



Asphalt core
samples from
different
locations.
Montreal, 2005.
© CCA

ASPHALT IS NOT BLACK

Mirko Zardini

GC My first question is relating to your exhibition for the 2003 Triennale di Milano, 'Asfalto: Il Carattere Della Città' – how did you come up with the idea to address asphalt?

MZ I was interested in exploring the idea of the modern city from a different point of view, in terms of how a material can transform urban environments and the experience of the city. And I thought that asphalt could offer another starting point because of its banal, but hidden presence in the existing narrative of Modernity. There are a lot of different histories about infrastructure and engineering in the modern and contemporary city, but a material like asphalt was never considered an important part of these histories. Looking at this single material, you discover a longer narrative than might be expected. Although asphalt is often associated with the car, it was first used in the mid-19th century as a material for the pedestrian and for sidewalks. It was then adopted for the bicycle and only at the end of the 19th century, did it become associated with the car. When it was first used for the automobile and until the Second World War, asphalt enjoyed a very positive reception, so positive that it was considered a privileged material and used to pave historical squares and public spaces - the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, for example.

Only after WWII, with increased use of the car and growth in traffic, did the role and perception of asphalt move from a positive one to a negative one. Already in the 1960s, there was a movement to de-pave the modern city. Gordon Cullen, for example, was known for his vision to substitute asphalt with cobblestone. More contemporary movements, like those in California, have initiated the de-paving of asphalt surfaces in order to re-introduce ideas of green space, the garden and orchard, and the 're-naturalization' of the ground of the city.

GC It is a story that concerns also an idea of cleanliness, and the use of asphalt as a new material for a more hygienic way of living: the bicycle is cleaner than the horse... Perhaps this idea of



↑
'1973: Sorry,
Out of Gas'.
Installation view,
Canadian Centre
for Architecture,
2007. © CCA.

de-paving, as well as the nostalgia for ancient ways of paving the roads in the city, are connected with a change in cultural relationships to hygiene.

MZ The success of asphalt was, according to some historians like Clay McShane, most applauded by civil engineers who embraced the material as the solution to ‘the problem of the city,’ deeply associated with issues of cleanliness, maintenance, and cost. Asphalt was much cheaper than other materials, and with its smooth surface, not only was cleaning much more efficient, but it was also possible to inscribe signage on the ground. Until that moment, signage was always vertical, and the idea of horizontal signage was facilitated by the presence of the asphalt. For engineers, the material was a solution to many problems.

GC You mentioned before asphalt’s hidden presence and one of the reasons why architecture is black today is probably a need to conceal itself. Do you think asphalt is still hidden, or has there been a coming-out for the material, and a recognition of its pervasive presence in cities?

MZ I think that, in general, there is a shift in ideas of the city and also of the architecture in which we live – to consider it more from an environmental point of view. When I say environment, I mean a consideration for a more complete context, but also an attention to different sensorial experiences – not only the visual one, but also sounds, smells, and tactile experiences. Much more attention is being paid to the materiality of these different sensorial experiences in a lot of contemporary architecture, and also in the design of open spaces. In this sense, de-paving movements demonstrate that asphalt – or the city’s surface – is now very present in public awareness and the experience of the city.
But the problem with this question is that you associate asphalt with the idea of black, but asphalt is not black.

GC Of course. Black architecture too is never completely black, otherwise it wouldn’t be visible. It would behave as a visual ‘black hole’, like in some works of Anish Kapoor.

MZ So, let’s assume that asphalt is grey. What is interesting about this material is its heterogeneity, as a combination of sand, stones, and bitumen. There is more and more research to substitute bitumen with polymers or glues that can take on differ-

ent colours. Topotek was the first to use this kind of coloured surface, but a lot of work of this sort has been done elsewhere as well, using alternative chemical glues. In the case that these substitutes become too expensive, asphalt can be simply painted. But it is more and more common to see the surface of the city in colour. Think of the artificial landscapes that a lot of designers are doing now.

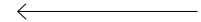
Asphalt can also be transparent. The grey of asphalt can be substituted with an invisible binding agent between different aggregates so that even if the artificial layer is there, what is visible is a consolidated ground. While offering the same qualities as asphalt, this kind of pavement is visually non-intrusive.

If we are speaking of the different intentions behind other kinds of materiality, we could anticipate that colour and a variety of treatments could add value to the asphalt surface that is no longer dedicated to the car, but reconquered for the pedestrian and the cyclist. Such a re-evaluation of asphalt for the pedestrian returns us to the origin of the experiment, especially in Paris, when bitumen and then asphalt was first introduced for sidewalks. At the time, this was an incredible success, when suddenly the mud and the irregularity of stone could be substituted with a wonderful, smooth surface that facilitated a new ease of movement. So asphalt has returned to its origin, but this time it can be coloured.

- GC** So do you think the flâneur was a by-product of asphalt?
- MZ** Well – yes. From my point of view, I associate the flâneur with asphalt.
- GC** While you were talking about asphalt and the shift from the blackness of bitumen to more transparent glues, I was thinking about the movement of black matter from the horizontality of the plan to the verticality of the building, because asphalt was used for both the paving of roads and for the waterproofing of roofs.
- MZ** Yes, from an engineering perspective, visions for the mid-century city insisted on a perfect, clean, impermeable, easy-to-maintain, and not too expensive urban surface; so from a horizontal, or satellite view of the world, all the roofs and all the ground-level surfaces would have reinforced a – I won't say black, but grey – asphalt utopia, fulfilling hygienic, standardized, and efficient ideals. In trade catalogues of the 18th, 19th and ear-



'Asfalto: Il carattere della città'. Installation view, Triennale di Milano, 2003. © Giovanni Chiaramonte.



'Sense of the City'. Installation view, Canadian Centre for Architecture 2005. © CCA.

ly 20th century, streets, squares, and roofs were shown covered with asphalt – a perfect, seamless, and grey material.

GC The Modern approach to white paint had a similar role in cleaning, connecting things, and hiding all the architectural tectonic tricks, like a sort of smoothing of the surface.

MZ There was a text by Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*,¹ in which he introduced a 'Law of Ripolin' that advocated for white as a kind of productive morality. I think this text was published in 1925, and in 1926 there was also a book published by an engineer, Pedro Juan Manuel Larrañaga,² that made a similar attempt to associate asphalt with ideas of morality, democracy, and an improved civilization. So in a span of two years, two materials of opposite shades – white paint and grey asphalt – were claimed by architects and engineers for the same purpose, relating them to modern ways of living.

GC Among your exhibitions, 'Sense of the City' was closely connected with the issue of materiality and experience of other senses beyond the visual you were speaking about before.

MZ Yes, there were some reviews of this exhibition that were very smart. One, written by Cristina Bianchetti,³ understood that the exhibition was an effort to explore the urban environment as a place of experience and not only as a place of production – a radical shift away from the Modern idea of urban environments. Although clearly we still recognize the city as a centre of production, the exhibition sought to underline how our perception of the contemporary city is increasingly related to the different experiences that we have. This is not a new idea for architecture – Steen Eiler Rasmussen, for example, published his book *Experiencing Architecture*⁴ in the 1960s – but the idea of experience was a way to dismantle a certain conceptualization of architecture and the city in purely visual terms. By introducing new perspectives, it is possible, in my opinion, to provoke totally different ideas of architecture and the urban. And that was what the exhibition tried to do – to produce some tools to re-frame the way we think about architecture and the city.

These notions of experience are also related to the idea of the interior. Today, we see an interiorization and domestication of outdoor space and an increase in the public character of interior spaces. So the distinction between the experience of public and private spaces is becoming increasingly blurry.

GC I would like to further explore your perspective as a curator and also as Director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA); you have both a deep understanding of history because the CCA is a museum with many archives, and also a panoramic approach, because you produce exhibitions reflective of the contemporary context. From this viewpoint, do you have the sensation that the idea of black is a real trend or is it only my obsession?

MZ I respect obsession a lot. Without it, it is impossible to go anywhere. You have an obsession with black and I have an obsession with grey.

I was interested in the grey and dirty exterior suggested by Dustyrelief F/B-mu, a proposal by François Roche for a new museum in Bangkok whose envelope was designed to accumulate dust and airborne pollution. There is significant, recent interest in the black exterior as well – far greater than an interest in colour. For some architects, like the Montreal-based Saucier+Perrotte, black has become a kind of trademark.

But there is also an ongoing discussion of black in relation to the production of architecture, for example, in respect to the digital screen. Mark Wigley investigated the appearance of the black screen in *When is the Digital in Architecture?*²⁵ – a collection of discussions, seminars, and texts that was part of the CCA project, or obsession, with the digital.

GC So now the background that we draw on is black.

MZ Mark Wigley argues that the black screen that appeared in the MIT laboratories in the mid-1950s was anticipated by white on black drawings by architects like Ivan Leonidov in the 1920s, and as far back as the blueprint, invented in 1842. So architects really started to first use the black background in traditional drawings on paper. And of course Wigley associates the black screen with the photographic reversal and the flip of an architectural drawing to its negative in the publication process.

GC In another interview for this issue, Eduardo Arroyo recalls the discussions around the use of black during his time at OMA in the 1990s.

MZ There were many architects that were drawing with white on black, Cedric Price, for example, whose archive is at CCA. But Mark Wigley makes the case that Leonidov was a major predecessor of this.

1. Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925), Eng. ed. *The Decorative Art of Today*, transl. by James Dunnett (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

2. Pedro Juan Manuel Larrañaga, *Successful Asphalt Paving: A Description of Up-to-date Methods, Recipes & Theories, with Examples and Practical Hints, for Road Authorities, Contractors, and Advanced Students* (London: Richard Clay & Sons, 1926).

3. Cristina Bianchetti, 'A prospect for the city', *Domusweb* (09 May 2006), <<https://www.domusweb.it/en/reviews/2006/05/09/a-prospect-for-the-city.html>> [accessed 13 June 2018].

4. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962).

5. *When is the Digital in Architecture?*, ed. by Andrew Goodhouse (Berlin: Sternberg Press; Montreal: CCA, 2017).

The idea of writing with white pen on black paper and light on a black screen can be extended to the urban environment as well. The conceptualization of the night in Modern architecture was a kind of background over which architects could experiment with light as a form of writing. But it was not only the writing itself that makes this transition interesting, it was the darkness of the city as a background and a canvas that also produced a new definition of the urban environment. In this sense, we can also take into consideration the black box as an interior space for film, an extension of the black screen and an ideal environment in which to perceive, not only a drawing, but also video, new media, and different representations of architecture produced using digital tools.

So the black box is a small counterpoint to the Modern canon of the white interior. But the idea of black as a background and blank surface is a different discussion from the idea of black as the colour of building. Some of the arguments that you made in your 2013 essay 'Black Boxes,'⁶ for example that black architecture can be understood as a contemporary extension of Mies' projects in North America, embed black with an entirely different meaning, one of maintenance and preservation.

GC Black can perform in very different ways according to different intentions and situations. But the idea of the black box as a background for scripting or drawing with light is very interesting. As you said, it could be considered a process of internalization of public space and also an extension of the night. I remember the Venturis spoke of the darkness of the casinos in Las Vegas as a way to extend the night in the interior, to suspend the rhythm of the day, and keep customers gambling.

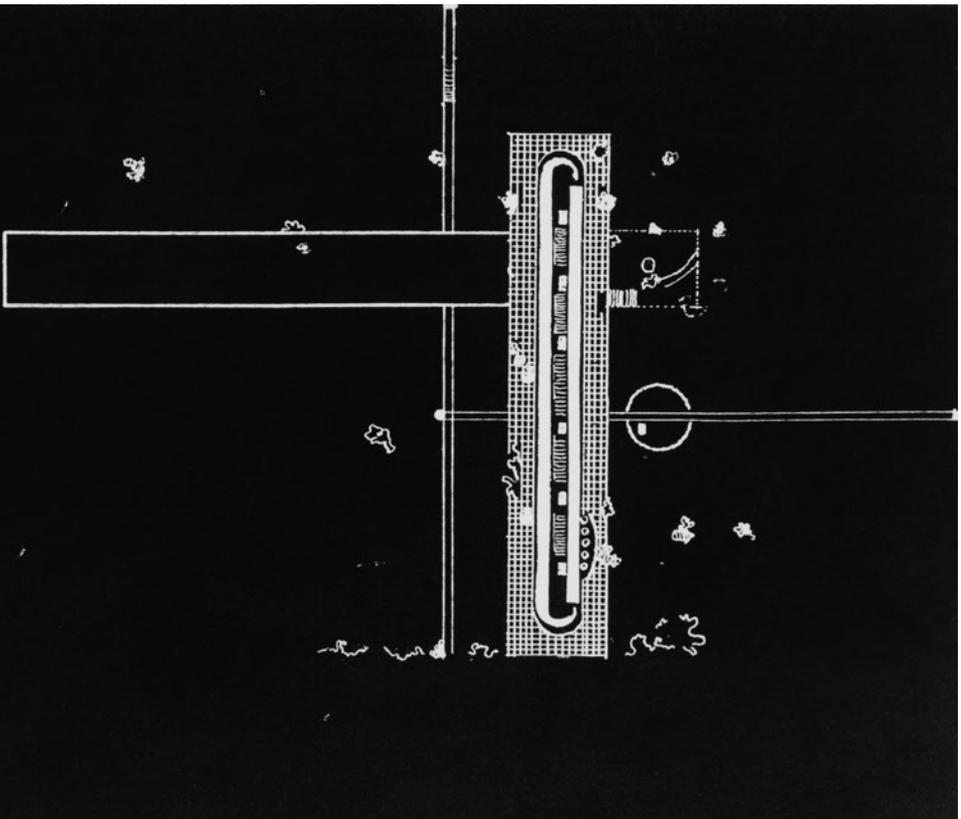
MZ The extension of the night in the context of the casino is also interesting; Jonathan Crary's book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*,⁷ described the disappearance of the 24-hour sleep cycle and the introduction of a 24-hour work cycle. Black can be associated with ideas of permanence and in this case, permanent work and permanent exploitation; or, in the case of Las Vegas casinos, permanent entertainment, which also exists with film, video games, whatever.

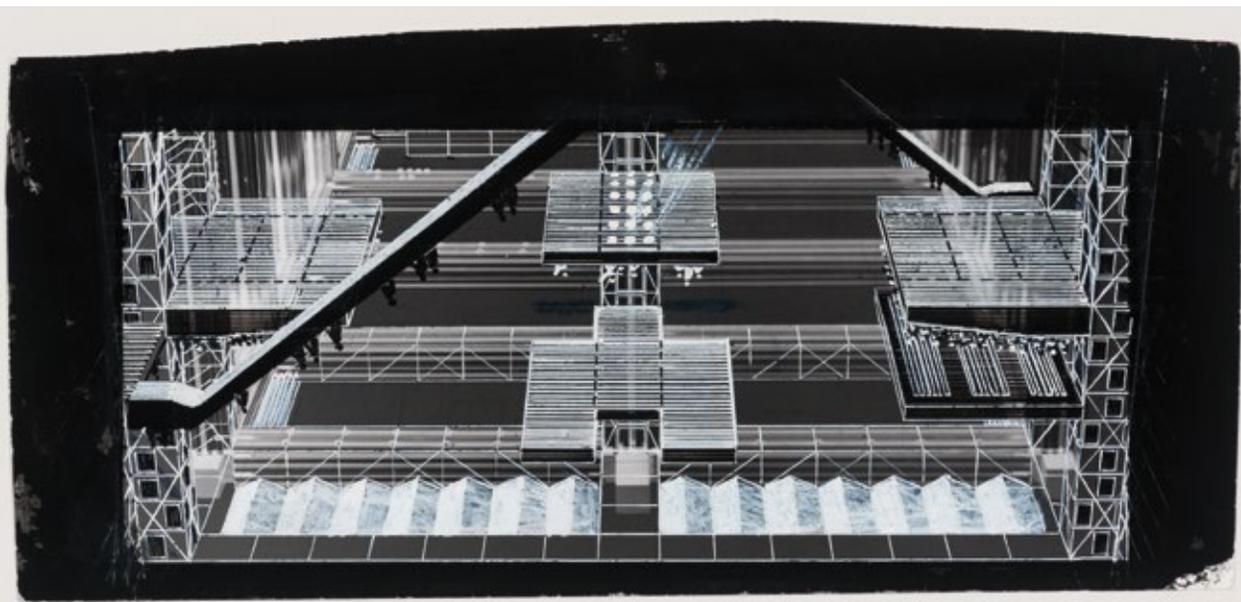
GC Another subject you have addressed in your research and exhibitions is the issue of degradation and the dirt, decay, and combustion that contaminate the whiteness of the modern surface and transform a building, or its cladding, throughout its life. This

6. Giovanni Corbellini, 'Scatole nere/Black Boxes', *Paesaggio urbano*, 5-6 bis (2013), pp. 6-23.

7. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London, New York: Verso, 2013).

Ivan Leonidov. Tsentrosoyuz Building, Moscow, photograph of a plan for the competition, 1929-1930. Gelatin silver print, 18 x 13.1 cm. Canadian Centre for Architecture PH1989:0012:045.





Cedric Price. Fun
Palace, worm's-
eye interior
perspective,
c. 1964. Black
and white ink
over photostat,
19.1 x 8.7 cm.
Cedric Price
fonds (AP144),
Canadian Centre
for Architecture
DR1995:0188:519.
© CCA

is a counter-history of the modern hygienic city that we spoke of before.

8. Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (London: Architectural Press, 1969).

MZ This idea of pollution has been addressed by David Gissen, Françoise Roche, and many others. There are two facets of this work: the conceptual value associated with rethinking ideas of contamination and hygiene, and the engineered solutions that reduce pollution and address other specific environmental issues. Both areas of research consider the transformation of the building important for the creation of new, or different environments. But to really consider a counter-history of the modern hygienic city, we have to think beyond a problem of darkness versus lightness, dirt versus cleanliness. I think the building must be positioned in the context of a larger environment, as part of a system of tools that deal with new environmental conditions. This is a kind of extension of the ideas of Reyner Banham in his book, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*,⁸ that considered the role of the mechanical engineer as the basis for contemporary architecture.

GC Do you know the pavilion by Asif Khan for this year's Winter Olympics in South Korea? He used a sprayable form of Vantablack – a material that absorbs light using nano-technology and achieves the blackest black through the particular form of the surface. It is a different formulation of the Vantablack S-VIS exclusively licensed to Anish Kapoor's studio for artistic use.

MZ Is this the stealth military approach applied to building?

GC In a way – though warfare mostly looks for an invisibility to radio and micro-wave frequencies. The pavilion is a very strange building, with optic fibres that create points of light, like a dark sky with stars. Also the 'selfie building' at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi was of Asif Khan. Perhaps there is no connection, but it is interesting that the same designer who concealed the black pavilion addressed before the exposition of the self.

MZ The concept behind the Korean pavilion is interesting. In a certain way, it is introducing another idea of performance. And contemporary discussions on how architecture relates to environmental issues often introduce the building as a kind of performance with the capacity to make invisible phenomena like pollution and contamination visible, leading us to question the general attitudes we have towards environment.