Book review

Building Decorative Materials

Yan Li and Shuzia Ren. Woodhead Publishing, Sawston, Cambridge, UK, 2011, ISBN 978-0-85709-257-1, £145.00, 401 pp.

This is a new textbook, originally published in China and translated into English by Yan Zhou and Hong Liu. It is apparently aimed at students in 'modern vocational education' and focuses on decorative materials for interior and exterior architectural applications. The book contains 17 chapters, including an introduction. It covers basic properties; stone; gypsum-based materials; cement, concrete and mortar; ceramics and glass; metals; wood; plastics; fibre-based products; coatings and adhesives; waterproof, acoustic/thermal insulating materials and energy-saving/environmentally friendly options. This would seem to be an appropriate list of chapters and the book does not appear to omit any commonly used facing materials.

The chapters are presented very consistently, using metric units and closing with some helpful ideas for student exercises and self-test questions. Where necessary, the authors go to some lengths to provide detailed typologies for common material types (e.g. Chapter 8 on glass, which contains a clearly presented table of types of glass). A particularly praiseworthy aspect is the structure of each chapter; sub-sections are broken into easily digestible pieces and often punctuated with helpful illustrations. All of this is entirely appropriate and to be expected in a student textbook.

However, all is not what it seems. The book was written for the Chinese context, to support students on building courses in China. It would be remiss not to point out this important fact to a prospective purchaser, because throughout the publication we see repeated mention of materials,

practices and standards that are grounded often exclusively in China. The specific materials, standards and architectural predilections described here simply do not reflect cultures and industry standards outside China; only occasionally does the book make mention of other markets. That said, there is some value in the coverage of generic concepts such as the properties, characteristics and uses for each material. Formulae for typical properties and testing regimes are broadly consistent across political boundaries, but it is important to remember that this book only rarely refers to international standards (ASTM, BSI and DIN, etc), so lecturers who are located outside China are unlikely to put this book on their recommended reading list.

Furthermore, the quality of translation in many passages is less than adequate. Although a few instances of this would be understandable, in certain places a combination of poor syntax and weak technical basis collude to undermine the book's value and consequently the classroom authority of any lecturer who attempts to use it (e.g. '*The radioactivity of natural stone is a great issue concerned by people. It is proved that most of natural stone contains a little radioactive stuff*'; p. 39). Furthermore, only nine publications are given as references and the lack of lists of further reading, and of web references does not help matters. While the book generally makes good (in some places, arguably too much) use of tables and diagrams, the colour plates are all grouped at the start and inadequately captioned, so the reader is not able to cross-refer properly to relevant sections in the text.

There is no doubt that this would be a helpful book for a student based in China, but the same cannot be said for those located elsewhere. On the positive side, if you are currently working on a building project for a Chinese client, then by reading this book you would at least gain a broad understanding of indigenous decorative materials and common practices, but the cover price may still come across as rather expensive.

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