

Raw materials

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On top of the irrefutable effects of the building industry on greenhouse gas emissions, what is now causing an outcry is the number of stages of transformation involved in processing raw materials into construction materials. This has not always been so, indeed is not so all around the world, and we are progressively returning to past habits, both to reduce the amount of material used, but also to use it without affecting its physical integrity. A major trend of our times – and one that we can heartily commend – is to return to the Earth that which we take from it, and without polluting it; ‘natural’ materials are all the rage. In particular raw materials, those that have been barely touched before being submitted to the close scrutiny of engineers’ calculations and the creative zeal of the architect. Wood (without glue), earth (unfired), straw, cork, even seaweed, sand and mushrooms; the range of construction materials is not so much increasing as it is turning away from chemical transformation processes, as we have done over the last few years under the combined effects of the awareness of our entry into the Anthropocene era, the development of cutting-edge technologies but also of bio-mimesis. In short, raw materials are stealing the show today because they are seen as the unprocessed, and therefore noble, version of building materials, which are normally crudely stuffed full of additives. But the subject does not only bring up ethical considerations. The connoisseur will see as much beauty in a wall of high-performance concrete as in a thatched roof, in a glass brick as in an archway of unfired earth. Master glassmaker Emmanuel Barrois recounts, “Working with glass every day, I learned to distrust it. It is a showy material, seductive, it glimmers and draws attention to itself; it is a material that really needs to be used with restraint. Glass is almost tormented, abused, because it gives away too much, and some things shouldn’t be made public. At the end of the day, it will always manage to evade us somehow, it will produce effects that we hadn’t expected, and that little extra is enough to bring a project alive.” This issue of *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* is not only about materials in their raw state, but also about those, joining the ranks of ‘natural’ materials, that have undergone transformations to give them a certain allure. Ask the brick what it wants to be...