

## Untimely Matter

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A concrete structure is very like a photograph. On its surface are fixed permanently the marks of its making – like Roland Barthes's definition of photography, it is a record of a moment that-has-been. This similarity, between concrete as it sets, and photographic film as it is exposed, makes concrete different to other building materials, and puts it at a disadvantage when it comes to the representation of time. Conventional construction communicates time in various ways, most obviously through weathering. It is sometimes said that weathering completes the work – only when time and human use have either worn away the surface or added a patina to it does a building attain maturity. Concrete does not lend itself to this kind of gradual and progressive ageing. Most concrete buildings are condemned either to permanent newness, or to instant decrepitude. Whatever visible ageing they undergo often happens within a very short time of their completion. Indeed, staining and shrinkage cracks can sometimes make a concrete building look old even before it is finished – after which there may be very little further change in the building's appearance for another half century. On the other hand, concrete can remain looking perpetually new.

At Louis Kahn's Salk Institute, the concrete has hardly changed since it was cast, and all the evidence of ageing is concentrated upon the weathering of the untreated timber. But the everlasting newness of concrete is more than a matter of surface appearance: concrete architecture is fixated on the belief that concrete is a new material, a material without a history, a material entirely directed towards the future. The backward glance, the inevitability that the frozen present will become a past (which for Barthes gave photography its poignancy) rarely enters into the aesthetics of concrete. To treat concrete as a historical material (which would not be so unreasonable given that it has been around for well over a century) goes against all that we have been led to believe about it. Concrete limits a building to being eternally new. For these reasons, concrete has not lent itself to showing time. Concrete is, we can say, untimely matter; it never speaks in more than one tense, generally the present, sometimes the future, and almost never the past. Yet for time to be present in a work of art, there must be an awareness of different temporalities. In the novel, characteristically this is achieved by the present time of the narration and the past time of the story being told. In a photograph (and here concrete is not so like photography) there is always a tension between the future implicit in the image, and our knowledge that that future is now past: this is what Barthes meant when he wrote 'each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death'. And in architecture, while traditional materials can be used to create some of these temporal disjunctions, with concrete it is more or less impossible. Concrete does not easily make us aware of time, for it rarely deals with more than one temporality. Can concrete be made to overcome this disability?

Over the last half-century, there have been various experiments directed at concrete's untimeliness. One such was BBPR's Torre Velasca in Milan, but this was widely condemned; Tafuri described it as 'impure', 'contaminated' and 'dirty' because of the way past and present time were mixed in its appearance, and a similar mixing occurred in the various treatments of the concrete from which it was made. Yet a little 'dirty time' does us no harm, on the contrary, it is what allows us to recognise time and temporality. Another, more recent, experiment is a house and office in North London, completed in 2000, designed by Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till for their own use. The site adjoins the mainline railway, and to insulate the office building from the noise of trains, it is protected by a wall of sandbags. The sandbags contain a sand, cement and lime mix which was wetted after they were laid, and set hard. In the four years since the building was completed, sunlight has rotted the bags away, and the wall has emerged as concrete; for a time, the marks of the bags were left imprinted on the surface, but now, rain and atmospheric conditions are breaking down the surface and it is being eroded. We can see the concrete of the wall as not simply the result of an instant, a frozen moment, but also as something that is made slowly, revealing itself as an unpredictable and long drawn out process. The architects write about it, 'Most walls are detailed to shrug off the effects of time, but this is a wall that has been designed to allow time to pass through it, and thereby to modify it; an evolutionary architecture'. It is an attempt to overcome the photograph-like arrested moment that is the usual fate of concrete, and to extend concrete's vocabulary beyond the single tense to which it is normally restricted. The office stands on piers and is cushioned by springs against the vibration of passing trains. The piers are gabions, filled with recycled crushed concrete. We are made aware of concrete as something that is not necessarily always bound to the present, but as a historical material, which had a previous life, maybe in a now demolished tower block. The structural system used here is new, for a domestic building, but the material is old, it comes with a history. The gabions suggest a double time - a past once filled with optimism but now discredited, and a present in which that past is not buried, but given a place. The attempts of the Wigglesworth and Till house to overcome concrete's untimeliness show that rather than remaining restricted to the present tense, like the clumsy attempts of the novice learning a foreign language, concrete could be made to progress to a more varied vocabulary that includes some past tenses.