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The Honesty of 20th Century Brutalist Architecture

If the Incredible Hulk had a middle name, “Brutalist” would be it. Indeed, the term sounds like a Marvel Comics bigger-than-life character. However, Brutalism is not a superhero but an iconic architecture that is bold, raw, and demanding. It is a famous public architecture that is future-focused from post-war economies. It is confident, moody, and evocative and is experiencing a renewed appreciation from a generation that grew up with it. “The brutalist architecture of the 1950s to 1970s had a futuristic edge to it, but some felt it offered a dystopian view of the world rather than a utopian one (“Brutalism - Discovering Poetry in Pragmatism” 266).

The term originated with functional government, housing, and factory buildings that exploit and stretch steel, concrete, and wood in stark and massive blocks. There are ideological camps about Brutalism: the movement has deliberate plainness, crudity, and violence of imagery. Or, it is a modern historical form worthy of preservation for its straightforward use of materials and democratic oeuvre. No longer considered behemoth blights, the mass, graphic visual appeal, and dramatic light and shadows of the buildings on social media bring a nostalgic revival. The contribution of brutalist architecture is a history of purpose, design optimism, and an example of international collaboration.

Brutalism started in western Europe in the 1940s and was revolutionary. The manifesto for brutalism came from an article in *The Architectural Review* in 1955, written by Reyner Banham (Mould 703). He called it “New Brutalism” and articulated the movement. The style is global and interpretive. Between the 1940s and 1970s, Russia and Europe led the way with contemporary buildings characterized by the creative use of construction materials perfected during and after WW2, such as large sheets of glass, aggregate gravel, steel, aluminum, concrete, and wood. The mood is dramatic, weighty, and

straightforward with linear planes, geometric angles with strongly controlled views inside and outside of the buildings. Except for the occasional water feature or fountain, gardens and greenery are primarily absent, favoring manufactured vistas and focus drawn to the building itself. Textures, however, are naturalistic. Metal, construction aggregate, and slab stone endure the seasons and develop a patina from the elements. Electricity and electrical components designed for warplanes and submarines adapt to these modern architectural forms. Brutalism brings people closer to the details of the building. The materiality has logic on full display. For example, a concrete wall is easier to understand in its unadorned purity; a wall free of decorative tiles or patterned wallpaper. Consider the staircase: stepping up or down in a straight line is the most efficient amble. An ornate switchback or spiral staircase is a frivolity unwelcome in Brutalism. “In other words, the conceptual distance between the material and its function is as small as possible in brutalism” (Mould 704). This egalitarian spirit is the cornerstone (corner concrete block?) of the style.

The style intends to bring people together in a merry and egalitarian way, but it fell out of favor like fashion. The movement starts and evolves on the ideals of social equality, which is precisely why these buildings should be preserved and restored. Architecturally speaking, the intent is to pull the ripcord on wartime strife and imbue forward-thinking to a healing and productive society. “Most brutalist architects are not recognized names, but civil servants in government offices charged with revitalizing weary cities” (Banthorn 57). The need for political and social reform is vivid, and architecture can create perfect atmospheres of change. However, this style was not enduring like a spired Gothic cathedral or a classical presidential memorial. In Europe, as governments changed, Brutalism became a physical and ideological burden to welfare states. Funding waned, and tower blocks and housing tried to make do with meager budgets for maintenance. Alas, these former symbols of change bottomed out into dangerous slums for a very underclass the style attempted to prevent. These buildings became icons of failed politics and amplified social disparity. With modern preservation planning and methods, we can avoid this demise by recalibrating these unique spaces and forms to bring people together.

Wonderfully, the style emerged as optimistic modernism in the United States. Outside of Western Europe, the realistic style evolved in Australia and the Americas. Mr. Paul Rudolph (1918-1997) was chair of the School of Architecture at Yale University from 1957 to 1965. He is an influencer in the modern direction of American architecture. “I want...a million things going on at once, but they must be resolved and balanced, because it is through the resolution of tension that something becomes dynamic (Balle, *The Paul Randolph Foundation*).” In the United States, Brutalism was not fraught with the gravitas of post-WW2 escapist renewal. The style folded into the progressive mood of modern architecture of mid-century America. Rudolph and others gravitated to the honesty and definitions of controlling light and space with exposed materials.

During his time at Yale, the school built his design for the Yale Art and Architecture Building (the A&A) in 1963. Considered the highest and best example of Brutalist work in the United States, it has been celebrated, pilloried, and set on fire. Because the fire didn’t take hold, the actual and metaphorical strength of the building remains. In a letter to the New York Times, Helene Sroat quotes a student in her dissertation about the humanism of Brutalist architecture. The student is frustrated by the building and how its ego upstages the art of the people. “Its dark, rough concrete walls are a disdainful expression to the art student, whose work is belittled by them (3)”. By contrast, Rudolph calls his work “as being very human.” However, he admits he likes his buildings more like sculptures. Sroat quotes from a 1964 Architectural Record article: “I’m afraid that I would rather see most buildings without people...but...this is one building which seems to me to look better with people (2)” Rudolph says of the A&A.

The evolution of Brutalism is international, as, with many things American, immigrants got the work done. A democratic spirit lives on in the immigrants that came to America to build these structures. “(T)he Americas benefited from the skills and aesthetics of newly arrived immigrants...(they) shared their familiarity with the technical attributes of concrete buildings...” (Blanthorn, 57). This heritage is popular with a generation more connected to the world than a post-war culture would ever know. The “brutalist revival” has enormous appeal due to the structures’ ecological benefits and natural attributes. Exposed and reinforced concrete are still efficient and low-cost, and new construction methods and material

combinations remain viable and resilient solutions. Suddenly, former eyesores are valuable artifacts as giant sculptures and monuments to a past era “...concrete boxes, upside-down ziggurats, fortress walls, and hunking behemoths' ' dot cities worldwide, as Nate Berg describes. He penned an article about the questionable preservation of a Paul Rudolph-designed Brutalist government center in Goshen, New York, which tells of the bi-polar sentiment of “love it or hate it” of these mid-to-late-century modern buildings. Like Goshen, suburban American towns burgeoning in a mid-century economy were quick to adopt this progressive architecture. However, in this case, the building’s restoration seems prohibitive. Like its European predecessors, this building’s shoddy maintenance and post-hurricane damage are easier to fix with new construction. The “save it or replace it” question will just become louder over time.

Tension and dynamism live on in the mid-life crises Brutalism is now having. It demands to stay relevant, intelligent, and attractive as the buildings age into their 50s and 60s. As we’ve learned in the challenges of preserving early American architecture, Arts & Crafts bungalows, churches, many factors influence success or failure. It is easy to dismiss an old building as functionally or aesthetically obsolete, with little regard for its history and familiarity in a community. Yet, the preservation and adaptation of these buildings are essential for community health. They offer continuity and comfort. They have a material and architectural honesty worth remaining in a world where diverse communities exist and deserve to thrive. Just as immigrants influenced our practical application of Brutalism in America, these modern buildings maintain their democratic and purposeful spirit living on for everyone, free of the architectural shackles of classicalism or colonialism.

Works Cited

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