

Concrete and the Making of Eastern Europe (Munich, 26–27 Jan 27)

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, München

Deadline: Apr 15, 2026

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte

Concrete and the Making of Eastern Europe: From Interimperial Networks to the International Socialist Division of Labor.

Online conference, January 26-27, 2027, organized by the "Art, Environment, Ecology" / "Kunst, Umwelt, Ökologie" Research Group, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich.

Modernist architectural discourse and historiography have long established concrete as a rational, efficient, and hygienic building material—in other words, as a marker of modernity. These aesthetic associations stem from concrete's material affordances as well as its infrastructural and architectural uses. From river dams to high-rise apartment buildings, the material has been crucial to increasing energy production, expanding transportation networks, and providing social benefits such as housing and public health facilities. In Eastern Europe, concrete is paradigmatically associated with the memory of state socialism. However, its intensive deployment long predates the installment of communist regimes—charting, in fact, the expansion of state power across political caesuras. While early-twentieth-century imperial railways linked peripheral sites of resource extraction to industrialized centers, in the 1930s and early 1940s, concrete aided the expansion of defense and transportation infrastructure, which underpinned the genocidal project of Nazi Germany and its allies. At each turn, concrete became embedded in state projects of capital accumulation, place-making, and biopolitical governance. This conference sets out to explore the material practices and geopolitical dynamics associated with the production, deployment, and discarding of concrete in Eastern Europe across the twentieth century. The broad chronological span seeks to challenge the narrative predominant in popular discourse that has established the material as a political symbol of state socialism, largely unmoored from global histories of capitalist modernization.

This online conference is organized around three thematic panels, designed to debate continuities across established periodizations. The panel "Extractivism," chaired by Monika Motylińska (Leibniz-Institut für Raumbezogene Sozialforschung), invites contributions on the geography and infrastructure of gravel and limestone extraction and concrete production, as well as the labor practices and geopolitical relations that these processes entailed. Motylińska also welcomes papers that consider cement and concrete as a "meta-infrastructure" of extraction—a necessary precondition for the emergence and expansion of extractive industries. Second, "Development," chaired by Nikolay Erofeev (Freie Universität Berlin), aims to examine building typologies, urban layouts, and aesthetic forms engendered by the broader processes of urbanization, industrialization, and proletarianization that concrete construction accelerated. This section considers the con-

tested meaning of progress and development across conventional historical caesuras, from early integration into capitalist economic flows to fascist "alternative modernities" and the much-contested "socialist international division of labor." Third, the panel "Waste," chaired by Adam Przywara (University of Basel), will consider historical discourses on the noxious by-products of concrete production (e.g., cement dust and CO₂) as well as practices of rationalization, pollution reduction, and economic efficiency. The conference will conclude with a keynote lecture by Kim Förster (University of Manchester). Altogether, the conference centers the material processes underpinning the near ubiquity of concrete as co-constitutive of political and economic relations within and among the states of Eastern Europe.

Researchers are invited to submit abstracts (max. 400 words) considering, but not limited to, the topics outlined above. To facilitate intellectual exchange, the conference will be held in English. The abstracts, alongside a brief biography (max. 150 words), may be submitted until April 15, 2026, to a.masgras@zikg.eu. For queries, please contact Alexandra Masgras at the aforementioned email address. All submissions will receive a response by May 15, 2026.

The aim of this online conference is to lay the basis for a network of architectural historians and theorists interested in applying materialist and critical environmental methods to the region of Central-Eastern Europe. A publication based on the conference proceedings will be discussed with all participants during the closing of the event.

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Reference:

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