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'To Make Britain Concrete Minded': Peter László Peri's *London Life in Concrete* (1938)

Tobah Aukland-Peck, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, US, tauklandpeck@gmail.com

In 1938, sculptor Peter László Peri staged a solo exhibition in London titled *London Life in Concrete*, a selection of sculptural works fabricated out of concrete. Contemporaneous critics enthused about Peri's experiments with the exciting new medium. Multi-coloured relief works, set on a high ledge that encircled the room, showed scenes of everyday life in the capital: figures of shoppers, builders, and commuters arrayed across flattened backgrounds. The simple format of these sculptures belied the political entanglements of Peri's chosen material. Rough finishes typify Peri's concrete works, both those exhibited in *London Life in Concrete* and those later commissioned to decorate a post-war public housing complex in London. Their explicitly modelled surfaces present the medium as one tied to human labour and equate the work of builder and of artist. *London Life in Concrete* was sponsored by the Cement and Concrete Association (CCA), a new trade group established to promote the use of concrete in building projects in Britain. This paper traces the history of Peri's concrete sculptures and the relationship between Peri and the CCA. It reveals the role that Peri's work played in the commercial project to establish concrete as the architectural material best suited—both practically and ideologically—to the homes of the British working class.

Introduction

In 1936, the British trade group the Cement and Concrete Association (CCA) commissioned a relief sculpture for its London office from Peter László Peri, a Hungarian artist living in London. *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association* (**Figure 1**) depicted a group of men transporting, mixing, and raking cement, the material that was the *raison d'être* of the CCA. Peri organised the succession of working figures across a long, horizontal composition. A worker on the right brings in a wheelbarrow of aggregate to add to the large heaps of stony fragments on the floor, piles tended by three men with shovels. A mixer dominates the left-hand side. One man tips it forward while another struggles under the weight of the cement. The theme of concrete fabrication closely aligned with the CCA's commercial interests, but the material is present in more than just subject matter. Peri made the relief itself out of concrete. Here, concrete is visible in two distinct forms: the depiction of the coarse stony material, heaped into piles and swirled through the mixer in a liquid amalgam, and in the sculpture itself, the final hardened object. The artwork evidences a concern with process, both industrial and sculptural, and Peri made an explicit connection between concrete and the working-class labour that formed it. He built up the bodies of the workers with strokes of a mason's trowel, and the artist's hand is evident in these marks: the quick modelling required by the wet concrete was captured permanently as the sculpture dried. While the rigid limbs of the workers and the solidity of the sculpture's material emphasise the fixed nature of the piece, this is a work about formation. Peri defines concrete through visible human labour.

Figure 1: Peter László Peri, *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association*, 1936. Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Two years later, in 1938, the CCA sponsored a large exhibition of Peri's reliefs: *London Life in Concrete*. This iteration of corporate patronage used Peri's colourful concrete sculptures to promote an expansive view of concrete as a medium not just

for construction but for decoration. The show celebrated Peri as 'not only a skilled interpreter of life as he sees it but a creator of an entirely new medium—a sculptor in concrete' (*London Life in Concrete*, 1938). Peri encircled a room in London's Soho Square with a continuous progression of concrete sculptures, including reliefs that stood about three by one and a half feet. The flat sculptures leant on the wall on a chest-high ledge (**Figure 2**). As was the case in the depiction of the construction workers in *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association*, Peri focused on everyday scenes: busy London streets, domestic interiors, buses, and tea rooms (**Figure 3**). Colourful pigments, which Peri mixed into his concrete, differentiated bodies and backgrounds, lending a polychromic liveliness to the roughly textured ground.

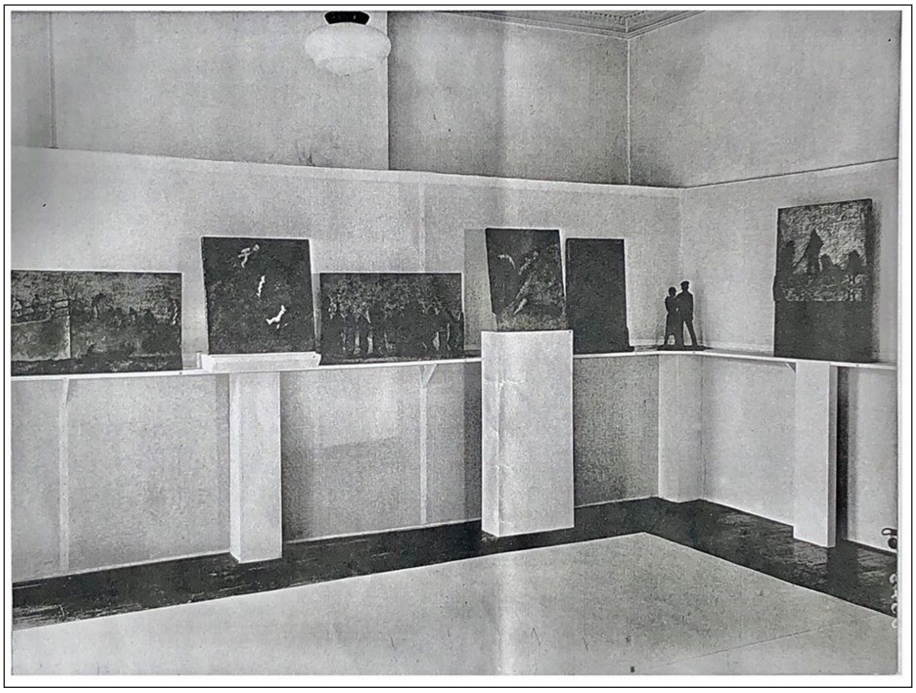

Figure 2: Installation view of *London Life in Concrete*, 1938. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Peri was singled out in the press for his almost exclusive use of the material, and critics like William Walwyn of *Reynold's Newspaper* celebrated Peri as the 'only' sculptor working in concrete (Walwyn, 1938). While some artists in the United Kingdom, including Henry Moore, occasionally experimented with the plastic capacity of concrete, Peri used it as his primary material. Discussions of Peri's work, from contemporaneous articles by prominent leftist art historians including Francis Klingender and Anthony Blunt to recent scholarship on Peri by Gordon Johnston

and Rosamund Lily West, have identified the political context of this designation (Klingender, 1936; Blunt, 1937; Johnston, 2013; West, 2021).[1] Concrete marked Peri's Communist convictions: the alignment of the representation of everyday people and the spaces in which they lived. Addressing Peri's concrete reliefs of the 1930s and his sculptural contributions to London working-class housing projects in the 1950s, the present study attends to the commercial context of Peri's medium of choice in interwar Britain. *London Life in Concrete* appeared during a period in which concrete—a malleable, liquid material—was at the centre of debates on modern design, skilled building labour, and city planning. Peri's commission by the CCA, this essay shows, was not incidental to his artistic vision. Rather, his work supported the vision of the trade group, promoting concrete as a tool to improve the life of the everyday British citizen.

Figure 3: Peter László Peri, *Street Scene*, 1937. Pigmented Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Peri's politics had, already, instigated a shift in his practice from the rigorous Constructivism that defined his early work in Berlin in the 1920s to the figural sculptures that preoccupied him after his arrival in London in 1933 (Peri, 2020). In

[1] In this period, Anthony Blunt was the art critic for the *Spectator* alongside his academic work at Cambridge and, later, the University of London. During his time as an undergraduate at Cambridge, Blunt developed a serious interest in Marxism, and his critical writing in the mid- and late-1930s expressed this political position. Blunt was also, in the mid-1930s, recruited as a spy for the Soviet Union.

London, Peri's concrete reliefs were hailed by critics like Blunt and Klingender as an exemplar of modern social realism (Klingender, 1936; Blunt, 1937). Yet while the social context of Peri's subject matter was of interest to art historians, many critics saw *London Life in Concrete* primarily as an architectural innovation. 'Sculpture in concrete comes handily, I should imagine, to architects at the moment when the fashion is turning against the bleak spaces so much *de rigeur* a few years ago', the critic for the *Liverpool Daily Post* noted in their review (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 1938). In 1954, Peri reflected on the architectural role of the concrete reliefs,

> Sculpture can only develop if it is used in connection with architecture. Architects cannot suggest the use of sculpture, during the present period of economies, unless it means something to the people for whom the building is built. The subject matter is decisive. If people recognise something out of their own experience they will be able to appreciate it, and will suggest its use' (Peri, 1954).

Figural sculptures in concrete, Peri believed, put static buildings into a dynamic relationship with the everyday lives of those who dwelled in them.

The CCA was founded in 1935 with the intention of 'fostering the use of cement by propaganda' (*The Scotsman*, 1938). In the 1930s and 1940s, advertisements from the CCA extolled the flexibility of concrete, which could be used in buildings, gardens, roads, pools, and exterior cladding. This period saw a notable increase in visible concrete construction, a development championed by British architects like F.R.S. Yorke. In an article in the *Architect's Journal* in 1936, Yorke noted,

> Until quite recently reinforced concrete was regarded as an 'engineering material' to be used as little as possible in 'architecture,' and to be hidden from sight in decent work. The few architects who did use it in exposed places, treated it as a cheap and rather nasty substitute for stone. Such treatment has given concrete a 'past' to be lived down. (Yorke, 1936: 243)

CCA's turn to 'propaganda' contributed to the shift in the popular perception of concrete, from an undesirable facsimile of stone to an exemplar of innovations in modern architecture: tall buildings, simple design, and efficient construction. In 1936, the CCA commissioned Marcel Breuer and Yorke to create a model concrete city for the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia, London (**Figure 4**). Breuer, a prominent member of the Bauhaus who left Germany for London in 1935, and Yorke, one of Britain's most active modernist architects, designed the 'Garden City of the Future', a large town made up of high-rise apartment buildings, wide boulevards, shops, and office buildings. The model buildings, with large windows, terraces, and smooth white

facades, were unornamented, though curving staircases, arching buttresses, and some small organically shaped buildings broke up the linear design of the apartment blocks. As was the case in architectural experiments by architects like Le Corbusier in France and Breuer's fellow Bauhaus members in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the concrete façades of the 'Garden City of the Future' did not imitate stone, bricks, or other conventional materials. Rather, the smooth exterior walls, evidence of the replicability of simple concrete architecture, signalled a new aesthetic of modernity.

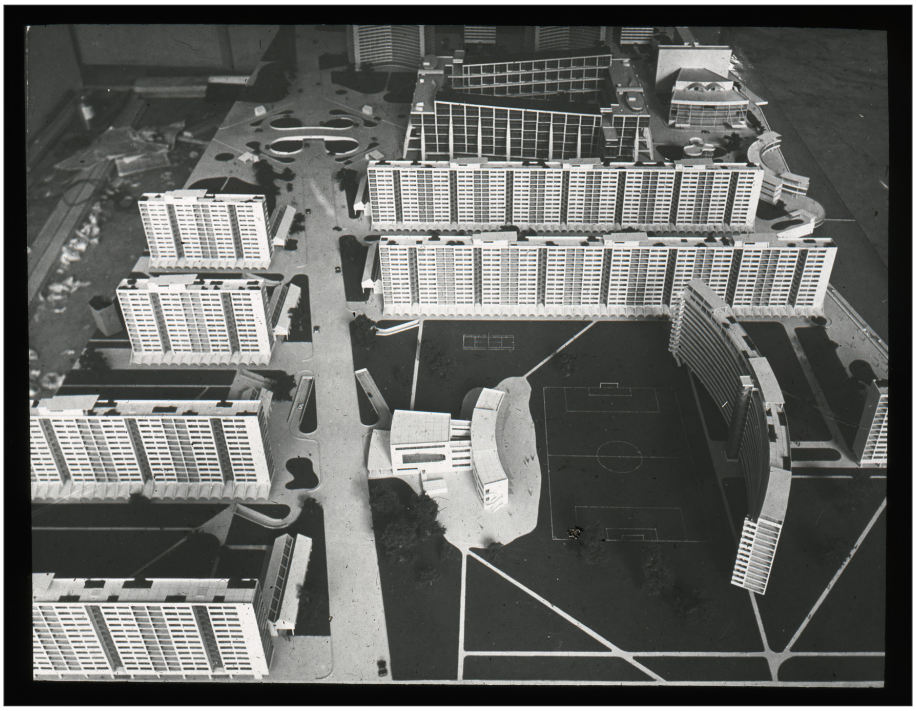

Figure 4: View of the Garden City of the Future model by Marcel Breuer and F.R.S. Yorke, 1936. Marcel Breuer Digital Archive, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

Two years later, *London Life in Concrete* offered a competing vision for concrete finishes: handmade, colourful, decorative, and figural. Even as prominent architects like Breuer and Yorke celebrated the rigorous simplicity of reinforced concrete, more traditional British designers in the 1920s and 1930s explored ways to make steel and concrete buildings palatable to the wider public. Notable architectural exhibitions in this period, including the Palace of Housing and Transport at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley and the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibitions, offered examples of concrete homes with facades that mimicked conventional brick or timber (Weaver, 1926). Peri, who worked as an architect in Berlin in the mid-1920s, contested aspects of both of these architectural precedents. Like Breuer and Yorke, *London Life in*

Concrete suggested that modern concrete constructions should not hide the method of their fabrication. At the same time, Peri resisted the conventions of modernist standardisation. A decade before the aesthetics of concrete in modern architecture shifted from light coloured, stippled walls to the textured, handmade surface of New Brutalism, Peri's concrete reliefs used textures, colour, and aggregates to reveal the human element in the process of formation. This approach embraced visible fabrication as central to sculptural work and resisted the contemporaneous emphasis on innate natural form, the notion of truth to material, that defined much of British sculptural production.

This paper suggests that the CCA's patronage projects in the 1930s, the 'Garden City of the Future' and *London Life in Concrete*, envisioned a relationship between concrete and the British working class, the former through the utopian format of the apartment blocks and the latter through the integration of working-class subjects into decorative schemes for the buildings that would house them. I argue that Peri proposed a re-evaluation of the conventions of concrete architecture, one that centred the human figure and the laborious process of fabrication as defining elements and, therefore, aligned the material with the artist's leftist political convictions. At various points in his career, Peri worked as a mason, an architect, an abstract artist, and, finally, as a figural sculptor, experiences that prepared him to take a central role in the debates in interwar Britain about realist art making, political activism, and working-class architecture. His figural reliefs evidenced the often-overlooked aspects of the creation of concrete: its handmade quality, its evocation of movement, and its association with craft.

Engineered Nature: Concrete in Interwar Britain

Reviews of *London Life in Concrete* correlated the innovative quality of Peri's sculptures to the modernity of concrete. However, concrete was not, as the catalogue introduction for the exhibition put it, an 'entirely new medium' (*London Life in Concrete*, 1938). Concrete was used extensively in ancient Rome, though it fell out of regular use until the early nineteenth century. In 1824, British stonemason Joseph Aspdin patented Portland cement, a powder binder made up of limestone that, when mixed with water and an aggregate (such as gravel), produced a strong substance that could be moulded into almost any required shape (Francis, 1977: 116). Aspdin based the name on the resemblance of concrete to Portland stone (Francis, 1977: 111–113). This celebrated limestone, which was used in the construction of famous London buildings including St. Paul's Cathedral (1666), The British Museum (1753), and Somerset House (1792), was exclusively quarried from England's Dorset coast and, therefore, closely associated with its natural topography (Butler-Warke and Warke, 2021). Today, products of the

Portland quarries are still in high demand, and the history of the industry and the authenticity of its stone is celebrated by The Portland Sculpture and Quarry Trust, established in 1983. In the early 19th century, the term 'Portland cement' signalled future debates over the character of concrete, its relationship to nature, and its capacity for mimicry.

Concrete fell uneasily between categories of the industrial and the natural. Its artisanal appearance and rocky surface denied its engineered aspects, but its flexibility and significant strength seemed to challenge the definition of natural material. As a result, concrete was an ambiguous standard-bearer for the modernist movement. In his study of its history, architectural historian Adrian Forty describes the contradictory nature of concrete in 1930s architecture:

> Concrete's inherent backwardness, its earthbound origins in the peasant process of *pisé*, is never far away, and always ready to reclaim it back from the engineers and technicians. While concrete has the appearance of an advanced technology … one man with a cement mixer and a wheelbarrow can produce passably modern structures (2016: 29).

Far from reliant on the machine-made standardisation celebrated by the modernist movement, a concrete building could be erected by the labour of the everyday working person.

The debate over the human-made aspect of concrete was equally stark in the context of interwar British sculpture, a period dominated by the idea of truth to material. Prominent British sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore defined their practice partly based on an attentiveness to the natural physical characteristics of their material. 'Every material has its own individual qualities', Moore wrote in his famous 1934 statement for Unit One, a group of British artists whose work helped introduce abstraction to the British art world. 'It is only when the sculptor works direct when there is an active relationship with his material', Moore continued, 'that the material can take its part in the shaping of an idea' (Moore, 1934: 29–30). Thus, it was the responsibility of the artist to recognise the inherent qualities of natural materials such as stone and wood and make these properties visible through direct carving. This practice excluded concrete—as it did bronze casting, clay, and plaster—because, as a malleable material, it had no stable physical properties to extract. Rather, concrete shaped ideas through its very flexibility.

Like Peri, artists and critics in the interwar period were drawn to concrete as a sculptural material primarily for its relationship to architecture.[2] Moore experimented with concrete sculpture and created twenty-one works in the material between 1926 and 1934 (Collins, 2016). These aligned with his typical subjects of the period: reclining women, human torsos, and busts. Unlike Peri's flattened reliefs, these were sculptures in the round. There was little differentiation between these works and Moore's reclining women and torsos in stone. Moore maintained that these investigations were important for his understanding of the relationship between sculptures and buildings: 'At the time reinforced concrete was the new material for architecture', Moore reflected in an interview in 1963, 'As I have always been interested in materials, I thought I ought to learn about the use of concrete for sculpture in case I ever wanted to construct a piece of sculpture with a concrete building' (Hedgecoe, 228). The flexibility of the material is evident in the variety of finishes of his concrete sculptures. Some are pitted to resemble stone, some are darkly tinted, and some are buffed like bronze. The array of styles aligned with the diversity of concrete architecture but, ultimately, Moore's sculptures in the round were encountered outside the structural context of concrete buildings.

In *The Stones of Rimini*, a 1934 study of historical European carving practices influential for British sculptors like Moore and Hepworth, critic Adrian Stokes famously distinguished between direct carving and modelling, the practice of building up clay, plaster, or concrete. Stokes lamented that in the modern era, the distinction between the two had been eroded. '*Modern building materials are essentially plastic*', Stokes wrote. 'These materials have little emblem of their own. With an armature of steel, Le Corbusier can make you a room of any shape you like … Their organisation will be simple sheer design that has no use for trappings, least of all for sculpture' (Stokes, 1934: 1964). While Peri and Moore identified the plasticity of modern materials as an opportunity for expanded sculptural investigation, Stokes maintained that the industrial fabrication of such materials undermined the artistic endeavour. The shapeshifting lines of modern architecture, created through the interaction of steel and concrete, were in opposition to the formal confines of stone or wood sculpture. 'Should the growth of plasticity, of manufacture, in labour and in art, overpower

[2] Other sculptures in concrete completed by British artists include Willi Soukop's *Head of a Girl* (1935) (see *The Scotsman*, 1935a), Barbara Hepworth's *Turning Forms* (1950–1) for the Festival of Britain, and Loris Rey's sculpture of a mother and child (see Collins, 2016).

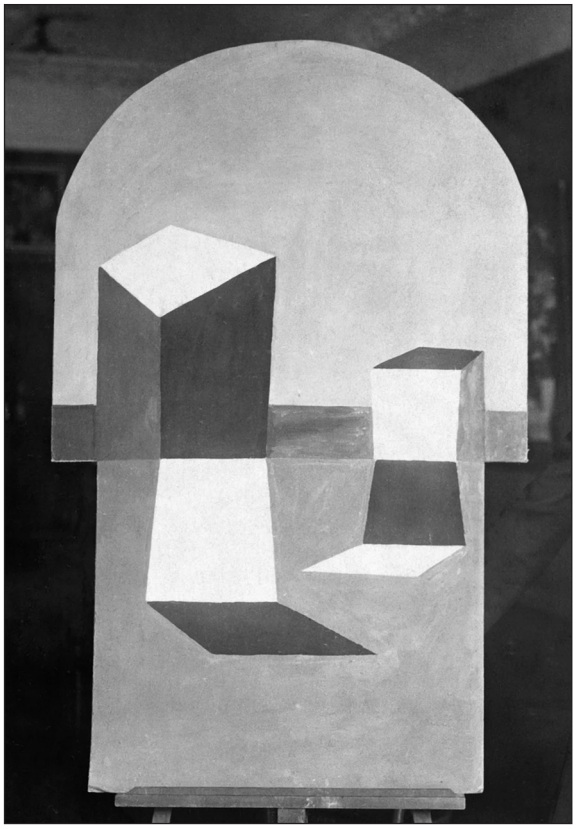

Figure 5: Peter László Peri, *The Water Between Houses (Space Construction 1)*, 1920–1. Tempera on Board. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

carving activities altogether, then there is no future for visual art as hitherto conceived by the European races,' he concluded (Stokes, 1964: 166). The process of industrial manufacturing celebrated by Peri's *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association* created a substance untethered from natural formation, one that interrogated—and according to Stokes, undermined—the relationship between artist and their craft.

Peri exhibited his first concrete sculpture, *Reclining Figure*, in a major exhibit at Der Sturm gallery in Berlin in February 1922, which he shared with László Moholy-Nagy. At Der Sturm, Moholy-Nagy and Peri's paintings, collages, and sculptures aligned with the Constructivist adoption of industrial material as a medium that is transparent about its fabrication. Peri contributed paintings, concrete sculptures, and coloured wooden sculptures called *Raumkonstruktions* [Space Constructions], such as *The Water Between Houses* (1920–1) (**Figure 5**). The *Raumkonstruktions* betray the play between flatness and three dimensionality that would typify his later concrete reliefs. On the back of a photograph of *Reclining Figure*, Peri identified it as his 'first concrete'. The piece takes on a conventional art historical subject, the female nude, but does it in an unconventional medium (**Figure 6**). It is modelled rather than carved, its uneven surface evidence of an additive process of the human hand. *Reclining Figure* is stylised, and the female form geometric, with round balls of breasts and stomach inlaid into the flat rectangle of her chest. Her head is disproportionately small and faceless, with a helmet of hair. There is a lack of cohesion that shows Peri's early struggle with the medium, and the straight lines of the body conflict with the additive rounds of stomach and breasts. On the flat sides of the body, there are visible strokes of the mason's trowel.

Figure 6: Peter László Peri, *Reclining Figure*, c. 1922. Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Though Peri saw *Reclining Figure* as a new moment in his artistic practice, his experiments with concrete, a material more commonly used for building, related to his past work experiences. Peri was born in Budapest, and the artist's early years in Hungary were marked by the nation's short-lived Communist revolution. As a young man there, he participated in avant-garde groups, including the MA theatre group and the Budapest Proletarian Art Workshops, that introduced him to radical politics and Constructivist ideas (Peri, 2020). At the same time, Peri worked as an apprentice to a stonemason, a position that familiarised him with manual labour and building materials. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1920, Peri fled the country and eventually settled in Berlin. There, he joined a group of avant-garde Hungarian exiles like Moholy-Nagy (Mansbach and West, 1991: 70–71). In 1923, Peri and Moholy-Nagy collaborated with Ernõ Kállai and Alfred Kemény to write a manifesto in *Egység*, a Communist art magazine. In it, they laid out their vision of a Communist Constructivism, and asserted that 'we artists must fight alongside the proletariat' (Kállai, Kemény, Moholy-Nagy, and Péri, 1923). If Peri's earlier Constructivist sculptures expressed this political aspect through their streamlined aesthetic, his later sculptural work in concrete—anticipated by *Reclining Figure*—proposed a more immediate alignment between proletariat workers and proletariat artists.

The Cement and Concrete Association and the 'Garden City of the Future' (1936)

The CCA was formed in 1935 as a public-facing institution (*The Scotsman*, 1935b: 2). British cement manufacturers were united through the Cement Makers' Federation, which controlled prices and organised the market. The creation of a separate organisation, which still operated under the auspices of the Cement Makers' Federation (with whom the CCA shared office space in London's Belgravia), encouraged the British public, rather than just industry professionals, to embrace concrete as an element of the built environment. 'The next stage in [concrete's] development was on more commercial lines, controlled by the business man rather than by the enthusiastic designer', noted a 1936 article about the CCA (*Belfast News-Letter*, 1936). Engineers used concrete as a standard tool in modern construction in this period, but steel and concrete were frequently covered by architectural finishes, their presence unremarked by the casual viewer. In the 1966 study *The British Building Industry: Four Studies in Response and Resistance to Change*, economic historian Marian Bowley noted that while developments of modernist architecture in the interwar period were well-publicised, in practice it was much more common to see concrete frame construction with a neo-Georgian façade. This style 'had no logical connection with the structures of the building', she writes, and the schism between construction and façade pointed to the differing agendas of engineers and architects (Bowley, 1966: 77). 'Architects were following in the wake of engineers rather than providing engineers with new problems to solve', she concludes (Bowley, 1966: 78). The CCA looked to expand knowledge of concrete fabrication beyond engineers to, instead, engage government officials, city planners, and everyday Britons. It turned concrete into a marketable entity. The formation of the organisation, one newspaper reported, 'may be taken as an indication of the commencement of a national campaign to increase the uses of cement' (*The Courier and Advertiser*, 1935: 4). 'Modern conditions make such work essential in industry', another asserted (*The Scotsman*, 1935b). The CCA would, a third affirmed 'make Britain concrete minded' (*Birmingham Gazette*, 1935: 6).

While the CCA encouraged the use of concrete in assorted buildings projects, from swimming pools, to homes, to air raid shelters, the presentation of a major housing complex at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, Britain's most public-facing architectural display, signalled larger ambitions for the medium. This was an opportunity to convince the British public that concrete could facilitate the creation of larger, utopian urban planning projects.[3] Instead of hiding its material composition,

[3] See publications including Cement and Concrete Association (1938) *Air-raid protection*; Cement and Concrete Association (1935) *Design and construction of open air swimming pools*; Cement and Concrete Association (1938) *The Construction of Concrete Roads*.

this project made the design benefits of concrete clear. In doing so, it used the format of the garden city, one first proposed by British urban planner Ebenezer Howard in 1898, to counter the common assertion that the simple lines of modernist architecture, the style most closely associated with concrete, went against the British design tradition. Blunt, the art critic, addressed the public distrust of modern design in his column for the *Spectator* in 1937. He visited an exhibition of British architecture at Burlington House and noted the dismissive comment of a fellow exhibition-goer about a so-called 'functionalist' house designed by modernist architect Raymond Myerscough-Walker: '"If my wife asked me to live in a house like that, I'd divorce her. Is it really a home at all?"' (Blunt, 1937). 'It seemed to me', Blunt wryly noted, 'that such a statement threw a great deal of light on the attitude of the English public towards modern architecture' (Blunt, 1937).

The issue of modern design subtended the detached home suggested by Myerscough-Walker and the large complexes of middle- and working-class homes explored by the CCA. The 'Garden City of the Future' had a precedent in a 1934 competition sponsored by the Cement Marketing Company, a precursor to the CCA established by the Associated Portland Cement Group in 1920 (*Leeds Mercury*, 1920). The 1934 competition for the design of working-class flats in reinforced concrete was widely publicised and the winners were the subject of an exhibition at the Imperial Institute in 1935 (Denby, 1935). Architect Berthold Lubetkin and Tecton, the architecture group of which he was a co-founder, were the winners. That same year, Lubetkin, another European emigrée to London, also used concrete for the design of the famous London Zoo Penguin Pool (Lewittes, 2022: 45–56). Less adventurous than the avant-garde Penguin Pool, Lubetkin's plans for the concrete working-class flats had a simple façade with large balconies surrounded by open space (Cement Marketing Association, 1937). The economic efficiency of the design was based on a shuttering system, premade moulds that were used to cast concrete in situ, and used a simple Cullamix stipple mixture to finish the walls (*Architects' Journal*, 1935: 441–443). A year later, in 1936, Breuer and Yorke proposed a similar design on behalf of the CCA. In Germany, Breuer was involved with innovative public housing projects that relied on concrete, including the Werkbund collaboration at the Weissenhof Estate (1927) and Walter Gropius's Siemensstadt Estate (1929) (Bergdoll, 2016: 8–13). Like these projects, and Lubetkin's design for the working-class flats, the 'Garden City of the Future' proposed a system of buildings to house working people, with offices and high-rise apartment surrounded by common green space.

Breuer and Peri shared an approach to architectural design based in the avant-garde discourses of 1920s Berlin. Despite the critical success of Peri's abstract

artworks of the early 1920s, he put his artistic practice aside in 1924 to join the Berlin City Architect's Department. This shift was motivated by politics, and Peri applied his experience in constructing shape, line, and spatial arrangements in sculpture to human-scale projects on behalf of the city's working-class residents (Johnston, 2013: 86–87). Peri's 1924 submission for the competition to design Lenin's memorial shows the artist in the process of a transition between sculpture and building, and the t-shaped construction, bisected by a sickle-like curvilinear flourish, mirrors the format of the *Raumkonstructions*. The same year, Peri drafted plans for a mammoth apartment block of reinforced concrete (**Figure 7**). Peri was interested in work of Berlin-based architects including Ludwig Hilberseimer, and the two shared an exhibition of architectural drawings at Der Strum in 1924 (Peri, 2020). Like contemporaneous Bauhaus buildings by Breuer, Hilberseimer, and Gropius, Peri used a slab design with gridded windows, smooth walls, and symmetrical balconies. Peri's proposed building asserted the potential of concrete in constructions of efficient, clean, and spacious housing for the working class, and he embraced the interplay of concrete and glass as a primary visual element. Years later, in 1930, Peri and his wife, Mary, lived in Gropius' Siemensstadt Estate (Peri, 1970). By then, Peri's relationship with concrete diverged dramatically from Breuer's and their shared basis in the Berlin avant-garde. In 1928, Peri quit his architectural job and began to make figurative sculpture. Art historian Francis Klingender interpreted the shift in a 1936 review of Peri's work as emblematic of the ongoing political conflict between abstraction and realism: 'His architectural designs were still inspired by the dictates of abstract form, rather than by the requirements of their living function as buildings' (Klingender, 1936).

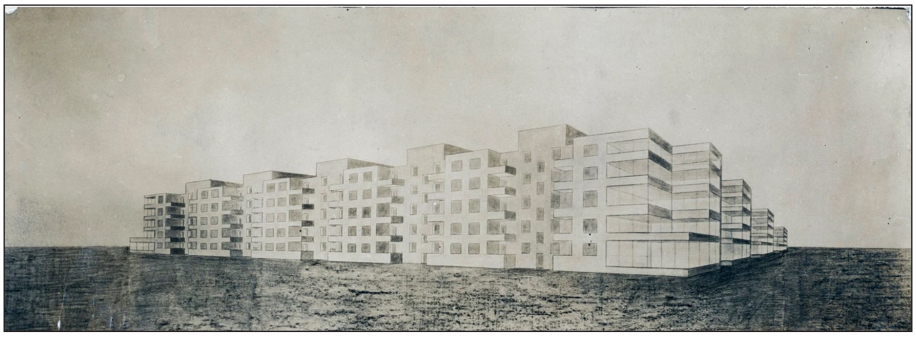

Figure 7: Peter László Peri, *Design for a Housing Block*, 1924. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Breuer's work in London on the 'Garden City of the Future' continued the investigations of abstract line that defined Berlin architectural work of the 1920s. The 'Garden City of the Future' showed the variety of forms that could be achieved by

concrete construction. Concrete's load bearing strength and malleability meant that all elements, both structural and ornamental, could be created out of the same material. The flexibility of concrete even extended to the façade designs, and Breuer and Yorke used balconies, buttresses, awnings, and curved frontages to break up the standard slab designs more typical of German concrete architecture (Harris, 2018: 161). Each group of buildings had different footprints, heights, and exterior patterns. Such distinct designs, Harris argues, recognised 'a human need for variety and contrast often lost in the modernist drive toward standardisation' (Harris, 2018: 169). The plasticity of concrete—an element that Stokes, in the same period, saw as an existential threat to artistic creation—asserted the medium's potential for abstract decorative form. In the 'Garden City of the Future,' the series of lines and sculptural forms were unified by the simple white façades of the buildings, achieved by a decorative cement finish like the one used in Lubetkin's design. Through this finish, the diverse additions maintained an aesthetic of machine fabrication, one that Yorke celebrated in his 1934 book *The Modern House*. 'Modern materials and construction and the shapes produced by them have an intrinsic beauty that needs no embellishment, that can itself give life to aesthetic emotions, by contrasting planes, logical forms that please the eye and mind, that are the result of construction and of purpose' (Yorke, 1934: 14). Concrete—flexible, strong, and mobile—was an ideal material for expressing these modern 'aesthetic emotions'. It was the idealisation of machine fabrication and the attendant standardisation of form that precipitated Peri's turn away from the abstract lines of modern architecture.

The ornamental additions to the 'Garden City of the Future' show Breuer and Yorke interrogating the contrasts of concrete construction: its capacity for experimental forms and the efficiency of standardised fabrication. Yorke was a strong proponent of prefabrication and wrote in 1934 that 'economical house[s] of good quality can only be made possible through rigid standardisation and prefabrication' (Yorke, 1934: 188). The post-World War I housing shortage spurred a significant increase in the erection of prefabricated dwellings in the United Kingdom (Burnham, 1951: 16). In their 1936 plan, Breuer and Yorke limited their experimental forms to smaller buildings and non-structural façade elements. The office buildings and apartment blocks could still be constructed with a standardised slab design (Harris, 2018: 158). Such standardised aesthetics, which defined many contemporaneous concrete buildings, were borne from practical cost saving-measures: fewer skilled workers. Slabs could be poured offsite and transported to the building site. This mode of construction, a system devised in Britain in the late 19th century, was influential in the pivot to prefabricated building in the twentieth century (Herbert, 1978: 186). Likewise, though the concrete shuttering system used by Lubetkin in the working-class flats competition in 1934

was poured on site, prefabricated moulds obviated the need for experienced builders. 'The moving of the shutters from one position to the next is a very simple operation for which skilled men need not be employed', Lubetkin's proposal noted (Denby, 1935: 443). While other materials, including steel and timbers, were used in these new designs, there was an especially close association between concrete and so-called unskilled labour.

Prefabrication was an important topic for the CCA, and in the following decades the organisation published a number of books and pamphlets promoting precast concrete (Bilig, 1947; Cement and Concrete Association, 1962). The CCA's publicity campaign was important as prefabricated homes were, architectural historian Gilbert Herbert writes, 'regarded with distaste by a conservative public' (Herbert, 1984: 16). It was not just the lay person who was resistant to concrete construction. The machined aesthetic of these newer buildings signalled the increased mechanisation of building processes, and the attendant exclusion of individual labour. Advances in prefabrication allowed construction companies to avoid paying the wages of unionised building workers by using lesser-skilled factory labour to create prefabricated parts that were then assembled on site (Finnimore, 1989: 113). In the summer of 1924, the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives engaged in a series of strikes and wage negotiations that, according to contemporaneous news sources, delayed construction of a number of new working-class housing developments (*Motherwell Times*, 1924). Some commentators and government officials opposed to organised labour action suggested that increased concrete construction could be a solution to such disputes. Housing expert B.S. Townroe observed,

> Suggestions are being freely made in certain quarters that concrete and other methods of construction rather than with brick is the way out of these labour troubles, and it is proclaimed that a dozen unemployed men, without any training, under skilled supervision, can put up concrete houses made of blocks. It is true that a shell of a concrete house can be so erected, and that concrete houses are bound to be increasingly built in the future…Official figures show that whereas 55 per cent. of the labour engaged on a brick house must be skilled, 42 per cent. must be used in the best form of concrete (1924: 287).

Concrete fabrication was wielded as a tool of resistance against striking workers.

During World War II, a period that saw a significant increase in prefabricated construction, the secretary of the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives summarised the threat: 'unless we are prepared boldly to face up to the question we

may find our craft processes broken down to smaller units of such simplicity and specialisation, that…our economic position is placed in jeopardy' (Finnimore, 1989: 114). The ease with which concrete could conform to different shapes and forms disrupted the skill-based building industry, in which builders had to learn how to handle timber and stone, in favour of a system of undifferentiated labour. In reliefs such as *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association*, Peri depicted human labour at the foundation of concrete fabrication. However, the conflict over concrete construction pitted organised labour and large-scale housing against one another, two key concerns of working-class communities (Burnham, 1951: 16).

'You can't put it on your mantelpiece': Peri's *London Life in Concrete* (1938)

Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association is one of several building-related reliefs that Peri created in the 1930s that were displayed in *London Life in Concrete*. Many of Peri's sculptures showed everyday life in London, including scenes like *Rush Hour* (1937), *Tea Shop* (1938), and *Embankment* (1937). The subject matter in the exhibition was emblematic of the mature period of Peri's artmaking, which left Constructivism and architecture behind in lieu of figural sculpture. In 1928, Peri left his architectural practice and joined the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany, renouncing his previous abstraction and, instead, creating small figural sculptures out of plasticine. In an anticipation of the official switch to Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union in 1932, the Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists in Germany advocated for realist representation over the abstract experiments of the immediate post-Revolution period. Peri's simultaneous adoption of realist sculptures shows his ongoing attention to changes in Communist art policy (Johnston, 2013: 86). He would later write of the shift that there was 'one thing abstract art cannot do. It can never give the emotional experience which good representational art does. Hardly ever can it be more than arts and crafts' (Peri, 1965). The dismissal of the abstract work of his Constructivist cohort as decorative was a significant reversal of Peri's beliefs. The reference to arts and crafts treated the material composition of the object, a source of energy and independent meaning in a constructivist context, as secondary to the emotional resonance of the human figure.

Peri and his British-born wife Mary McNaughton, who he met in Berlin in 1928 during her music studies in the city, fled Germany in 1933 to escape repercussions for the distribution of Communist materials (Peri, 1970). They settled in Hampstead, London (Peri, 2020). As he established his practice in the United Kingdom, concrete became Peri's primary medium. Instead of a continuation of his sculptures in the round, Peri flattened his figures into narrative reliefs that incorporated figure and

background in a single object. In their simple lines and attention to the shape of the object, these new works recalled the format of his *Raumkonstructions*. Leftist artists and critics in 1930s London who ascribed to Marxist ideas of aesthetics and production used Peri as a paradigmatic example of Communist art, and the artist appeared in public forums including a debate on Surrealism and Realism hosted by the left-wing Artists' International Association in 1938 (Swingler, 1938). Prominent socialist critics Blunt and Klingender saw in these works a complete synthesis of form and figure. Crucially for this British audience, Peri's work offered a socially engaged art that avoided the strict confines of Socialist Realist doctrine. Instead, Peri engaged with the lives of London's working class in particular, an artistic approach that maintained the ideas of Communism without the more militant aspects of Soviet policy. A review of *London Life in Concrete* in the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Part of Great Britain, welcomed Peri's reliance on workers as the basis for his sculptures, 'Road workers, wood workers, Lyons' waitresses and street crowds are his models' (*Daily Worker*, 1938). Human bodies took the place of abstract line and shape, but the artists maintained an interest in materials and formal organisation. 'Only the discipline of his earlier abstract phase could lead Peri to his present mastery of form', Klingender wrote in 1936, 'but it is his peculiar merit that in an intense and often bitter struggle he has succeeded in applying his powerful weapon of a new technique to its proper and fruitful task of expressing the vital experiences of ordinary men and women' (Klingender, 1936).

A notable group of Peri's reliefs displayed in *London Life in Concrete*, including *Building Workers* (1936) (**Figure 8**), *Sawing* (1937), and *Building Job* (1938) (**Figure 9**), engaged with construction and labour. These scenes emphasise the human body rather than the technical aspects of concrete, steel, and timber; we see the people who are responsible for creating modern concrete buildings. In *Building Workers*, for instance, the steel beams suspended in the air provide a playful backdrop for the men that Peri depicts, one balancing as if on a tightrope and the other raising his hand in a cheer. The reliefs also hold the traces of Peri's sculptural labour. Peri's process borrowed from building methods, and his modelling of the reliefs recalled his early experience in masonry. He began with a metal framework, the same scaffold used in concrete buildings. This was the support for the poured concrete background, which retained the rough mottled surface of concrete walls. On top, he used different coloured concretes to build the bodies of the figures, layering and smoothing the material with a mason's trowel. The textural contrast made the plasticity of Peri's modelling explicit and integrated the fluctuations of concrete form into a static object. Bailey has argued that concrete is an index of its own materialisation: 'Concrete not

only describes how it becomes a form', she writes, 'it also expresses the character of its fixed condition. Concrete-as-material carries within itself the properties and qualities of its own formation' (2015: 242). The dynamic quality of the material, visible in both the textural variation of sculptures like *Building Job* and in the depiction of the working bodies needed to create concrete, could be integrated even in the final hardened form. 'As a craftsman,' the *London Life in Concrete* forward reads, '[Peri] rejoices in the discovery of a medium having the spontaneity of clay modelling combined with the permanence of carving in stone' (*London Life in Concrete*, 1938). Because Peri worked in concrete, he was part of this process of creation. He connected the artist and the industrial labourer.

Many of the reviews of *London Life in Concrete* commented on the relationship between Peri's sculptures and architecture. 'Architects and craftsmen have for a long time envisaged the possibilities of concrete decoration', one stated (*The Bellshill Speaker*, 1938: 3). Another noted that the reliefs showed 'the possibilities of concrete as a medium for mural decoration [and] frescoes' (*Western Mail*, 1938: 7). Rather than the coloured concretes that personalised the facades of private homes, however, Peri's work was related to a more communal setting, most notably the working-class housing estate. Blunt, who was the art critic for the *Spectator*, saw Peri's use of concrete and his depiction of everyday Londoners as a successful integration of progressive politics and formal innovation. In the catalogue for Peri's 1937 exhibition *The New Realism in Sculpture*, Blunt wrote of the reliefs,

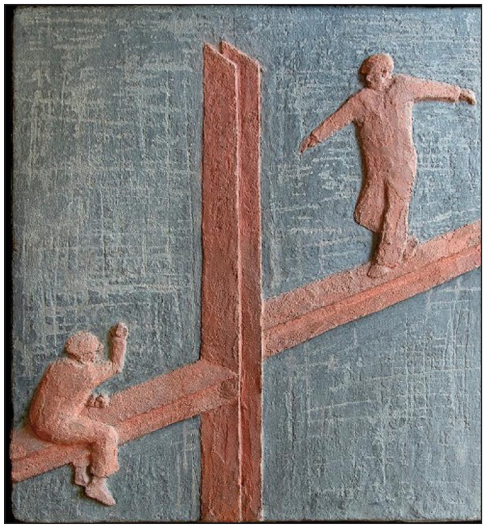

Figure 8: Peter László Peri, *Building Workers*, 1936. Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

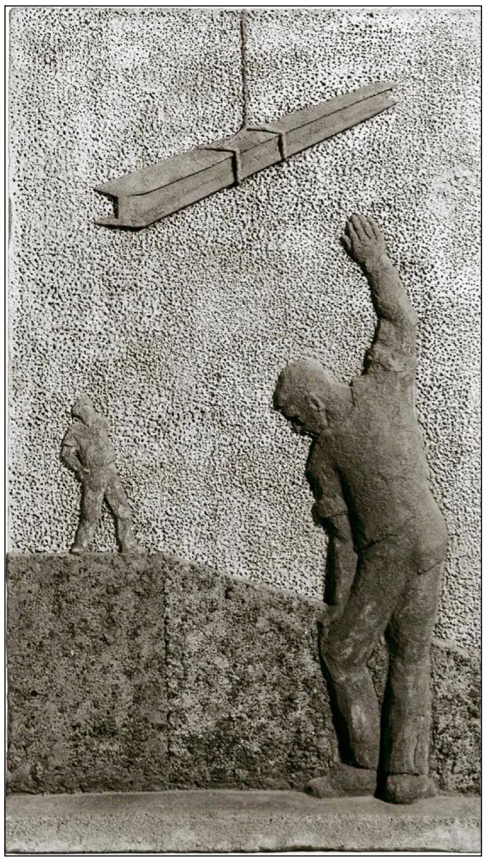

Figure 9: Peter László Peri, *Building Job*, 1938. Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

> His groups represent everyday scenes of the worker's life ... in the medium of concrete, the use of which, as the most important building material of today, opens up the possibility that sculpture may again be united with architecture. In this way sculpture can again become a communal art, and Péri can be said to have done for it what the Mexican fresco painters have done for painting; that it to say, to have brought it into contact with the serious reality of the day and made it an art for the whole people instead of the entertainment of a small intellectual élite (1937).

The evocation of the Mexican muralists shows Blunt's interest in bringing the politics of painters like Diego Rivera into a British setting. However, artists like Rivera and José Orozco made provocative images that were markedly more radical than Peri's 'charming' scenes (as one newspaper called them) (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 1938: 6). Rather, Peri's reliefs suggested that the details of working-class work and lives deserved to be visible and monumental. In this, Peri was not pushing the boundaries of acceptable public discourse like the muralists. Rather, he was bringing back an older artform—the classical frieze.

In the reliefs that Peri exhibited in *London Life in Concrete*, the protrusion of simplified figures from a flat background recalled the marble friezes of Classical and Neoclassical architecture. One of Peri's earlier sketches for *Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association*, for example, emphasises the linear stillness of the composition, with an even line of columns dividing the figures into discrete groupings (**Figure 10**). In the final relief, this pictorial strategy gives depth to the dark background. The display of the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum, widely regarded as one of London's treasures, was perhaps an inspiration for the artist to revisit this early form of narrative sculpture (**Figure 11**). Peri designed the exhibition of *London Life in Concrete* himself, organising the artworks into a progression reminiscent of the frieze format. The ledge that ran continuously around the room at waist height unified the objects into a series that evoked the museum display of the Parthenon Marbles. The classical frieze presented easily understood narratives that referenced and responded to the communities in which they were installed, and the artist was intimately involved in the social and religious life represented in the scenes that they created. Embodied knowledge of material, or *techne*, was central to this process, and in contributing a key part of the architectural scheme, artists in the classical period had a role that overlapped with the builder, together producing useful objects to hold and represent their communities.

Figure 10: Peter László Peri, *Sketch for Mural for the Cement and Concrete Association*, 1936. Concrete. The Estate of Peter László Peri.

Figure 11: Roger Fenton, Stereoscopic view of the installation of the Elgin Marbles, British Museum, c. 1857. J. Paul Getty Museum (Creative Commons 0 Attribution License).

While *London Life in Concrete* hinted at an architectural function for the reliefs, the artworks confounded many visitors, who found them hard to accept as either sculptures or architectural elements. Mary Peri later observed of the exhibition that people 'didn't think it was something you could have in your home. Concrete – no! You can't put it on your mantelpiece' (Johnston, 2013: 84). The heaviness of the material and the ongoing resistance to concrete in a domestic setting meant that few pieces from the exhibition sold. The critic for the *New Statesman and Nation* contested the

idea, widely repeated in reviews of Peri's work, that concrete's modernity expanded its sculptural potential, 'Mr. Peri's sculpture bulges awkwardly in any aesthetic pigeonhole', they wrote. 'The bright coloured concrete in which he models his everyday scenes and contemporary figures is perhaps a medium suited to the moment, but, compared with the versatile plaster, the rich bronze or the almost lively stone, it is dead and unbeautiful' (*New Statesman and Nation*, 1938: 993). Despite the mark of the living hand, this critic felt that concrete could not escape from its engineering roots.

While there is no extant documentation of the circumstances of Peri's commission, concrete's difficult relationship with decorative schemes could, in fact, have been the rationale for the CCA's promotion of his works. During the 1930s, concrete companies in Britain expanded their offerings from the uniform white finishes that typified many modernist concrete buildings. Advertisements in *The Architectural Review* encouraged customers, perhaps wary of these streamlined structures, to experiment with different cement finishes in a large variety of colours and textures. The Cement Marketing Company, for instance, offered their customers finishes including scraped, stippled, 'English Cottage', and brushed. 'The range of shades', they promised, 'is almost infinite' (*The Architectural Review*, 1936: lxxv–lxxviii). They even offered 'art tiles', which had a multi-coloured, mottled appearance. Such advertisements were aimed at middle-class consumers, as evidenced by the large Surrey house that the Cement Marketing Company included as an example of the coloured concrete façade. These more unique finishes were positioned as an accessible luxury, they were 'not an expensive finish' and could 'be carried out by any skilled plasterer' (*The Architectural Review*, 1936: lxxv-lxxviii). The handmade look of finishes like 'English Cottage' used the labour of the plasterer as a visual element to counter the machine aesthetic of concrete. CCA was interested in Peri's work precisely because it implied that the exterior of concrete buildings could evoke a more unique, handmade appearance. Peri's sculptures in coloured concrete disrupted the standardised form of concrete buildings and gave the CCA an opportunity to expand the public understanding of the material.

In contrast to the middle-class homes finished in coloured concrete that were shown in contemporaneous advertisements, a review in the *Times* emphasised the ornamental quality of Peri's reliefs as appropriate not for mantelpieces but for factories; 'For industrial buildings in particular both subject matter and material suggest an appropriate decoration' (*Times*, 1938: 10). The *Times* implied that Peri's reliefs were exclusively defined by the link between concrete and the factory, rather than the craft of builder or artist. Indeed, in his introduction to *London Life in Concrete*, Blunt emphasised the importance of the everyday: 'Road workers, builders, char women and the street crowds of London are his models, and the simplicity of form

which characterises his work is completely in accord with the spirit of his subjects' (*London Life in Concrete*, 1938). The designation of simplicity forged an alignment between Peri's past experiments in abstraction and the bodies represented in his later work, one that collapsed the working-class experience into a set of standardised stereotypes. Despite Peri's efforts, these critics approach the working-class experience itself as an abstraction. In a reversal of Peri's more utopian vision of the legibility of concrete for the working class, the *Times* suggested that it was only in the environs of the factory that these individuals could understand themselves. The industrial buildings that subverted individual craft to the machine would only represent working-class subjectivity on the exterior, a decorative flourish rather than a vision for a collective future.

'Following the bricklayer'

The CCA commissions of the 1930s were, in some ways, both models. While Breuer and Yorke's city plan was explicitly utopian—a vision of the future—Peri's reliefs were also on a smaller scale, proposals for what it would mean to integrate the working-class experience into visible architectural form. In 1949, however, Peri had the opportunity to create his concrete reliefs on a large scale. The artist was commissioned by the London County Council (LCC) to produce sculptures for its new South Lambeth Estate, a large public housing complex built in a working-class area of London that had sustained significant damage during the Blitz (West, 2021).[4] Peri's work with the London County Council predated the official patronage system that the LCC implemented beginning in 1957, and his work provided a basis for future public sculptures in concrete, most notably the large abstract works by William Mitchell in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Mitchell, 1977; Pereia, 2012). Peri's *Following the Leader (Memorial to the Children Killed in the Blitz)* (1949), *Boys Playing Football* (1951–52) and *Mother and Children Playing* (1951–52) are over-life-size figural reliefs that Peri moulded out of Pericrete, the same signature coloured concrete that had been displayed in *London Life in Concrete* (**Figure 12**). The skin, hair, and clothes of these figures were modelled in monochromatic swaths of yellow, white, and terracotta that stand out from the brick siding of the council housing, which Peri originally painted in blue to accentuate the figures. In the reliefs, Peri adopted the pictorial strategies of a frieze, using varied scale and dynamic angles to suggest recession of space and movement against the flat backdrop of the building.

[4] In this period, Peri also made the large-scale concrete sculpture *Sunbathers* (1951) for exhibition at the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Figure 12: Peter László Peri, *Mother and Children Playing*, 1951–52. Horton House, South Lambeth Estate, Fentiman Road, London. Author's photograph.

Peri integrated himself into the building process, noting that 'All of these works are only possible to carry out on the site, following the bricklayer as the wall goes up' (Peri, 1954). In Peri's mind, both roles contributed to the function of the building, and his sculptural ornament disrupted the line between artist and builder. A press image of a woman and two children staring up at *Mother and Children Playing* shows the intended resonance between Peri's sculptures and the working-class residents of the South Lambeth Estate: the mother in the photograph could be the mother on the wall and Peri's rendition of the scene could very well be something from her 'own experience' (*The Sphere*, 1952) (**Figure 13**). Construction on the South Lambeth Estate started before the war. The simple red-brick façade, tilted roof, and prominent chimneys of the buildings gestured to Britain's nineteenth-century architectural heritage rather than to modernist design. When Peri took part in the building process, he was working on a site where people were already living. 'I don't know much about art', one resident

told a reporter, 'but I must say it has brightened up the estate quite a lot' (West, 2021: 20). After Peri's work was completed, however, the unknowing observer would have been hard pressed to identify these sculptures as concrete. Their colourful forms, brick background, and distance from the ground undermined the specificity of the material. It was not tied to the mode of construction. The London correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* wrote of the reliefs in terms of brick rather than concrete architecture; 'The medium of concrete in bas-relief has two advantages in being cheap and in being related to the brickwork' (*Manchester Guardian*, 1952). The process of creation—the dynamics of labour inherent to the material—faded away after Peri completed his work. At the moment of their creation, however, the reliefs offered an opportunity for direct contact between the artist and the residents of the apartments. 'The ordinary people are the ones who really appreciate it,' Peri told a reporter, 'I am surprised at the knowledgeable questions that women ask me' (*The Star*, 1952).

A TENANT OF A LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL HOUSING ESTATE IN SOUTH LAMBETH ADMIRING ONE OF THE BAS-RELIEFS BY PETER PERI : This is one of a series of bas-reliefs, depicting scenes of family life, which Mr. Peri has done for the flats in Fentiman Road and Tyers Street, South Lambeth. One 6-ft. sculpture of a woman holding the hands of several young children is designed as a memorial to children of the neighbourhood who lost their lives in the air raids on London. Mr. Peri was one of the sculptors who contributed to the South Bank Exhibition last year; his group of sun-bathers, in terra-cotta concrete, aroused considerable admiration. He is also an engraver and etcher, and is exhibiting at 3, Northumberland Avenue, London, W.C.2, from December 21.

Figure 13: 'A Tenant of a London County Council Housing Estate in South Lambeth Admiring One of the Bas-Reliefs by Peter Peri' *The Sphere*, December 20, 1952 © Illustrated London News Ltd/ Mary Evans.

In the decade after *London Life in Concrete*, the Cement and Concrete Association continued to advocate for the aesthetic possibilities of the material. An editorial published in 1950 in *Concrete Quarterly*, a CCA-sponsored publication founded in 1947, considered the architectural possibilities of concrete in the post-war moment. 'Architecture since the war has been drawing away from the strict functionalism of the twenties and thirties', the editor wrote. 'Like other forms of art, it is "loosening up" and feeling for a greater freedom of expression … Here is a new call to men of imagination and vision' (*Concrete Quarterly*, 1950: 1). The human element—imagination and vision—was integrated into the increasingly varied surface of concrete buildings. Instead of the stark white walls of prewar modernism, postwar concrete architecture incorporated diverse aggregates, finishing methods, and colours. 'The architect who makes a concrete building, concrete in its skin as well as its bones, need no longer feel he is taking a chance' a 1951 editorial in *Concrete Quarterly* read. 'Its skin can be relied on to look as he wants it to' (*Concrete Quarterly*, 1951: 1). It was during this period that Britain became the experimental centre of New Brutalism, an architectural style that concentrated on the so-called honest texture of building exteriors, which were finished in industrial materials like concrete. Given the adversarial relationship between concrete and the British public in the 1930s, this was a striking development. The term New Brutalism was canonised by British critic Reyner Banham in a 1955 essay for the *Architectural Review*, and he identified three primary aspects: the focus on materiality, the external legibility of the building's internal function, and a modular construction (Banham, 1966: 11). Concrete was central to this movement, and Banham argued for a relationship between New Brutalism and the *béton brut* style, which had been recently adopted by architects like Le Corbusier. This concrete was left raw and unfinished after it was cast and set. It maintained evidence of its fabrication, its contact with other materials, and the labour that went into creating it.

In the 1950s, concrete buildings in the UK were increasingly textured and raw, their unique appearance structured by happenstance and the handiwork of the builders rather than the clean, white machine aesthetic of interwar buildings. The adoption of New Brutalism and the *béton brut* style, Banham argued, uncovered a central contradiction of interwar modernism. The standardized, clean, and streamlined exterior cladding of modernist buildings was, in fact, very difficult to achieve. Le Corbusier's shift to the uneven textures of *béton brut* concrete was evidence that he had, according to Banham,

> abandoned the pre-war fiction that reinforced concrete was a precise, 'machine-age' material. That fiction had been maintained, even in the thirties, by two main devices: either by rendering over the roughness and inaccuracies of concrete with

> plaster and paint; or by lavishing on it skilled labour and specialized equipment beyond anything the economics of the building industry normally permitted … [Le Corbusier] decided to recognize that concrete starts life as a messy soup of suspended dusts, grits and slumpy aggregate, mixed and poured under conditions subject to the vagaries of weather and human fallibility (1966: 11).

The human origins of concrete haunted the machine aesthetic of the 1920s and 30s. Peri's resistance to these fictitious clean finishes, while out of step with the concrete architecture of interwar Britain, evidenced the same interest with 'messiness' and 'human fallibility' that would concern this new generation of architects. During a time when modern architecture resisted visible signs of human labour, his concrete reliefs made the human element of the material explicit.

While Peri's insistent figuration was at odds with prewar modernism and postwar New Brutalism, his uneven trowel strokes and depiction of building scenes aligned with the interest in fabrication expressed by both movements. He proposed an integration of artist and architect—or of artist and bricklayer—as professions defined by the experience of their materials. Yet a paradigmatic shift he envisioned in the decorative schemes of new working-class housing projects in Britain did not materialise. Peri's interventions remained limited to the relief models—which fell in a liminal space between sculpture, decoration, and architectural elements—and the small group of full-size sculptural reliefs that he contributed to London council flats in the 1950s. The catalogue essay for *London Life in Concrete* showed the problematic assumptions by critics and the CCA that undergirded and, ultimately, undermined Peri's innovative experiments with the unconventional material. 'Peri portrays the man in the street in a medium which that man knows and understands,' it declared (*London Life in Concrete*, 1934). The assumption of the identification between Peri's subjects and his artistic medium conflated the working-class body and concrete itself. In these critical responses, concrete was not defined by labour. Rather, the labourer was overtaken by material.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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