



Once derided as the medium of municipal eyesores, concrete is suddenly the material of choice for leading designers and architects. Linton Chiswick reports.

Sarah Gaventa, a design enthusiast and curator, had already written a book for Dorling Kindersley about the perfect home office when she pitched the idea of *Concrete Design* to an editor at Mitchell Beazley. Clearly, this was a tougher proposition. She remembers the response – “a sharp intake of breath”. Her editor made the required leap of faith, but even as Gaventa started writing, others in the publishing house remained dubious. “It turned out to be the only book that the accountants knew anything about because they were convinced it was going to be such a colossal failure.”

This was in 2001. Four years later, something very like a concrete revolution is influencing every strand of contemporary design. The material is being re-evaluated, rehabilitated, reborn and described as exciting, high-

tech and luxurious without so much as a smirk. It can also be extremely expensive. Furthermore, Gaventa's book is scheduled for a paperback reprint next February. Let the accountants account for that.

To older generations accustomed to concrete as something coarse and monolithic – the medium of motorways, multistorey car parks and bad town planning – high-tech concrete sounds like a nonsense. After all, isn't it just sand, cement, gravel and water?

Not necessarily. How about concrete infused with optical glass fibres? The invention of Hungarian architect Áron Losonczy, light-transmitting concrete is gaining an excited word-of-mouth following in design circles. You'd be hard-pressed to find a contemporary architect who isn't aware of LiTraCon (pictured above) or hasn't seen the (eerily beautiful) photographs. At this stage, though, few

have seen it “in the stone”, because this is a material right on the cutting edge of interior and exterior design.

LiTraCon enjoys all the usual properties of concrete – it's strong, light, long-lasting and an effective barrier to unwanted noise – plus an extraordinary extra: a shadowy translucency, like subtle, shifting wallpaper. Losonczy won a “red dot: best of the best” design award for the material this year and is nominated for Germany's DesignPreis 2006. If you want to go and see it right now, your options include the four-metre-high Europe Gate on the banks of the Danube in the Hungarian town of Komárom, where it catches the morning light and celebrates Hungary's entrance into the EU. Or you could make your way to the German village of Sittelson, between Bremen and Hamburg, where Losonczy has just installed a white LiTraCon internal wall in an experimental show home. And if you'd like some LiTraCon



# CAST IN A NEW LIGHT

in your house without committing to a radical rebuild, the new LiTraCube lamp (pictured below) – a concrete lampshade and a guaranteed talking point – is available for around £415, plus shipping from Hungary.

Gaventa, who is admittedly not difficult to enthuse on the subject of concrete, is particularly animated about LiTraCon: "Imagine it used extensively in a domestic environment. On the one hand you'd get that concrete sound barrier, on the other you'd see the shadows of all the people walking past. Those glass blocks suddenly look so boring in comparison."

This isn't the first time concrete's been chic. It was the subject of a Modernist love affair back in the 1930s, a passion ignited by Berthold Lubetkin's much celebrated Penguin Pool at London Zoo. And, of course, it was the material du jour in the 1960s and 1970s: distressed at the Barbican Centre in the City of London, stacked Babel-high at Erno Goldfinger's notorious Trellick Tower in North Kensington, and delicately patterned at the Hayward Gallery.

But what's particularly interesting about the current concrete trend is that it's emerging from the inside out. It has been small-scale, domestic, boutique products that have been the driving force in the rehabilitation of what used to be solely a structural material, the supporting actor or understudy in the theatre of architecture.

And these products don't come more boutique than Kelvin Birk's jewellery. The Bloomsbury-based German designer makes contemporary pieces in concrete, using – wait for it – diamonds as aggregate (pictured on opening page, from £200). There couldn't be a more literal example of the grey stuff's trajectory from utility to luxury. But from a jeweller's perspective, it's all media – tactile and interesting in its own way. Birk explains: "I get used to working with expensive materials. And then a bag

of cement costs a couple of quid and I only need a tiny amount. The value of the concrete might be one and a half pennies. And often when I put the stones in, it can be a bit like when you find crystals in mountains and caves." He also likes to wrap concrete in silver, playing – like a number of contemporary designers – with the juxtaposition of textures.

Birk says he counts a large number of architects' partners among his customers and the most frequently asked question is: wouldn't that concrete bracelet be a little heavy? "If I made the whole thing out of silver it would be much heavier. The specific gravity of silver is higher than concrete. But you never usually get concrete in small amounts. It's usually a car park or something."

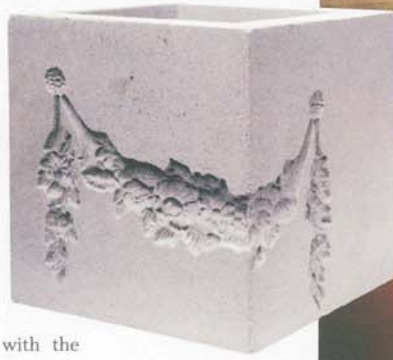
In September, the concrete revolution reached London's New Bond Street. *Vestigo*, a three-week exhibition at the Lalique store, brought Lalique glass together with Ascète, a French furnishings and design house. Lalique contributed crystal eagle and cockerel heads, lion, ram and turtle studies (pictured overleaf, from £1,090-£2,590). Ascète provided industrial-looking concrete-block furniture, ponderous in its aspect but not its reality. Ascète's concrete is super-light (it is applied to a foam core like a hard shell) and waxed and polished to perfection, but still concrete to the touch.

The objects on display – furniture for both garden and interior use – mixed references to neoclassical French sculpture with Brutalist architecture, with the consequence that the crystal seemed more crystal-like, the concrete more concrete-like. According to Ascète designer Pierre Gonalons, the fascination lies in the unexpected juxtapositions: "One is rich, the other one is poor. One is precious, the other one is not. One is very sophisticated and highly finished, and the other is crude. One is very ancient, the other is very recent. The key word is 'shock'. This is like working with a brutal material and creating a new trend."

The *Vestigo* objects are available by special order from Lalique's New Bond Street store. As far as Gonalons is



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concerned, their purpose is more than interior design, and there is a whole generation of architecture-savvy clients ready for concrete to come in from the cold: "This isn't just furniture. It has an architectural purpose. It's like a part of your room, a part of your walls. The low coffee tables resemble beams, but on the floor. It's a vocabulary of construction and very modern."

That the decision to reprint Gaventa's book was made in the same year as the *Vestigo* exhibition, the same year that concrete planters by Kathy Dalwood (£85-£160, pictured above left) have made her a finalist in the Design & Decoration Awards while LiTraCon is winning prizes across Europe, is more Zeitgeist than coincidence. Ken Rorrison, of

From top: a Fu-Tung Cheng interior; a concrete planter by Kathy Dalwood; the Hungarian LiTraCube lampshade.

wasn't sullied by social engineering experiments, as in Britain, it has, particularly in California, suffered from association with another recent design trend. Cheng explains: "I respect minimalism, but I do feel that it is much like aligning yourself with one season out of the four. Winter, basically. It has a certain beauty, but it isn't necessarily something you want to live with all year round. I think some people still associate coldness and modernism and concrete. But by infusing concrete with other materials – wood, tiles, slate – and cross-fertilising, it really warms up."

Cheng's company specialises in countertops, satisfying a desire among clients for something more original than granite. "Granite isn't a luxury product any more," Cheng argues. "It's a mass-marketed product. You can get it at the Home Depot. That's the Wal-Mart of design."

What's interesting about the concrete



kitchen and bathroom (and, for that matter, about Kelvin Birk's jewellery) is that it's a proper celebration of craftsmanship and design. The material itself is cheap – but spending proper money on a kitchen or bathroom that is aesthetically beautiful, tough, easy to clean and finished to a texture as silky smooth as glass shows an understanding of design and architecture on the part of the client – rather than merely an attraction to labels, trends or a material's perceived rarity. Bespoke concrete whispers understated good taste and stealth wealth. Guy Bamford, director of Cast Advanced Concretes, manufacturers of the



innovative Mass concrete surfaces, agrees that part of the attraction of specifying concrete is the chance to take an active role in design and make decisions: "Just talking about using concrete puts you in a different world. This is the world of architects, and to be a part of that as a consumer is really exciting."

Like Birk, Bamford counts an unrepresentative number of architects and designers among his clients – Mass surfaces have been specified in projects at the National Gallery and the Barbarons Beach Hotel in the Seychelles, as well as a few very grand private homes such as Nevill Holt in Leicestershire, a mostly 17th century, Grade I house recently restored by David Ross, co-founder of the Carphone Warehouse. Bamford feels that part of the attraction is the integrity of the material. It doesn't pretend to be intrinsically rare or precious. It just works. "It's concrete," he says. "Clever concrete, but it's still concrete."

Mark Bradley, whose company Paul Davies Design specialises in interior concrete surfaces, agrees. He reports a growing trend for countertops made of the same stuff as the floor: an architectural vision of interior design made available to anybody (who can afford it). His clients also like their concrete neat: "Some of our competitors use what I would call conglomerate concrete... fake concrete. But that's one of my selling points. We use 100 per cent concrete and nothing else – the same material that an M1 motorway bridge is made out of."

According to Gaventa, the ultimate status symbol is a concrete kitchen or bathroom that's been cast in situ. "I

Above: Cast Advanced Concretes' Mass workshop. Left: Lalique's *Vestigo* table and bench.

went to somebody's apartment years ago to see a cast-in-situ kitchen," she explains. "The effect is almost like, 'I can afford it and my beams are good enough' because it's a major commitment. The only way to get it out is to get in an industrial drill. Or blow it up."

But if you want the look and feel of concrete without having to endure three months of casting, finishing and living in a building site, Cast Advanced Concretes' Mass range (pictured above left) sounds sensible. A kind of concrete veneer (wrapped around an MDF core), it is produced – off site – in 15 to 100mm thick sheets that can (just) be carried on site. It's durable, anti-microbial, and polished to a quietly gleaming, tactile finish. It costs roughly the same as "mid-range granite".

So what about the future? Is it hard and grey? Or will concrete yet again turn out to be a passing trend? Gaventa doesn't think so: she reckons concrete will be pushed ever more high-tech by enthusiastic early adopters. A few companies are currently experimenting in etching photographs on to concrete surfaces. The results are apparently surprisingly detailed, rich and beautiful.

"I guess that's another form of luxury, isn't it?" Gaventa muses. "Using a technology before it's ready for mass production. It's the same as people who had flat-screen televisions a few years ago, before they became cheap enough for Dixons. So I look forward to seeing who, over here, gets the first LiTraCon apartment wall. What an architect needs is a very rich client who wants to divide up their flat using it – and, God, wouldn't it be stunning?" ♦

### A WAY THROUGH THE CONCRETE JUNGLE

**Buschow Henley Architects**, 020-7033 9700; www.buschowhenley.co.uk. **Cast Advanced Concretes**, 0870-241 8171; www.castadvancedconcretes.com. **Fu-Tung Cheng**, 001510-849 3272; www.chengdesign.com. **Kathy Dalwood**, 020-7372 2677; www.kathydalwood.com. **Kelvin Birk**, 020-7691 8080; www.kelvinbirk.com. **Lalique**, 162 New Bond Street, London W1 (020-7499 8228). **LiTraCon**, 003630-255 1648; www.litracon.hu.

LITRACON: BEL 2001-2005; DALWOOD: MATTHEW WELLMAN; HARBED LTD; GUY BAMFORD; TARKAS BUDIMOSKIC