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INSPIRATION FOR INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

BOOKS
K. L.

Concrete poetry

experiments with an exciting medium

REVIVING THE ANTIQUES TRADE
WALLS WITH CHARACTER
WOMEN AND NEW TECH
MARK WILKINSON



If you consider concrete to be the contemporary option, think again. Not only did the Romans get there first (check out the Colosseum's double-concrete arches), but the Greeks beat them to it, and Neolithic man was a tad ahead at 8,2,000 years before Christ. Indeed, it's the capacity for concrete to bring that mass of such a valuable material to work with. But even so, some of the more adventurous (and long-term) uses as the preserve of kitchen countertops and garden furniture.

Alan Hodge, education director at the Concrete Centre, believes there is a lot more scope for concrete if architects and designers were more daring. "Concrete is the unsung material – and its versatility is boundless. Unfortunately, the blame is the UK's lack of imagination that allows it to almost get cast aside like the flames consumed in its rivers of concrete pouring.

We need to see concrete as much as a luxury material as a utilitarian one."

For that reason, the Concrete Centre, the British Concrete Association and the Royal College of Architects in the United Kingdom have joined to support the Concrete Design Awards – in which designers are asked to interpret concrete in unappreciated and for a long potential using cement in new ways. The winners of the third awards were announced at the end of last month, in which the prize went to three women and Will Chubb, a 26-year-old architectural student.

Hodge's prize winner here relevant winner is a fabricator of design trade, and one that offers the design industry a spark of inspiration. Take Masato Takahashi's 'Vegetarian chair' – a gorgeous swop of delicate interlocking strands that draws on the inspiration of Herzog and De Meuron's stadium for the Beijing Olympics – providing an elegant seating solution for

Pre-fabulous

From light-conducting blocks to amazingly delicate chairs, concrete is the unsung material – misunderstood and waiting to be exploited by interior designers

WORDS BY GARRY MASON



inside or out. Another finalist, Rupert Walsh, subverted the whole idea of the material with his work *Temporal Concrete* on an interactive concrete facade in front of an existing building. His proposal showed architecturally featured concrete panels, with concrete floor tiles laid in front that would detect vibrations caused by pedestrians. Using electromagnetic technology from the transport industry that acts upon the reinforcing in the concrete, the whole facade would react to the environment by continually moving and flexing. 'The aim is to allow this material that is conventionally perceived to be heavy and static to obtain a lightness and temporality,' says Rupert, 'enabling it to respond to the faintest vibrations and otherwise imperceptible sounds.'

Phoebe Cummings and Stine Jespersen's *Sensual Concrete* project took third prize in the Awards for their pieces

combining lace with the material. The lace was used over and within the concrete, and sometimes left as a feature through holes in the concrete. They aimed to produce a hybrid that appears soft and fragile, which could be applied to lighting and ornamental use, inside and outside.

Kay Wong also teamed concrete with textiles, combining gold knitted cloth, woven fabric and buttons with concrete to create some exciting pieces. She explores the feminine, philosophical, poetic and softer possibilities of concrete by juxtaposing the hard and soft materials in an examination of the crossover between concrete embedded into fabric and fabric into concrete.

A more practical piece, Marko Flečnik's *Concrete Food*, played with the form, texture and colour of concrete for use as tableware. His designs showed stylish products made from concrete cast in moulds. Interest is added by using black and coloured concrete together with unconventional shapes.

However, there are some established artists in concrete who are already helping

MAIN IMAGE: MARKO FLEČNIK'S CONCRETE TABLEWARE IS AN HONEST DESIGN THAT CELEBRATES THE DELICACY OF CROCKERY WITH THE ROBUSTNESS OF CONCRETE. ABOVE, MASATO TAKAHASHI'S PROTOTYPE VALUENESS CHAIR THAT DRAWS ON THE QUALITY OF FABRIC AND THE DESIGNS BY HERZOG AND DE MEURON FOR THE NEW BEIJING OLYMPIC STADIUM



to push the boundaries of the medium commercially. One of the most noteworthy is David Underly, who creates beautiful coloured wall panels, which he describes as "industrial folk". A hybrid of sculpture and painting, the size of the work varies from 30cm x 30cm to 3m x 2m, but despite their concrete composition, the 2cm-thick panels are surprisingly light. Though the work could be seen as relief sculpture, each panel hangs on the wall as a painting would.

One of the elements that makes David's work so appealing is that it is not just a visual experience. "It is as much tactile and sensual as it is visual," he explains. "For me, the work is just as much about weight and mass as it is about the beauty of the imagery it produces."

Ben Weigl also produces stunning



concrete wall panels. These are monochromatic, relying on texture and shape. Some of his work uses the idea of geographical

contours, while other, perhaps more abstract pieces are inspired by erosion. "I tried to capture and fossilise in concrete the power of erosion," he explains. "A piece resembling a slice of honey through a polished segment of solid stone that has eroded and evolved for a million years."

For an even more three-dimensional perspective, one of the country's leading concrete sculptors is Cecile Vincent, who created the Bubble Light sculpture with Anthony Farnham and the Blue Jack Garden at Chelsea Flower Show. The conical Bubble Light, with its fantastically coloured bands, was the first large-scale public sculpture to use colour concrete with fibre-optic lighting. "My work uses

ABOVE: PHOENIX CUMMINGS AND STIVE JESPERSEN EXPERIMENT WITH CONCRETE AND LACE. BELOW: SHED STUDIO'S CHAIRS AND (RIGHT) ITS BLACK STOOL. FAR RIGHT, NICA'S NOTA TABLE





DAVID UNDERLY'S BEAUTIFUL PAINTINGS ON CONCRETE COMBINE COLOUR AND TEXTURE TO OFFER THE DESIGNER A REFRESHING OPTION FOR WALLS. BELOW, PETER WELK'S GEOGRAPHICALLY-INSPIRED CONCRETE WALL PANELS TEAR SINGULARLY OR IN GROUPS TO PROVIDE A VERSATILE SOLUTION.

concrete from stone imitation to a material in its own right,' says Carole. 'The high-polished surfaces reveal texture, form and colour, with all the time-proven assets of concrete: flexibility, strength, durability, acid resistance to vandalism and graffiti.'

In September, Carole will be holding a seminar called *Sculptural Inspirations*, with David Underly, as part of the Concrete Centre's Concrete Elegance series.

On the furniture front, unveiled at Milan was Sica's Nota table, which strikes the perfect balance between the delicacy of glass and the robust cement bases.

And for the garden, Urbis is making wonderfully simple pieces – from planters and benches to pots and roof garden systems, while Shed Studios is also creating exciting garden furniture.

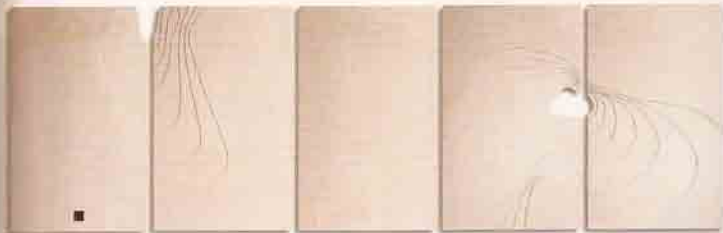
For designers wishing to collaborate with concrete specialists, Martyr Fear's Specialist Precast Products helps to create bespoke pieces. Established in Bedwys, South Wales in 1992, the company is a well-respected specialist producer.

Indeed, it is often the specifier's needs that helps to drive concrete creativity forward. Cast Advanced Concretes is set to launch its latest product – large precast panels for walls and floors – at 100% Design in September, largely due to requests for a solution from Foster and Partners. 'It's all very well to talk about architect Tadao Ando's fabulous concrete constructions in Japan, but in the UK we seem incapable of producing high-quality in-situ decorative concrete,' says CAC director Guy Bamford. 'Trying to talk to a

structural engineer about the aesthetics of concrete isn't always the easiest thing to do. A specifier wants more control over quality of finish and colour than on-site work can give. And because concrete work in any construction has to be one of the earliest considerations, it can be trashed during the rest of the build.'

So the company decided to produce large panels which can measure up to 1.4m x 2.8m, and can be accurately specified and put in place after initial building work has been completed.

Concrete technology is advancing in exciting ways. One of them has been the compact reinforced composites developed in the past few years by Danish researchers CRC Technology, using fine aggregates. With the aid of fibre





FAR LEFT, KAY WONG'S WEDDING DRESS COMBINES CONCRETE AND FABRIC. LEFT (FROM TOP) URBIS'S SHELL BENCH, RUPERT WALSH'S TEMPORAL CONCRETE PROJECT IS A BUILDING FACADE THAT USES ELECTROMAGNETIC ACTIVITY TO PRODUCE KINETIC ART. BELOW, MICHAEL DELUCIA'S WATER RIPPLES - A COLOURED AND TEXTURED IMAGE OF WATER FOR WALL PANELS. BELOW LEFT, THE LATEST WORK OF JAPANESE CONCRETE SCULPTOR YUJI KAKIYO (+858 3 777 6061)



reinforcing rather than a rod, it can create finer forms than with larger aggregates, but still deliver the strength of steel.

Also set to revolutionise the concrete medium is LiTraCon (Light Transmitting Concrete), the first mass-produced products of which are expected on the market at the end of 2004. The brainchild of Hungarian architect Aron Losonczy, it is a concrete stone block that conducts light through its embedded glass fibres. Light passes through the stone without any significant loss and illuminates the darker side of the structure. Shadows are shown in precise shapes on the opposite surface. It has innumerable applications for designers and architects.

It all goes to show that there's more in a bag of cement than one of the ingredients to a stiff mortar mix. **ic:FX**

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