The Architects of Transience: Concrete, Infrared, and the Unraveling of Modernity

The paradox of concrete as both the symbol of modernity and its antithesis—destruction—has been beautifully and vividly re-examined in the 2024 documentary by Viktor Kossakovsky, *Architecton*. The film opens with the ravaged remains of concrete structures in Ukraine, setting the stage for an exploration not only of architecture's relationship to materiality but of its role in the broader narrative of progress and decay. Through this lens, Kazimir Malevich's geometrically pure forms gain new resonance, shifting from abstract utopian ideals to poignant metaphors for the tension between stability and fragility inherent in all human endeavours.





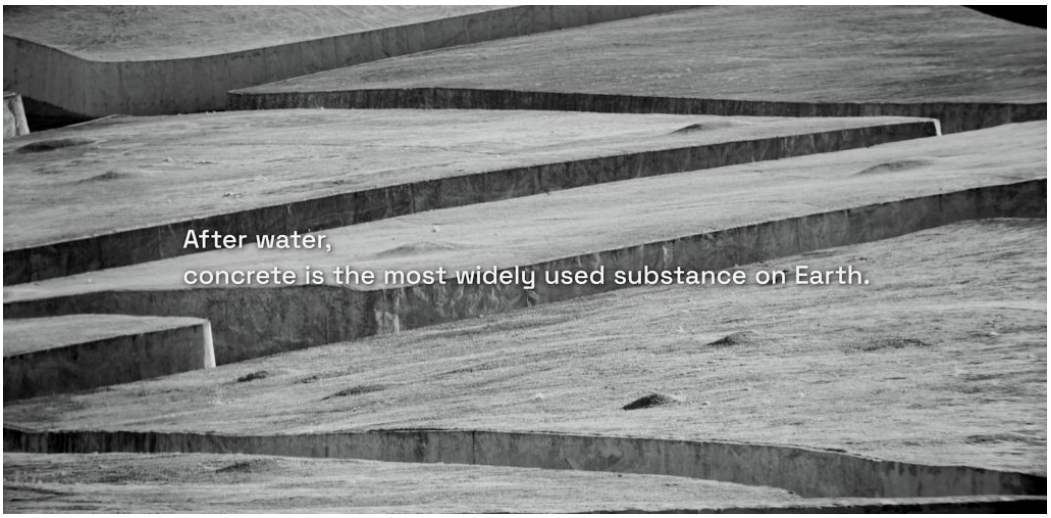




The ruins of Baalbek, stark against the infrared sky, their massive columns diminished yet unwavering. Their presence in the landscape is both imposing and ghostly, a relic of human ambition that now exists in a state of suspension, neither fully intact nor wholly lost. In the documentary’s meditation on concrete and stone, Baalbek serves as a distant counterpoint—where modern concrete is cast and shaped to fit the needs of the present, these ancient stones, quarried and placed millennia ago, endure as both triumph and ruin, a reminder that all architecture, no matter how permanent it seems, is ultimately subject to time.



One striking quotation from the documentary reads: “After water, concrete is the most widely used substance on Earth.” This simple statement highlights concrete’s ubiquity and significance in shaping the modern world. Water—life’s most fundamental element—has long been the basis of human survival and connection with nature, while concrete, as the second most used material, represents humankind’s drive to dominate and define its surroundings. Yet, despite its ubiquity, concrete’s eventual decay exposes a different truth: the same forces that humans attempt to master—through architecture, engineering, and design—are ultimately beyond control. Concrete, while seemingly permanent, is just as vulnerable as the stone it mimics, subject to the ravages of time, war, and nature.



In one particularly striking image, a solitary man with a wheelbarrow is dwarfed by a massive block of stone, carved millennia ago and abandoned. This visual echoes the evocative imagery of Michelangelo's *Prisoner* statues, housed in Florence's Accademia Gallery. These figures, half-formed, trapped in their stone prison, seem to struggle towards liberation, embodying both the act of creation and the stasis of unfulfilled potential. The abandoned stone, much like these unfinished figures, occupies a space between being and non-being, between intention and entropy. The stone seems to call out for a form that has not yet been realized, just as the massive concrete structures in the documentary gesture toward what could have been—monuments of progress now succumbed to time and violence. In this way, both the material and its artistic potential exist in a state of suspended animation, caught between the historical force of its creation and the inevitable dissolution of all things.



Integral to this exploration is the use of infrared imagery, a technological choice that disrupts our traditional understanding of built structures. Infrared, often used to reveal hidden heat signatures, transforms concrete buildings into spectral forms. What was once solid, monumental, and permanent is reduced to an ethereal presence, a visual manifestation of the invisible energies and decay beneath the surface. It's as though the material itself is attempting to communicate its vulnerability—an image of architecture that exposes itself not as a static entity, but as a system of energies, histories, and eventual dissolution.



A crucial scene in the film—an extended sequence of a massive rockslide—underscores the inherent power of stone, nature’s counterpoint to human architecture. As colossal boulders cascade down the mountainside, the camera lingers on the massive, unyielding force of the stone. This raw, natural destruction stands in stark contrast to the calculated, human-made beauty of classical architecture. The imagery here is a reminder that stone, while emblematic of permanence, is also vulnerable to the overwhelming forces of nature. This stark juxtaposition of classical ruins, once thought to be eternal, returning to the earth, punctuates the fragility of human ambition and the fleeting nature of monumental achievement.



The pairing of concrete and rock, two materials that symbolize permanence, with such violence and collapse speaks to their liminal

nature. Both substances, when used for habitation or as symbols, straddle the boundary between human-made constructs and the natural world. They strain the traditional distinctions between subject and object, man and nature—two concepts that architecture has long worked to contain and define. Concrete, as both a building material and a symbol of modernity, offers the illusion of control over nature. Yet, it is precisely this illusion that makes it so susceptible to forces beyond our grasp. Rock, though an ancient and seemingly immutable material, can also become a harbinger of destruction when untethered from human will. These materials blur the boundaries of the architectural discourse, pointing to an inherent instability between humanity's ambitions and the larger natural forces at play.

Concrete, though seemingly durable, is as much a material of transience as it is of permanence. The structures it creates can endure for centuries, but the very process of their construction—through human labour, environmental forces, and the inevitable decay—ensures their eventual dissolution. In this, concrete is emblematic of the human condition: the striving for permanence caught in the endless flux of change and decay.

Through this lens, the interaction between concrete and rock becomes a reflection of the tension between human intention and natural forces. These materials are not mere objects to be shaped or controlled but are agents in their own right, influencing the spaces they inhabit. When viewed through infrared, they reveal themselves not as passive backdrops but as active participants in the construction of meaning. Concrete's malleability and rock's permanence, when combined, create a tension that straddles the boundary between subject and object, a dialectic that architecture itself has long sought to transcend. If technologies shape our understanding of reality, then the use of infrared here forces us to confront the complex interplay between human creation and the natural world.

Malevich's *Architecton*, in this context, becomes more than a study of abstract form. It serves as a blueprint for reconsidering the purpose and meaning of architecture in a time when the very materials that define our spaces are constantly in flux. If the built environment is constantly being reshaped by forces both seen and unseen, then architecture is not a static

monument but an ongoing negotiation between humanity and the materials that constitute it. And in the suspended forms of stone and concrete, we find a reminder that art, too, lies at the intersection of creation and destruction—a space where form is constantly being struggled into existence, only to eventually fade back into the material world.

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