

Old Practices, New Technologies: Architecture and Concrete

Adrian Forty

What happens when an old practice confronts a new technology? The responses are usually conflicted – hostility, resentment, suspicion, enthusiasm – and out of the encounter, the practice itself is often changed. Architects, despite their current self-image as nimble and ahead of the game, have by no means always been willing recipients of new technologies, and as often as not have regarded themselves as the guardians of humanistic values against the agents of progress. These discussions are as relevant now as they ever were in the past.

Architects' encounter with concrete a century or more ago is a story that in certain respects anticipates their relationship to more recent technologies. Here was a new technology that almost passed architecture by, its relevance to architecture by no means obvious or 'natural'. For a long time, architects were uncertain as to what to do with it, and when architects did engage with it, they did so in ways that were not necessarily as 'rational' as the medium's origins in the world of building and contracting might have led people to expect. Whether architects have made the best use of concrete in the century or so that it has been available to them is not a question that often gets asked – and yet it deserves to be asked.

New technologies rarely come without a cost – the exploitation of physical or human resources - and it is for architects, in the way that they interpret that technology, to decide whether that cost is worth paying. As a humanistic discipline – which it is the mission of the AHRA to promote - architects' responsibility is not in the invention of new technologies, but to *place a value* upon the technologies promoted by others.

Biography:

Adrian Forty was a founder member of the AHRA and until recently Professor of Architectural History at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. He is the author of *Words and Buildings, a Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (2000) and his latest book *Concrete and Culture, a Material History*, was published in 2012. He was the President of the European Architectural History Network 2010-14.