



*Figure 1 (Left). Worker using a torch to remove sections of structural steel as temporary support of earth walls created during the excavation for the cellar levels of a new high rise residential building in Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Author*

*Figure 2 (Right). Workers guiding the lifting of a curtain wall panel which is being hoisted by a portable floor mounted crane located two floors above for a new office building project in Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Author*

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## UNSEEN EFFORT IN CONSTRUCTION:

### A Photo Narrative

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Tradespeople are essential to the built environment, yet their contributions often go unnoticed. Their work is a critical part of transforming materials into functional spaces, but these efforts are frequently overshadowed by the final product. Having spent years on construction sites, it is clear that there is immense dedication and expertise that go into creating the spaces we occupy. Through photography, we aim to highlight the human stories behind construction and advocate for greater recognition of their role in shaping the spaces we inhabit.

For architects, engaging with the realities of construction is not merely an acknowledgment of labor but a pathway to better design. Understanding how buildings are built—from the early stages of excavation to the finishing touches—can foster more thoughtful architectural practices and the production of better construction drawings. By capturing the momentary beauty of the construction process, we hope to bridge this gap and remind designers that the built environment is a collaborative effort, shaped by many hands and minds working together. This essay seeks to use photography as a way to highlight a few of the countless tasks completed by tradespeople throughout the construction phase.



At the earliest stages of large construction projects, the balance between stability and risk is vividly evident. For example, the removal of temporary supports during excavation reveals the delicate interplay of engineering precision and physical labor. In Figure 1, a worker uses a torch to dismantle steel braces that had temporarily stabilized the excavation walls of a high-rise construction site. These supports—a necessary but ultimately invisible step—allow for the permanent concrete superstructure that will stabilize the structure. This critical phase underscores often-overlooked moments that allow architectural designs to be realized.

Once foundational work is completed, the process progresses to creating durable and functional surfaces. In Figure 3, two workers finish a recently poured concrete slab, a task that combines physical strength with meticulous attention to detail. Concrete finishing requires knowledge of material behavior, as timing and technique directly impact the quality of the final product. This stage represents the human touch required to transform material into an enduring component of the built environment. Similarly, the installation of a curtain wall in Figure 2 exemplifies the collaboration and precision required during

*Figure 3. Two workers finish troweling a recently poured concrete slab on grade for a new apartment building in King of Prussia, PA. Photo by Author*



the intermediate stages of construction. Workers guide the large panels into place, balancing mechanical innovation with teamwork to create the sleek and modern aesthetic associated with contemporary architecture.

The later stages of construction often involve protective work that ensures both functionality and longevity. Roofing, pictured in Figure 4, exemplifies the skilled labor required to protect buildings from the elements. Here, a worker installs a modified bitumen torch-down roofing membrane. These final acts, often hidden from view, are essential to ensuring the integrity of the underlying structure and finished architecture.

As the structure takes shape, attention turns to the interior, where the trades transform raw spaces into functional and aesthetically refined environments. In Figure 5, a worker carefully applies tape and joint compound to sheetrock seams, a task vital to the smooth, polished walls expected in finished interiors. Likewise, the application of paint in Figure 6 is not merely an application of color, but the act that determines the texture, tone, and atmosphere of the space.

*Figure 4. Closeup of a worker installing a modified bitumen torch-down roofing membrane over the concrete deck of a new residential building in Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Author*



By highlighting the tradespeople whose work brings architectural designs to life, we gain a fuller understanding of the built environment as an ongoing, collaborative act. The value of this understanding to the practice of architecture is exemplified by Peter Zumthor in *Thinking Architecture*:

I feel respect for the art of joining, the ability of craftsmen and engineers. I am impressed by man's knowledge of how to make things which lies at the bottom of his skill. I try to design buildings which are worthy of this knowledge and worth the challenge they impose upon this skill.

*Figure 5 (Left). Worker on stilts "finishing" the joints between two sections of gypsum sheetrock by installing joint tape and compound for a new apartment building in Paterson, NJ. Photo by Author*

*Figure 6 (Right). Worker spray painting an apartment in a new apartment building in Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Author*

## ENDNOTES:

1. All photos were taken with a DSLR in color between 2017 to 2024. Modifications include correcting perspective, lens distortions, and standard levels/contrast adjustments. Excluding the subjects, the rest of the photo is converted to monochrome. This is meant to draw attention to the tradespeople, as is the thesis of this essay.
2. Zumthor, P. (1999). Thinking architecture. Birkhäuser.