

CONCRETE

I once had a strangely vivid architectural dream about concrete. As I closed my eyes, a palimpsest of floor plans flooded the darkness; a rapidly unfolding avalanche of concrete references, visually sedimented through time on the back of my brain, forming an intricately woven mental map. A black mantle of memory, heavily embroidered with urban fabrics. Some of the imagery was necessarily lingering in front of my eyes in an orderly manner of form, as was the case with Hans Dieter Schaefer's Paths and Passages and The Boulevard of Architecture. The intricate pattern gradually subduced and a curiously looking floorplan was abstracted. Dense, vibrant, hidden, an archipelago of radially narrowing, labyrinthine rooms, gravitating towards an inner teardrop-shaped cloister, opened to the sky. The floorplan contours of the walls had an oil on gold leaf texture, reminiscent of an old, forgotten artifact. Gradually the referential curtain lifted, quietly revealing the next act of the oniric experience. A sequenced plethora of bird's eye views that blurred the distinction between memory, experience and imagination; an intriguing vision of a wild forest, crossed by a marshland that hosted reflections of exposed decaying steel rebars. The forest penetrated through a superimposed white, whose true material identity was now revealed as entirely cast in matted earth concrete. Narrow vertical apertures in heavy thick walls revealed the archetypal qualities of order and monumentality. Like on a living carpet, in a perpetual state of immovability, I strolled the infinite looking, corridor garden, never to reach its teardrop center, either passing, entangled and lost in its web of rooms. I held a recurrent fascination about the metamorphosis of a hidden abstract idea into a sculptural concrete form, while utopically working with this material in school projects. I also find it interesting that, unlike other languages, whose words to designate the material makes reference to an ingredient of it (like "beton" from latin "habetum", a binder material), English uses a homonym word assigned to signify both the most used artificial material and also practically everything that is material and tangible in general, coming from the Latin root "concretus" (meaning compact or condensed, the perfect passive participle of "concresecere", from "con-" (together) and "crescere" (to grow)). I never thought of concrete as something "growing together", until I saw a painting by Belgian contemporary artist Godeau Kieder, that gave me an impression of a "debris" of my dream. Entitled "Starfighter", depicting in an almost cryptic manner a wild forest growing in tightly large, but in the same time tightly fit between two thin white vertical boards, just like concrete, a seemingly infinite matter nested in a finite formwork of vegetal nature that remains forever imprinted on the fiber's surface. Therefore, we can state that concrete's materiality, if perceived on its appearance, is a trace of the formwork's disappearance. Some may consider matted earth as a form of concrete, but in the end, if we are to identify the essence of concrete, what first comes to mind is the dichotomy between the casted and that in which it is cast, between the molded form and the "reimposition" matter within. The Greek word Eidos (εἶδος, "visible form", and related terms μορφή (morphē), "shape", and κοινότητα (koinotēta), "appearances", were originally used in ancient philosophy and literature to designate the visible, or "that which is seen", but gradually acquired a deeper meaning: "concrete manifest-ness" or "physical givenness in thought", similar to a coincidentia oppositorum of solids (concrete) and voids waiting to be filled (formwork). *Hylomorphism* is another philosophical theory, developed by Aristotle, which conceives every being (ousia) as a compound of matter (concrete) and form (the formwork). These metaphorical analogies may help re-imagines and reinterpret concrete for the benefit of both. Ethics (the pragmatic sustainable aspect) and Aesthetics (the poetic experience of a concrete space). In fact, the very word "imagine" comes from Latin imago meaning a copy, a likeness, an imitation, and indeed, we can rightfully say that concrete is mimetic. Even if concrete is pigmented or it uses a complex negative formwork, in order to attain a special feature, that would enable a tactile experience involving the tactile sense, a cement based object of dishonesty as all these processes follow the innate logic of the act of building with concrete. According to Plato's Theory of Forms, the physical world is but an imperfect copy of the atemporal perfect realm of unchangeable ideas, while Aristotle stated that the any work of Art and artifacts are an attempt to recover the elusive ideality and perfection of the original Realm of Ideas. Even if we consider the formwork as the true nature and concrete a mere casted replica, together the two elements create a building material that is authentic, autonomous, self-sufficient. While bricks need concrete or other stronger materials for structural reinforcement once the structure surpasses a certain height, concrete already has the strength and beauty to be ideally both structure and ornament. *Firmitas and tenetas* in the same time, its strength being concealed (the steel armature), its beauty revealed (the formwork's nature). Last but not least, what I particularly like most about concrete is its monolithic nature, allowing for what Valerio Olgiati describes as "concreta", a principle of his. Non-referential architecture, relating to an "architecture of dividing", a conception of space that divides a whole into parts until it works as a building, opposite to a conception of spaces that begins with molding and then gradually adds the parts. Another interesting analogy would be that of Goldfried Semper's *Beholdenstheorie*, that perceives our bodies as being enveloped in a series of layered, over-expanding enclosures. Just as skin defines and protects the body, clothing and architecture - although different in their materiality and scale - perform similar functions. An open cut on the surface of the skin naturally heals. Moreover, the archetype of the holy Seamless Robe of Jesus points to the fact that "the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom" (John 19:23). Many therefore also see the need of buildings to possess a kind of integrity, if being constructed out of one single material, as the monuments of the past, like the mighty stone cathedrals. Concrete, "the stone of XXI century", allows for such a lofty architectural ideal to be achieved. Yet to forever dwell in the realm of the Abstract, my dream of re-imagining concrete as the reconciliation between Artificial and Nature lives on.

