economic development plan aimed at solving the housing shortage, centering on the dialogical connection between praxis and Lebenswelt, or lifeworld.

The chapter documents the transnational integration that the materials, people, and expertise that traveled across the ocean contributed to and reports on concrete

examples of local adaption of building practices based on contingent needs, such as how excess sugar derivatives were pressed and used to construct internal walls. The reader learns about and hears directly from Cuban and Yugoslavian workers who collaborated, learned, and built together, advancing the prefabricated technological system in both Cuba and Yugoslavia. This narrative highlights both successes and failures, including shortcomings due to inadequate human planning as recounted by Reinaldo Escobar, a Cuban journalist.

The book concludes by emphasizing the relevance of dialogism for interpreting architectural history and reinforcing findings within architectural theory. However, this tendency to prioritize theory falls short when addressing historical trajectories. Badnjar Gojnić does not fully explore the concept of praxis as a philosophical notion nor does the book adequately examine how collective building practices are addressed in the field of architecture and labor or production studies.

Badnjar Gojnić may have decided to focus on the Yugoslavian experience of praxis philosophy so as to avoid theoretically overburdening the book. What remains particularly curious, however, is the limited discussion of how the Yugoslavian experience of collective production contributed to a larger history of practices and of the potential connection between these experiences and the participatory practices that emerged locally and internationally in subsequent years. While the contemporary development of collective practices is outside the book's scope, it has the potential to significantly influence future scholarship in the field.

To conclude, the book is a rich, innovative, and valuable contribution to the study of the collective practice of building, and it explores in manifold ways the intersection of philosophy and construction, as its title suggests. While the approach rooted in a unique and specific context might need further refinement to have broader applicability, it nonetheless establishes a valuable precedent. The book provides concrete examples of theory turned into praxis for the many scholars who have theorized cross-disciplinary methodologies in architectural history and theory and yet struggle to find such examples.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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