

TOWARDS A NEWER BRUTALISM

GSAPP Summer 2019
AAD Studio
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From the New Brutalism...

This studio revisits the “new brutalism,” working from the principles for architecture articulated by Alison and Peter Smithson and Reyner Banham in the early 1950s: a legible (or “imageable”) synthesis of spatial, structural and material organization; individual buildings conceived as urban theses; the ambition to directly express new technologies and social relations through architectural form. In Banham’s terms, the architecture of the new brutalism could be defined through: “1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of structure; 3. Valuation of materials for their inherent qualities “as found”; in the Smithsons’, setting out their working method at the outset of their career, “its essence is ethical,” it is an attempt “to face up to a mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work.” Students are asked to critically evaluate the efficacy of these principles today, considering parallels and differences between the postwar years and the present--both periods marked by the aftermath of global crisis, rapid transformation in technology, media and consumption, shifting horizons of political possibility, and the need to rethink the nature of urban inhabitation.

...to a Newer (New New) Brutalism

Today the ethic of the new brutalism appears widely held. A collective body of work that we might call a “newer brutalism” has emerged across the field in the past three decades--and this work is intensifying among those honing their techniques and interests in the post-recession, post-digital (post-any such designations) present. At a time of diffusion within the field and recurrent crisis outside, this latent project of a newer brutalism, at once rigorously disciplined in its expression and expansive in its concerns, suggests a foundation from which to advance architecture towards more collective, progressive and ambitious ends, reconciling aesthetic and political interests, material and urban strategies, and conceptual, representational and construction techniques. Echoing the moment of the new brutalism--a reverent extension of prewar modernism that simultaneously prefigured Team X, and the pop, high-tech and brutalist styles of the 1960s and 70s--today we are in a position in which it is possible to simultaneously work through appropriation and invention, irreverence and sobriety, virtuosic and rudimentary techniques, contextual specificity and global aspiration. Where the new brutalism sought to give form to the emerging welfare state and consumer society of the postwar period, the newer brutalism might express and challenge the transformed economies, social relations and environments of the new millenium.

No Diagrams, Just Buildings (That Are Diagrams)

Often standing in opposition to the diagrams and mannered representations that have consumed so much recent disciplinary energy, this newer brutalism suggests that built form itself is sufficient in its explanatory and expressive power. In Banham’s terms, the immediately apprehensible “image” of a building should convey a set of principles by which material and space are precisely, economically and evocatively distributed. Towards this end, the studio will explore varied modes of working through constraint and legibility: the generic and default; the found and ready-made; the serial and discrete; and, especially, the literal (which, as Mark Linder argues, the new brutalism epitomizes). These might be understood as techniques of a newer brutalism that reflect subsequent developments in the discipline, including the “conceptual” and “expanded field” art and architectural practices of the 1960s and 70s, new materials and construction methods, and the constant interaction between the analog and digital

that has conditioned architectural work since the 1990s. They are means of working between the varied media of the studio (physical and digital models, rendered images and orthographic drawings) and the building itself, and of achieving architectural form that is representative of its cultural context, transparent in its material assembly, and directly responsive to its programmatic needs and urban situation.

Everyday Living and Working and Living Working Everyday

The studio project is a prototypical urban infill building--an everyday building for the twenty-first century city. Rather than adhering to conventional programmatic categorizations, each project should challenge commonplace distinctions between residential (“domestic”) and commercial (“productive”), as well as “public” and “private,” spaces and programs. Projects should directly addressing our contemporary technological and social context, which confounds these categories in the form of precarious and flexible new forms of “work,” the commodification of “domestic” spaces and activities through sharing platforms, and diverse individual and collective living, working and live-working arrangements. The most novel and virulent urban typologies are hiding in plain site--AirBnB rentals, WeWork conversions, “poor doors,” empty luxury apartments--suggesting that alternatives to the “background” architecture of the city that so easily accommodates these often pernicious phenomena is necessary.

The Prototypical is Political

Each pair of students will work on a separate site arrayed between Tenth Avenue and the High Line in Chelsea, the combined work of the studio representing a counter-thesis to the current showcase of commercial development by high profile architects that has been produced there in the past fifteen years. While experiments in architectural typology and collective inhabitation are often relegated to outlying or *ex novo* neighborhoods, where land is more easily procured and political opposition less costly, here these experiments are positioned as a direct challenge to the ongoing development of an area that is currently laden with financial and cultural capital. It is perhaps those urban places that are most “desirable” that are in need of greatest reform if a truly equitable urban society is to emerge. In conceptualizing their projects, students should consider models of public and/or collective ownership, as well as the displacement, segregation, extended commutes and other damaging effects of the ongoing crisis in affordability and access to space (and longer histories of exclusion and exploitation) in New York and other cities. Conceived as an exercise in testing the political potential of new models of urban infill building--those building types that comprise the spatial and material frame within which urban life by and large unfolds--the studio asks students to define alternative structures that might proliferate in New York and elsewhere, offering new possibilities of living, working, and building in the twenty-first century.

New Brutalist Transcripts

The following is a dialogue constructed between texts that sketch a partial history of the “new brutalism” and suggest a series of concerns for clarity in the conception and form of architecture from which the studio might depart.

RB: Reyner Banham
ML: Mark Linder
AS: Alison Smithson
PS: Peter Smithson

AS & PS: *It was decided to have no finishes at all internally--the building [the house in Soho] being a combination of shelter and environment [...] 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 internal finishes wherever practicable. The Constructor should aim at a high standard of basic construction as in a small warehouse.”*¹

AS & PS: *With the completion of the Pavillon Suisse [sic, by Le Corbusier], modern architecture became academic. With the completion of the Unité [d’Habitation in Marseilles by Le Corbusier], life has returned. [...] Technique is seen once more as a tool: the machine as means. The dead hand of De Stijl can be lifted from our backs. [...] Discuss real architecture. [...] Establish real standards. [...] Architecture and urbanism are problems of significant organization. Utter complexity made lucid.*²

AS & PS: *Any discussion of Brutalism will miss the point if it does not take into account Brutalism’s attempt to be objective about “reality”--the cultural objectives of society, its urges, and so on. Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society [a late-capitalist/post-capitalist society?], and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work.*³

RB: [...] *one, like Cubism, is a label, a recognition tag, applied by critics and historians to a body of work which appears to have certain consistent principles running through it, whatever the relationship of the artists; the other, like Futurism, is a banner, a slogan, a policy consciously adopted by a group of artists, whatever the apparent similarity or dissimilarity of their products. And it is entirely characteristic of The New Brutalism*

[...] *that it should confound these categories and belong to both at once.*⁴

AS & PS: *Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.*⁵

RB: *what characterizes the New Brutalism in architecture [...] is precisely its brutality, its je-m’en-foutisme [I am crazy-ism], its bloody-mindedness.*⁶

PS: *The intention of the first period of modern architecture was that buildings should be machine like, and whether machine made or not, they should look machine [computer?] made. As a reaction to the period of, say, 1936 to 1946, when poetic machine work degenerated into superficial stylistic machine-work [...] one of the things which interests us now is that a genuine aesthetic of machine building technology should arise [...]. If a thing is really made of pre-cast elements, or concrete blocks, the building has to reflect the way it was built with pre-cast elements or concrete block, and inevitably the building will not only have a different scale from an architecture that is conceived of as a being a single object made by a machine, but it will be built at the scale of the genuine machine with which it was built.*⁷

ML: *The prototypical instance of a literalist architecture was New Brutalism, but not as formulated by Alison and Peter Smithson. The literalism of New Brutalism is most vivid and usable in Reyner Banham’s reformulation of its principles: Memorability as an Image (vs. formal legibility of plan) Obsessive emphasis on basic structure (vs. clear exhibition of structure) Ineloquence, and abstemious underdesign of details (vs. valuation of materials for their qualities “as found”)*⁸

RB: 1. *Formal legibility of plan Both [the Hunstanton School and the house in Soho, by the Smithsons] have formal, axial plans [...] and this formality is immediately legible [...] [...] it requires that the building should be an immediately apprehensible visual entity, and that the form grasped by the eye should be confirmed by their experience of the building in use. Further that this form should be entirely proper to the functions and materials of the building, in their entirety. [...] one thing of which the Smithsons have never been accused is a lack of logic or consistency in thinking about design [...] One of the reasons for this obtrusive logic is that it contributes to the apprehensibility and coherence of the building as a visual entity, because it contributes to the building as “an image.”*

¹ Alison and Peter Smithson, “House in Soho, London,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 11. Originally published in *Architectural Design* (December 1953): 342.

² Alison and Peter Smithson, “Some Notes on Architecture,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 13-14. Originally published in *244: Journal of the University of Manchester Architecture and Planning Society* 1 (Summer 1954): 4.

³ Alison and Peter Smithson, “The New Brutalism,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 37. Originally published in *Architectural Design* 27 (April 1957): 113.

⁴ Reyner Banham, “The New Brutalism,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 19-28. Originally published in *Architectural Review* (December 1955): 354-61.

⁵ Smithson, “The New Brutalism.”

⁶ Banham, “The New Brutalism.”

⁷ Alison and Peter Smithson, Jane B. Drew and E. Maxwell Fry, “Conversation on Brutalism,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 38-46. Originally published in *Zodiac* 5 (1959): 73-81.

⁸ Mark Linder, “Literal: There’s No Denying It,” *Log 5* (Spring/Summer 2005): 82-86.

[...] *the New Brutalists' interests in image are commonly regarded [...] as being anti-art, or at any rate anti-beauty in the classical aesthetic sense of the word [...] what moves a New Brutalist is the thing itself [...]*⁹

ML: *Literalism is conventional. [...] Literalism is representation without idealization: "this is this." Literalism is readymades and repetition. Literalism is specificity. Literalism is replicas.*¹⁰

RB: [...] *large blocks of topologically similar spaces stand about the site with the same graceless memorability as Martellos towers or pit-head gear. [...The Sheffield University competition, by the Smithsons] remains the most consistent and extreme point reached by any Brutalists in their search for Une Architecture Autre [...]. The definitions of a New Brutalist building [...] must be modified so as to exclude formality as a basic quality if it is to cover future developments and should more properly read: 1, Memorability as an Image;*

2. clear exhibition of structure

Both [Hunstanton and the house in Soho] exhibit their basic structure [...]

[...] *the Smithsons' work is characterized by an abstemious under-designing of the details, and much of the impact of the building comes from the ineloquence, but absolute consistency, of such components as the stairs and handrails.*

3. valuation of materials for their inherent qualities "as found"

[...] *Hunstanton] is almost unique among modern buildings in being made of what it appears to be made of. Whatever has been said about honest use of materials, most modern buildings appear to be made of whitewash or patent glazing, even when they are made of concrete and steel. Hunstanton appears to be made of glass, brick, steel, and concrete, and is in fact made of glass, brick, steel, and concrete. [...] 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.*¹¹

AS: [...] *reacting upon [...] buildings which were built as if they were not made of real material at all but some sort of processed material such as Kraft Cheese [but isn't Kraft Cheese just as real as concrete?]; we turned back to wood, and concrete, glass, and steel, all the materials which you can really get hold of [what can you get hold of now?].*¹²

PS: *Concrete blocks—laid and pointed like ashlar masonry. Reinforced concrete—off smooth shutters. Stainless steel—sheets, tubes, pressings, fixings. Timber—in framing and detailing, left natural finish. Common plywood and blockboard—left natural finish. Enamelled metals—vitreous, stoved, (and powder-polyester, 1970's–80's).*

*Polysulphide pointing—to absorb movement. Galvanised mild steel—sheets, tubes, pressings; left natural finish.*¹³

PS: *raw brick
raw block
raw steel
raw paint
raw marble
raw gold
raw lacquer*¹⁴

PS: *Brutalism is not concerned with the material as such but rather the quality of the material: what can it do? And by analogy: there is a way of handling gold in Brutalist manner and it does not mean rough and cheap, it means: what is its raw quality?*¹⁵

ML: *The prototypical statement of literalism is not Frank Stella's quip, "What you see is what you see." The prototypical statement of literalism is his explanation, "I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can."*¹⁶

PS: *A modern architect does not think of a theory and then build it; you assemble your buildings and your theories as you go along. [...] The business of materials "as found" does not imply a rejection of marble and plaster and stainless steel [...] you can get a direct effect out of the most simple material. You can say a lot with simple things, you give even a certain elegance. [...] we think the brick is the antithesis of machine building and yet for practical reasons we have never built in anything else. [...] When I was 19 I said I would never design or build anything in brick in all my life, and yet one is face to face in England in this northern climate and in the middle belt of Europe with the fact that brick does the job. You cannot argue with it, and therefore you know there is a certain sort of common sense in it. If common sense tells you that you have got to make some poetic thing with brick, you make it with brick.*¹⁷

AS: [...] *we started working on the field of town buildings because it was obvious that it was no longer possible to break the situation with a few buildings of the caliber of Garches [the Villa Stein by Le Corbusier], but one had to be thinking on a much bigger scale somehow than if you only got one house to do (and this would never be as big as Garches), but even if you only had a little house to do it somehow had to imply the whole system of town building by expressing it in itself (by its very smallness perhaps).*

⁹ Banham, "The New Brutalism."

¹⁰ Linder, "Literal."

¹¹ Banham, "The New Brutalism."

¹² Smithsons, Drew and Fry, "Conversation on Brutalism."

¹³ Peter Smithson, "'The Fifties.' The Materials Sacred to Brutalism" (dated 30 July 1986).

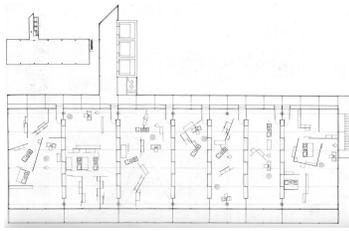
¹⁴ Alison and Peter Smithson, 1930s (Lauenförde/Berlin: TECTA Möbel/Alexander Verlag, 1985).

¹⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Smithson Time* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung/Walther König, 2004).

¹⁶ Linder, "Literal."

¹⁷ Smithsons, Drew and Fry, "Conversation on Brutalism."

**Towards a Provisional
Atlas of a Newer Brutalism**



Abelos & Herreros, Housing & City, 1988



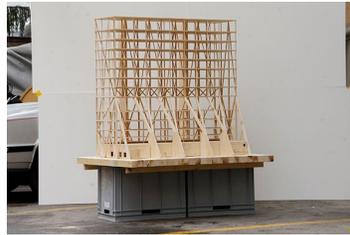
architecten de vylder vinck taillieu,
Les Ballets C dela B and LOD,
2005-08



Brandlhuber+, VRM Rocha, 2011-15



Bruther, Cultural and Sports Center,
2014



Christian Kerez, EWZ Herdern, 2016



Dogma, Communal Villa, 2015



Elemental, Quinta Monroy. 2003



Ensamble Studio, Cyclopean House,
2015



formlessfinder, Load Test, 2010



Herzog & de Meuron, Koechlin
House, 1993-94



Gabinete de Arquitectura, FADA,
2018



Junya Ishigami, Kanagawa Institute
of Technology Workshop, 2008



Lacatan & Vassal, Maison Latapie, 1993



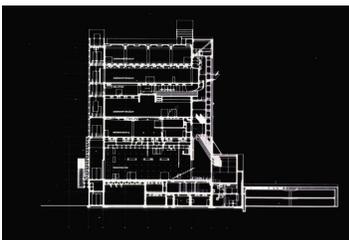
MVRDV, Celosia Housing, 2009



NLÉ, Makoko Floating School IIIx3, 2018



Office KGDVS, Villa, 2007-09



OMA, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, 1989



Office for Political Innovation, House in Never Never Land, 2007-09



Present Future, New Corktown, 2016



SANAA, Gifu Kitagata Apartment Building, 1994-2000



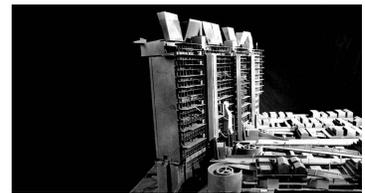
Shiguru Ban, Curtain Wall House, 1995



Sou Fujimoto, Itabu Toilet, 2012



T+E+A+M, Clastic Order, 2017



Wes Jones, California Unité, 1983



WORKac, Arizona House, 2016