

Design

These days, it's hard to talk about new directions in design without jumping almost immediately into a discussion of materials. Indeed, a rekindled interest in the material aspect of building is one of the biggest shifts in architecture over the last 15 years. Titanium is to the New Modernism what Dryvit was to Post-Modernism.

This "Design" issue of *ArchitectureBoston* focuses on materials and craft — the tangible aspects of architecture. In architect-speak, "craft" suggests the method and care with which materials are joined. "Craft" is also a handy marketing term for retailers trying to satisfy the growing consumer appetite for do-it-yourself projects, Arts and Crafts furniture reproductions, and artisan-wares found in trendy boutiques. Today's Home Depot shoppers speak knowledgeably about varieties of granite and ponder the relative virtues of cherry and mahogany. Madonna had it only half right — we are material girls *and* boys.

We demand a lot from building materials to keep weather out, to protect us from fire, to conserve energy, as well as to convey social, cultural, and aesthetic messages. New materials and technologies are pushing design boundaries. Some of us are confident that we are on the cusp of creating an ever-richer environment; others worry that our computer manipulations of materials will engender a more precipitous rush to an immaterial world of sensory deprivation.

There is a gee-whiz aspect to the current coupling of materials and technology. British architect Alan Short notes that "modern technology is invisible," suggesting that the much-admired high-tech aesthetics of architects like Nicholas Grimshaw and Richard Rogers are downright bizarre. Short need not worry — the high-tech look is really a tarting-up of old-fashioned building technologies, soon to be seen as quaintly anachronistic as Art Deco. With the construction of Bilbao, high-tech became low-tech.

It is not too soon to worry about the insidious long-term influence of Frank Gehry. Is every city and town in America — or given this global economy, in the world — prepared to meet the onslaught of undulating metal walls that will infest their communities once every architect has access to the same technology? However brilliant Bilbao may be, all great ideas are snatched up by the marketplace and driven to cliché. Gehry himself seems to be bent on "branding" Bilbao, turning a masterpiece into a style, inviting down-market imitation.

Computer technologies have liberated designers from long-standing constraints. Sudden freedom can foster an exhilarating "Look, Ma, no hands!" confidence. But sudden freedom can also promote reckless joy-riding — adolescent behavior without regard to social or civic responsibility. "Because I can" is frequently a motivation without rationale or merit.

Like the new blender that leads us to foist dreadful concoctions on unwitting guests before it is put on a shelf to await a more appropriate use, new materials and computer-aided design technologies will inevitably lead to acts of willful caprice and outright imposition. Let's hope the gleeful exuberance that is about to be visited upon us passes quickly, giving way to deliberation and sophistication. Only then will the new technologies contribute to truly meaningful innovation.

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