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Ways of Building, Ways of Seeing: Two Churches under Construction

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Introduction

Labour – as seen through film

Architect, theorist, and historian Sérgio Ferro sought to “develop a history that enables one to see both head and feet at the same time – the magnanimous ideal and the muck down below. A history of architecture seen from the building site”.ⁱ Building history is rarely written from the perspective of the construction site itself. Most research focuses on design, typology, or technology, while the concrete realities of building — labour, collaboration, improvisation, coordination, and conflict — often remain out of view. This article begins from the conviction that a deeper understanding of historical building practices doesn’t just start with asking what was built or how, but especially by whom, and with what means.

These questions come into sharp focus in two unique film recordings of construction sites in the Belgian town of Mol: one from 1955, showing an emergency church built by local volunteers; and another from 1968, depicting the construction of a permanent church led by a professional contractor.ⁱⁱ These films not only capture two buildings that are closely linked geographically, programmatically, and in terms of community, but also how building practices evolved: from collective involvement to structured organization, from improvisation to regulation, from community to detachment.

The films offer a rare window onto the building process. They don't just show the materialisation of the design but also make "the work" itself visible — sometimes explicitly, sometimes between the lines: who was present on site, what skills were employed, how did collaboration take shape, and how was the site organised as a social space. The focus was not on the final result or on technical innovation, but on construction as a practice: the social, physical, and material conditions under which the buildings took place.

In this paper, we therefore take labour as our central analytical lens. After briefly situating the form and context of each building, we analyse each project in terms of labour organisation, tools and equipment used. Form and technique gain meaning through their relationship to the people who engage with them. The construction site emerges not just as a place where buildings are made, but where relationships between labour, authority, and material production are negotiated. The shift observed between the two sites — from a people-centred to an object-centred building culture — is not only technical, but also social and ideological.

Film as a source

Film plays a key role in this analysis. As a visual source, film is uniquely powerful: it captures simultaneous action, rhythm, and choreography, and gives space to the informal and everyday aspects that seldom appear in written records. At the same time, film is not a neutral medium: the camera selects, frames, and narrates. What is shown? What is left out? Who is given a face, and whose labour remains implicit?

However, while it is not unusual to find photographs of construction sites throughout the 20th century, films are far less common.ⁱⁱⁱ A notable early example, dating from the late 1920s, was the work of filmmaker and architect Ernest Weissmann, who turned his lens on the temporary, dynamic setting of a construction site of e.g. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye. Weissmann's cinematic portrayals went beyond the carefully staged photographs intended for public consumption. They revealed the evolving nature of the site, the construction process, the labourers, the tools they used, and the fluctuating presence of architects.^{iv}

Though constantly in development, motion picture equipment was, until the late 1960s, rather expensive, relatively rare, and demanded technical skills. Nevertheless, with the rise of manual amateur film cameras, the medium became more widespread among hobby filmmakers. Furthermore, to document a developing construction site, the filmmaker needed to be consistently engaged and fascinated with it. In Mol, the local film group *Beeldspraak vzw*—an established association active across various communities—had both. Over the course of two decades, they documented more than 250 events in the region, including fairs

and competitions.^v Among these, they also filmed the construction of the two churches discussed in this paper. What sets these churches apart from others filmed around the same period—such as the *Christ Ressuscité* in Tubize (1955) and the *Notre-Dame de Stockel* (1962–67)—is the close connection between the two churches in Mol, offering a unique perspective on different construction practices within the same typological and geographical scope.

While the films form the primary point of departure of this paper, the visual record—due to the inherent characteristics of the medium and the selective choices made by the filmmakers—is inevitably incomplete. This is why we combine film analysis with other sources: architectural plans, payroll records, archival documents, interviews with those involved, and literature on labour and regulation in Belgium’s construction sector. In addition, interviews are used to capture more informal, often overlooked aspects of the building process, adding a further layer to the historical reconstruction.^{vi} By reading these sources in dialogue with one another, we shed light on how two local construction stories illuminate broader postwar transformations in building culture—particularly in terms of labour organisation, technique, and site management.

The emergency church, built by and for the people (1955)



Figure 1. At the church’s inauguration, priest, children, and builders gathered, marking the building as ready to welcome the community that built it. Photo: Ginderbuiten 1955: bouw en inwijding van de Noodkerk.

The first movie (1955) depicted the construction of a modest, one-story brick building with seven symmetrically aligned windows, a hidden steel roof structure, and roof tiles (Fig. 1). It

was not intended as the final church. Rather, it was conceived as a temporary solution—a functional space that allowed religious services to begin quickly, responding to the immediate needs of a growing neighbourhood.^{vii} This approach followed a broader European trend: in the aftermath of the Second World War, demographic growth and urban sprawl led to the rapid development of new residential areas. Keen to maintain a presence in these emerging communities, the Catholic Church often opted for provisional, ‘emergency’ constructions while awaiting the completion of administrative procedures and funding for a permanent church.^{viii}

The plans were likely drawn up quickly and with simplicity in mind but still bore the signature of a certified, local architect; a formal requirement for obtaining a building permit. The straightforward form not only facilitated the design process and administrative procedure, but also allowed for flexible use over time, enabled construction by low-skilled or unschooled labourers—volunteers, in this case—and matched the materials that were readily available. During the first decade after the Second World War, building materials were in short supply, requiring a frugal and pragmatic approach. Brick and timber, which had long been commonly used in Belgian construction, remained the primary materials. In this particular case, they were supplemented by reused steel profiles that were straightened before being repurposed.^{ix} The project was led by the local priest, Hendrik Smits. Although it was common for *bouwpastors* (building priests) to oversee the development of church projects, Smits played an unusually active role in the construction. He was not only responsible for fundraising, securing permits, and communication with authorities, but in the absence of a contractor, he took on that role as well. He assembled a team of volunteers, supervised the work alongside a municipal site inspector, and—as seen in the film—even took part in the physical building process. His central involvement underscores the urgency of the project, which he had pledged to complete by Christmas to ensure the holiday mass could take place, as the existing chapel had become too small.^x

Besides the priest, the construction film captured a diverse group of workers: men, women, teenagers, and children; all from the neighbourhood. This reflected the idea that the church was “built for and by the people”.^{xi} This area was home to a predominantly working-class population, consisting of several carpenters and around thirty masons^{xii}, many of them unschooled but experienced. Recognising this local accumulation of practical expertise and tacit knowledge, the priest proposed to the archdiocese (the regional administrative division of the Catholic Church) that the community’s skills be mobilised for the project. He launched a formal call for volunteers through a newspaper advertisement in July 1955 titled “We are

building an emergency church”. It announced: “Monday, August 1st, from 7 PM onwards, the volunteers will be registered: so that we know whom we can rely on. (...) Groundworkers, concrete workers, masons, helpers, carpenters, truck drivers—all are expected”.^{xiii} Notably, the call extended beyond the trades known to be present in the neighbourhood, listing nearly all recognised building trades of the time, as defined in the biweekly construction journal *Het Bouwbedrijf*.^{xiv}

The film captured several of the trades mentioned in the call: men engaged in masonry and carpentry, alongside teenage boys performing similar tasks—suggesting that they were learning and practicing these skills directly on site. In contrast, women, children, and the priest were shown in more peripheral roles, such as sorting bricks or transporting them to the masons.

It remains unclear whether (all) the volunteers actually practiced these trades professionally, or whether some acquired their skills informally through experience or community exchange. This ambiguity makes it difficult to determine the exact expertise each person brought to the project and may partly explain the sometimes chaotic or overlapping nature of the work. The film suggested that, at times, physical strength mattered more than technical knowledge, as seen in moments of collective labour, e.g. ten men are seen carrying the steel roof structure across the site. At other times, expertise appeared to have been concentrated among a few individuals, e.g. when a small group gathers around one or two men bolting together the steel space trusses (Figs 2-3).

This uneven distribution of skill was also reflected in the film’s somewhat more chaotic scenes, where multiple tasks take place simultaneously: while one group of men laid bricks in a row, children transport bricks from a nearby pile in wheelbarrows to the masons; while men throw mortar and bricks at the foot of the scaffolding, others above are laying bricks (Fig. 4). The division of labour on site evoked the traditional distinction between craftsmen and labourers, with the latter supporting the former through auxiliary tasks.^{xv} The fact that construction was volunteer-based and took place during evenings and weekends further explained the communal and informal nature of the work, as well as the presence of children and women.^{xvi} While teenage boys appeared to be more fully integrated into the building process, the film confirmed that the construction site remained a predominantly male domain, with women largely confined to peripheral roles.^{xvii}

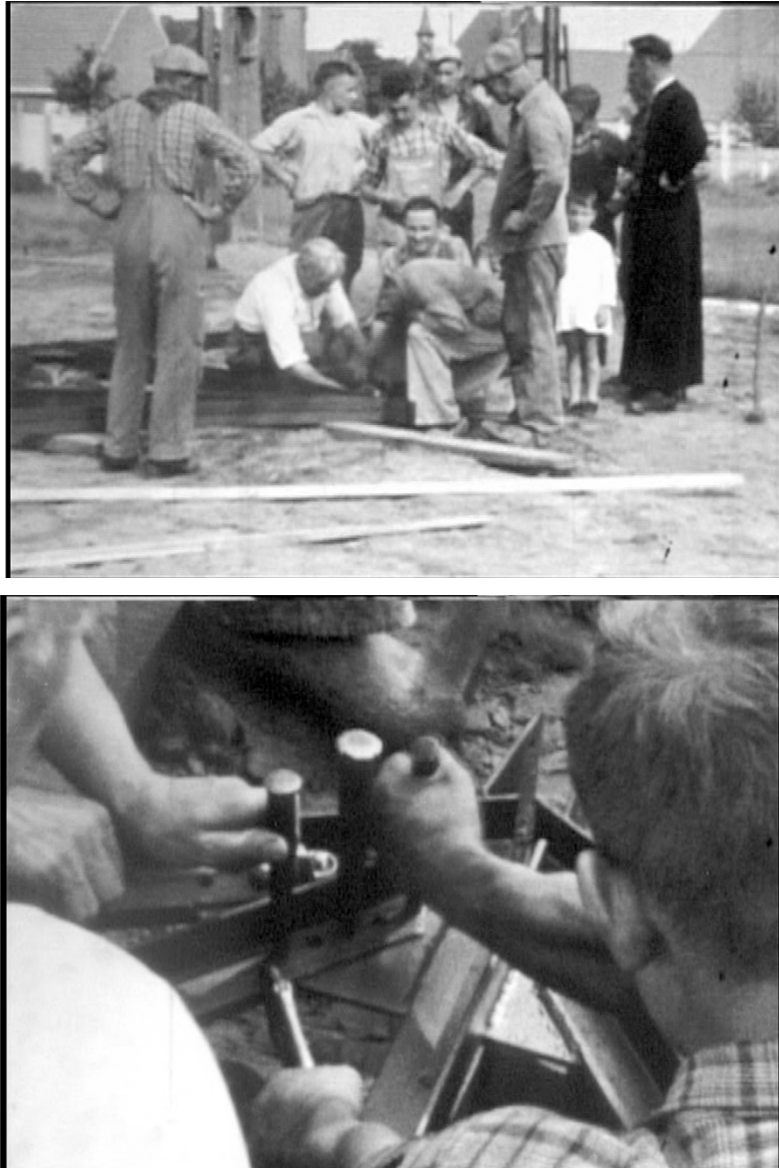


Figure 2-3. A group of men, a child and the priest observe two labourers as they tie together two pre-welded steel trusses on the ground. The first shot provides an overall view, while the second zooms in on the manoeuvre. Photo: Ginderbuiten 1955: bouw en inwijding van de Noodkerk.



Figure 4. A man tosses bricks to a worker on scaffolding, while another throws mortar into a bucket. Photo: Ginderbuiten 1955: bouw en inwijding van de Noodkerk.

Led by the local priest and shaped by financial constraints and a strong sense of urgency, the volunteer-based workforce relied primarily on simple, manual tools. Although basic mechanical and electric equipment were becoming more common in the Belgian construction sector since the late 1940s to boost productivity^{xviii}, the urgency of the project and the unavailability of trained labourers left little room for technical instruction. Hence, the construction process depended largely on the expertise at hand: manual labour. Earth was dug manually with spades, and small tipping carts were used to move soil across the site. Sacks of CBR cement were stacked beside a modest concrete mixer, which ran continuously in the background as bricks were laid. Wheelbarrows played a central role in transporting both bricks and mortar across the site, while ropes were used to hoist the steel roof trusses into position. Ladders gave access to the upper parts of the structure, where steel elements were bolted together.

Despite their simplicity, these tools were valued. One sequence in the film showed a man carefully inflating a wheelbarrow tire—a moment that underscored both the importance and scarcity of reliable equipment. At the same time, tools were also used in an informal, communal matter: children raced each other with wheelbarrows, briefly transforming the work instruments into toys. This blend of necessity and improvisation reflected the community-based, bottom-up spirit that defined the project.

The informal nature of the construction process also raises questions about safety. Workers were seen standing freely on ladders, children running around, and there were no visible barriers around the construction site—except for a single sign reading “no entry to the work

site”. As acting contractor, the priest had stated in his call for volunteers that “Anyone who works will be insured against workplace accidents”.^{xix} Yet it remains unsure how this promise was implemented in practice, and whether it included informal labourers such as women and children. His statement did, however, reflect a growing concern for safety in the 1950s construction sector, which continued to suffer from by frequent accidents. Although the General Regulation for Occupational Safety had promoted protective gear since the early 1950s, unsafe practices remained widespread, especially on small, informal sites like this one, where habitual work rhythms and a sense of freedom often overruled formal safety regulations.^{xx}

Throughout the film, *Beeldspraak* vzw placed a strong emphasis on the people involved in the building process. Through close-ups of faces, moments of laughter, repetitive gestures, the unstructured rhythm of the site, and children playing, they conveyed a sense of intimacy and familiarity between them and the volunteers. Particular attention was given to the interaction between people and tools, through care and play. The open nature of the site, while raising safety concerns, also served as an aesthetic motive: such sites were often framed as playgrounds for children, highlighting a spirit of improvisation and freedom.^{xxi} These elements collectively underscore the communal and collaborative effort that characterised the construction of the emergency church.

From community effort to contractual organisation: building the definite church (1966-68)

The second construction film covered the period from 1966 to 1968, more than a decade after the first church was built. Although there was early enthusiasm to build a permanent church, administrative hurdles—particularly those related to securing a 30% state grant from the Ministry of Public Works—delayed the project by over five years. Although the parish committee had already signed contracts with an engineering office and a steel manufacturer, construction could only begin after the grant was formally approved in 1965. A public tender was launched in early 1966, awarding the contractor firm Eysermans, and work started in August that year. By March 1968, the church was completed.^{xxii}



Figure 6-7. The steel space frame was delivered by truck, with its workers sitting on top.

Photo: *Ginderbuiten* 1965: *Bouw en inwijding van de Nieuwe Kerk*.

The steel space frame, central to Meekels' design, was prefabricated by the German firm Mannesmann, expert in steel tube constructions. In the 1950s, the company developed the *Oktaplatte* system—a modular framework composed of welded joints and reinforcing bars.^{xxvi} Prefabrication allowed key decisions and technical expertise to shift from the construction site to the factory, reducing the need for specialised labour on-site and reflecting broader changes in the construction sector. The steel structure first appears in the film as it is delivered by truck, operated by transport company Stoof, passing through the streets of *Ginderbuiten*. After the individual rows of the frame had been welded in the factory by specialised workers, they were stacked onto the truck – on top of which one or two of the manufacturer's workers were seated. Their presence quite literally embodied the transfer of technical expertise from the

company to the construction site. On site these workers installed the frame with the help of a crane, welding each row onto steel profiles positioned on top of the concrete columns. The site labour, while mainly manual and not highly specialised, was nonetheless skilled – typical of many small-scale projects of the period. The construction film showed this clearly: masons and carpenters are the primary figures on the screen. Often, only one group of workers or trade—masons, carpenters and truck drivers—was seen simultaneously on site; a reflection of the more structured division of tasks introduced by the contractor, who had been formally appointed by the parish committee to coordinate and rationalise the work. Wage files submitted biweekly by the contractor, signed by the workers, and checked by the authorities, confirmed this systematic organisation (Fig. 8).^{xxvii}

This strict division of labour—both on site and in the factory—contributed to a growing distance between workers and the finished product.^{xxviii} Yet in the final phase of construction this separation briefly collapsed: in order to meet the deadline, eleven labourers from different trades worked together simultaneously. Paid equally and performing a variety of tasks, their coordinated effort marked a brief return to collective, versatile labour.

The image shows a historical document titled "LOONSTAAT" (Wage State) from the archives of the church fabric in Mol. The document is a multi-column table listing workers, their trades, working hours, and wages. It includes handwritten entries and signatures. The table has columns for "NAMES", "Trades", "Working hours", "Wages", and "Signatures". The document is dated 1960 and includes a signature of the contractor.

Figure 8. A wage file listing the labourers on site, their respective trades, working hours, and calculated wages. Source: archives church fabric, Mol.

The wage documents also reflect broader shifts in the construction sector during the 1960s, including the increasing professionalisation of trades and a growing concern for worker wellbeing, safety and productivity.^{xxix} Workers were paid by the hour, determined by trade and level of experience.^{xxx} The files also accounted for common labour conditions such as sick leave, weather-related interruptions (e.g. days of rain), a five-day or forty-five-hour work week – long advocated by the Christian Union since the 1950s and gradually implemented

during the 1960s^{xxxii} – and official holidays, as published by *Het Bouwbedrijf*.^{xxxii} The contractor's mandatory registration with the *Rijksdienst der Maatschappelijke Zekerheid* (National Social Security Office) gained importance as construction projects grew in scale and mechanisation increased. This registration insured both the contractor and his workers against workplace incidents, reinforcing the growing institutional framework surrounding construction labour.

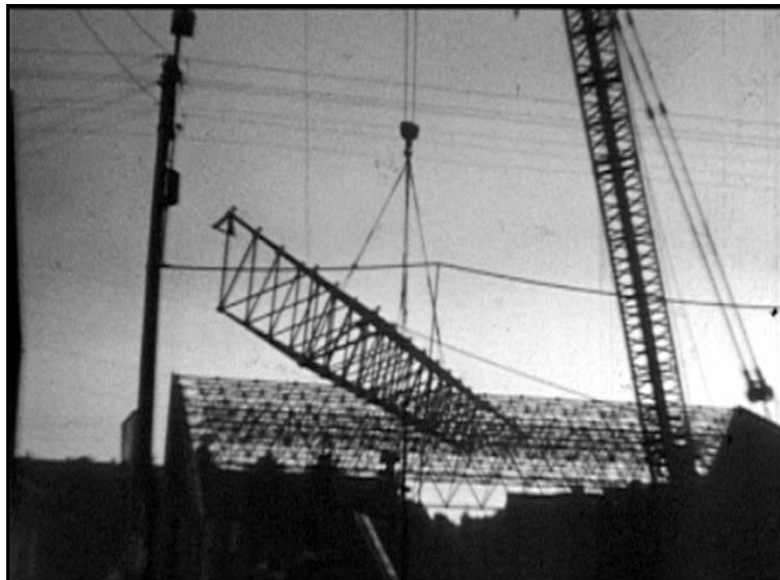


Figure 9. A crane lifts a section of the steel space frame onto the roof. Photo: Ginderbuiten 1965: *Bouw en inwijding van de Nieuwe Kerk*.

Despite the relatively large scale of the construction, mechanised tools remained scarce on site. The contractor was responsible for providing equipment, according to the available labour, skill sets and practical need. The film depicted how he delivered bricks in bulk by truck. Furthermore, the construction site appeared scattered with familiar, low-tech items such as wheelbarrows and timber formwork. The most visible sign of mechanisation was the use of cranes. While the contractor's own crane appears idle in the early stages of construction, a second crane, provided by the transport company, was later installed to lift the steel space frame into place, row by row. At that point, the crane signalled a shift in both the pace and scale of the work. In the final phase of construction, the contractor's crane was used by carpenters to install the timber roof windows. He also introduced a circular saw—one of the few electrically powered tools on site. Despite the broader trend of industrialisation in the construction sector, mechanisation often brought little advantage to small-scale sites like this one, where costs could easily outweigh the benefits.^{xxxiii} Similar tool use was evident at other contemporary church construction sites, which relied on minimal machinery. Archival footage from the Dymo factory (Sint Niklaas, 1963), for example, showed that besides the

prefabricated beams, most tasks were still carried out with hand tools and tipper carts. Even in some more experimental projects like the thin shell construction in the Huberty House (Overijse, 1961-64), basic equipment like wheelbarrows remained dominant.^{xxxiv}



Figure 10. As the gates opened for the church's inauguration, the construction site briefly became a place of public gathering. Photo: Ginderbuiten 1965: *Bouw en inwijding van de Nieuwe Kerk*.

As both manual and mechanised tools became more dispersed across the construction site, the contractor's capacity to enforce safety protocols increasingly relied on restricting site access to registered workers during working hours. Fences were erected to enclose the site, visually asserting the contractor's authority—clearly visible in the opening shot of the film. From that point on, the contractor regulated all entries, including visits by the architect, the priest, and other stakeholders. (Still, the boundary was not entirely impermeable: children occasionally entered the site during weekends when no supervision was present.^{xxxv}) Public access was limited to ceremonial moments, such as the laying of the first stone, when a procession led by the bishop allowed local residents to pass through the main gate, briefly transforming the regulated building site into a communal space. Outside of such events, only close acquaintances—such as family members or friends—were sometimes allowed to observe progress, usually near the entrance.

The film reflected the more controlled and professionalised atmosphere on site. The fenced perimeter, the subdued lighting, and the scattered machinery evoked a landscape of industrial residue. Unlike the earlier film, which emphasized collective labour, this one focussed on formal events such as meetings, suggesting a more distanced relation between the filmmakers

and the workers. Special attention was given to the delivery and assembly of the steel space frame, marking a clear visual and narrative shift towards architectural spectacle.

Comparison of the two construction sites and films

While the two construction films from Mol reflected broader trends in postwar Belgian building culture, they were also deeply grounded in local conditions—testimonies of how specific constraints and opportunities shaped each project. The emergency church, constructed in 1955, arose from a sense of urgency and was largely driven by the initiative of the local priest, who mobilised volunteers and improvised with available tools and materials. This was a form of building deeply embedded in the social fabric of the neighbourhood: flexible, collective, and shaped as much by necessity as by design. Conversely, the design itself was tailored to allow such collective, low-tech construction.

By contrast, the permanent church built a decade later followed a formal competition, a protracted planning process and was executed by a professional contractor. The key difference was not the implementation of more advanced tools and techniques, but rather the organisation of labour. Its architectural ambition required specialised labour and a more hierarchical, regulated construction process. Technical specifications and contractual obligations now dictated not only what was built, but how it was built: in phased, sequential operations, increasingly shaped by safety regulations and industry norms.

Analysing construction films not only reveals technical details about the building process but also offers insight into the perspective and priorities of the filmmakers themselves. As John Berger reminds us “every image embodies a way of seeing”^{xxxvi}: the filmmaker actively selects what to capture, how to frame it, and from which angle, thus shaping the narrative. These choices determine what is foregrounded—be it workers, tools, construction techniques, or the architectural object—and, in doing so, influence how we, as researchers, interpret the act of building. In *Beeldspraak* vzw’s first film, the focus lied squarely on the people: their gestures, interactions, and relationship to the tools and each other, reinforcing the informal and community-driven character of construction – an aspect often overlooked in official architectural histories. In contrast, the second film shifted its gaze towards the architectural object and ceremonial milestones. Although the construction process was still documented, workers were mainly shown in formal meetings with the contractor, reflecting a more detached, professionalised perspective. This suggests a shift in both representation and reality: from communal labour to architectural modernity.

Conclusion: from community to control – and what film shows us

These two case studies reveal more than just a scaling-up or technical evolution. They reflect a broader transformation in mid-20th century building culture—one that redefined how construction was organised, experienced, and represented. The shift was not simply from small to large, or from manual to mechanised, but from collective labour to controlled labour, from informal collaboration to codified hierarchies. It is through the organisation of labour—who builds, how, with whom, and under what conditions—that broader societal transformations become tangible.

The increasing regulation of building processes in the 1960s was not limited to improving safety or efficiency; it also introduced forms of distancing workers from the meanings, identities and agency historically attached to the act of building. The site was no longer a space of improvisation and communal negotiation, but one governed by contracts, specifications, phased planning, and institutional oversight.

Film plays a crucial role in making these dynamics visible. Far from being a neutral medium, it frames and narrates the construction process, shaping how it is remembered and understood. By capturing both presence and absence, the visible and the implied, these films allow us to trace how building sites functioned not only as places of production, but also as arenas of negotiation, authority, and transformation. Seen through this lens, the history of construction "from below", rooted in labour, tools, and the rhythms of the site, deserves a central place in architectural historiography. It reveals not just how buildings were made, but how broader societal transformations—industrialisation, regulation, shifts in authority—were negotiated on the ground, one construction site at a time.

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ⁱⁱⁱG. Delhumeau (Ed.), *Le Béton en Représentation: La Mémoire Photographique De l'Entreprise Hennebique, 1890–1930*, Paris: Hazan, 1993

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^vAll their films are listed here: <https://mol.bibliotheek.be/catalogus?q=beeldspraak%20vzw> (Consulted on March 31, 2025).

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^{viii}Domus Dei Brochures (1953-63), Archives of Domus Dei, Archives Archdiocese, Mechlin.

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^x(Note 7)

^{xi}C. Berghmans et al, *Fier is ginderbuiten*, Mol: Molse Kamer voor Geschiedenis, 1996.

^{xii}Mrs Stevens, conversation with Chiara Kuijpers and Femke Van der Meulen, Parish Centre of Mol-Ginderbuiten, April 30, 2025.

^{xiii}Gazet Van Mol, No.31 (July 30 1955), p.1

^{xiv}This was published monthly, eg.: Het bouwbedrijf: moniteur van de nationale confederatie van het bouwbedrijf (28 August 1955), p.10

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^{xvi}Dossier Sint Jozef-Ambachtsmanskerk (1950-68), archives Ministry of Justice, Brussels; Dossier Sint Jozef-Ambachtsmanskerk (1950-68), archives Ministry of Public Works, Brussels.

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- ^{xxxiii}Angillis, (Note 18), p.99.
- ^{xxxiv}*The Erection of the steelwork*, Archive Karel Van Riel, Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, 1963; S. Van de Voorde, L. Raaffels, 'The private house of engineer Jean-Marie Huberty and its hypar roof. A unique experiment in concrete construction in Belgium in the 1960s', *Iron, Steel and Buildings: Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of the Construction History Society*, Cambridge 2020, Cambridge: Construction History Society, 2020.

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