

## BOOK REVIEW

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Jean-Louis Cohen and G. Martin Moeller, Jr., editors

***Liquid Stone - New Architecture in Concrete***

Basel, Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser, 2006, 248 pp., 303 color and 201 b/w illus. £38.50

ISBN-13: 9783764374839, ISBN-10: 3764374837

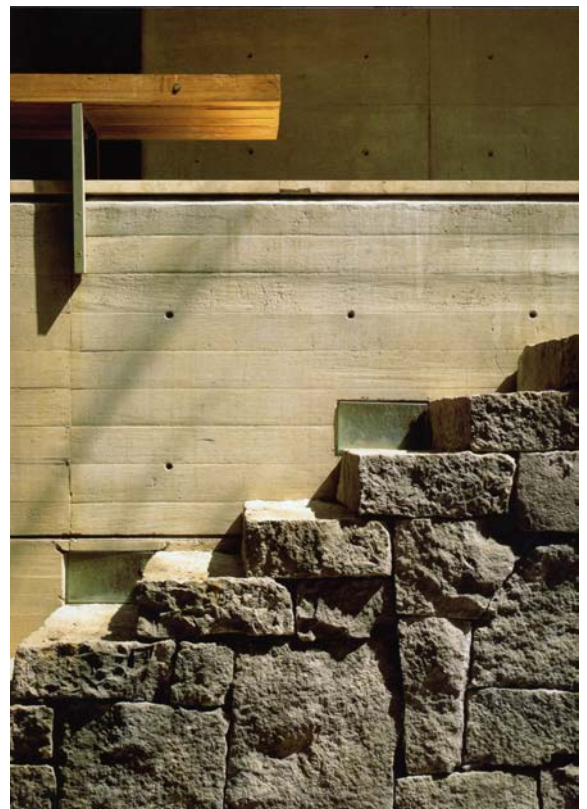
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For historians of the twentieth-century Modern Movement (MoMo), the last decade has been a disorientating time, when an episode they had assumed was securely closed, safely lodged in their own academic territory, has once again burst into vigorous life. After lying dormant during the Postmodern decades, the MoMo has broken out of “history,” with a fresh generation of hero-designers and polemical manifestos, and previously-stigmatized building forms like tower blocks and megastructures are once again proliferating, only now on a global scale.

It is confusing enough for MoMo heritage organisations like DOCOMOMO to have to face forwards as well as backwards, but more disturbing still is the suspicion that all is not quite right with the new modernism. The aggressive individualism of its “iconic” monuments expresses not social democracy, like the “old” MoMo, but a triumphal global capitalism, through an all-embracing hierarchy of branding and badging that encompasses both the crassest signature-buildings and the most elite setpieces of avant-garde theory and poetic form.

This transformation and appropriation of the old Modernism by the new has required a comprehensive reevaluation of the former, expunging ideologically inconvenient European / socialist elements in favor of a new mid-Atlantic commodified interpretation. One of the key areas of re-interpretation concerns the “new” constructional techniques and materials that were among the Modern Movement’s proudest boasts. Probably the foremost of these symbolically-loaded materials is concrete-- once the mainstay of countless prefabricated mass housing projects of the *trente glorieuses*, but now requiring ideological repositioning as a sensuous, artistic material (as was done with red brick by the English “Queen Anne” architects of the late nineteenth century).

This agenda of transatlantic harmonization is powerfully advanced by *Liquid Stone*, a complex, multi-stranded project largely sponsored by Lafarge, a Paris-based multinational cement and aggregate conglomerate with strong American interests. The foundation of *Liquid Stone* was a long-running and popular exhibition of 2004-6 at the National Building Museum in Washington D.C., from which stemmed a 2006 conference at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and the present book, whose contents graphically express the new agenda. The book begins with a fifty-page section of four essays by historians, explaining the evolution of the architectural use of concrete, and teasing out old-Modernist precedents for the new Modernism's more sensitive, individualistic use of concrete: "Architecture and Technology," by Antoine Picon, "Modern Architecture



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and the Saga of Concrete,” by Jean-Louis Cohen, “A Material without a History,” by Adrian Forty, and “The Semantics of Exposed Concrete,” by Rejean Legault. All are variants on the “complexity and contradiction” interpretation of Modernism going back to the 1960s, and a slight repetitiveness is the result: Forty’s is the most original, with interesting material on hybrid-construction postwar Italian buildings.

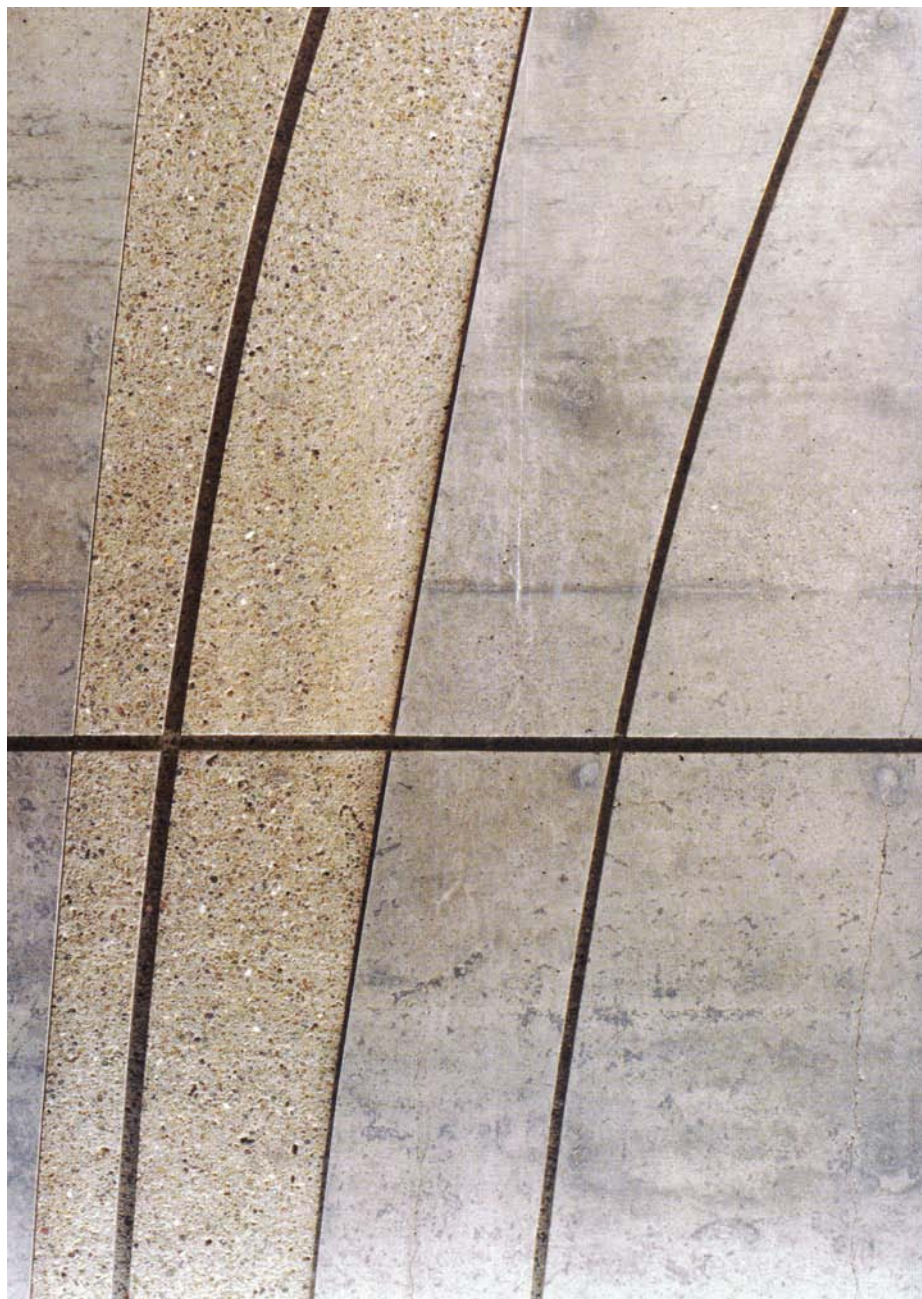
Then follows the main body of the book, a 183-page project-by-project catalogue of the exhibition, comprising a succession of twenty-nine projects (drawn from Europe, America and Japan) and subdivided into three formal headings-- “Structure,” “Surface,” and “Sculptural Form.” Almost all the projects are for one-off or elite buildings rather than collective complexes; and, in a sign of the relentless spread of digital architecture, a quarter of the projects are virtual ones. Architects featured include Takashi Yamaguchi, Baumschlager & Eberle, Atelier Jean Nouvel, Foster & Partners, Ingenhoven & Partner, Santiago Calatrava, Hariri & Hariri, Tadao Ando, Antoine Predock and others. The featured projects are prefaced by short essays, which again emphasize the theme of the new poetic sensitivity of concrete, closely attuned to the metaphoric demands of branding: critics of the jabbingly gestural shells of Santiago Calatrava’s Tenerife Concert Hall, for example, are chided as killjoys unable to appreciate an “extraordinarily exhilarating work of architecture that has become an icon not just of Tenerife, or even of the Canary Islands, but of all Spain.”

The book’s concluding section (edited by Franz-Josef Ulm) presents a series of computer generated projects exploiting various proprietary systems for super-strong or super-poetic concrete construction, developed by Lafarge or US university research departments. Here, the branding process is carried even further, in a series of barely concealed sponsorship plugs. Drawn together under the heading “Future of Concrete,” their breathless technological language curiously echoes the rhetoric of the original system-building boom half a century ago--except that in the 1960s, the building industry was firmly harnessed to the cause of social reform, whereas now, the commercial ethos is both the end and the means.

In another half century, will this “new concrete,” in its turn, appear just as outmoded as 1960s *Plattenbau* does today? Only time will tell!

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