Brutalist Interior Urbanism: Visions, Paradigms, Design Strategies

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In the 1950s, younger generations of British architects developed a new approach to architectural and urban design, as a strong reaction to what has been perceived as the failures of Functionalism. “In the early and late 1940s,” Peter Smithson affirmed in 1959:

> We were in a situation in England in which many things got built which you felt were a lie, and a lot of ideas have been carried on in architecture well into the 1950s, when building programs became strictly a formula.[1]

These actions responded to the design clichés of the International Style “kit of parts” and the impoverished dogma of “form follows function.” This response, as pointed out in the article “Ornamented Modern & Brutalism: Towards two movements?” in Zodiac magazine, was among “one of the many ways to react against the idealism of contemporary culture: a search for reality that corre- sponds to an irrepressible need for truth.”[2]

This approach was contextualized in a theoretical framework by Reyner Banham in his seminal 1955 essay, “The New Brutalism.”[3] The British historian uses the Hunstanton School in Norfolk (“the first true Brutalist building”[4]), designed by Alison and Peter Smithson, to define this new architectural movement: clear legibility of plan, emphasis on honest exhibition of structure, technical elements, and services (such as water pipes, electrical components, and conduits), and an uncompromising expression of materials to show their character and quality “as found.”

Furthermore, the school plan (whose clarity is derived by Miesian[5] and Palladian—via Wittkower—influences[6]) demonstrates Palladio’s and Alberti’s idea of the “house as a small city.” It is organized around a large multi-purpose, double-height hall defined by a peristyle, and flanked by two light-courts. It resembles an urban block with courtyards and a covered piazza surrounded by porticoes. A “vertical volume rising from a small service court- yard, (…) reminiscent of a clock tower” which “is in fact a raised water tank towering over the roofs of the building”[7] adds another element that gives the overall composition an urban and civic aura. Somehow, the Hunstanton court- yard is a square, the hallways are streets, the classrooms are dwellings—this “house (for learning)” is a city in miniature (Image 42.1).

Construction and Scale: Toward a Brutalist Topological Interior

While the Hunstanton School is still strictly related to the Renaissance principles codified by Wittkower, the way it is represented through photographs (by Nigel Henderson, a friend and collaborator of the Smithsons) in a prominent 1954 Architectural Review article defines a shift as the building relates to Brutalism. Here, as Anthony Vidler observed, the “seven views taken as if on a walk around the building, had already transformed this otherwise symmetrical object into a quasi-picturesque experience.”[8] Even more relevant are the other 15 photographs of the interiors. This set of images, arranged on the pages as a collage-like composition, represents a journey inside the building in which the axiality of the spaces disappears, almost replicating the spatial experience, as well as the dynamic movements of the eye and the body within the space. As Michael Pearson argues, in his analysis of the characteristics of Brutalism:

As one moves about in an environment, one receives a visual image of the experience, perhaps mentally appreciating topological, rather than metric properties—in the same way that a child considers qualities of closure, proximity, separation, and continuity before straight lines, angles, parallels, and regular forms.[9]

The concept of topology is another key aspect of those Brutalist buildings that abandon the symmetry and predominance of Euclidean geometry of buildings like the Hunstanton School or Kahn's Yale Art Center. In Brutalist architecture, the "master discipline" of Platonic geometry is subordinate to the dominant role of topology and its qualities of "penetration, circulation, inside and out."[10] Architectural composition is now interested in a "ruthless honesty in expressing the functional spaces and their inter-relationships," while spatial arrangements are "based on the topography of the site and the topology of internal circulation."[11]

These connections between building and urbanism (the Palladio/ Alberti "house as a small city" and the topological/experiential design strategies, even from the interior) become opportunities to move to more monumental and complex architectures. This change of scale, in my opinion, is a clear declaration of poetics in Brutalist architectural discourse based on two fundamental aspects. The first relates to the ways in which this architecture is built, in a conceptual way and in the built realm. The second aspect is linked to an idea of urban monumentality, not only in typological/morphological terms, but particularly in topological, sociological, and anthropological terms.

Regarding the first aspect, Peter Smithson is very transparent when he compares the Modern Movement's fascination with machine aesthetics to the genuine "brutal approach" that arises in building construction. "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 blocks." He continues:

> Inevitably the building will not only have a different scale from an architecture that is conceived as 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.[12]

We can read here the need for truth that is one of the main characteristics of Brutalism, linked to the honesty of expression in building technologies and the use of raw materials: steel and bricks, but mainly concrete.

Concrete means Le Corbusier, and the use of *béton brut* ("raw concrete") in his late 1940s buildings, in particular the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, which became the main reference in the development of the Brutalist language. First, the Unité reflects the idea of the building as a "machine for living in" but also as big as the machine that built it. Made of béton brut, it has the scale of a cement factory, monumental as the temples of Magna Grecia and Michelangelo's Basilica of St. Peter in Rome: "the concrete work at Marseille started as a magnificent ruin even before the building was completed."[13] The Unité is, quoting Vincent Scully, a "muscular giant, a temple, an aircraft carrier, (…) a medieval city, a dirigible's hangar,"[14] that represents the different scale of Brutalist architecture. Finally, the Unité represents the collective character of a "building as city" that conveys urban themes and design strategies in its com- position, spatial arrangements, and interiors, at a monumental scale.

As previously mentioned, the Brutalist movement arose as a reaction to the cultural context that architecture existed within during the late 1940s. The CIAM after World War II, thanks to the British delegation, showed the urge to move mainly toward collective and sociological aspects. This need was fully expressed in the 1951 CIAM, where the British MARS group presented a grid that reflected

an urban approach and ascending scale of community: “village,” “neighborhood,” “city sector,” “city,” and “metropolis.”

Following this path, the Smithsons, for CIAM 9 (1953), prepared the so-called “Urban Re-Identification” grid that expressed the need for new architectural forms, in particular for the house,

> Which is capable of being put together with others (…) so as to form bigger and equally comprehensible elements which can be added to existing villages and towns in such a way as to revitalize the traditional hierarchies and not destroy them.[15]

These concepts and the CIAM 9 grid intended to codify a hierarchy of collective urban artifacts that represented “a connection between physical elements of the city and human behavior”[16] as expressed by a series of photographs by Henderson, included by the Smithsons in the visual representation of the grid, depicting children playing in the streets.

This is how we can interpret Brutalism: a civic and humanistic architecture where the overlapping of the needs of the domestic environment with urban collective character (so that the building and its interiors are designed according to “the topography of the site and the topology of internal circulation”)[17] is realized with the honest use of materiality, structures, technologies, and through a change of scale—a topological and urban approach, even (or most of all) in their interiors.

Houses and/as Cities: Brutalist Urban Interiors

This interaction between architecture and urban planning strategies, clearly declared in the CIAM 9 documents, is evident in the most iconic Brutalist projects of the 1950s and 1960s. With their progressive increase in the scale of intervention, and an aim to “resolve polarities, individual-collective, permanence-change, physical-spiritual, inside-outside, part-whole, which we no longer believe to exist,”[18] we can decipher them clearly through the lens of interior urbanism.

For the Smithson’s projects for Golden Lane Housing competition entry of 1952, for Sheffield University (1953), and for the late 1960s Robin Hood Gardens Complex, the circulation system defines the overall composition, based on a topology-predominant approach, where “streets in the sky,” gangways, bridges, and decks are urban components that belong to the architectural experience of the building, blurring the boundaries between public and private, domestic and urban (Image 42.2).

This idea of the building as a microcosm that replicates topological connections is the essence of an urban experience, recognizable in many Brutalist projects. It is particularly evident in a series of projects where building and city are blurred into one another through a dramatic change of scale. Again, the Smithsons are a point of reference: their project for the competition for Haupstadt Berlin (1957–1958) employs a multilevel platform made of nets of pedestrian paths and connections overlapped onto the existing street grid. Here, the new and the old cities connect emphasizing the complexity of these urban interiors—as multistory, open-air courtyards overlooking the streets below. These ideas were realized in London throughout the 1960s in projects that attempted to build the Brutalist city, such as the South Bank area or the Barbican Center. Both projects are fragment examples of a sublime “multi-layered metropolis, with its labyrinthine spaces, underworld and dark surfaces.”[19]

The premise set by the 1950s projects also inspired the megastructural “conflation of city and building as infrastructural, spatial, and functional armature,”[20] which Banham himself looked at with

interest.[21] The 1963 competition entry for the Frankfurt Römemberg district, designed by Candilis, Josic, and Woods, is a multi-layered, thick, inhabited platform where monumental courtyards connect the existing urban fabric with the new building. A similar approach is recognizable in their project for the Free University in Berlin (1962–1964) (Image 42.3).

The building is conceived as an ideal city organized as a large-scale, horizontal, and high-density grid structure. Its connections recreate—within the interior—the arrangement and urban experience of streets, enclosed public spaces, and open courtyards, envisioning what the contemporary city is, as Italian architect Andrea Branzi describes it: the city as a continuous interior, where streets, squares, and public spaces are part of an interconnected system of urban spaces.[22]

But for me, the most iconic paradigm to express the concept of interior urbanism in relation to Brutalism is the project for the Venice Hospital, designed by Le Corbusier between 1964 and 1965.[23] As reported by Italian art historian Giuseppe Mazzariol, Le Corbusier was invited to Venice in 1963 to discuss the project for a new hospital for the city and, during the meeting, he said that the only condition to build in Venice was if he was able to find the correct scale for the intervention. Again, the theme of scale is essential. For Le Corbusier, scale refers not to the architectural scale of the building, but to the urban scale of the "building as city." The compositional strategy is very similar to the examples previously mentioned, the so-called "mat-buildings" designed by the members of Team X. It also closely aligns with the project for the hospital presented by a group of Italian architects in the 1963 competition organized before inviting Le Corbusier.[24]

The Swiss master developed his project as a huge platform on stilts—a clear reference to the way that the city is built—and as an extension on the water of the San Giobbe area, the western part of Venice which faces the mainland. The platform is organized in a series of pinwheel modules, with a central open space and four hallways on which the rooms and services open. Mazzariol explains this composition in a clear, succinct way:

> Le Corbusier was asked why, looking at the plans of the buildings, they were interchangeable with many parts of the urban fabric. He responded that what he did was to simply seamlessly transfer in the interior of the Hospital the interweaving of arteries and veins of the whole urban organism, and this would have brought solutions appropriate to Venice.[25]

In fact, the pinwheel configuration is a modern transfiguration of the historical Venetian urban fabric, made of *calli*, narrow pedestrian streets, connected to *campielli* and *campi*, small and large squares. This emphasis on the circulation system is, on the one hand, a correct interpretation of the character of the city. On the other hand, it is strongly related to the Brutalist interest in using the topological approach in architectural and urban composition. Although the dimension of the building is monumental, indeed a megastructure, the design takes careful consideration of the human scale and the architectural characteristics—compression-release, open-close, light-shadow—typical of the urban experience in Venice (Image 42.4).

As emphasized by Mahnaz Shah, Le Corbusier "tried to create an urban environment for the common man," replicating how "the Venetian building adapted to its immediate urban structure—with the presence of semi-public, semi-private spaces that are typically Venetian, i.e. the courtyards and small gardens."[26] Completely built with reinforced concrete, the building is an introverted structure that re-invented Venice. This civic building, unfortunately unbuilt, was designed to be a "machine for healing," to serve the community, and would have represented another phase in the history of Venice. After the "city of wood," depicted by the bird's-eye view drawn by Jacopo de' Barbari in 1500, and the "city of stone," built by Sansovino and Palladio, the hospital would have transformed Venice into the "city of concrete," and thus, a perfect example of Brutalist interior urbanism.

Notes

1 Peter Smithson, Alison Smithson, Jane B. Drew, E. Maxwell Fry, “Conversation on Brutalism,”

Zodiac, no. 4 (1959): 76.

2 Ibidem, 68. Translation from Italian by the author.

3 Reyner Banham, “The New Brutalism,” *The Architectural Review*, December (1955).

4 Reyner Banham, “Brutalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Modern Architecture*, ed. Wolfgang Pehnt (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1964), 62.

5 Philip Johnson, “Review: Comment on School of Hunstanton, Norfolk,” *The Architectural Review*, September (1954).

6 “However, the symmetry of the plan and of the elevation pattern, should not be seen as major architectural objectives of the design, however full of the architects’ minds may have been of Wittkowerian or Palladian ideas.” Rayner Banham*, The New Brutalism* (London: Architectural Press, 1966), 19.

7 Christopher Grafe, “Finite Orders and the Art of Everyday Inhabitation,” in *Alison & Peter Smithson: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Max Risselada (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2011).

8 Anthony Vidler, “Another Brick in the Wall,” *OCTOBER. New Brutalism*, no. 136 (2011): 122. 9

10 Banham, “The New Brutalism,” 361.

11 Banham, “Brutalism,” 62.

12 Zodiac, 73. The emphasis is in the original article.

13 Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 16.

14 Vincent Scully, “Le Corbusier 1922–1965,” in *Vincent Scully: Modern Architecture and Other Essays*, ed. Neil Levine (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 246.

15 Zodiac, 44.

16 Simon Henley, *Redefining Brutalism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: RIBA Publishing, 2017), 127.

17 Banham, “Brutalism,” 62.

18 Alison and Peter Smithson, “Draft Framework 1956,” in *Team 10 in search of a Utopia of the Present*, ed. Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel (Rotterdam: NAI, 2005), 49.

19 Henley, *Redefining Brutalism*, 138.

20 Henley, 138.

21 Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (London: Thames and Hud- son, 1976).

22 Andrea Branzi, “Interni.” Accessed October 18, 2020. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/interni_%28XXI-Secolo%29/

23 A comprehensive investigation on this project is in Mahnaz Shah, *Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital Project: An Investigation into its Structural Formulation* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013).

24 The group was formed by Romano Chirivi, Costantino Dardi, Emilio Mattioni, Valeriano Pastor, and Luciano Semerani. See Francesco Tentori, *Imparare da Venezia. Il Ruolo Futuribile di Alcuni Progetti Architettonici Veneziani dei Primi anni '60* (Roma: Officina, 1994).

25 Giuseppe Mazzariol, "Tre progetti per Venezia rifiutati: Wright, Le Corbusier, Kahn," in *Le Venezie possibili: da Palladio a Le Corbusier*, ed. Lionello Puppi and Giandomenico Romanelli (Milano: Electa, 1985), 271.

26 Shah, *Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital Project*, 149.