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History of Modern London

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Brutalist City

For many years surrounding the Second World War, there existed no unique architectural style that spoke to the experience of Londoners. This was in part due to the oppressive popularity of the international style in Europe at that time, which, although not immensely successful in London, did prohibit other styles from flourishing. It carried notions of order, restraint, and control, which fundamentally contradicted London's disorganization and fervent growth. The London population as well, noted for their brash and cynical realism, never took to the aspirational and somewhat pretentious 'international' buildings of glass and air.¹ The remedy to this disconnect between modern architecture and modern Londoner was proposed in the form of "The New Brutalism" by two English architects: Allison and Peter Smithson. Similar to the international style in its rectilinear geometry, the New Brutalism differed most notably in its material choice and in its ethical statement. The Smithsons conformed to post-war Londoners' need for relatable architecture, not aloof or antiquated, and they defined brutalism by its attempt to confront a "mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work."² In an examination of the relationship between London's physical space and the community around which it was created, the causes of the rift between architectural modernism and London as a city become apparent. And where the international style conflicted with London's post-war ethical direction, the New Brutalism was able to help guide the population into its new place in the world.

¹ Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Penguin, 2002), 311.

² Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "Thoughts in Progress" *Architectural Design* 27, no. (April 1957): 113.

The term “international style” was first used, quite literally, in 1932 by Henry-Russell Hitchcock in reference to Frank Lloyd Wright’s place among an international crowd of architects.³ While the most characteristic features of the international style were first realized in the modernist buildings of the 1920s, most notably the horizontal windows and design-free façade exemplified in Le Corbusier’s “Villa Savoye,” it was Wright who pioneered the usage of long lines and taut plane surfaces. He and the other modernists sought to create open, voluminous spaces, typified not by gaudy ornamentation but by the nature of their physical construction. The ideology of the international style can be derived from the manifestoes of the European functionalists, who sought justification in their aesthetic designs through their technical ones, or, to use the words of Louis Sullivan, that “form ever follows function.”⁴ This rationalization of the design process and emphasis on solving practical problems indicated an increasing moral purity in the mission of architecture. To Hannes Meyer, “interest in proportions or in problems of design for their own sake is still an unfortunate remnant of nineteenth century ideology.”⁵

At its most basic level, architecture shapes and controls physical mobility within a city by defining avenues of movement through its construction. On a higher level, architecture affects the way a population socially interacts with its city. Inhabitants experience a city’s architecture both aesthetically and practically; thus it imbues every interaction with its own artistic statement. It follows to say that if the ideological mission of a building strongly misaligns with the users’ ethos, the two will fundamentally be at odds. In opening up spaces and cleaning walls, the modernist architects created an aesthetic that became *too* pure for Londoners. The often-used plain white walls and cantilevered boxes, evocative not just of efficiency but of sterility, imposed an unobtainable goal of

³ Philip Johnson and Henry-Russel Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: The Museum, 1932), 29

⁴ Lewis Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, no. (March 1896): 403.

⁵ Philip Johnson and Henry-Russel Hitchcock, *The International Style* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 51

perfection on the observer. While the buildings themselves achieved this goal, they remained unable to connect to the humans who could not. It is clear that, by a simple observation of London's history of literal and metaphorical grittiness, Londoners did not tend towards or hope for a more sterile environment. One could argue that the merits of the international style came from its aspirational optimism, but those aspirations were both out of reach and out of character from the London in which they were set, so instead they served as a reminder of human limitations.

The New Brutalism, as proposed by the Smithsons, did the opposite. In its goal to be "objective about 'reality'—the cultural objectives of society," brutalism was able to offer post-war Londoners an ethical direction with which they could align themselves.⁶ To the Smithsons, brutalism was the answer to the "*whole* problem of human associations" between building and community. There were, according to critic Rayner Banham, three defining physical features of New Brutalism that addressed this issue: a building should be "an immediately apprehensible visual entity; and that the form grasped by the eye should be confirmed by experience of the building in use...and this form should be entirely proper to the functions and materials of the building."⁷

These criteria were first realized in 1954 by the Smithsons' "Hunstanton School," which received acclaim for boldly exhibiting its internal structure. In the exposed concrete and steel frame, neither material nor design choice were hidden, all the way down to the pipes that fed the sinks and toilettes. The Smithsons chose to build the Economist building in London, as well as several other projects, in much the same way. Such architecture is often described as "honest" because of the way the building allows the viewer access to the sources of their experience. To post-war Londoners still lost in the aftermath of destruction, the massiveness and the transparency of New Brutalism, both in

⁶ Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "Thoughts in Progress" *Architectural Design* 27, no. (April 1957): 113.

⁷ Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism" *Architectural Design* 118, no. (December 1955): 354.

its physical size and in its ethical statement, created clear moral and physical guidelines by which the population was eager to follow.

New Brutalism is often remembered as a force for socialism, due to its propensity for large concrete blocks with minimal decorative elements that is well suited to large-scale, publicly funded projects, such as welfare housing. For that reason, many love to criticize brutalism for its darker legacy as a failed social venture. Because brutalist buildings are physically designed to mimic the emotional experience of the user, they are sometimes less than adequate when it comes to practical usage. Take, for example, the Smithsons' famous public housing project Robin Hood Gardens. After only a week of use, the Smithsons' hope for a utopian community based on the honesty and purity of his architecture was dashed by the disorganization and mismanagement of the London public housing system. Vandals quickly began to deface its spaces, such as the stairwells and the laundry room.⁸ But the Smithsons' contribution to England does not come from the application of their designs, as Hunstanton School was also deemed by many to be impractical in actual usage, but from the social optimism with which it is inextricably tied. Underpinning brutalist architecture is a desire for physical freedom and the socio-economic mobility that it accompanies. For London, the Smithsons' works and the remaining brutalist tower-blocks "function as reminders of what has been lost; what, to use Scribner's phrase, 'was imagined to be possible.'"⁹

Brutalism has recently experienced a resurgence in its scholarly appreciation, which can be perhaps attributed to its passage from recent blunder to historically significant artifact that all styles of art must make.¹⁰ The present appreciation of brutalism is somewhat perplexing, as it stands in

⁸ *The Smithsons on Housing*, DVD, directed by Bryan S. Johnson (London: BBC2 1970)

⁹ Andrew Burke, "Concrete Universality: Tower Blocks, Architectural Modernism, and Realism in Contemporary British Cinema" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 3 (May 2007): 187.

¹⁰ Michael J. Lewis, "The 'New' New Brutalism" *The New Criterion* 33, no. 4 (December 2014), 19.

sharp contrast to the popular neo-international style of today's skyscrapers. The tall and slender silhouette of 432 Park Avenue has recently redefined the New York skyline. Its feature-less walls and looming figure make it physically and visually unattainable to all but the ultra-rich. While brutalism evokes equality and egalitarianism, modern skyscrapers exemplify our society's wealth inequality. In the case of city living, socio-economic status mirrors physical position, and for both the divide between top and bottom is decided by the ethical values of the time. It is no coincidence that brutalism never reached higher than the tower block; its architects, the Smithsons, designed it to promote unrestricted and accessible socio-economic movement, laterally and vertically. From an aesthetic standpoint, it is difficult to evaluate the merit of brutalism in comparison to today's architecture. But from an ethical standpoint, it is clear we must be weary of praising buildings that are emblematic of economic injustice, for it is architecture that guides us to our future.

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