

Concrete, Its Use and Abuse*

By Irving K. Pond, F.A.I.A.

I HAVE written so much abstractly on architecture and architectural principles that it is good again to get down to hard and fast matters and fix my hypotheses in the concrete. I say "again," for many years ago as chairman of the Committee on the Allied Arts of the American Institute of Architects I was the author of a widely circulated report from that Committee dealing with concrete as a medium of architectural expression. I have had but slight occasion to put into practice the theories I then advanced, but I have continued to hold, and still maintain them.

Since that time the use of concrete in building operations has grown apace and enthusiasts and specialists have arisen to scatter their words and their works broadcast—sometimes, though not always, the words being more attractive than the works—sometimes the words and works alike bordering on the grammatically atrocious—as, for instance, when the beauties of cast rock-faced-concrete blocks have been urged and the monstrosities themselves have made pitiable what otherwise might have been semi-respectable structures—"semi," mind you, not "wholly," respectable; for the taste which could advocate and incorporate into its product such base imitations could not create or fashion a thoroughly respectable structure. Some two years ago while acting as chairman of a board to adjust, and settle perchance, jurisdictional differences between the carpenters, the architectural iron workers and the sheet metal workers of Chicago, I suggested facetiously that the fabricators of imitations should be penalized by giving over to the trades whose products were imitated the erection of all such imitations. Thus stone masons should erect all tin fabrications simulating stone cornices, architraves or entablatures, and do plastering where plaster simulated Caen-stone—one might put it "con"-stone—on walls and in vaulted ceilings. My pleasantry was met with hearty and strenuous disapprobation—each trade wanted to tell its own little lie and to reap the benefits which each felt certain would accrue to it in a world so slightly endowed with the elements of sincerity or of good taste.

So my first item of advice, if I may be permitted to offer advice to a body of men interested in the development or handling of a comparatively new and altogether worthy building material, is to treat the product with respect, to shun and scorn imitations, to recognize limitations, which attach to all materials, as well as

to all men, and to work within those limitations. This is not saying that because a thing has been done, and frequently and appropriately done, in one material it shall not be done in another or a new material which may be employed with equal propriety; however, the new material should not employ forms which are purely distinctive of the old, but should develop forms which inherently characterize the new.

What these characteristic forms may be is a subject for very searching study and analysis. Possibly through synthesis rather than analysis will the characteristic forms disclose themselves. So was it in the past with the old materials—so probably will it be with the new.

Now concrete is a material which lends itself to many kinds of manipulation. It can be cast, poured, pressed, assembled in the shop or on the job; it can be applied in liquid or in solid form to the work immediately in hand. So many are the possible methods of its application—such a diversity of means may be employed toward its legitimate ends that some of its enthusiastic sponsors see in it a panacea for structural ills and possibly for aesthetic building ills, a substitute for all previously employed building materials—excepting, possibly, door hinges—and a perfect end in itself. Therefore, it behooves those who can impartially survey the entire field to offer both warning and encouragement—encouragement in its legitimate use; warning against its too free employment, especially where other materials may better serve the conditions. The economics of the general situation favor concrete, and through this factor alone there may arise a tendency toward its too general employment; toward its substitution for other materials which, though perhaps costing more in mere money, satisfy the senses and better fulfill geographic and climatic conditions. The cheapness and ease of casting a flat slab of concrete has led certain enthusiasts to advocate the general adoption of a flat slab type of roof in any and all parts of the country (and ultimately of the world). It is advocated for a northern climate because it can very cheaply be made strong enough to hold a load of snow and ice. But that is not what a roof is for—it is to shed snow and ice. The flat slab roof is advocated for a southern climate because the overhang for shade is so cheaply procured. The shade is desired, but not at the expense of ugliness which results from unembellished overhangs—and concrete embellishments are expensive. The factors of ease and economy in manufacturing concrete slabs, whether to be applied

*An address delivered before the National Conference on Concrete Housing, recently held in Chicago.