

Time, knowledge, and the making of the city through construction and demolition work

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Abstract

This article looks at how decisions are made in everyday construction work, showing how the city emerges through practices of knowledge. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted on construction and demolition sites, it argues that the city is not produced only through abstract planning or regulation; it is made day by day through situated decisions taken on site by entrepreneurs, quantity surveyors, and workers. Knowledge in construction is not only technical or formalised; it is also learned through experience, relationships, and familiarity with materials and work processes. Plans rarely unfold as expected, and conditions on site – time pressure, uncertainty, and social relations – require constant adjustments. The city therefore emerges through a non-linear process in which planning and improvisation are closely intertwined and where risk, compromise, and practical knowledge play central roles.

Questo articolo analizza come vengono prese le decisioni nel lavoro quotidiano dell'edilizia e come la città emerge attraverso pratiche di conoscenza. Sulla base di una ricerca etnografica in cantieri di costruzione e demolizione, si sostiene che la città non si produca solo tramite pianificazione astratta o regolamenti. Essa si costruisce giorno dopo giorno attraverso decisioni concrete, prese al momento da imprenditori, geometri di cantiere e operai. La conoscenza nel settore delle costruzioni non è solo tecnica o formalizzata: si apprende con l'esperienza, attraverso le relazioni umane e la familiarità con materiali e processi di lavoro. I piani raramente si realizzano come previsto e le condizioni di cantiere, fatte di tempi stretti, incertezze e relazioni sociali, richiedono continui aggiustamenti. La città emerge così attraverso un processo non lineare, in cui pianificazione e improvvisazione si intrecciano e in cui rischio, compromesso e conoscenza pratica giocano un ruolo centrale.

Keywords: knowledge; construction; labour.

Parole Chiave: conoscenza; edilizia; lavoro.

Introduction: thinking the urban through knowledge

I am trying to follow Giuseppe, the quantity surveyor to whom I have been entrusted for the visit, step by step, staying close because the noise of the excavator and the drills is so loud that it is covering his voice. As he explains the work, I observe the demolition crews who, systematically – almost orderly within

the apparent chaos – are sorting materials, stacking them, and dividing them by hand or with the help of the excavator, whose arm rhythmically separates and brings together piles of wood, steel, and rubble. At first sight, the work appears simple, systematic, and rational. What I understand later, through repeated visits to demolition sites, is that this apparent order is the result of a continuous process of adjustment, coordination, and judgement, shaped by expertise and, above all, by experience.

The city is not only designed on paper. It is also quietly reshaped through everyday practices on construction and demolition sites. Urban space is produced through plans, regulations, and projects, but it is also realised and transformed through practical forms of knowledge: knowing how to read a situation, how to anticipate problems, how to handle materials, how to deal with cost and time pressures, and how to adapt when things do not go as expected.

This article explores how cities take shape through everyday ways of knowing. It looks at how construction entrepreneurs, engineers, and workers mobilise practical, relational, and experiential knowledge in their daily work. By following construction and demolition practices ethnographically, I show how urban space is continuously produced through routine decisions, adjustments, and forms of expertise that often remain invisible. These decisions do not make the city by themselves, but they shape how projects are realised on site and, little by little, how urban space takes form. By focusing on construction and demolition work, this article brings into view urban professions that are central to the making of cities yet often remain in the background.

This perspective connects to broader debates in urban anthropology and urban studies on how cities are produced through everyday practices rather than solely through planning and design (Lefebvre, 1991; Farías and Bender, 2010). Rather than treating the city as the outcome of abstract decisions made in offices, this article follows a tradition of scholarship that attends to the material, relational, and situated dimensions of urban life (Simone, 2004). Furthermore, this article speaks to debates on sustainable cities. It shows that practices such as reuse rely on specific kinds of knowledge, time, and labour. Therefore, the issue is what kinds of knowledge current construction systems allow and, consequently, what kind of city we can create.

This article draws on two intersecting bodies of scholarship.

The first is an anthropological tradition concerned with practical, embodied, and situated knowledge – how people learn through doing, how skills are acquired through participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and how forms of knowing that are tacit (Polanyi, 1966), sensory (Stoller, 2007), or craft-based (Herzfeld, 2007) shape everyday work. The second is a tradition in urban studies and urban anthropology that understands the city not as the outcome of planning alone, but as continuously produced through material practices, social relations, and everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991; Simone, 2004). By bringing these two traditions into dialogue, this article argues that construction and demolition work is not only a site of knowledge production but also a central mechanism through which urban space takes form.

I first examine how construction entrepreneurs navigate uncertainty and search for knowledge in situations in which the outcomes cannot be fully anticipated. I show how learning often happens not through linear planning, but through openness, relationships, and attention to unexpected encounters. I then look at how knowledge is acquired on site through experience, observation, and repetition, paying attention to how learning unfolds within everyday work relations. In the following section, I turn to labour relations in demolition work, showing how the coexistence of skilled and unskilled labour is not a contradiction but a constitutive feature of the sector, as well as how experience-based knowledge becomes economically valuable even when it is not formally recognised. Finally, I show how accelerated construction schedules privilege certain ways of knowing – those aligned with speed and standardisation – while marginalising others that depend on care, experimentation, and time. In doing so, this article suggests that urban form emerges not only from design choices or policy frameworks but also from the temporal and epistemic conditions that shape what can be learned, known, and done on site.

Following construction work: an ethnographic approach

This article draws on different periods of my field research. I first began working with construction companies during my PhD, conducting participant observation between September 2013 and September 2014. During that year, I spent most of

my time in small and medium-sized businesses in Lombardy, learning as an apprentice about a world that was entirely new to me (Sischarenco, 2019). I was not only observing this world but also moving within it, learning through proximity and everyday interaction. I often travelled with construction entrepreneurs from one office to another or accompanied them to construction sites, observing their work and talking with them about what they did. My interlocutors showed me how they navigated their professional world: how they learned about new jobs and tenders, how they managed relationships, and how they dealt with risk and uncertainty in their field. I returned to the construction sector several years later, between February and August 2022, during a postdoctoral project focused on the use and reuse of building materials. This later fieldwork did not mark a rupture; rather, it allowed me to deepen and integrate what I had observed during my doctoral research. This time, I worked mainly with demolition companies, with the aim of understanding how buildings are dismantled and how materials are sorted, reused, and disposed of (Sischarenco, 2025). During this second period of fieldwork, I built relationships and took part in the everyday activities of several demolition companies, working alongside owners, managers, and workers on demolition sites and in offices. Through ongoing conversations and encounters over time, these relationships extended beyond formally defined periods of fieldwork. It was from these repeated movements between offices, construction sites, and demolition sites that the perspective developed in this article took shape (Figure 1).

Across both periods of fieldwork, my interlocutors included construction and demolition entrepreneurs, engineers, quantity surveyors, and workers in small and medium-sized companies based in Lombardy, primarily in Milan and the Province of Bergamo. The fieldwork was not confined to a single company or site; over the two periods, I engaged with between fifteen and twenty companies, some more regularly and others through fewer encounters. By moving across different organisations and contexts, I was able to observe a range of practices.

In this article, I offer a different perspective on how the city grows and develops, one from which urban anthropologists are often excluded. I do not walk through the streets of the city, nor do I observe the emergence of buildings, and I do not study them

through zoning plans or architects' drawings. Instead, I see the city through the eyes of the people who shape it through their work – an approach that shares something with ethnographies conducted inside workplaces and institutions (Burawoy, 1979; Ho, 2009), as well as with anthropological studies of construction and material practices in Italy and beyond (Marchand, 2009; Perrotta, 2015).

I see the city through the eyes of construction and demolition company owners, with whom I move by car across the city from one construction site to another or from one office to the next. I also see it through the eyes of the quantity surveyor who explains a site to me and through those of the builder I encounter handling materials on site. I analyse how, through their learning processes, expertise, and experience, these actors shape the city in ways that are often unplanned and only partially visible.



Fig. 1 Participant observation at construction and demolition sites. Source: photos by the author.

Navigating uncertainty and unexpected knowledge

In construction work, knowledge is not only a matter of technical expertise; it also emerges through relationships, decisions, and practical encounters. How do construction entrepreneurs learn to recognise which information is relevant, how to read tenders, and

how to anticipate risks in uncertain situations? These everyday judgements do not remain abstract; they translate into specific buildings, materials, and urban compromises.

My interlocutors' search for knowledge is rarely linear or fully planned, just like my own search for knowledge in my fieldwork. They try to remain as open as possible, and they are often uncertain about where useful information will come from. When I first learned participant observation as a method, I often felt lost and hesitant, and I was repeatedly told to go, listen, and stay open to what the field might offer. What my interlocutors do in their daily work is not so different. They cultivate relationships and keep themselves available to information, even when they do not yet know whether it will be useful for securing a job or solving a problem. Like me, they move forward without clear guarantees, relying on openness, attention, and experience. In this sense, we share a similar way of searching for knowledge.

The unpredictability of knowing, and the central role of relationships, common sense, and creativity, become especially visible in the rhythm of everyday work. This is particularly evident when looking at how a working day actually unfolds. Days often appear orderly and carefully planned, filled with meetings and scheduled activities. Yet plans frequently change. Unplanned conversations, movements, and encounters constantly emerge. One of my interlocutors once told me the following: «Sometimes you are just around like that, and one thing leads to another». A meeting may end earlier than expected, and you may suddenly find yourself near another company and decide to stop by, discovering something unexpected. Or a phone call forces you to postpone everything and rush to deal with an urgent issue on a construction site. Meetings that initially seem useless may later turn out to be important for entirely different reasons. Knowledge, inspiration, and opportunity often come through unexpected meetings and events, through conversations with others, and sometimes through seemingly dead moments. Unpredictable knowledge comes at unpredictable times.

As Alberto, one of the construction entrepreneurs I worked with, once told me, «You always need to go and listen». He compared this attitude to Odysseus tied to the mast, waiting for the song. In the myth, Odysseus chooses to listen to the song of the Sirens despite the danger it poses. Sailors who were drawn in by the

song's enchanting promise of omniscience would inevitably meet their death. Following the advice of the sorceress Circe, Odysseus asks his crew to tie him to the mast, allowing him to hear the song without losing himself to it.

Alberto recalled this ancient story as we were on our way to a meeting for a tender. He already knew that the contract was risky, as the client had a reputation for not paying. Still, he wanted to go. He wanted to listen, to understand what was happening, to ask questions, and to gather information that might prove useful later, perhaps in different situations and for other contracts.

You should always go and listen – it is never a waste of time. Not for me and my ethnographic data, and not for the entrepreneurs I have worked with. You need to keep your eyes and ears open because you never truly know what will prove useful, and there is always something to learn. What may not seem important in that moment can later turn out to be exactly the information or connection you need.

Following this approach, Alberto attended the meeting, asked questions, observed interactions, and gathered details that might not have seemed relevant at first – but which could prove valuable in future negotiations or projects. Situations like this are not exceptional, but part of how decisions are made in everyday construction work.

Deciding whether to take on a job is one of the moments in which knowledge becomes most visible. Sometimes entrepreneurs refuse work that appears profitable on paper because they already know, from experience, that the client will not pay. In other cases, they accept jobs for the prestige they may bring in the future. For example, Aldo, another entrepreneur among my interlocutors, took on a large restructuring project in Milan not primarily for financial reasons – at least, this is how he presented it – but for the name attached to it, which he knew might open the door to other prestigious commissions.

Information often arrives in unexpected ways. Pieces of information may seem random at first, yet each one can later help avoid risks or open up new job opportunities. The theme of unpredictability, and the impossibility of knowing everything in advance, runs throughout my research. It is often difficult – if not impossible – to anticipate how a project will actually unfold once work begins.

This uncertainty is particularly visible in the ways in which entrepreneurs take on projects whose implications are not fully clear from the outset. Certain aspects cannot be known in advance, as they only become visible on site – at the moment of realisation. Rather than engaging in detail with design decisions from the beginning, entrepreneurs often accept a job knowing that many choices will have to be made later – in practice. They may already sense that some solutions will be difficult to implement, yet this does not prevent them from moving forward. What appears feasible on paper will probably take much longer in practice, and some elements of the project will change along the way because they cannot be realised as originally planned.

Through these decisions – whether to accept or to refuse a job, when to postpone choices, which compromises to make, and which risks to take – construction entrepreneurs shape how projects are carried out in practice. Even when these choices are mainly linked to the interests of a single company, they contribute over time to how urban space takes form.

Knowing through everyday practices, work, and materials

The unpredictability we have seen is not limited to this kind of knowledge and decision-making; it also extends to material work. In practice, on a construction site, prior assumptions and theoretical knowledge are constantly tested, and knowing often unfolds through doing and by doing.

Expertise plays a crucial role in the construction field. However, many situations cannot be anticipated and must be addressed contextually. Numerous uncertainties can arise for companies when delving into the everyday practices of construction and demolition. For example, drawing on my research, I found that even with theoretical knowledge about how a demolition should proceed and which materials could potentially be reused, the field often surprises you. Predicting how a project will turn out is challenging; costs may be higher, timelines may be longer than expected, and decisions often require adjustments along the way. During another visit to a construction site near Bergamo, a worker explained to me that according to the architect's original project specifications, they had initially planned to preserve a much larger quantity of materials to reuse in the same building. As he told me, «At the beginning, the idea was to save much more».

The building was relatively old, and some of its elements were considered valuable, including parts of the floors, a wrought iron handrail along the stairs, and some large stones (Figure 2).



Fig. 2 Piles of materials being sorted on site for reuse or disposal. Source: photos by the author.

The worker led me to one of the rooms and pointed at the floor. «Look at this», he said, showing me marble tiles decorated with an ornate pattern. «They're beautiful. You could easily use them again in a new building». For a moment, reuse seemed both desirable and possible. But then he added the following: «The problem is the work». Removing and cleaning the tiles required time. «Too much time», he said, «and the labour cost becomes too high». Although the company had started to remove the tiles carefully, they soon realised that the effort required exceeded what the project could sustain.

The same applied to the iron handrail. «This is another issue», the worker explained. «Regulations have changed». The old railings were lower than what current safety standards require. «If we want to reuse them, we'd have to modify them. And that's not simple, and it's not cheap». In the end, what had initially been identified as a valuable material to preserve became difficult to justify once the work, time, and costs were taken into account.

A few months earlier, in a different building, I had observed piles of parquet flooring that had been carefully removed and stored, with the idea that they would be reinstalled once other renovation work was completed. At the time, this seemed like a reasonable option. When I returned several weeks later, however, the parquet slats were no longer there. They had been thrown away, and an entirely new floor had already been installed.

Looking for an explanation, I asked Irene, one of the site engineers.

«The client decided to completely demolish the existing parquet rather than reuse it», she told me. They had carried out some on-site tests, including sanding the parquet. «It started to split», she explained. «The strips separated unevenly».

I asked whether it might have been possible to take the parquet to a specialised company, treat it there, perhaps strip by strip, and then reinstall it. Irene pointed at the subfloor. «That was the main problem», she said. When they removed the parquet, they discovered that the screed underneath, laid in the 1950s, was crumbly and no longer suitable for a new installation. They also considered salvaging only the valuable part of the existing wood and using it for the new flooring. «But it was too expensive», Irene concluded. «It could have worked, but for the client, it was becoming too costly». In the end, they decided to purchase and install new flooring.

Once more, decisions are made in the course of work. As in many similar situations, logistics and costs play a key role. Transporting the parquet to a workshop, refurbishing it, and reinstalling it would have required significant resources, with no guarantee of a satisfactory result. Situations like this show, once again, that knowledge, rather than being fully available in advance, is situated in specific contexts and emerges through doing. In all these situations, knowing does not precede action but takes shape through it.

In this way, the city emerges not just from plans but from action – extending what urban scholars have described in terms of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) to the specific domain of professional construction work: the decisions, materials, and improvisations of builders and demolition workers are among the concrete mechanisms through which that production happens. The materials that are kept, discarded, or transformed – and the ways in which workers navigate these constraints – produce the built environment. Urban space is continually remade through these practical negotiations and through the improvisations and adjustments that are part of everyday work.

Knowledge cannot be separated from its conditions of application. Concepts need to be contextualised and applied to concrete situations in order to become visible and meaningful in practice. That is why, for instance, my interlocutors often try to understand the anthropological knowledge I share with them in relation

to their specific work practices. Without a concrete context of application, notions can remain sterile.

This emphasis on contextualisation also explains why bureaucracy is frequently described by my interlocutors as blind. Bureaucratic procedures are perceived as too standardised and distant, failing to take into account the variability and specificity of real situations. As already noted by Blau (1956), the scope for «rational discretion» within bureaucratic systems is limited. In demolition work, in which decisions must respond to material conditions, timing, and risk, knowledge cannot be fixed or applied mechanically. It only makes sense insofar as it can be adapted, interpreted, and creatively mobilised within a particular context.

Practical experience and learning in the field

The importance of practical work and contextual decision-making also points to another key dimension of construction practices: learning in the field. Knowledge is continuously produced and sedimented through experience, repetition, and routine. Stoller (2007: 158-181) talks about «embodying knowledge through experience». Many forms of knowing that guide everyday work are not explicitly taught or formally transmitted but emerge through doing. As Coy puts it, «learning is by doing; watching, over and over again, and then trying to do this thing for oneself» (Coy, 1989: 2). Skills and information can be learned through both education and experience. However, a distinction is often drawn in the literature between audited and artisanal knowledge (Herzfeld, 2007: 91-113) or between academic written knowledge and empirical practice-based knowledge. Rapport and Harris (2007: 317-318) challenge this dualism, arguing that these forms of knowing are always entangled and mutually constitutive. This entanglement becomes visible precisely in practice. As Carr (2010) argues, expertise is not something people simply have or hold but something they enact – it emerges through doing in specific situations and in relation to others.

Learning is situated within what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as a «community of practice» – a group of people who share a craft or profession and learn through mutual engagement in shared activities, where newcomers gradually acquire competence by participating alongside more experienced practitioners. Knowledge is not detached from the context in

which it is produced, nor does it emerge solely through formal teaching; rather, it develops through active engagement in shared practices. Harris (2007: 4) notes that «any knowledge is inevitably situated in a particular place and moment; that it is inhabited by individual knowers and that it is always changing and emergent». Therefore, insisting on distinctions between objective or subjective knowledge seems irrelevant (Harris, 2007), especially in my fieldwork, in which knowledge is mediated by others most of the time. Knowledge also travels with, and through, individuals. It is transmitted from master to apprentice, but also among colleagues, competitors, and other actors involved in construction processes. As Crook (2007: 245-266) suggests, «knowledge is distributed through lateral networks of communication», calling attention to the social relations in which knowing is embedded.

These dynamics are particularly visible in practices of recycling. In a previous article (Sischarenco, 2025), I asked what role knowledge and routines play in enabling – or preventing – material reuse in construction and demolition. Drawing on ethnographic observations, I showed that workers and assessors mainly rely on recycling practices that are learned through daily experience and gradually ingrained in their work. These practices are often applied almost automatically. Recycling, in this sense, has become part of the normal rhythm of construction work and of an established way of working. Workers know how to separate materials, where they should go, and how they fit into existing logistical chains. This form of knowledge is stable, widely shared, and reinforced through repetition.

Learning in the field is not abstract but deeply practical. Managing demolition work, in particular, requires experience-based knowledge that can only be acquired through direct engagement with materials, tools, and sequences of action. As I realised during my time on construction sites, understanding demolition means understanding order, timing, and coordination – elements that are rarely written down but are crucial in practice.

As we moved through the building, floor by floor, Emir, one of my interlocutors, showed me the structure of the building, explaining how each task had to follow a precise sequence. Some actions had to be performed while other parts of the construction were still intact; otherwise, it would be too risky for the workers.

He recounted an episode in which he was very worried about a worker who was in danger of falling along with the excavator because of the collapse of a floor. Accidents can easily happen if you are not careful. «Everything follows a specific order», Emir explained. «You don't need much formal education, but you gain understanding through experience. Good organisation streamlines your work, making it faster and safer – and more cost-effective».

This kind of practical learning also applies to material recycling. Handling materials for recycling requires a high level of practical expertise. Materials must be sorted carefully and cannot simply be piled together. As Emir explained, «You can't just start demolishing without removing the stuff in the way; otherwise, it gets mixed up with the debris, and no one can collect the rubble because it's all mixed with plastic and insulation». Delivering a mixed load to a recycling company inevitably increases costs, as the materials then need to be separated again. During another site visit, a quantity surveyor confirmed this point: «One of the most crucial aspects of this job is the separation of materials. If you are efficient at it, you can sort them quickly and effectively, leading to cost savings for the company». What appears to be a simple technical task is, in practice, the result of experience, coordination, and attention.

Learning, in this sense, is deeply contextual. It depends on what is repeatedly done, what is tested in practice, and what becomes familiar through experience and over time. Learning is an active process that often requires embodiment (Coy, 1989; Ingold, 2000; Herzfeld, 2007; Stoller, 2007; Ingold and Lucas, 2007; Sennett, 2008). Similarly, in his ethnography of a small repair shop, Harper (1987) shows how practical skills emerge through long-term engagement with materials and breakdowns, producing what he calls a «deep knowledge» of how things work and fail. This knowledge is corporeal, temporal, and learned through repetition rather than through formal instruction.

What can be learned easily is what fits into existing routines; what requires new forms of coordination, infrastructures, or temporalities tends to remain marginal. A good example of this is reuse. Unlike recycling, reuse has not become part of everyday routines. Knowledge about how to reuse materials – where to sell them, where to buy them, how to store them, how to restore

them, or how to trade them – is often fragmented or missing altogether. As a result, reuse remains difficult to implement in practice, even when it seems desirable in theory or on paper. Like the bricoleur described by Harper (1987), drawing on Lévi-Strauss's (1962) formulation, demolition workers who engage in reuse rely on material judgement and familiarity rather than on standardised procedures. Sennett (2008) describes this kind of engagement as the defining quality of craftsmanship: a slow, attentive, and iterative relationship with materials built through what he calls the «rhythm of habit» – the repeated, embodied engagement through which a worker develops genuine responsiveness to what the material itself demands. It is precisely this quality of knowing – careful, cumulative, and time-dependent – that becomes hardest to sustain under conditions of time pressure and cost optimisation.

In one case during my fieldwork, several doors identified for preservation were sent to a carpenter for restoration. The carpenter – one of the company's long-term suppliers – assessed the doors, photographed them, designed a solution, and produced a sample frame. This sample was then sent back to the architect for approval. This process required time, a specific chain of relationships, and costly artisanal labour. As research on circular construction has shown, materials do not circulate on their own: their reuse depends on human labour, skills, and time, which are difficult to calculate and often undervalued in project decisions (Kobi *et al.*, 2023). These examples highlight the central role of hands-on experience and non-formalised knowledge in construction and demolition work. A significant part of learning happens directly in the field through observation, repetition, and participation. Knowledge is embodied, interiorised, and gradually refined through practice rather than transmitted through formal instruction. Anthropological scholarship has long emphasised these dimensions of learning, describing knowledge as sensory, practical, and often tacit (Polanyi, 1966), embodied through the senses (Stoller, 2007; Downey, 2010), and developed as a form of judgement through practice or «skilled vision» (Grasseni, 2004). Learning, as Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, is situated within social contexts and unfolds through participation in communities of practice, in which skills are acquired by watching, repeating, and gradually taking part rather than by mastering formalised

procedures (Coy, 1989; Marchand, 2003).

Understanding demolition processes would have been difficult – if not impossible – without being present on site. Just as I learned by observing my interlocutors at work, my interlocutors themselves acquired most of their skills in the field through experience rather than formal instruction. Knowledge, in this sense, does not precede practice but emerges through it.

The economic value of unskilled labour

These dynamics become particularly visible when looking at labour relations in demolition work. Skilled and unskilled workers, as well as forms of care and neglect, coexist in this sector. My fieldwork reveals how apparent contradictions are in fact constitutive features of everyday practice. Many companies, including Emir's, one of my interlocutors, have their origins in larger demolition firms and mainly employ immigrant workers. Their work is often carried out using small machines or through manual strip-out operations. By contrast, other firms specialise in complex demolitions using heavy machinery and predominantly employ Italian workers, as operating such machines requires individual certification (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 Workers and machinery operating on a demolition site. Source: photos by the author.

Certification is directly linked to the worker rather than to the company. For this reason, firms are often reluctant to invest in training and certification for workers hired on a temporary basis. If a worker leaves after a few months, the cost of certification cannot be recovered. At the same time, even in jobs classified as provisional or unskilled, a certain level of experience is indispensable. As we have seen, demolition work must follow a precise sequence; otherwise, it becomes dangerous. For example, a worker may fall if a floor collapses unexpectedly. A worker on their first day may not yet know this sequence of actions. This kind of understanding is acquired through practice and observation – by working on sites and by learning how to read a building once one has gained some familiarity with demolition and construction work.

Skilled and unskilled labour therefore come together in everyday practice, which is not really a contradiction, but a constitutive feature of demolition work. Less skilled workers, who lack certification or formal training, are functional to the system because they help reduce costs, just as smaller companies are functional within the sector. Paradoxically, not having formal knowledge or training becomes economically valuable. Workers with little formal training are not marginal but central to the construction economy. Their expendability is not a sign of their irrelevance, but of the opposite, as they form a reserve of flexible, low-cost labour on which the profitability of the sector depends. The reliance on cheap, unrecognised labour is a constitutive feature of much of capitalism, in which profit depends on the gap between the value that workers produce and the recognition – economic and social – that they receive (Harvey, 2001; Ferro, 2024).

The coexistence of skilled and unskilled labour also points to a broader process of commodification shaping the construction sector. Work is increasingly organised to maximise speed, reduce costs, and standardise outcomes. At the same time, construction cannot be fully organised as an industrial production process comparable to the manufacturing of standardised goods. As Sergio Ferro (Ferro, 2024, 2025) has argued, despite mechanisation and attempts to rationalise labour, construction remains deeply tied to site-specific conditions and to forms of craft knowledge that cannot be entirely standardised. Buildings cannot be produced in

the same way as clothes or other industrial commodities. There is always a component of skill, judgement, and adjustment that emerges only in practice on site.

However, forms of knowledge that rely on experience, attention, and slow engagement with materials, such as more artisanal work, become harder to sustain. This becomes visible, for example, when materials are preserved and sent elsewhere to be restored, as in the case of doors that were removed from a building and sent to a carpenter. Their reuse required assessment, experimentation, and negotiation: the carpenter evaluated the doors, produced a sample, and sent it back to the architect for approval. Such processes require time, coordination, and a willingness to engage with uncertainty – conditions that are increasingly difficult to sustain within accelerated construction schedules.

Time is not only an economic constraint but also an epistemic one. The pressure to build fast limits the kinds of knowledge that can be produced and mobilised, privileging forms of knowing that align with speed and standardisation, while marginalising those that depend on care, slowness, and experimentation. As cities are expected to grow quickly, certain ways of working – and knowing – are stabilised, while others are progressively excluded. Urban form thus emerges not only from decisions and plans, but also from the temporal regimes that shape what can be known, learned, and done in practice.

Conclusion

How is a city made? This article suggests that it is made through the daily work of people who navigate uncertainty, mobilise practical knowledge, and make countless small decisions on site – decisions that, accumulated over time, translate abstract plans into built form and shape the city.

This article has shown how construction entrepreneurs, engineers, and workers navigate knowledge, risk, and decision-making in their everyday practices. Through judgements about which projects to accept, which materials to preserve or discard, how to organise work, and how to respond to unforeseen conditions, these actors do not simply execute plans. They continuously shape the material and social forms of urban space.

Rather than treating the city as the outcome of abstract

design or regulatory frameworks, this article has argued for understanding urbanisation as a process grounded in situated forms of knowledge. What becomes built or dismantled emerges through practical decisions taken under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, and economic constraint. As the ethnographic examples show, plans function as starting points rather than as fixed scripts. Much of what matters only becomes visible on site through engagement with materials, infrastructures, and people. In this sense, urbanisation is never entirely predictable; instead, it unfolds through a non-linear process in which planning and improvisation are deeply intertwined. Entrepreneurs navigate risk by remaining open to information that arrives unpredictably through encounters and relationships; workers learn to read buildings, materials, and sequences of action through repeated engagement on site. These ways of knowing are not incidental to urban form – they are constitutive of it.

Learning in the field plays a crucial role in this process. Skills are acquired and stabilised through repetition, routines, and participation in communities of practice. Recycling, for example, has become embedded in everyday work because it aligns with existing infrastructures, rhythms, and forms of learning. Reuse, by contrast, remains marginal because it requires different temporalities, additional coordination, and forms of expertise that are harder to sustain. What can be learned, and what remains difficult to learn, directly affects which material practices become normalised – and which do not.

Finally, by examining labour relations in demolition work, this article has highlighted how knowledge, value, and time are entangled. The coexistence of skilled and unskilled labour is not an anomaly but a constitutive feature of the sector. Experience-based, situational knowledge remains indispensable even where formal training or certification is absent. At the same time, pressures to reduce costs and accelerate work favour forms of labour and knowledge that can be mobilised quickly. Time thus emerges not only as an economic constraint but also as an epistemic one: it shapes which kinds of knowing are recognised, rewarded, or excluded.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the city emerges through specific regimes of knowledge and time. In other words, urban form is the product of what can be known, learned, and

done in practice under particular conditions. By paying attention to everyday work on construction and demolition sites, this article contributes to a broader understanding of the city as a material outcome of situated knowledge, practical judgement, and ongoing adaptation. This perspective has implications that extend beyond the building site. If urban form is shaped by the epistemic conditions of construction work – by what can be known, learned, and done under particular regimes of time and labour – then changing the city also requires changing those conditions. Debates on sustainable urbanism, circular construction, and urban equity cannot be resolved at the level of policy or design alone; instead, they depend on whether the forms of knowledge, skills, and time that more careful, relational, and material practices require are recognised and made possible. The city, in other words, is built not only through design, but also through the continuous – and always contested – work of knowing in action.

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