

# FOR PIETRO VALLE

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Giacomo Borella

There's a conundrum here: you asked me to write something about the building site and I never succeed in doing it because I am always on the building site.

We do have some small construction going on here around Milan but, above all, there is a sort of building site in our office. You should not imagine a Renzo Piano-like workshop, sponsored by UNESCO and with a view on the sea, but a dark and messy basement filled with the tools of those who make architecture (or attempt to) with a do-it-yourself attitude. Architecture, referred to what we do, is really a big word, but, from our small viewpoint, we try to blend hand and intellectual (this is another big word!) labor. It's been a while since we had enough of sitting in front of a computer and leaving the practical, physical, bodily part (that is, all the fun!) to others! We still, though, are able to make only small things by ourselves; those that are a little bigger, we still give them to a real builder. Blending design, hand labor and dialogue with builders is what we like to do. In *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (a classic, written more more than one century ago and more up-to-date than a lot of the featheredbrained assertions of Rem Koolhaas...), Kropotkin says that those who try to blend hand and intellectual labor are "individuals who escaped the much praised work specialisation. They are the irregulars, the kossacks who fell out and broke through the barriers built between clas-

ses".

At times there has been friction with builders and, other times, a profound understanding. Some days ago, for example, I was on a roof with Mr. Oscar, who is finishing our project for a small extension. He is a shrewd craftsman, he does the masonry but also the wood and the metal work. He was using a hand riveter, the same as mine, a cheap tool, elementary, perfect: one of those tool that Ivan Illich labeled as "convivial". I said to him: "Shit, the riveter is still a fantastic tool!". he stopped for a moment, looked at me and, smiling, said "Pota... (Pota is his favorite quote) "...it always work...".

Here is Oscar working at the flashing.



The next day it was our turn: we had to build a pergola on a balcony, in another building site, without any Mr. Oscar to help us. A pergola done with chestnut poles, the ones used in agriculture, bound with ropes without any metal tie. This is the way we thought of building it:



While we were making it, though, we realised there was a flower box overhanging just in the place where the central pole was planned and interfering with it. Our structural engineer, Carlo, was there, and playing the rope binding master. We consulted with him and he figured out that the pole thickness was strong enough to allow us to get rid of the central pole. He also suggested to bend the two side bays some forty centimeters towards each other, so that they would contrast; we did as he said. Luisa, the apprentice helping us, in the end said. "I have learned more today with these poles than in a whole year of structures class". This is the pergola as it came out.



In general, the building site has been reduced to an annoying interregnum that gets in the way between the bodiless output of the computer processing and the abstraction of the finished work that wants to resemble a rendering.

In a modern country, it is absurd to spend such a long time and effort to go from the conception to the finished product!

Contemporary architecture (but Modernism had already taken giants steps in this direction) seems to be thought to conceal its nature of human product.

Dear Pietro, excuse my messy thoughts. I would like to write something more structured but we are in Rovinj, Istria, now, assembling a small shop, and I am a little bit in a hurry.

I say farewell with a small sketch of Rovinj.

Goodbye now, and thank you for your patience!

Giacomo

Rovinj, april 17, 2015

