

# Concrete and Culture. A material history

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Forty had already used the analogy between language and architecture in his previous book *Words and Buildings*, exploring the vocabulary used in architecture throughout modernity and, albeit to a lesser extent, tracing the link throughout history. One good example is the chapter 'Metaphors of Language', in which he demonstrates that theoretical aspects of linguistics have been extrapolated to explain both partial and general aspects of architecture since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This analogical connection would strengthen the perception of architecture as a medium of expression and a motor for cultural transformation.

These investigations into the vocabulary of modern architecture and linguistic metaphors in architecture doubtlessly helped the author in his discoveries surrounding the relationship between concrete and culture. The parallelism he establishes with language leads him to the conviction that beyond its material and physical properties, concrete possesses an immaterial, metaphysical component that interacts with and becomes part of the world of culture.

Forty drew on additional aspects of his previous book for this study: therefore, many of the terms defined as the essential vocabulary of modern architecture in *Words and Buildings* correspond to the chapters of *Concrete and Culture*. Here, he presents this as an opposition of sorts: a concept and its opposite coexist without eliminating one another in the cultural nature of concrete. The majority of the chapters in the book are concerned with one of these oppositions, as stated in their respective titles.

The fundamental idea of the book appears to be the idea of concrete as a medium of communication that serves cultural production in many different scales and with widely varied implications. In fact, Forty states this early on, in the introduction, adding that concrete resembles language due to its universal and ubiquitous nature. He maintains that concrete, like language, is utilised in a wide variety of ways all over the world, and that everyone encounters it on a daily basis. According to Forty, the fact that concrete is such a widely used medium is an indication that it is beyond the control of the engineering and architecture disciplines; he highlights – and substantiates with abundant facts and figures – that it is largely used by non-experts and non-professionals.

There is a precedent that may help the reader understand Forty's theory of the relationship between culture and technical means of construction, namely a well-known text by Adolf Loos entitled 'The Plumbers', published at the cusp of the 20th century, in 1898. In it, Loos formulates a new definition of culture. Interestingly, with regard to Forty's text, this definition reached Loos from neither a professional nor a disciplinary field; the essential characterising feature on which this new state of culture was based was plumbing; that is, the whole range of domestic systems that enable removal of wastewater and conveyance of water and energy. What he found most important was that all homes in the United States were equipped with such facilities; at the time, this was not the case anywhere in Europe. For Loos, this was not just any aspect of culture; he saw it as a technical medium that actively constituted a part of culture, allowing it to develop and manifest itself – this is very much in line with Forty's understanding of concrete. The political insinuations are clear when he expressly states that such systems permit egalitarian personal hygiene, which is essential for collective life in mass society. The link between the two texts becomes even more explicit when Loos mentions concrete, asserting that stone is non-essential to modern life if concrete can easily be used a substitute.

While Forty never offers an explicit explanation of how he understands the role of medium of culture that concrete plays, he clarifies many aspects of this throughout the text. His discussion has a wide span, ranging from the most closed and disciplinarily specialised subject areas to the broadest and most open areas of mass culture. An interesting example of the latter are the terms and phrases he takes from the popular language of various locations. He demonstrates how these express certain specific, highly precise aspects and reveal the material's profound cultural implications. He notes, for example, that in Mexico, the metal reinforcement framework left pointing up toward the sky on the top of residential buildings is called 'castles of hope': the name captures the hope that construction of the uppermost floors can continue when fate brings better times. Another expression in Forty's collection is *to concrete over*. This very widespread expression has equivalents in many languages. In Spanish for example, there is the verb 'hormigonar' – concreting – or, popularly, 'encementar' or 'cementing' – to express the cancellation of all traces of pre-existing nature on a plot of land.

Forty makes generous references to other mediums that serve culture throughout the book; many of which are those of mass communication, or art. There are numerous mentions of cinema, photography, art and literature, which are placed in relation to various aspects of concrete, thus presenting the material as a medium of expression with an equal capacity to influence culture.

Based perhaps on analogies between concrete and the written language, the works gathered are presented as documents to be

interpreted, in a sense not unlike the 'reading the walls' concept used in archaeology. Seen thus, one might say that every concrete work carries within it certain information that the author can decode and interpret. These interpretations are connected via various lines of argument, giving *Concrete and Culture* a quality reminiscent of narrative literature. In spite of the vast amount of information contained within it, the story told in this book reads very easily.

This is conceivably also why the images in the book are treated as important as the text itself. Most of them are photographs, many of which were taken by the author on extensive journeys made for the express purpose of documenting this study. Some of the photographs are left uncommented, such as those appearing at the onset of each chapter. He lets them speak for themselves, as if they were works of art whose only associated text is a title. Thus, the photograph and the material concrete alike are perceived as mediums of communication with an equal influence on and relevance for culture, and they would have developed parallel to each other, both having originated in the 1830s.

Another important question regards the degree to which the book is an historical study. The subtitle includes the word 'history', leading us to believe that we have in our hands a history of concrete. Forty explains that he has not approached the work as a history of the use of the material; for that purpose, he argues, there is already a solid catalogue. He maintains that it could be considered a history of the medium, and that more than writing a history of the medium, he studied a medium with a history.

As far as the contents of the book go, Forty approaches the multitude of aspects that comprise the phenomenon of reinforced concrete from a variety of angles, starting from its origins in the 1830s and continuing until the present day. He uses contrasting as well as integrated arguments to do so. The first eight chapters are each devoted to a pair of opposites. The ninth chapter is dedicated to the great affinities that he sees between concrete and another great medium of culture: photography. Finally, in chapter ten, he develops the idea that concrete is experiencing a renaissance.

In a language analogy, these oppositions would correspond with the polysemy of concrete as a medium of communication: concrete would be able to express different and often contradictory meanings with the same signifier – its constructed material reality.

Forty concludes by asserting that the mutual influence of concrete and culture will continue with the same intensity in the future, even as social, political, economic or environmental circumstances cause their interdependent relationship to evolve.