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Doctoral Dissertation
Doctoral Program in Architecture. History and Project (33th Cycle)

The Icelandic Concrete *Saga* Architecture and Construction (1847–1958)

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sofia Nannini". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line at the end.

Sofia Nannini
Turin, February 22, 2021

Summary

When inaugurating the first and only Icelandic cement plant in 1958 in the village of Akranes, the Minister of Industry Gylfi Þorsteinsson Gíslason (1917–2004) claimed that “many people would say that a land without building materials is uninhabitable”. By 1958, not only had Iceland become inhabitable enough, but the country had also acquired its political independence from Denmark and a material independence from the rest of the world. Concrete had already become the most popular building material on the island and Iceland was now going to produce its own cement. More than one century before, in 1847 cement was first employed as plaster on the walls of the cathedral of Reykjavík. However, until the turn of the century the majority of rural and urban dwellings were still being built out of local turf or expensively imported timber. There were only a handful of public buildings in stone and lime; their construction was overseen by Danish architects and builders. After a few decades, Icelandic engineers, architects and mastermasons were building their country exclusively in concrete. How did this technique become so popular to the point that the first decades of the twentieth century are referred to as “the age of concrete” by Icelandic historiography? This research traces the presence of cement and concrete in a very peculiar architectural and construction history at the edges of the European continent: the story of an architecture in constant struggle with material shortage and the natural elements; its outcomes intertwined with Icelandic politics, culture and society.