The *New* School of Decorating Concrete

Opening aesthetics to a freer artistic spirit

BY KELLEY BURNHAM AND MICHAEL MILLER

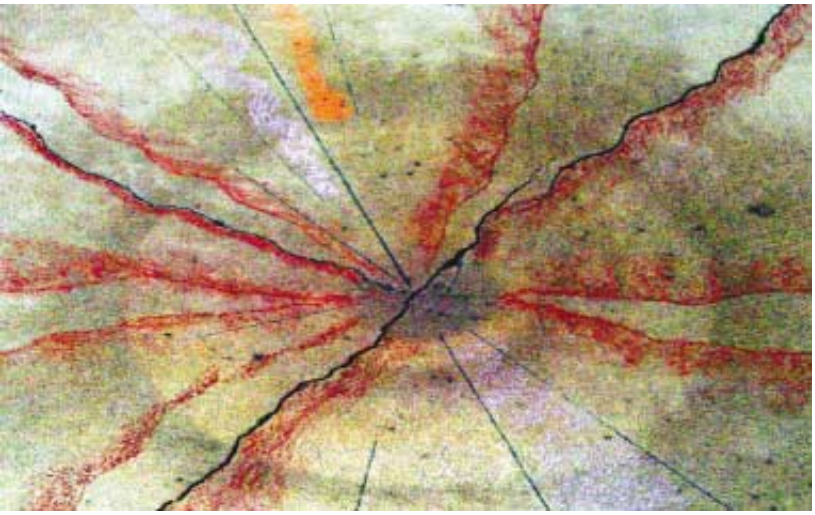
For some 100 years, architectural concrete has been designed, defined, codified, and critiqued primarily by architects and engineers from a distance—a *safe* distance. Now there is a school of thought that is closing the distance: the new school of "sensory" concrete.

THE OLD SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Concrete has always been practical, the world's most widely used and wonderful construction material, fulfilling our basic societal needs. But the bar for expectations is raised with architectural concrete, and both designers and constructors approach this work with forethought, discipline, and control. Their mantra is consistency.

On many occasions, their work is inspired. Their spaces and the material may suggest grand ideas, such as order and anarchy (representations of chaos through deconstruction). There is an emphasis on forms, surfaces, and boundaries. These forms and surfaces are often dictated, or at least constrained, by structural and construction considerations, such as jointing, placement schedules, tie holes, and form modules. When the bar is raised, so are expectations. More often than not, raised expectations meet with some level of disappointment.

Clearly, structural failures are unacceptable. Even nonstructural defects and blemishes are generally replaced or repaired. How many



Sensory concrete reflects a high level of intimacy and spontaneity between man and material

times have you heard: "Concrete cracks. That's just what it does." Yet, even as this is spoken, most are still aghast when it actually happens. Inherent inconsistencies and variegation, so desirable in stone and suede, are regarded as unacceptable defects in architectural concrete. "Acceptance" and "sense of humor" are certainly not keywords in ACI International's "Guide to Architectural Cast-in-Place Concrete."

Do plans and specifications, developed at a safe distance, only guarantee a disconnect and disappointment? Is there a way to more completely integrate concrete design and construction, and lessen the distance between the mind, the man, and the material? Those concrete artists working in the new school approach believe so.

THE MAGIC OF CONCRETE

The new school of sensory concrete embraces the innate qualities of concrete, and the sweat and skill that helped create it. To fully understand this approach, let's reflect on the magic that is concrete.

Concrete wears its history. Part of its magic is its ability to suspend time and capture motion. Each placement is discrete and complex. The angle of a trowel, the shadow of an eave, and even the gait of a stray dog can be crystallized and made permanent through the chemistry of hydration.

Additionally, the very act of shaping, placing, and finishing the concrete is compelling and dynamic. When the ready mix first courses down the chute, breaks, falls, and then hits the ground, it's as if a tornado touches down. The work crew launches into action, and, even to the casual observer, the adrenaline surge is palpable. Is it organized chaos, or just chaos?

OLD SCHOOL	NEW SCHOOL
Distant	Intimate
Consistent	Variegated
Artificial	Natural
Strict	Human
Regimented	Flowing
Manufactured	Individual
Crisp	Soft
Ordered	Complex
Straight	Organic
Safe	Vulnerable
Controlled	Risk
Bound	Acceptance
Defined	Friendly
Homogeneous	Interactive
Rigid	Approachable
Planned	Serendipitous
Subdued	Outspoken, Bold

This countertop, by Fu-Tung Cheng and Cheng Design, is a blend of old school discipline and new school intimacy. There is as much attention to the details and to the finish of the tea bar as to its form. Note the simulated ammonite fossil and other integral embeds

The feel of this market's produce section is that of an open-air farmer's market. Notice combined sculptural and applied finishes: a natural field of ground limestone aggregate, garden beds defined by scarified borders, and fruit and vegetable patches colored in layers over scattered paper leaves

From the moment water molecules meet cement particles at the batch plant, there is one irreversible fact—the "mud" is going to get hard, and it's going to get hard within a finite amount of time. Then, in spite of all of the preparation and the best intentions of those responsible for the placement, something might go wrong. And that is also part of the magic!

SENSORY CONCRETE

Sensory concrete focuses on tapping the energy endemic to concrete design and construction, and revealing and interpreting its magic. It generates the desire to look, to approach, to look closer, and to touch. A key quality of sensory concrete is closeness. There is an emphasis on finishes and human proximity to those finishes.

Where architectural concrete has generally been designed by architects and engineers (and sensory concrete may be, as well), sensory concrete's roots are with the artist and the artisan, those with a more hands-on style and flair for finishes.

The materials and tools of the new school are the same ones commonly used in producing architectural concrete: integral color, color hardeners, hand saws and grinders, stains, and dyes. Spray paints, pastels and crayons, colored

This ringed planet was precast with hand-packed integrally colored concrete "blobs," then installed formed side up on a structural concrete substrate. The integral black field, with artfully scattered aggregate, was placed then ground. Cracks, patchy colors, and the sporadic nature of the aggregate exposure enhance this historic Italianate concept

"Sheriff's Star Plaza and Lobby" is a collaboration between Seattle artist Vicki Scuri and San Francisco fabricator Buddy Rhodes. Constructed with monolithic black and white precast concrete pavers, black area "voids" were in-filled with white, and vice versa

pencils, chisels, and carbide-tipped scribes are only a few of the items used additionally in new school applied finishes. Just about anything can be a potential tool or material, and new techniques are developed as ideas continue to evolve.

Those producing sensory concrete have a passion for this material. Activated by the medium's raw physicality, these artisans revel in the choreographed steps and serendipitous missteps of the concrete placement process. They regard each concrete mixture's unique qualities and inconsistencies as a point of response, rather than problems to be masked or repaired.

Imagine a precaster whose road to artistic success has been based on poor consolidation, but with strong, durable, and appealing results. This describes San Francisco artist Buddy Rhodes, a concrete technician as knowledgeable and intuitive as they come. His angular, veined aesthetic style is derived from what is conventionally thought of as improper placement and lack of vibration, but the results are beautiful and unique.

Embracing this new philosophy can be liberating. A few years ago in Vancouver, BC, Canada, after an extended session of layout and scoring, concretist Gary Phillip Jones stretched, held his back, and groaned, "I swear I'll never cut another straight line." And he's been able to make good on his exclamation. Phillip has since partnered with organic artist Bjorn Ollner. In their world, there are no straight lines. Their curvilinear creations are fluid and beautiful, with soft edges and eased transitions. The old school edges Phillip struggled to produce with chalk-line, straight-edge, and steady hand are now born of torn paper templates, scattered sand resists, and a deeply rooted passion for his material. Both Phillip's clients and his formerly aching back thank him—all due to the new school of sensory concrete.

Floor of Ca'Toga, Galleria d' Arte by Venetian artist Carlo Marchiori, combining old school concrete and terrazzo techniques with out-of-the-box, hand-packed precast planetary elements

Those who work with their hands are laborers…

Those who work with their head and their hands are craftspersons…

Those who work with their heart, their head, and their hands are artists.

Selected for reader interest by the editors.

Kelley Burnham and **Michael Miller** are principals of the concretist (**www.theconcretist.com**), colorists and fine artists producing sensory concrete. Burnham is an amateur geologist with a degree in design from San Jose State University. Miller is a featured speaker at World of Concrete and a member of ACI Committee 303, Architectural Cast-in-Place Concrete.