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NEWS

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COMMENT> JUDITH BARRY AND KEN SAYLOR

Judith Barry and Ken Saylor discuss labor issues in the Gulf and beyond.



ABU DHABI HAS BEEN THE CENTER OF RECENT CONTROVERSY ABOUT WORKER'S RIGHTS IN THE AEC INDUSTRY. COURTESY NASA

It is time for the architecture community to stand with artists and activists to improve the labor conditions in the construction of buildings across the developing world.*

Over the last several months, three prominent members of Gulf Labor Artist Coalition (Gulf Labor), the activist/artists group that formed five years ago to protest and rectify the exploitation and indenture of immigrant laborers working on the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island, have been denied entry, and in some cases deported, from the UAE. All three—Andrew Ross, Ashok Sukumaran, and Walid Raad—are spokespersons for Gulf Labor. The reasons given by the UAE authorities for their denial of entry and deportation are that they pose a “security risk,” but this risk remains undefined. The real reason seems to be that all three have been vocal critics of labor conditions in Abu Dhabi, and by association critical of other developing/emerging market sites as well. Andrew Ross, a professor at NYU, has long been critical of many aspects of NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus, including its treatment of its laborers, as well as other institutions building on the site. While Ashok Sukumaran and Walid Raad, well-known and oft exhibited artists within the UAE, have also publicly objected to the labor conditions on Sadiyat Island. To date several art-related organizations have expressed solidarity with these Gulf Labor members, including AMCA, the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World, Iran and Turkey; L’Internationale, a European confederation of six modern and contemporary art institutions; the participating artists in the current, 12th Sharjah Biennial; CIMAM, International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art;

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as well as a joint letter from 60 international curators, critics, and museum directors.

That there has not been a far greater outcry from within the increasingly global art and architecture communities about the banning of artists and activists from the UAE is disturbing. Perhaps it is the effect of many artists, architects, curators, scholars, critics, museums, and galleries inability to acknowledge that their own labor is not exceptional in its support of and exploitation by the multi-billion dollar industry that is the contemporary art and architecture world.

Nonetheless, there is interest in these issues as evidenced by press accounts of Gulf Labor's activities at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, and most recently at the Venice Art Biennale, where Gulf Labor is an invited participant in Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *All the World's Futures*. Working alongside other activist groups, Gulf Labor successfully shut down the Peggy Guggenheim Collection during one of the preview days, forcing the museum to close for several hours. As a direct result of this action, Gulf Labor will finally meet with the Guggenheim trustees to present their extensive research about current labor conditions on Saadiyat Island; findings that detail how persistent these abuses continue to be.

Gulf Labor's demands—to ensure that migrant workers rights are protected during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi—has also been endorsed by Human Rights Watch (HRW). Their 2015 report describes how, even now, after five years of protest, forced labor as a condition of employment continues on Saadiyat Island. Employers are still withholding workers' wages and benefits, failing to reimburse them for recruiting fees, confiscating their passports, and housing them in substandard accommodations. HRW also noted that in the most serious cases, contractors working for the two government development entities on the NYU and Louvre sites apparently informed United Arab Emirates (UAE) authorities about strikes which lead to the deportation of several hundred striking workers. These abuses continue despite the fact that the UAE government has labor laws that would protect these workers if they were enforced.

There are some professions where it might be possible to avoid noticing the inequality among laborers, but the expanding reach of the global art and architecture milieu is not one of them. In fact, since the end of WWII, with the introduction of the U.S.A.'s Marshall Plan, artists and architects have increasingly performed as migratory cultural workers whose labor, especially over the last 20 years, is exploited and undervalued. Yet, most artists do not identify as laborers, and hence do not necessarily make the connection between their condition and other forms of migratory work, such as laborers, where conditions are much worse. This situation is the norm and is visible in the very same countries where many artists are also working as they participate in biennales, festivals, art fairs, and gallery exhibitions. Nicholas McGeehan, [in a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece](#), notes in discussing the response of the museums on Saadiyat Island, "These institutions, and some art critics as well, have touted their move to Abu Dhabi as a turning point in cultural history. But right now, in a climate of increasing repression, it seems that art and culture are being put into the service of money and power, an unquestioning surrender to authority that contradicts these liberal institutions' very ideals."

As Andrew Ross asks, "The artists and writers of Gulf Labor have been doing all the investigating and advocating. It's time architects stepped up and took responsibility for addressing the gulf between Design and Build."

How are architects considering labor issues?

In their influential book, [Building \(in\) the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture](#) (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), the editors Peggy Deamer and Phil Bernstein, both faculty at Yale School of Architecture, focus on the seismic shifts in labor roles that have accompanied the technological advances in building design and construction processes. Peggy Deamer has remarked that architects traditionally don't consider labor issues as part of their purview of interests even in their own offices, let alone in the emerging markets. Hence, while it was shocking for Zaha Hadid to admit last year that she has nothing to do with workers, and it is the government's responsibility to take care of labor conditions—and in fairness to her, she was quoted out of context—it is true that architects are not usually responsible for hiring the construction workers that build their buildings. But is it really true that she and other well-known architects don't have the power to insist on fair labor practices for their projects? Surely labor conditions throughout most of the emerging world are by now well known, hence ignorance of these conditions is not a believable defense. What does all this star power translate into if not a responsibility to act ethically?

What if all the architects, and especially all the high profile architects, demanded a living wage and rights for these workers? And what if all refused to work on buildings where workers are not treated ethically? As brand name architects are hired to increase the cultural capital within an emerging region, a refusal of work by these brands in solidarity with other paid laborers, would go a long way toward bringing these issues to the forefront of public opinion.

After the Hadid controversy, Frank Gehry, the architect of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, seemed to



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take up this challenge. But other than the good public relations it generated about his awareness of the labor issues and his attempt to ensure that equitable labor practices will be implemented (and by association the enforcement of the actual labor laws in the UAE), it remains unclear if or how Gehry is currently addressing these questions. His statement did not become a rallying cry for other architects and architecture firms building in the UAE or elsewhere to band with laborers. No other architecture firms made a similar statement about labor conditions. In fact, it seems that Gehry's willingness to engage in discussions about labor issues and, at least on paper, to insist that they be addressed, has not spread to other offices. It is also unclear whether or not Gehry's good intentions translated into an actual contractual demand as his contract with the Guggenheim has not been made public, leaving us wondering when his office will issue an update.

All of the above is further complicated by the Guggenheim's oft-repeated claim that work on the building has not begun, whereas Gulf Labor/Human Rights Watch and others counter that the building's infrastructure is being built as the site is being prepared for construction. The current laborers on the Guggenheim site share the same conditions that GL/HRW et al. are protesting, and as laborers should be protected under the UAE labor laws, but as mentioned, these laws have yet to be enforced by the TDIC, the governmental department of Tourism, Development, and Investment.

However, some architects are engaging with these issues.

In 2011, *Who Builds Your Architecture?* (WBYA?), a coalition of architects, activists, scholars, and educators, formed to examine the links between labor, architecture, and the global networks that form around the construction of buildings. WBYA? has organized a number of panels and working groups to widen the scope of the ethical reach of architecture as a practice, including adopting many of the labor reforms advocated by Gulf Labor.

As is probably well known to most readers of *AN*, labor costs are among the lowest budget-line items in construction management documents for buildings in emerging markets. Why? Because of all the "materials" used in the construction of buildings throughout these regions, labor is the cheapest. It is the one resource that is easily available and especially, replaceable. In fact, as Cynthia Gorney notes in her article for *National Geographic*, "Far From Home," in many developing countries people are often the most lucrative export. The most expensive building materials are concrete and steel, which is also exported from abroad.

But the issue with treating laborers as though they are a plentiful raw material is that they are not a raw material. Instead, they are human beings. As Phil Bernstein has said, "When do human lives become valuable? How do we make human lives valuable economically? We know how to do this ethically, but not how to do this economically?"

As the introduction of BIM and IPD modeling is irrevocably transforming the entire building process from design through construction, it seems to us that another step for architecture, alongside standing with Gulf Labor, would be to use technology (digital modeling) to explicitly consider labor as a resource just like concrete or steel; digital simulation like BIM can make labor explicit within the design and construction process, and thereby understandable. This might also be a way to leverage architecture into more of a supply chain model around issues of sustainability, and by association, social and ethical responsibility. While this is by no means a fix, it would immediately make laborers and labor issues much more visible locally within the practices of architecture and construction management, particularly to those making the decisions about the hiring of construction workers across the world.

Judith Barry and Ken Saylor

**In the interest of full disclosure the authors are members of Gulf Labor and among the 2,263 signatures of the Gulf Labor Petition.*