

SOMETIMES BUILDINGSITES

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I would like to think of building sites as laboratories, places of material experiment, playgrounds even. They are not. They are zones of tactical warfare, to be entered flanked by yellow-waterproofed and helmeted foremen. For the skirmish even the architect is supposed to don steel-toed boots and helmet. Whether aggressive or friendly every word from the yellow, lego-figure like, site foreman is a minefield and even a nod in answer could lead to a surprising and unexpected cost increase. They invariably imply that the planning is incomplete (normally this means that they have chosen to misread the plans) and that it would be far more expedient to substitute material B for material A. Luckily one cannot and legally must not, speak to all site operatives, those casting furtive glances in the direction of the person who has invented the geometrical puzzle they are trying to cast in concrete. Most are dreaming of returning to Romania, Hungary or Kosovo to build superior illegal buildings with concreting skills picked up in Germany or Switzerland.

Louis Kahn once said that it is only during construction or as ruins that the grandeur of a building is accessible. While locked in servitude (in use), the drama of a building's making is rendered invisible. It is my habit to explore BOLLES+WILSON building sites on weekends or in the evening when, without the distraction of role playing, their magic has time to emerge. Deserted they

emanate an aura of becoming, imagination fills in the missing details and the beast, frozen in its becoming, speaks of what it wants to be, of the comforting spaces and passages of movement it will soon engender. It is at this moment that any building has the potential to take its place alongside arcadian ruins or whatever taxonomy of reference the perceptive explorer has in his or her baggage.

The experience of this suggestive "sometimes poetic" is one of the greatest rewards for an architect. This is the moment when a reconfiguring of the material world, one that was incubated elsewhere (the studio and in the architect's imagination) becomes fact, place.

This poetic potential of the building site is echoed in my favourite sentence in Vladimir Nabokov's Berlin novel *The Gift*: "On yesterday's vacant lot a small villa was being built, and since the sky was looking in through the gaps of future windows, and since burdocks and sunlight had taken advantage of the slowness of work to make themselves comfortable within the unfinished white walls, these had acquired the pensive cast of ruins which, like the word "sometimes", serve both past and future."