I am Mauro and I represent ULLARC – the Union of Workers in Architecture. I would like to thank those who made this initiative possible and involved us, and I greet our friends from AKEA, Uncomfortable Questions in Architecture, and SAW Unite. In my speech, I will try to provide an answer to the questions posed by the organizers regarding the condition of workers, the socio-political context of the construction market, and the concrete prospects for struggle.

The Italian territory is characterized by a great diversity of environmental and social conditions. Before national unity, it was divided into many governing entities, and this encouraged the development of various urban and metropolitan areas. For centuries, rural activity kept extra-urban territories inhabited and guarded, even in a context of widespread poverty and harsh social differences. When the profession of architect was officially established in 1923 (nineteen twenty-three), a large part of Italy still lived in these conditions, even though several areas – and particularly the Po Valley in the north – were launched into a massive process of industrialization. Between the end of the 19th (nineteenth) century and the 1920s (nineteen twenties), the autonomy of architecture studies was defined in relation to fine arts and engineering.

Until the 1980s (nineteen eighties), architecture remained a profession practiced mainly by a medium-high bourgeois population, solidly embedded in academic, political, cultural, and industrial networks, especially in metropolitan areas, but not only there. In 1988 (nineteen eighty-eight), there were 47,000 (forty-seven thousand) architects in Italy – one for every 1,200 (one thousand two hundred) inhabitants – compared to 2024 (twenty twenty-four), where they have become 157,000 (one hundred and fifty-seven thousand) – one for every 375 (three hundred and seventy-five) inhabitants. The profound changes in Italian society are reflected in the professional microcosm of architecture. The number of architects is likely destined to decrease in the coming years due to the combined effect of demographic decline and the drop in enrollments after the 2008 (twenty-o-eight) crisis; but at the same time, the number of technical workers in architecture who are not architects has grown significantly, and it is impossible to map them through professional registers.

Italy, after being radically transformed by urbanization and industrialization, is today a "two-speed" territory. Metropolitan areas are linked to the growth of the service sector, where the influence of the real estate, financial, logistics, and tourism sectors is increasing. In this context, construction works are primarily a vehicle for profit for large and medium investment groups; they often lose any relationship with local housing, cultural, and productive needs, entering into dynamics of overproduction and speculation. Meanwhile, the so-called "internal areas" are witnessing a progressive emptying and demographic aging, along with the extinction of the social and productive fabric. Consider that from 1985 (nineteen eighty-five) to 2015 (twenty fifteen), the area covered by forests increased by 28% (twenty-eight percent), taking the place of cultivated lands.

In non-metropolitan territories, a craft coordinated by independent professionals or small studios still resists: a network of collaborations between architects and experts from related sectors, whose economic sustainability varies according to the type of clients they

manage to intercept. As for the young people entering the profession, while some manage to start an economically sustainable path, many must migrate to metropolitan areas or abroad to achieve even a fragile economic independence.

In the main metropolitan areas, in addition to a large number of small-medium studios or freelancers—who often work as "technical subcontractors" for larger firms—the weight of "service companies" is increasing. These companies model their activity around the interests of financial groups, public clients, or hybrids of the two. Engineering firms, design offices within non-construction companies, project management firms, and general contractors with design departments are examples of entities that each group hundreds or thousands of collaborators, including architects, engineers, surveyors, and administrative staff. It is important to note that these are not only local companies, but often multinational groups with Italian offices. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to map and quantify this complexity, but our Union is working on it. We are convinced that when we manage to provide a first overview of this complex structure, we will contribute to changing the dominant narrative, which almost always emphasizes the "oversupply" of architects compared to the European average. This narrative is often used to justify labor exploitation within a framework of cutthroat competition, ignoring the vast range of tasks, places, and hiring conditions in which architectural workers operate.

Working conditions in architecture—within the design, technical, and management fields—are not homogeneous, and we still need time to build an effective overall picture. In the meantime, we can provide some points for reflection. Having solid family support, not only economic but also in terms of culture and connections, still makes a difference in many stories of professional success or failure. This circumstance is linked to other advantages or disadvantages such as gender (there are more women graduates than men, but the gender gap is still strong in terms of money and position), origin from inside or outside the European Community, and the quality of the training path. Class difference surely damages the most fragile segments of the category: socially solid people can afford years of unpaid or underpaid work. Many stories of "vocation" and "sacrifice" omit the class advantage that made them possible. Those who truly need a salary to be independent are harmed by this rhetoric, which exalts personal commitment and talent while ignoring all background conditions.

In Italy, the majority of stable collaborators in studios and companies are hired as VAT-registered freelancers (partita IVA), and thus as independent professionals excluded from any possibility of collective bargaining. A vision based on individual performance and willingness to sacrifice is an ideal support for extracting "poor labor" in many professional sectors, including ours. "We don't work at the post office" or "we don't punch a clock," is often heard in design studios to differentiate so-called professionals from workers, identifying the latter as people lacking ambition. Working without time limits becomes a measure of virtue. While tens of thousands of people, especially young people, end up working for a few euros an hour, the old fetish of the "professional" continues to be evoked in the ritual of exploitation: "be exploited and you will be able to exploit, because this is the way to success." The problem is that this promise —as wicked in the past as it is today— is honoured less and less often, turning into "be exploited and you can continue

to be so," in the new order promoted by financial rent, which translates into unsustainable living costs for most.

There is a National Collective Bargaining Agreement for Professional Offices that could serve as a reference for regularizing subordinate work. However, architects and engineers working for other architects and engineers are easily excluded from this, because a 2015 (twenty-fifteen) law (the so-called "Jobs Act") excludes this case from the mandatory reclassification of "fake independent" relationships into subordinate ones. Other mechanisms further slow down regularization: architects and engineers are registered in a separate social security fund; furthermore, for those earning between zero and 85,000 (eighty-five thousand) euros, there is a "flat-rate scheme" (regime forfettario) with a fixed tax of 15% (fifteen percent). While this destroys tax progressivity, it encourages the "fake freelancer" to remain in that condition.
It is not only the "fake freelancers" who suffer; the entire system is damaged. Studio owners who would like to hire people properly find it difficult because competition is distorted, making certain costs unsustainable. Larger firms, especially in metropolitan areas, see an increasingly high turnover of people who, having no prospect of stability, move from job to job chasing better offers.

Even in public assignments, there is often an implicit invitation to compress labor costs. For example, to participate in "by invitation" design tenders (under 221,000 – two hundred and twenty-one thousand – euros), studios present a portfolio and an economic offer, and often the lowest bid wins. Public competitions involve a huge amount of work that is mostly not covered by the prizes, resulting in a net loss for those who do not win. The 2023 (twenty twenty-three) law on "Fair Compensation" establishes minimum economic thresholds when working for "large clients," but this only guarantees the studio owners, as it does not force them to redistribute those fees to their collaborators.

Due to time constraints, I cannot go further into describing the Italian situation. I want to conclude by briefly talking about our group and the prospects for future action. ULLARC is still a small group, officially born in 2023 (twenty twenty-three). We have organized various initiatives, but we remain an informal collective for now; shortly, we intend to establish a social promotion association. Our action has mainly concerned the exploitation of young "fake freelancers," gender disparities, and the relationship between training and work. Starting from 2025 (twenty twenty-five), we participate in the "Architectural Workers' International" network. Currently in Italy, there are no other organizations besides ours that promote rights for those who work in architecture and live in a condition of fragility. There are only professional associations that defend "the profession" without addressing the inequalities within it.

The initiatives we are developing for the coming months are:
- The publication of a report on medium-large firms, where we estimate a ratio of one hired employee for every 10 (ten) collaborators;
- An information campaign on inequalities in access to the profession, including the state exam and the underpaid internships introduced by some professional orders;
- Collaboration with a law firm to provide assistance to workers;

- A cycle of interventions at the Politecnico di Milano to discuss labor and inequality with students;
- Support for the struggle of university assistants for higher minimum pay.

Alongside these activities, we respond daily to those who write to us privately. I conclude by saying that, for me, three years of the Union have meant a lot. This continuous work of solidarity and awareness has given me the strength to help myself and my colleagues. Political work is a commitment, but it returns a lot. I take this opportunity to thank all the comrades of this journey, and I thank Kostas and all of you for this precious occasion for discussion.