

the firm was designing. “Koolhaas may have been the first to utter the words,” notes Shulman, a *Metropolis* contributing editor, “but there’s no question that it’s Price’s baby.”

Price began a systematic analysis of concrete to find out which of its elements—aggregate (usually crushed gravel), binder (customarily cement), reinforcement (normally steel rods), and form—or which combination of elements, could best be made to transmit light. He came up with a translucent concrete made from a crushed-glass aggregate and a plastic binder; for reinforcement, he also turned to plastic. The initial samples of translucent concrete appeared two years ago. Lit from underneath, says Shulman, a sample poured block of

translucent concrete “seems to breathe light like the sun breaking through winter ice.”

“Price believes his material could be used in construction as well as for design objects: bathtubs, toilets, tables, even lamps and lampshades,” Shulman writes. But many questions—about thermal dynamics, seismic stability, and other crucial matters—remain. Tests so far are promising, Shulman reports, but large-scale applications may be many months, even years, away. The cost of the new material is likely to be high: perhaps five times greater than that of traditional concrete. But the price may be right if Price is right about the promise of see-through concrete.

Farewell to Linguistics?

“The End of Linguistics” by Mark Halpern, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 2001), 1785 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., 4th fl., Washington, D.C. 20036.

In today’s wars over English usage, strict constructionists battle a growing corps of linguistic freethinkers, who take an “anything goes” approach to language. After all, these anti-authority folk say, language is a living, growing thing. Why fetter it with artificial rules and regulations?

Rubbish, says Halpern. “Language is not living, not growing, and not a thing; it is a vast system of social habits and conventions, inherited from our forebears, and showing every sign of being an artifact rather than an organic growth.” It changes—but it does so “when *we* [emphasis added] change it, and the metaphor that makes it autonomous only obscures our real task, which is to consider just how and why we change it.”

What has given that metaphor of language as a natural and autonomous creature such influence? In large part, Halpern believes, the culprit is the failed science of linguistics. The modern discipline began with much fanfare in the 18th century. Sir William Jones’s recognition in 1786 of the relationships among Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit led to the idea of an Indo-European family of languages. And linguistic scholars’ subsequent efforts to identify other such relationships and families were so successful that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, linguistics seemed well on its way to becoming “a science—a discipline dedicated to

elucidating the laws that govern an order of nature.”

But linguistics has not lived up to its early promise, Halpern maintains. Since the 19th century, “no great new principles have been formulated, no epoch-making discoveries have been announced.” Not that linguists have not been busy on all sorts of interesting projects: “Some are in effect anthropologists, gathering linguistic data from remote peoples”; others, following linguist Noam Chomsky, “try to find ‘deep structure’ behind language’s façade”; still others study how children learn to speak, or try to teach apes or whales the basics of human language. But there’s no sign of the “comprehensive and unified theory of language” that would have cemented linguistics’ status as a “natural” science.

What does the future hold? Halpern predicts that linguistics “will be broken up, and its fragments annexed” by related disciplines, “as geography has been.” Good riddance, as far as he is concerned. The English language can only benefit if the educated public, led perhaps by writers and philosophers, regains authority over the way it is spoken and written. “In the hands of its most skillful users rather than in those of its academic observers, the language will take on not an independent life, but the dignity and efficiency of a tool shaped and wielded by its proper masters.”