Building Sites in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 4-6 Jun 26)

Downing College, Cambridge, Jun 4–06, 2026
Deadline: Sep 5, 2025

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Building Sites in Early Modern Europe (c.1400-1700).

The CSCA (Ax:son Johnson Centre for the Study of Classical Architecture) is inviting papers for its forthcoming conference on Building Sites in Early Modern Europe (c. 1400-1700), to be held 4-6 June 2026 at Downing College, Cambridge.

This international academic conference explores the building site in early modern Europe and its networks (c. 1400–1700) as a place for production, exchange, and transmission in the history of art and architecture. Far from being mere spaces of construction, building sites functioned as dynamic laboratories where ideas, knowledge, cultures, technologies, skills, and social structures intersected. Building sites, in this way, acted as contact zones for the transfer of both practical and theoretical knowledge. Europe's 'builder' patrons, including the Medici, Pope Julius II, François I, Philip II, Catherine de Medici, and Louis XIV, facilitated the diffusion of techniques, methods, materials, and practices across geographic and cultural boundaries by summoning architects and artisans to their building projects, notably Leonardo da Vinci, Sebastiano Serlio, and Gian-Lorenzo Bernini. Peripatetic architects and tradespeople often shared discrete practices across borders, yet, in some instances, encounters could lead to practices being rejected, as seen in the case of Bernini in France.

Before the institutionalisation of architectural education around the turn of the eighteenth century, building sites served as spaces where pupils, apprentices and fellow architects observed the business of architecture in motion, facilitating learning by situational observation and heuristic engagement in physical and frequently chaotic assemblies. Similarly, the "confusion of tongues"—etiologically associated with the Tower of Babel building site—underscores the linguistic and social diversities found at building sites and demonstrates a dimension of architecture that has the potential to unite (rather than divide) through building processes.

Patrons, governments, and monarchs duly recognised the strategic importance of such sites as laboratories for technological advancement and demonstration of state and diplomatic affairs, often dispatching ambassadors, architects, and surveyors—sometimes in disguise as in the cases of Jean-Baptise Colbert, Christopher Wren, and Peter the Great—to observe, pry, steal, document, and transmit architectural intelligence back to their courts. Before the so-called 'Grand Tour, most royal architects, including Inigo Jones, Hendrick de Keyser, Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, and Lambert von Haven, had travel arranged for them to see buildings 'in rising' across Europe as part

of their educational formation.

This conference, then, considers building sites as complex mechanisms for revealing the practicalities of how buildings came into being, but also as social, cultural, and economic structures that underpin them. Key themes include the coordination of labour, management of materials, money, labour, guild regulations, and the relationships between patrons, designers, builders, and labourers. Particular attention is also paid to the importance of paper-based practices—drawings, prints, contracts, and correspondence—as essential apparatuses for administering and historicising architectural production, which fundamentally distinguishes this period from medieval practice. By analysing building sites as evolving structures of architectural practice alongside broader academic and bureaucratic developments, this conference aims to reframe the building site as a vital arena of artistic and architectural production and knowledge creation. It invites new perspectives on how architectural forms and institutions emerged in tandem with the socio-economic and political transformations in Europe and beyond.

We invite contributions from historians of art, architecture, the built environment, science, geography, economics, and other related fields. We are particularly interested in proposals that explore the following themes:
• Order (organisation vs chaos, administration, contracts, the state, bureaucracy, clergy, the academy, on-site vs remote control, patronage, security, safety)
• Situation (land, foundations, challenges, access)
• Technology and Techniques (machinery, innovation, engines, logistics, scaffolding)
• Materials and Materiality (access, ownership, importation, tools, measurement)
• Visuals and Visuality (prints and other images depicting sites, paintings, the idea of concealing construction)
• Labour (manual vs intellectual, language barriers, staffing animals, groups such as women, immigrants, enslaved and indentured workers)
• Microsites of production (huts, sheds, workshops, quarries, timber yards, kilns, stores)
• Mobility (portability, movement, operations, transportation)
• Knowledge (intelligence, espionage, diplomacy, disguise, practical vs intellectual exchange)
• Drawing (drawing broadly defined, models, contracts, letters, surveys)
• Allegory and Mythology (ancient allegory, metaphor, emulation, ceremony)
• Senses (noise, smell, sounds, work song, music, food)
• Scandal (failure or instability, abandonment, corruption, mismanagement)

To submit a proposal: Papers should be original and include unpublished research to be delivered in tightly focussed presentations. Select papers will be invited to be published in an edited volume. To submit a paper proposal, please use the form on the conference website: https://csca.aha.cam.ac.uk/building-sites-conference-2026/ by 17:00 (GMT) Friday, 5 September 2025.

Reference:
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