

Translating Ferro for the New Field of Production Studies: A UK / Brazil collaboration

Traduzindo Ferro para a Nova Área de Estudos da Produção: Uma colaboração entre Reino Unido e Brasil

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Abstract

This article traces the emergence and trajectory of a new UK / Brazil 3.5 year collaborative project Translating Ferro / Transforming Knowledges of Architecture, Design and Labour for the New Field of Production Studies (TF/TK) launching 01 October 2020. It outlines the growing interest in Sérgio Ferro's work on architecture and labour in the English-speaking context, and sets out how it will provide the basis for a new and much-needed cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural field of Production Studies. The key objective of this new field is to challenge architecture's blindness to production, and understand and interrogate design and construction across cultural contexts.

Resumo

Este artigo rastreia o surgimento e trajetória de uma colaboração de três anos e meio entre o Reino Unido e Brasil, um projeto chamado "Traduzindo Ferro / Transformando Conhecimentos de Arquitetura, Design e Trabalho para Estudos da Nova Área de Produção (TF/TK)" inaugurada em primeiro de Outubro de 2020. O projeto destaca o crescente interesse no trabalho de Sérgio Ferro em arquitetura e mão-de-obra em países cujo idioma é o Inglês, e estabelece como isso a base para uma nova e muito necessária interdisciplinaridade e interculturalidade no campo dos Estudos da Produção. O principal objetivo dessa nova área é desafiar a cegueira da arquitetura direcionada à produção, e entender e interrogar o design e a construção através de contextos culturais.

Translating Ferro for the New Field of Production Studies: A UK / Brazil collaboration

In November 2014 UK-based architectural historians Tilo Amhoff, Nick Beech and myself organised an international conference *Industries of Architecture* (IOA) at Newcastle University with the intention to put production at the centre of the debate in architectural humanities. ‘All too often,’ we wrote in our Call for Papers, ‘architectural theorists, historians and designers side-line the industrial, technical and socio-economic contexts in which building is constituted or maintain that these are not the proper concerns of architecture, even when acknowledging the limits and possibilities set for architecture’s production in advanced capitalism.’¹ Two years earlier Nick and I, through a chance encounter with a group of Brazilian researchers at the close of the 4th International Congress of Construction History in Paris,² had been introduced to what we would later understand to be the single most sustained enquiry into design from the perspective of labour and the construction site available in any language, that of Sérgio Ferro. The tendency of architectural discourse to overlook production (in favour of new technologies, use, aesthetics, symbolism etc.), which IOA problematized, is demonstrated by Ferro to be more than short-sightedness. It is a structural necessity to the maintenance of the profession’s capacity to act ‘over’ the building site in the service of capital.

Despite the unique status of Ferro’s body of work and its far-reaching potential to inform understandings of relations of production and architecture, and to address the current worldwide crisis in the building industry, there were at the time, no translations of Ferro’s texts into English, and only a handful of accounts available of his contributions as a theorist and historian, and as an architect with *Arquitetura Nova*.³ We were keen that his arguments would inform the direction of debates at

IOA and, with the help of Felipe Contier, Ferro accepted our invitation to give the introductory keynote, which he wrote in Portuguese as an introduction to *Dessin/Chantier*.⁴ Although Ferro was unable to attend, we nevertheless launched the event with his talk – reversing the planned format in which the English translation by Ricardo Agarez would have been projected alongside the spoken Portuguese.⁵ Ferro’s hard-hitting argument, that design is one of capital’s means to enact its final goal ‘to extract a substantial amount of surplus value’ and that architects ‘whatever their intentions and when acting within the profession’s usual terms, are courtiers of capital’ was both unfamiliar to most of the participants, difficult and unavoidable, and it set the scene for the discussions that followed. Moreover his inclusion at IOA had also drawn a substantial number of Brazil-based researchers who were already studying or informed by Ferro’s work. With Silke Kapp (UFMG) and João Marcos de Almeida Lopes (USP), both scholars of Ferro’s work who base their work with grassroots groups (MOM and Usina CTAH) on Ferro’s analysis and the possibility it opens for alternative modes of building, our conversations soon turned to the need for the translation of his key texts into English. Silke and I visited Ferro at his home in Grignan, France in November 2014 to propose such a project and discuss the selection of texts, and so began our collaboration.

At the time of writing this in July 2020, we have just heard that our joint bid to FAPESP and the UK-based Architecture and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for a 3.5 year project *Translating Ferro / Transforming Knowledges of Architecture, Design and Labour for the New Field of Production Studies* (TF/TK) has been successful. The project will launch later this year. At a time when condi-

Salama and Andrea Hardy (eds.) *Architecture Beyond Criticism: Expert judgement and performance evaluation* (London: Routledge, 2015) and the entry on Ferro on the Spatial Agency website <https://www.spatialagency.net/database/sergio.ferro> (accessed 07.08.2020). On *Arquitetura Nova* see, Pedro Arantes, ‘Reinventing the Building Site’, in *Brazil’s Modern Architecture*, eds. Elisabetta Andreoli and Adrian Forty (London: Phaidon, 2004), 170–210, and also Richard J. Williams, *Brazil: Modern architectures in history* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

⁴It was the later revised version of Ferro’s *O canteiro e o desenho* (São Paulo: Projeto Editori Associatos, 1776, 1982) published in French as *Dessin/Chantier* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2005) that I had been able to read. The title captured well for our audience Ferro’s idea that within the discipline, construction is conceived as if below architecture and keeps the double meaning of drawing and design that is otherwise lost in the direct translation as ‘design’. We have continued to use the French formulation.

⁵Ferro’s paper was published as ‘*Dessin/Chantier*. An introduction’ (trans. Ricardo Agarez and Silke Kapp), with ‘An Introduction to Sérgio Ferro’ by Felipe Contier in the *Critiques* series, Katie Lloyd Thomas, Tilo Amhoff and Nick Beech (eds.), *Industries of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹For details of the Call for Papers and the event see www.industriesofarchitecture.org (accessed 04.08.2020).

²The 4th International Congress of Construction History took place in Paris, 3-7 July 2012. For conference proceedings see Robert Carvais, André Guillerme, Valérie Neègre and Joël Sakarovich (eds.) *Nuts & Bolts of Construction History: Vols. 1-3* (Paris: Picard, 2013). The group of researchers included Felipe Contier, Silke Kapp, Roberto Eustaáquio dos Santos, Carol Heldt, Renato Anelli, Ana Paula Koury.

³For good (but brief) discussions in English of Ferro’s theoretical contributions see MOM (Morar de Outras Maneiras): Silke Kapp, Ana Paula Baltazar, Denise Morado, ‘Architecture as Critical Exercise: Little Pointers Towards Alternative Practices’ in *Field Journal* Vol.2 (1) 2016; José T. Lira, ‘Architectural Criticism and radicalism in Brazil’ in Wolfgang F. E. Preiser, Aaron T. Davis, Ashraf M.

tions for construction workers are worsening; design, construction and materials manufacture are ever more globally distributed, and responsibility is dispersed with serious consequences for builders, inhabitants and the environment, TF/TK proposes that Ferro's work can be mobilised to consolidate a new and much-needed cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural field of Production Studies (PS). The key objective of this new field is to challenge architecture's blindness to production, and understand and interrogate design and construction across cultural contexts. Moreover, following Ferro, PS aims to resist the privileging of architects over builders and will generate new knowledge through co-production with formal and informal building producers, as well as design practitioners and academics, and provide conceptual and political support for alternative models and agencies.

The project will involve a core team led in the UK by myself, and in São Paulo by João Marcos de Almeida Lopes together with 4 Co-Investigators (Silke Kapp, Pedro Arantes, José Lira, Matt Davies) with a team of 16 expert Affiliated Researchers drawn from a range of disciplines within and beyond academia, who will each contribute a Case Study in PS. TF/TK is organised around three key activities – that of i) collating a database of existing research, scholars and producers already concerned with production and labour in architecture and design, including the translation and publication of key works by Ferro;⁶ ii) structuring the field of Production Studies using Ferro's work as a basis and developing PS principles and methodologies with participants and iii) applying and testing PS methods through 24 case studies as exemplars to both address the gap in academic knowledge of production (histories of informal and formal production, related disciplinary approaches such as anthropology, political science) and provide resources for further action and change (documenting the work of social movements and self-builders, recording and trialing alternative forms of design pedagogy that engage with production). A series of public events in the UK and Brazil will begin with local PS website launches in 2021 and culminate in a Production Studies conference at Newcastle University in 2024.

⁶To include the translation into English of Sérgio Ferro, *Dessin/Chantier* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2005), the publication in English and Portuguese of Ferro's *Construction of Classical Design*, and an anthology of published and unpublished shorter texts covering the range of Ferro's writings, as well as commentaries by project participants.

Our confidence that there is a keen appetite for Ferro's work in the English speaking context and a recognition of its unique value an expanding community of researchers for whom labour and production are central concerns has been confirmed by more recent events. In 2018 *Harvard Design Magazine* approached us to publish another of Ferro's text in their issue No.46 *No Sweat*, and funded the translation of Ferro's 'Concrete as Weapon' by Kapp and Alice Fiuza. The text (which appears at the centre of the book as an 'insert' that can be pulled out, rather like the mobile contractual documents that architects prepare for use on site which Ferro writes about in *Dessin / Chantier*) has already been influential. In March 2019, supported by a Bid Preparation fund from the faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) at Newcastle University, we launched 'Concrete as Weapon' with a week of events in London, bringing together at least 70 people, some already known to us for their interest in Ferro's work alongside other new participants. We hosted two public reading groups of 'Concrete as Weapon' and launched the publication at Central St Martins with an introduction to Ferro's work by Silke Kapp and a screening and Q&A of *In Between*, a documentary about Usina CTAH (2016, 40 mins). By the end we had assembled the team and framework for the TF/TK project. And on 11 October 2019 an exhibition *Dreams Seen Up Close* curated by Davide Sacconi of the work of Arquitetura Nova and Usina CTAH opened at the second Biennale d'Architecture d'Orléans.⁷ Ferro was the guest of honour at the Biennale and the exhibition featured many elements of his personal archive.

As interest in Ferro's work grows beyond the Brazilian context in which it was first developed, it becomes clear that his arguments have an international audience in addition to the global reach of its concerns. But local building practices are determined by multiple factors, from environmental conditions, political systems, and geopolitical roles, to technological development, social and economic inequality, building traditions and labour organisation. Thus the field of PS demands awareness of singularities and commonalities across often radically diverse local production contexts. Indeed Ferro's own scholarship and ideas are themselves informed by translations of concepts across cultures of building. We look forward most of all

⁷See Biennale website, <https://www.frac-centre.fr/en/biennales/years-solitude/landscapes/dreams-seen-close/dreams-seen-close-1162.html> accessed 07.08.2020).

to the opportunities for exchange TF/TK provides, to directly tackling the translation of methods and concepts in PS, and opening out to allow for learning across disciplines and contexts. Through working with producers of the built environment in order to co-produce and transform knowledge of relationships between design and construction labour, TF/TK seeks not only to understand and critically evaluate these mechanisms, but also to identify existing and possible forms of production, in which building *processes* – in themselves and not just for their *products* – can become catalysts for social change, in which the social and material production of space engenders autonomy, equality, justice, creativity and joy.

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