New Brutalism: The major ideas that characterised the architectural movement

New Brutalism was a movement that emerged in Britain during the 1950’s. It was led mainly by the architects Peter and Alison Smithson as a response to a time of great austerity in the post-war years. In this essay I shall examine the major ideas of the movement by focusing mainly on the work of the Smithsons.

The term New Brutalism was first used when Peter and Alison Smithson published their project to build a house in Soho, London. The main principle behind this residential design was that all surfaces should be left unadorned, “the building being a combination of shelter and environment” (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1953: 342) In this way the materials used to construct the house would honestly express themselves. This aesthetic came from the post-war ‘make do and mend’ attitude, where in a time of great hardship, finishes such as paint, carpet and wallpaper were not affordable. When writing about their design Alison (1953: 342) wrote “… had this been built, it would have been the first exponent of the New Brutalism in England, as the preamble to the specification shows: ‘It is our intention in this building to have the structure exposed entirely, without interior finishes wherever practicable.’”

The idea of leaving materials unfinished was influenced by Le Corbusier’s expressionist period after the war, where his designs took on a much more monumental and heavier style. He described the construction of his buildings as ‘beton brut’ (rough-cast concrete) as the concrete was not rendered or painted but left rough in a very cheap way. The board marks of the concrete, and the hand marks of the workers were all left exposed. This can be seen in the ‘Unité d’Habitation’ in Marseille, which was finished in 1952. Out of insufficient funds for a steel structure came an exposed concrete frame that does not hide any defects that workers made in the concrete. The joints and knots of the wood used for shuttering are visible; creating a rich texture that evokes fascination. Le Corbusier (1937 cited by Samuel, 2007: 47) explained his thinking: “I have decided to make beauty by contrast. I will find its complement and establish a play between crudity and finesse, between the dull and the intense, between precision and accident.”

At the start of the movement, there was much argument amongst critics and architects about what New Brutalism should be. In December 1955 Reyner Banham introduced the movement to the Architectural Review, writing an article defining the New Brutalist style as three things: “1, Memorability as an Image; 2, Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3, Valuation of Materials ‘as found’” (Banham, 1955: 361). To come to this definition, he looked firstly at the Smithson’s Soho house design, and then at their first completed building, the Hunstanton Secondary Modern School in Norfolk.
The Hunstanton School was the first accepted New Brutalist building, even before it was finished in 1954. Banham described the school as being “almost unique among modern buildings in being made of what it appears to be made of” (Banham, 1955: 357). At the time, a lot of the modern buildings being built had a whitewashed appearance, despite being constructed out of steel or concrete. The Hunstanton School was completely honest about it’s materiality. Unadorned walls are left in brick, the ceiling was left as open framework, concrete slabs are left bare and columns and beams were left as steel. Even water and electricity are honest about their delivery, as the pipe work is visible. “One can see what Hunstanton is made of, and how it works, and there is not another thing to see except the play of spaces” (Banham, 1955: 357). The design was influenced by IIT in Chicago, by Mies van der Rohe, which the Smithson’s saw in a magazine. They were drawn to the very rectilinear appearance of the steel columns and beams, and to the large expanses of infill that were left unadorned. Another quality of both the Hunstanton School and the Soho residence was that they both had formal, axial plans. The school almost had biaxial symmetry. Banham therefore considered adding ‘formal legibility of plan’ to the New Brutalist definition. However the design of the Smithson’s Golden Lane and Sheffield University, neither of which featured formal plans in this way, later led Banham to dismiss this addition. Even without the plans, the building is apprehensible and coherent, making it visually easy to read. There is “no mystery, no romanticism, no obscurities about function and circulation” (Banham, 1966: 45). This became a key element of New Brutalism. 

In his article Banham (1955: 357) noted that “only one other building conspicuously carries these qualities in the way that Hunstanton does, and that is Louis Kahn’s Yale Art Centre.” Like the school, the Yale Art Centre exhibited its materiality and structural method honestly. The exterior of the building features a monolithic brick façade along the side of the building, and the front is a curtain of steel and glazing. Internally the innovative roof construction of a precast structure of hollow concrete tetrahedrons is displayed openly, as are the concrete flooring panels. The decision to use unfinished materials came from Kahn’s ideas on honesty. In a student interview he stated: “I believe in frank architecture. A building is a struggle, not a miracle, and the architect should acknowledge this” (Kahn cited by Loud, 1990: 84). This restrained use of raw materials gives the interior a rich quality and creates a simple and dignified environment in which art can be displayed. The Yale Art Centre was accepted by some Brutalists, but not all. Looking at the building more critically, it doesn’t quite meet the standard that was set by the Hunstanton school. Like the school, the main elements of the building are positioned formally in plan, and there are almost two axes of symmetry through the building. However, the cluttered use of display screens in the internal spaces results in the spaces loosing their formal clarity, and the positioning of doors and openings do not respond to the axial plan, loosing the
symmetry within the building. Another difference between these two buildings lies in the level of detailing. The detailing of the Hunstanton School is quite under-designed when it comes to elements such as stairs and handrails, which are left simple and consistent. The Yale Art Centre on the other hand, has elements of creative detailing; such as the steel netting of the stair rail, which is not in keeping with the raw concrete surrounding it. Whether the Yale Art Gallery conformed to New Brutalism or not, one of the reasons for some Brutalists refusing to accept this American building, was the fact that at the time they wanted to keep New Brutalism as a very British idea.

As well as buildings, it was the activities of the Smithsons that characterized New Brutalism, the most significant of which was the exhibition titled ‘Parallel of Life and art.’ This was presented by the Smithsons, along with photographer Nigel Henderson, and the sculptor Edouardo Paolozzi, in 1953. The exhibition featured 122 images, many of which were collected from magazines, newspapers, textbooks and other scientific sources, which deliberately stood against conventional images featured in an art gallery. Many images depicted distorted scenes of violence or destruction, to introduce the idea of the anti-aesthetic. They challenged the idea of a ‘good photograph’ by reproducing photos overly enlarged on unglazed photographic paper in order to emphasize the distortion and obscurity of the image. Each piece was selected by the organizers because of its direct emotional impact upon them, which they hoped to convey to others. The aim of the Smithsons through this exhibition was to challenge the idea of beauty and to get the ugly or the ordinary accepted as art. Some work had coarse, grainy textures, which could be related to the raw concrete used in the Hunstanton School, and implied that the other qualities that the exhibition showed were also intended to be applied to the New Brutalist architecture. The visually brutal image of the ‘Parallel of life and art’ exhibition was seen as the first formation of the aesthetics of Brutalism. The Smithsons followed this exhibition with another titled ‘This is Tomorrow’ which featured the installation ‘Patio & Pavilion.’ This installation was a simple wooden shed, in which everyday items were placed, constituting them as art. Peter Smithson (2004: 16) described the installation as “a kind of symbolic habitat in which are found responses... to the basic human needs.” The intention was to create an aesthetic out of the post-war ‘as found’ attitude.

Following the Smithsons exhibitions, one of the main opinions amongst architectural critics saw New Brutalism as “part of a world-wide revolution of the young against the accepted conventions of Life and Art” (Banham, 1966: 62). The movement had therefore obtained a very visual and aesthetic image. However, the Smithsons and other architects had intended for the movement to be fundamentally based on ethics, as it arrived in a time of austerity after the war, where people had to make do and mend.
and communities had to help each other. Therefore, for Peter and Alison Smithson, another fundamental feature of New Brutalism, was its response to social conditions. “Brutalism was not just about honesty in the use and construction of ‘as found’ materials... but was based on a social program committed to creating economically, environmentally, and culturally relevant architecture” (Webster, 1997: 142). In the late 1950’s they were particularly inspired by Roger Mayne’s photography of the streets of London. Through photography, Mayne captured the social context as it was found. As a result, in New Brutalism the idea of taking and using things ‘as found’ was applied not just to material objects as seen in the ‘Patio & Pavilion’, but to situations and social context.

In 1952 the Smithsons had entered a competition to redevelop the blitzed corner of Golden Lane, London. There was a need for mass housing, for which the Smithsons proposed a solution that exemplified their concern to respond to social conditions. The Smithsons decided that tower blocks were too private, so instead designed a scheme that inspired people to coexist. When designing, Peter Smithson (2001: 86) wrote: “Our aim is to create a true street-in-the-air, each ‘street’ having a large number of people dependent on it for access, and in addition some streets are to be thoroughfares.” The streets-in-the-air consisted of decks on three levels that would become places of social activity. The decks were wide enough for people to stop and talk, without worrying about stopping the flow of people and were designed to be safe for small children to play on, bringing street activity ‘as found’ into the program of the building. In this way the residential building would be integrated into the city’s existing social and cultural life. “Instead of remaining an isolated fragment, the residential building and the East End’s busy local life were intertwined” (Smithsons and Dirk Van Den Heuvel, 2004: 16). It was also a response to the increasingly popular automobiles on the ground that informed the decision to elevate the pedestrian streets. This building was influenced by Le Corbusier’s 'Unité d’Habitation' in Marseille, where a central gallery was used to access dwellings. This ‘rue interieure’ was a dark corridor that lacked natural lighting, so the Smithsons looked to rectify this idea, by moving it to the exterior of the building and widening it, so that inhabitants would socialise on the outside. The consequence of the street deck concept in the design for Golden Lane was that the building became hard to understand from the outside. In order for the decks to work as a social connection throughout the estate, it needed to reach every part it. This was achieved by arranging the accommodation in one building that was bent and stretched to fit the site. Unlike the 'Unité d’Habitation’ in Marseilles or the Hunstanton school, the design for Golden Lane was visually hard to read, and less apprehensible, therefore lacking one of the key features of a New Brutalist Building.
The competition entry for Golden Lane was unsuccessful, but the Smithson's idea of 'streets-in-the-air' was later manifested in the construction of their Robin Hood Gardens housing estate. Despite the fact that three busy roads bound the site for the estate, the Smithsons were eager to prove their vision of progressive social housing. Their aim was to design the best possible environment for living, accepting the site as it was, with its many limitations, in the New Brutalist manner. The estate consisted of two long, horizontal blocks, that bend inwards slightly over a communal garden space between them, to which the block structures acted as barriers against the surrounding roads. The streets in the air were put into practice in the form of wide concrete balconies that faced towards the centre of the estate. Like the Golden Lane design, these decks were designed to form social neighbourhood streets. In plan, the layout of the internal spaces responded to the site as it was, by positioning bedrooms, kitchens and dining rooms so they face the inner garden side. This created a calm environment for these quieter spaces and meant that the living rooms, as nosier spaces, were located on the outer, nosier side of the building. This could be criticised, in that the living rooms may well be where some residents prefer to spend most of their day. The materiality of the building conforms to the features of New Brutalism. The structure consists of pre-cast concrete panels, left unadorned and undecorated, and even cabling and other utility features are fitted externally with brackets. Both of these elements however have been questioned by many critics. Whist large concrete facades in buildings such as the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille come alive with the shadows formed by Mediterranean sunshine, the grey skies of the UK do not allow the concrete to perform in the same way, and the open cabling along the top of the decks just looks unsightly. The Robin Hood Gardens were denied a listed status, as many of the other ideals that the Smithsons designed were not as successful as hoped. The decks were designed as throughways, so that people could be constantly flowing through, but these are flawed as they lead to nothing more than the stairs and lifts. The Smithsons wanted to bring street life up into the building, but the social elements of London's streets that the estate attracted were not as intended. There has been much crime and vandalism around the building due to the secluded streets. People lingering on the decks intimidates residents and the nature of the stairs, where everything around each corner is hidden, has lead to a rational fear of muggers. The Robin Hood Gardens therefore, although a building that conforms to the features of New Brutalism, is not as successful and practical as the Smithsons hoped. However, the Brutalist ideals of dwelling were past on, and later realised in dwellings such as Siedlung Halen in Switzerland, the Harumi Apartment block in Tokyo and Park Hill in Sheffield.
There were therefore several major ideas that characterised the movement of New Brutalism. Firstly, it was based on honesty. The idea that the building should be honest about it’s use of materiality and construction, informed the design of the Hunstanton School where surfaces were left unadorned, and detailing was under designed and simple. Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation’ in Marseille, used raw concrete that honestly exhibited it’s flaws and method of construction. The uncovered materials in New Brutalism also came from the post war attitude of taking things ‘as found.’ This applied not just to materials, but also to the site, as seen in the layout of the Robin Hood gardens, as the buildings respond to the positioning of the surrounding roads. The ‘as found’ attitude also applied to social context, shown through the Golden Lane estate’s response to creating socially and culturally relevant architecture. In the case of the Golden Lane estate or the Robin Hood gardens, New Brutalism responded to the need for more dwellings by aiming to create an environment for a better standard of living. Another characteristic of New Brutalism, that was more successful in some buildings than others, was that it should be apprehensible. In the case of the Soho house or the Hunstanton School, the formal legibility of plan was used to make the building easy to understand. The final ideal of New Brutalism is it’s memorability of image. As demonstrated through the anti-art of the ‘Parallel of Life and art’ exhibition that aimed to evoke an emotional response, New Brutalist architecture has a unique aesthetic of large, sometimes monumental, unadorned forms. “It is distinctive, arresting, exciting and, at the same time, like almost no other form of architecture before it, able to generate extreme emotions and heated debate” (Clement, 2011: 7). Although many of the characteristics of New Brutalism were fundamentally based on ethics, in his book ‘New Brutalism,’ Banahm (1966: 134) states that “for all its brave talk of ‘an ethic, not an aesthetic’, brutalism never quite broke out of the aesthetic frame of reference.” This may be true, that visually the unique anti-beauty image of brutalism continues to evoke emotional response that the hidden ethics of the movement do not. However, the New Brutalist ethic remains and continues to influence and enrich architecture to this day.
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