Redefining Brutalism
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Brutalism is a movement that appeared in the 1950s as a distinctive subtype of post war modernism. It was a form of modernism that exposed the buildings basic elements and materials. A celebration of structures in which all components were designed in order to be seen and celebrated (Brutalist Architecture: Buildings, Architects & Style, no date). A movement centred around human experience and wellbeing.

Due to this in its beginnings Brutalism was considered innovative and progressive. Having gained traction after the war it become the epitome of socially progressive housing solutions and community driven buildings. This was quite evident especially in Britain where Brutalism was featured in educational buildings, low cost social housing and was widely influenced by socialist principles.

However, by the 1980s the British public opinion towards Brutalism shifted and it lost popularity. The original philosophy and intent of these building seems to have been lost and are now viewed as austere and soulless.

But what caused this shift in notion in the
UK? Was Brutalism such a horrible mistake? What made a once revered movement become so hated? How did a movement championing the relationship between man and building become considered dehumanising and soulless?

Hence this essay is an exploration of Brutalism and its many facets and iterations. Creating a narrative and understanding of the factors which lead to the movement’s change in perception in Britain and what its translation is in other countries. It is an aim to destigmatise this word and bring a new perspective to what it refers to and application around the world. Illustrating how easy it is for something’s true meaning to be lost and or altered due to external factors which should seemingly have no connection to these buildings. How external factors such as economic, politics, sociology, ethics and even climate managed to eroded Brutalism in the British public eye, while in the same time championing it in other nations.
The etymology of the term ‘Brutalism’ seems to be quite fittingly shrouded in controversy and provocation. Its first usage being a matter of debate and its different linguistic translation adding more confusion. The term itself seems to have never been liked or fully embraced even by the architects who worked under its philosophy.

“The mystification derives from two simple circumstances: one, that the term was coined, in essence, before there existed any architectural movement for it to describe; two, that it was then re-minted to describe a particular movement, to which it adhered for reasons that were, in part, so trivial and ridiculous that they could not be taken seriously until later.” (Banham, 1966, p. 10)

In his book “The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?”, Banham (1966) starts of by marking two issues which garnered confusion about the term Brutalism: on being its invention before a distinct architectural movement occurred and the other being its later popularisation.

Starting in the 1940s shortly after the end of
the second world war, architects in Europe began turning away from high Modernism in favour of a movement that would much later be described as Brutalism. During its initial stages Brutalism was referred to by some, such as Sigfried Giedion and Louis Khan, as New Monumentality, a style representing the feeling of eternity and rawness (Snyder, 2019).

Overall, four people can be credited with the creation of the word: Hans Aspuld, Alison and Peter Smithson and Le Corbusier.

The first Hans Aspuld seems certainly to be the creator of the term. He first made use of it in January 1950 to refer to the work of Bengt Edman and Lennart Holm, Villa Goth, seen in Figure 1 (Banham, 1966). He coined the Swedish phrase Nybrutalism to describe the rawness and material honesty of the house, which would later become the core of Brutalism. The house displays its structure: showing visible I-beams and exposed concrete and brickwork. Then during the summer of 1950 a group of British architects would pick up the phrase and spread it in England (Banham, 1966).

During the same period Alison and Peter Smithson would popularise the word in England with their Hunstanton School (Figure 2). However, they would claim the word was derived from Peter's nickname from his student days, Brutus, due to his resemblance to the busts of the Roman hero (Banham, 1966). This comical
circumstance along with their innovative work would garner popularity for the movement and spread its reputation.

Along with the Smithsons’ Le Corbusier would create a French iteration of the word, Beton Brut, which he would use to describe his monolithic, raw concrete structures. Here we can note the difference in wording regarding the British name and that of other nations. While the French word brut means, raw or rough, in English the connotation of the word brutal is completely different. Cambridge Dictionary (2007) defines the word brutal as cruel, violent, and completely without feelings. Therefore, the connotation of the word was one of the factors which affected the perception of the movement in the UK. Relating even its name to something which was brutal and soulless.

However, regardless of its murky origins one thing is evident in all version, that being the understanding of Brutalism as an architectural movement. Brutalism was represented by its honesty of materials and structure, monumentality and approach towards human experience. As defined by the Smithson’s, Brutalism wasn’t just a style it was an ethic not an aesthetic and its true meaning was to create buildings which were functional and a material adaptation of its inhabitants needs (Davies, 2017). Brutalist buildings focused on the needs of its inhabitants, first and foremost, with a deep concern for humanity and communities. These buildings were marked
by rough unfinished surfaces, clearly displayed structures and services, massive forms and emphasis of material (Brutalism Style Guide | RIBA, no date). This is evident in the already mentioned Hunstanton School which became one of the most popular manifestos of Brutalism.

The Hunstanton (Figure 3) was quite the innovation of the period. It was praised for its rigid lines and axial layout along with its frank expression of structure and material. This is quite evident in Figure 4 which shows the exposed materials and their connections as well as clueing us on the construction process. Sight planes are clearly defined with the use of material: steel for structural support, precast concrete for floors and brick for wall infills. How the building is meant to work and be used is clear, this paired back approach
lets the whole building breathe, making the spaces themselves the main feature. Even services such as water tanks, which are typically hidden are put on full display (Figure 5). This building disguises nothing at all showcasing its internal logic.

“Their philosophy encompassed a reverence for the materials of the built world, an affinity between building and man and architecture as way of life.” (Brutalism Style Guide | RIBA, no date)

Having now laid out the philosophy and intent of Brutalism the initial question of how it came to be so ostracised in Britain is made more evident. How did a movement which held the human experience in such high regard become paradoxically referred to as austere and soulless?
Brutalism is concrete. This seems to be the overall understanding of some regarding it. Truthfully concrete did become synonymous with Brutalism even though in its early stages it consisted primarily of brick and steel edifices as seen in the example of the Villa Goth and the Hunstanton School. This shift towards the use of concrete can be attributed to two factors: one economics and the second being its versatility and likeness towards the philosophy of Brutalism.

Reinforced concrete entered the architectural mainstream during the post war era. While in previous decades it was mainly used for industrial structures and then covered up, during the 1950s an expansion of its uses and appreciation could be seen (Mathew Postal, 2002). Concrete became extremely popular and considered a truly versatile material. As steel was scarce after the Second World War, concrete structures allowed for buildings to be created without the necessity of a full steel frame (Mathew Postal, 2002). Along with this the necessary materials to create concrete were widely available making it easy to produce. Concrete also enabled for precast
elements to be created offsite permitting a standardisation of some components.

For architects concrete was however not just an economic solution but one which enabled them to expand the post-war modern aesthetic and still portray their functional philosophy (Mathew Postal, 2002). Brutalists were highly concerned with how materials affected the inhabitants of a building. Thus, this lead them toward concrete as they considered it the best medium to express the functionality and logic of a space. For them an exposed concrete wall was easier to read than a covered up one, using the rawness of materials gave the inhabitants a better understanding of the spaces as well as helping them relate to it more. (Mould, 2017).

As Breuer said in his interview with Winthrop Sargeant (Hyman, 2001, p.157) : “I like to use concrete because it has a rugged quality. It is not a sweet material. It is a relief in modern architecture from all that glass and steel. Also, concrete can do almost anything in a building. It represents both structure and enclosure and per consequence it expresses structure more directly than any other material . . . Flowing forces can be expressed in the exterior of a building, giving it an organic character.” Architects of the period noted how versatile concrete was having numerous application, taking on multiple functions while in the same time having the ability to remain totally stark and neutral or take on
any texture it was cast with.

Le Corbusier was one of the first to appreciate the ‘rawness and ruggedness’ of concrete. In his Unite d’Habitation (Figure 6) he deliberately exposed the exterior’s imperfection and construction process (Mathew Postal, 2002). Figure 7 represents a close up of the façade displaying the visible pattern left on the board formed concrete along with any knots and flaws. This honesty and raw approach towards materials was embraced by Brutalist architects everywhere.

Hence one can easily see how concrete become directly corelated with Brutalism. Yet, the same material which inspired and drove these architects was the same which helped bring the downfall of the movement.
“For the architects of the period, concrete was a futuristic material that could fulfil their utopian dreams of mass housing and urban renewal. It was the perfect material to represent their ethos and in the same time create cheap and fast housing.” (Huppatz, 2019)

The same economic reasons which popularised the use of concrete in many post-war stricken nations such as Britain came with their own consequences. The relative ease with which concrete could be made and used allowed for it to become the forefront material in the reconstruction effort. As mentioned, concrete allowed for precast elements to be created and standardised allowing for quicker and simpler building processes. Younger architects such as the Smithsons started embracing this movement towards standardisation, mass production and prefabrication and considered it an unavoidable change (Kei, 2019). Nevertheless, this standardisation of elements and constructions did not seem to be fully embraced by the British public. These standardised buildings starting to be considered repetitive, uninspiring and lacking human regard.

Additionally, the British climate would soon turn out to be a challenge for concrete construction as well. If not treated and maintained properly concrete does not age well in damp, maritime climates such as the one in Britain. In these climates concrete can easily become streaked.
with water stains or rust stains from metal joints and reinforcements as well as seeing a growth of moss and lichens (Huppatz, 2019). This poor weathering of concrete added to the distaste in Brutalist buildings and further diminished the maintenance efforts of such structures. Hence their disregard and lack of upkeep only perpetuated the idea of Brutalism being an emblem of urban decay.

This shift in perception of concrete from a ‘miracle’ material to a ‘cold’ and ‘hideous’ one, caused a growing aversion for building made from it. Thus, in the British collective psyche concrete buildings, which were equivalent to Brutalist ones, were considered monstrous and inhuman only tarnishing the landscape.
“Because of its functionality, (relative) ease of construction and nod to modern utopian living, Brutalism was championed as an architectural movement that could aid European countries’ rebuilding in the 1950s and 1960s. In so doing, it became culturally synonymous with many of the postwar housing developments, particularly in the UK and France” (Mould, 2017 p.704)

As Europe was trying to rebuild itself from the ravages of war people looked towards systems of production and productivity in order to accelerate and streamline the construction process.

What was seen during this period was a standardisation of building types especially when looking at housing estates, where precast concrete was sometimes used as an economic motif rather than to serve the ideology of Brutalism. As previously mentioned, concrete was mainly used due to its strong and versatile functions and its ability to be easily produced and precast in a factory speeding up the construction process. Precast concrete buildings where considered the standard and widely used. However, in the same time this
standardisation was what cause some of its stigma.

As Brutalism championed human wellbeing and attempted to establish an ethical architecture in these war stricken nations it became a popular with public building and social housing (Karp, 2015). Brutalists embraced the creation of housing estates and social projects as they were intent to establish an ethical architecture which would benefit all. Thus, much like in the case of concrete, in the public perception Brutalism would become synonymous with social estates.

Such housing estates started being erected all over Europe however their popularity and appreciating varied largely from nation to nation. In places such as France Le Corbusier’s Unite de Habitation remains a gem of Brutalism and regarded as an example of modernity and innovation (Redstone, 2018). Yet in Britain the situation could not be more different. Here Brutalist housing estates are considered monstrous and inhumane with a lot of them standing up for demolition.

Various factors altered the perception of housing estates and along with it further tainted the image of Brutalism in Britain. One such estate was the Smithsons’ infamous Robin Hood Gardens (Figure 8). It is comprised of two blocks with a central green area. The buildings are made from precast concrete panels and hold a total of 213 apartments (AD Classics: Robin
Hood Gardens / Alison and Peter Smithson, 2011). The two buildings wrap around the internal garden, with one of them being only seven stories high in order to maximise light (AD Classics: Robin Hood Gardens / Alison and Peter Smithson, 2011). The central garden (Figure 9) includes a hill made from construction remnants and was considered an essential part of the Smithsons' design.

They designed the two blocks so that the living spaces looked onto the inner garden. This was done in order to reduce noise and air pollution and in the same time allow for families to watch over their children when they used the communal areas (Mould, 2017). This is just a reiteration of the ethos of Brutalism, creating building and communal areas meant to improve the inhabitant’s life. Creating a honest building encapsulating the needs and wants of the tenants, with many former residents...
acknowledging the safety and sense of community they felt while living there (Mould, 2017). The Smithsons regarded the estate as a model which demonstrated a more enjoyable way of living (V&A · Robin Hood Gardens, no date).

However, the original intent and experience of the building would soon be tarnished and the estate itself even demolished in 2019. By this time the estate was berated as a concrete mess and considered unliveable. This shift in perception was caused by a mixture of the aforementioned reasons (in previous chapters) but mostly due to the social and political changes of the period.

The first blow came with the rise of communism throughout Europe. Brutalism’s once appreciated outlook towards the community and the good of the general society became tainted by the assertion of the communist power throughout Europe. Brutalism in Britain started being associated with the acceptance of the communist doctrine and totalitarianism. Being pictured as a tool for these regimes to assert power over their nations. The fall of the Labour Government only made the situation worse sending people on “ridiculous anti-communist witch hunts which pursued into all walks of life, even architecture” (Banham, 1966, p.11).

Along with the fall of the Labour Government came the growth of neoliberalism, which encouraged the
privatisation of social housing and championed private living (Mould, 2017). Estates like Robin Hood Gardens which embodied the social ethos of Brutalism countered such ideologies hence creating an opposing narrative to the one desired by this political movement. City councils would soon start supporting the demolition of such estates in favour of private and gated developments (Mould, 2017).

On top of these political factors a shift in attitudes and stigmatisation regarding the communities which were in need of social housing greatly affected the perception of these estates as well. This was seen even in the early construction process when the Smithsons where asked why did they design a place which was too good for the people who would reside in it (Video: Alison And Peter Smithson On Housing, 2014). Still, the Smithsons considered that these people required dignifying housing regardless of their class and background. The site evidently represents Brutalism’s ethical philosophy and social monumentality. A GLC Householder’s Manual was even produced which outlined instruction by which the building should be used, noting “it is your turn to make it a place you are proud to live” (Mould, 2017, p.714). The Smithsons were trying to overturn the stereotypes around council estates. As noted in Oscar Newman’s ‘Defensible Space’ (1972) such public high-rise developments were generally liable to crime and antisocial behaviour as their residents felt no sense
of ownership or responsibility for them. Therefore, observing the Smithsons’ efforts in creating dignifying homes and a ‘living manual’. Yet as councils started disregarding these estates and not maintain their upkeep these buildings started falling in disrepair (Brutalism: The Rise & Fall | Lawcris, no date). Along with that they began being linked with antisocial behaviour and vandalism. Thus, these buildings were considered enablers of this situation due to their apparent harsh and dehumanising style (Mould, 2017). Council estates became synonymous with poverty and crime and along with it Brutalism.

Therefore, with the shift in social and political factors one can see how Brutalism’s perception started changing regardless of its original intent due to external factors which its promulgators had no control over.
Overall, after looking at the previous chapters one can start understanding how Brutalism came to be so disregarded and even hated in Britain. A mixture of external factors such as climate, politics, sociology and economics playing their part in the distaste toward this architectural movement. The mixture of these factors, which the architects had no control over, easily created a new narrative for Brutalism in the UK. They shaped the prevailing narrative that pre-war modernism was innovative while post-war modernism, especially Brutalism, is monstrous (Grindrod, 2013). Brutalism is a taint in the British landscape and consequently seeing the movement towards the demolition of such buildings. These buildings being catastrophic failures and concrete monstrosities which have to be eradicated (Grindrod, 2013).

Contrastingly in other nations Brutalism would become a revered movement, national identity and celebrated even to this day. This was especially seen in up and coming nations such as Brazil where Brutalism managed to steer away from its stigmatisation, and even become a method to reconstruct national pride.
In countries like Brazil where flawed democracy and military governments had prevailed, socialism seemed like a new hope (Politics and brutalism in Brazil, no date). All the political and military turmoil led many architects to align with Brutalism. They were looking for a manifestation by which to represent their ideals for architecture: as something that is open for everyone and has the good of the people as a focus. Most architects here worked under the ethos of Brutalism and created their own international version Brutalismo Paulistano (Lehmann, 2016).

“From the standpoint of Brazil European Brutalism was an expression of melancholy, the work of a civilization that had all but destroyed itself in the second world war, and whose use of technology was always now tainted with the knowledge of its capacity for self-destruction” (Forty, 2012, p. 128)

In Brazil, Brutalism did not mark the post-war reconstruction efforts instead allowing for the movement to develop differently, influencing the cultural and architectural identity. The prevailing political instability allowed Brutalism to become a symbol of pragmatism, defiance and social rights. On top of that the tropical climate, rich with foliage, gave the perfect backdrop for these buildings. The large monumental concrete structures completing the lush green environment (A Look at Brutalist Brazil, no date). Here Brutalism flourished and became a national treasure, with the
work of the architects of the movement valued even today.

One such example is Lina Bo Bardi’s, MASP, Museu de Arte de São Paulo (Figure 10). At first glance the building seems to be just a two-level glazed volume hanging of two concrete portals. However, the building is much more than that with the rest of it being ‘hidden’ underground. The upper floors housing the gallery while the submerged ones house the theatre, auditorium and restaurant. The building is specifically raised in order to preserve the cities panoramic view and adjacent Parque Trianon (AD Classics: São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) / Lina Bo Bardi, 2018). Through the building Bo Bardi exemplified the Brutalist ethos, by embracing the public spaces and prioritising the human experience.
The gallery spaces are free of columns and the pieces are displayed, in no particular order, on panels of glass as seen in Figure 11. The pieces seem to float in the air almost mimicking the form of the building itself (AD Classics: São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) / Lina Bo Bardi, 2018). The initial non-chronological layout was specifically chosen with regard to the social aspects of Brutalism. Bo Bardi wanted to destroy the elitism surrounding art work and represent it rather as something attainable to anyone regardless of class and education (Politics and brutalism in Brazil, no date). Additionally, the open plan and fluidity of the spaces gave Bo Bardi the freedom not only to create an art museum but a gathering space as well.

Largely the MASP is a demonstration of the power architecture has to promote equalitarian values and social reasonability (AD Classics: São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) / Lina Bo Bardi, 2018). The building is an example of Brutalism’s effort to attain an architecture for the people which can improve their lives and urban conditions.
Similar to what the Smithsons’ were aiming with the Robin Hood Gardens in creating an estate for all, Bo Bardi aimed the same thing in creating a museum which welcomed all, a space to educate the general public.

Yet unlike the Robin Hood Gardens the MASP managed to withhold its original intent and be recognised as innovative. Thus, part of the MASP’s success can be quite evidently attributed to the different factors in which Brutalism flourished in Brazil. Here these ‘political’ buildings were marked as heroic, becoming symbols of the national identity and being embraced by the public.
Chapter 6 - CONCLUSION

The truth is it seems that in the UK Brutalism was reduced to a simple aesthetic rather than ethic. Its original intentions, sensibilities, and concern for humanity were shrouded by the changing British landscape. The shifting political, economic and social trends along with the native climate of the UK managed to alter the perception of Brutalism permanently. Still what makes the whole situation more peculiar and interesting is that at first glance one would consider these factors to have no connecting and power over Brutalism and yet they held a decisive role in its perception. The initial sensibilities and ethos lost in a sea of changes, stripping Brutalism down to a mere visual style. However, one should also note how these same factors caused Brutalism’s success in other nations, such as Brazil, where it is a symbol of national pride.

Considering Brutalism just as concrete buildings would be a complete misunderstanding and misrepresentations of what it is. As noted by Owen Hatherley in his book, “A Guide to the Ruins of Great Britain” (2011, p. 87), “Brutalism was a political aesthetic, an attitude, a weapon, dedicated to the percept that nothing was
too good for ordinary people”. Brutalism was never intended to be just a simple style or aesthetic; it was much more than that. It was a tool whose purpose was the betterment of people's lives, a method by which to establish that everything was in people's reach regardless of background or class.

Nowadays, while the word Brutalism still sparks a mix of emotions in the British public, one can also note that its ethos managed to survive, just not under the same name. Brutalism's philosophy and intent managed to be engrained in the overall philosophy of architecture, transforming into a general understanding of what buildings should be. Shifting into an architectural sensibility under which many architects and designers work. Even though they would not be considered ‘Brutalists’, it is quite evident that their approach to design with a focus on human experience, commitment to social values and material honesty was instilled by Brutalism's strong philosophy and ethos. To conclude with, Brutalism's original intent seems to have been rebranded, becoming the essence and focus of practices and designs today.
Bibliography


List of Illustrations

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