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The New Brutalism: Ethic vs. Marxism? Ideological Collisions in Post-War English Architecture

New Brutalism, British post-war architecture, Reyner Banham, Alison and Peter Smithson, London County Council

/Abstract

At the end of the Second World War, an intense ideological confrontation took place in British architectural circles. The debate was influenced by a politicized generational divide, pitting the legacy of Howard's Garden City model, supported by those who called themselves 'Marxists', against Le Corbusier's *Unité* at Marseille, defended by a younger generation of architects who took a 'non-Marxist' position. Following these two different models, the principles of reconstruction established around the 'low rise' and 'high rise' dichotomy. The various political tendencies were translated into stylistic rules that addressed types, city configuration, and even materials, according to a rich constellation of new labels: the New Humanism derived from Soviet Socialist Realism, the William Morris Revival and People's Detailing, the New Picturesque advocated as a democratic model by Nikolaus Pevsner, and the New Empiricism reworked by Eric de Maré on the Cooperative Housing Schemes of the Swedish welfare state.

It is in this context that the New Brutalism originated. The term disguised subversive attributes with respect to the relationship of urban and architectural models with political demands. The rigid ideological instance that configured a conventional model for the reconstruction was purged in the New Brutalism through the introduction of a category meant to supplant Marxist ideology. Ethics, translated into the truth to materials and structure, as well as into the concept of 'as found', paved its way through an argument rooted in the architectural discourse.

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Comparing Ideologies: The Unité d'Habitation and the Garden City

The entire English post-war architectural discourse could not be fully understood if separated from the intense ideological debates that led to a new 'battle of styles', after the one that during the 18th and 19th century opposed the supporters of Gothic Revival to those of Neoclassicism. In Great Britain, in fact, the Welfare State, architectural critics and urban planners participated in the re-shaping of both national identity and the territory, in an interlacement that set one of the main characteristics of 20th-century British architecture.

In the 1940s, British architectural culture, suffering from thirty years of exclusion from international dynamics, began searching for alternatives to the reduction of the Modern Movement to the aesthetic values of the International Style.[1] With the Labour Party's electoral victory in 1945, and subsequent legislative deliberations such as the 1946 New Towns Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, the socialistic concepts of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City regained relevance in the form of principles for reconstruction.

The regeneration of British culture and the reconstruction of its heritage after the devastation of the war seemed possible only through the outline of a critical discourse representative of a social-democratic national identity[2]. The ambition to find a shared style for reconstruction led to a search for principles which could be considered national, in accordance with the statement 'England after the war must be England'[3]. With the aim of pursuing a British way within the Modern Movement, values belonging to concepts such as 'Englishness', 'craft' and 'Humanism' were rediscovered.[4]

It is on these topics that critics waged an increasingly bitter ideological battle, in an attempt to converge the debates into a succession of styles proposed in the form of guidelines. This second 'battle of styles' of the 1950s, driven by ideology, was necessary for Britain to configure its own metamorphosis of the Modern Movement, theorized in antithesis to the International Style.

Critics' research converged in the formulation of several stylistic lemmas that brought to the resurrection of 18th- and 19th-century principles, from the

1 Several are the essays and analyses about the impact of political and ideological debates on architecture criticism in post-war Britain. For the discussions related to the London County Council and reconstruction, see: Nicholas Merhyr Day, *The Role of the Architect in Post-War Housing: A Case Study of the Housing Work of the London County Council 1939-1956*, PhD Thesis (Warwick, University of Warwick, 1988); Nicholas Bullock, "La politica del London County Council 1945-1951", *Rassegna* 54, no. 2 (June 1993): 50–57; Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain. History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997); Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-War World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2002); Andrew Higgott, *Mediating Modernism: Architectural Cultures in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2006); Elizabeth Darling, *Re-Forming Britain : Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Alan Powers, *Britain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); Anthony Vidler, "Another Brick in the Wall", October 136, (Spring 2011): 105-132; Stephen V. Ward, "Soviet Communism and the British Planning Movement: Rational Learning or Utopian Imagining?", *Planning Perspectives* 27, no. 4, (October 2012): 499-524; Erden Erten, *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating the Modern Townscape* (London: Routledge, 2015).

2 Andrew Boyd, "A Review of the Symposium - The Kind of Architecture We Want in Britain", *Keystone* (May 1949): 96. In the conclusion Boyd states: 'we shall get a great architecture in England only when the working class is dominant, when the state and society are moulded by the great ideas of socialism, and when architecture is inspired by the conscious aim to celebrate and inspire the achievements of the people.'

3 "Rebuilding Britain", *Architectural Review* 93, no. 556 (April 1943): 86.

4 John Gloag, *The English Tradition of Design*, (London: King Penguin: 1947): 15.

Picturesque[5] to the theories of Augustus Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris.[6] These 'pioneers' were selected for their ability to translate a democratic and socialist vision into architectural principles.[7] In addition to Nikolaus Pevsner's stance on a style derived from Ruskinian ethical principles, other critical interventions on *Architectural Review* aimed at steering the debate toward the impact of modern architecture on the 'common man', through an 'appeal to public taste'.[8] The specific British reconstruction agenda emerged also in the CIAMs through the contributions of James Maude Richards, who at the time was the editor of *Architecture Review*. This debate progressed via the search for a new 'humanism', understood both as an aspiration to a more human, or 'humanized' architecture, and as a reference to the classical principles of architecture. This justified the resurgent interest in Geoffrey Scott's book *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste*,[9] as well the popularity of Rudolph Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism of 1949*.[10]

In the hope of strengthening public consensus in favour of the new housing policies supported by the post-war government, and with the aim of solidifying relations with Labour Party politicians, British critics promoted an approach aligned with the government's reconstruction agenda. The intention was to perpetuate the relationship between art, politics and architecture, as advocated by Pevsner through radio broadcasts such as 'Art for Everyone: Art and the State.'[11] The search for a new national architecture with humanistic overtones and the capacity to meet reconstruction needs also involved consideration of foreign examples as prototypes adaptable to the British context.

The political affinity between the Labour Party and the Scandinavian welfare state made the choice of the Swedish architectural model the logical expression of an architecture for a socialist democracy. This reference was also supported by a popular publication by Bertil Hulten,[12] in which Sir Patrick Abercrombie, author of the 1943 County of London Plan, indicated in the legislation of the Swedish welfare state a model for Britain, 'where class or income differences are minimalised in architectural expression.'[13]

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5 Nikolaus Pevsner, "A Short Pugin Florilegium", *Architectural Review* 94, no. 560 (August 1943): 31–34; "A Village Planned to Be Picturesque", and "Price on Picturesque Planning", *Architectural Review* 95, no. 566 (February 1944): 39–50; Nikolaus Pevsner, "The Genesis of the Picturesque", *Architectural Review* 96 (November 1944): 139–46.

6 Maxwell Fry, "The Future of Architecture", *Architects' Year Book* 1, no. 1 (1945): 7–10.

7 "Rebuilding Britain".

8 Howard P. Robertson, *Architecture Arising*, 1 ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), 82. The discussions raised by the considerations about the 'common man' were then summarized by labels such as Peoples' Detailing and Townscape.

9 Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914).

10 Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, vol. 19, Studies of the Warburg Institute (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1949).

11 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Art for Everyone: Art and the State* (London: BBC Radio, 16 June 1946).

12 Bertil Hulten, *Building Modern Sweden* (London: Penguin, 1951). During the war, also George Everard Kidder Smith raised the interest of British architects in Sweden with his *Stockholm Builds* (1941). In September 1943 *Architectural Review* dedicated an entire issue to Sweden, edited by the photographer Eric de Maré and entitled "Swedish Peace in War". It showed the possibility of combining traditional materials and a progressive trend capable of overcoming pure Functionalism, through a vernacular and psychological dimension envisaged for the 'humanization' of architecture.

13 Patrick Abercrombie, "Introduction" in Hulten, *Building Modern Sweden*, 3.

The term 'New Humanism', theorized around 1944,[14] was a British response to Alvar Aalto's take against Functionalism[15], and included a wide range of examples of Swedish architecture, founding the basis for what Eric de Maré would assemble in 1947 under the term 'New Empiricism'.[16] However, the 'New Humanism' was not limited to reconsidering Scandinavian inputs. It also converged interests in post-revolution Russian architecture, which since the mid-1930s was dubbed Socialist Realism. The question of Socialist Realism is decisive for the understanding of the ideological substratum that animated the definition of Humanism in the British context. Humanism was hence understood as an alliance between architecture and politics, in the wake of the Russian example: 'Realism demands of the artist constant active participation in the daily activities and the emotions of the people whom he serves … it also implies fundamentally that art is a part of the socialist dynamic.'[17]

Interest in Socialist Realism grew out of seeing architecture as a reflection of political thought, and thus as a means to mend the fracture between art, architecture and politics. The architecture of the Soviet Union was analysed as an experiment of urban and social reconstruction, and thus one that could support the moral assumption that communal and 'human' considerations should be reflected in reconstruction programmes.

Hence 'New Humanism' outlined a synthesis oriented on a Russian-Swedish axis. Its centre was mainly ideological, supported by a political imperative turned into an architectural language capable of overcoming pure functionalism and 'provid[ing] the men in the street with something more genuine'. Therefore, in light of the positions taken by critics in the immediate post-war period, architecture became a political instrument and a vehicle for those civil values that an entire society could share.

The ideological battles of the early 1950s represented a key moment of openness that engendered the proposals of new movements, based on the questioning of International Style principles and the search for an English essence within the Modern Movement. This very same agenda defined the conceptual ground of what can be defined as an aspiration towards a new movement: the New Brutalism. This definition summed up a critical stake that purged the English theoretical tradition of ideological principles, in favour of an essentially ethical position.

The clash of the ideological implications of Socialist Realism with the

14 Herbert Read, "A New Humanism", *Architectural Review* 78 (October 1935): 47–48; "The New Humanism", *Architects' Journal* 96, no. 575 (November 1944): 375–76.

15 Alvar Aalto, "The Humanizing of Architecture", *Architectural Forum* 73 (December 1940): 505–6. In this contribution Aalto articulated the crisis of Functionalism and the consequent search for an architecture responding to human's psychological needs, supporting the possibility of a regionalist interpretation of the Modern Movement. Architectures by Aalto himself, as well as by Gunnar Asplund and Sven Markelius were the core examples that later converged in the definition of New Humanism.

16 Eric de Maré, "The New Empiricism: Sweden Last Style", *Architectural Review* 102, no. 606 (June 1947): 199–204; Eric de Maré, "The Antecedents and Origins of Sweden's Last Style", *Architectural Review* 103, no. 623 (January 1948): 8–22. For a more recent revision of these two definitions, see Joan Ockman, "New Empiricism and New Humanism", DBR 41/42 (winter/spring 2000): 18-21.

17 "Architecture in the USSR", *RIBA Journal* 48 (June 1941): 155–58.

search for a theoretical take defended through the New Humanism or the New Empiricism makes it possible to understand the crucial scope of the New Brutalism. Its origin was in fact at the crossroads of British debates culminating in the definition of new styles, the theoretical urban implications generated by the *Unité d'Habitation* building site in Marseille, and the political positions that dictated the principles of reconstruction.

A whole generation of young architects and critics were opposed to the nostalgic deviation advocated by institutional intellectual circles, such as the editorial staff of *Architectural Review*, and supported an architecture that would become the most eloquent symbol of their rebellion: the *Unité* of Marseille, which in England, and beyond, steered the debate in a completely unexpected way. The *Unité*, which was diametrically opposed to the English New Towns model of Howardian derivation, imposed an ideological dichotomy between 'low-rise' and 'high-rise', between British and international cultures, and between two divergent political visions. Le Corbusier's work sanctioned a specific position in the English architectural debate and became the pretext for an ideological front on which the *Unité* urban model became part of the apologetic rhetoric of the architects who opposed the return of the picturesque, the advent of the Scandinavian model through the New Empiricism and the Soviet reference of the New Humanism.

Subsequently, a strong ideological subdivision developed within the Housing Division of the London County Council, marked by two opposing factions reflecting different generational visions and divergent political and design orientations. The supporters of the Lecorbuserian model, nicknamed 'hards', were politically unaligned and commonly defined as 'non-Marxist';[18] they included architects Alison and Peter Smithson, Colin St. John Wilson, James Stirling, Alan Colquhoun, Peter Carter and the so-called 'AA trio' of Bill Howell, John Killick and Gillian Sarsen. On the other side stood the *Unité*'s detractors, nicknamed 'softs' because they advocated a concept of modernity promoted through a Marxist ideological framework and a 19th-century urban model linked to the brick building tradition and 'low-rise' development; various trends conflated within the 'softs', starting with the Garden City model, to the principles of the New Humanism, New Empiricism, and William Morris Revival, all of which resulted into the prototypes in line with the spirit of the New Towns designed by Cleeve Barr, Rosemary Stjerstedt, Oliver Cox, and Philip Powell.

In the early 1950s, the 'softs' began to criticize the 'hards' by calling their vision of reconstruction 'New Brutalism', a name used within the London County Council to denigrate what was emerging as a new urban model and embodied in the example of *Unité*. The path to the definition of New Brutalism is complex and unexpectedly concerns the cultural trajectory that leads to Scandinavia, always seen by the British in an anti-Lecorbuserian way. All the clues converge to hypothesize that in 1950 the term New Brutalism was already in use according

18 Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Review* 118, no. 708 (December 1955): 354–61.

to a particular connotation that found its origin in Sweden.[19]

It is no coincidence that in the summer of 1950 three London County Council members, Oliver Cox, Graeme Shankland and Michael Ventris, who were proponents of the Marxist wing of the New Empiricism and supporters of the Swedish-English cultural connection, visited Hans Asplund, son of the better-known Gunnar Asplund. Several hypotheses support Hans Asplund as author of the definition of what he called 'Neo Brutalism'. Asplund coined the term in January 1950 as a 'sarcastic' reference to the design of Uppsala Villa Göth, the first building ever constructed by Swedish architects Bengt Edman and Lennart Holm, with whom Asplund shared an office space.[20] Under the banner of Neo Brutalism, Asplund intended to criticize the theoretical vision that Edman and Holm imprinted on materials, selected for their characteristic strictly 'simple and pure', and to be used in a 'direct' way.[21] The Villa Göth represented a particular stance on contemporary Swedish architecture, as evidenced by Holm's frequent critical contributions. In 1948 he harshly criticized the contemporary drift of Swedish architecture, to the point of ridiculing New Empiricism as defined by De Maré. The New Empiricism was for Holm the result of 'hallucinations', 'funny episodes' and 'silly generalizations', and evidence of a betrayal of functionalist doctrine owing to a 'sentimental romantic' approach.[22] What emerged, then, through Asplund's sarcastic term, was a contrast between the values of Neo Brutalism and those of New Empiricism.

The export of the term Neo Brutalism from the Swedish context entailed an all-English meaning of New Brutalism, which did not specifically concern the honesty of materials. New Brutalism became a tag charged with the criticism levied by 'softs' against younger generations, whom they considered politically less committed.[23] The origins of the definition of New Brutalism were hence coloured by a passionate discussion about future urban visions, in an open collision between the sentimentality of New Empiricism and the heroic dimension of the *Ville Radieuse*. The terms of the debate conducted within the London County Council demonstrated an active cultural process aimed at a political interpretation of the *Unité*. The report of a 1951 symposium on the latter, organized by London County Council members, stated that 'This building and the ideas

19 The origins of the Swedish definition of New Brutalism are confirmed by a 1956 letter from Hans Asplund to De Maré published in Eric de Maré, "Et tu, Brute?", *Architectural Review* 120, no. 8 (August 1956): 72. However, Banham's assumption is not actually confirmed in the review 'Byggmasteren', in which the definition New Brutalism is not present. In a 7 March 1955 typewritten document, the Smithsons confirmed the existence of a term similar to New Brutalism in use in the Scandinavian countries. The document is in Alison and Peter Smithson Special Collection, Loeb Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA, folder E009, and then published in "En Ny Engelsk Skola", *Byggmästaren* 34, no. A6 (5 June 1955): 159–62. This hypothesis is also confirmed by Banham himself in both his 1955 and 1966 contributions, in Banham, "The New Brutalism" and in Reyner Banham, "The polemic before Krushev" in, *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966), 11-15. Contemporary historiography also confirms this thesis, starting with Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1980).

20 de Maré, "Et tu, Brute?".

21 A description of the villa is published in "Villa i Uppsala", *Byggmästaren*, no. A12 (December 1952): 256-58. To understand Edman and Holm's vision of materials, see: Bengt Edman and Lennart Holm, "Tegelspråk", Tegel *40*, no. 2 (1950): 46-50.

22 Lennart Holm, "Ideologi Och Form", *Byggmästaren* 27, no. 15 (1948): 264-72.

23 Otto Saumarez Smith, "Graeme Shankland: A Sixties Architect-Planner and the Political Culture of the British Left", *Architectural History* 57 (2014): 393–422.

behind it have probably engendered more heat "for and against" than any other building since the war'.[24]

At the time when the Housing Division of the London County Council was engaged in the design of new residential typologies, the ideological opposition between the Lecorbuserian 'vertical city' model and the 'low-rise' reconstruction of the New Towns resulted in a political clash. The ideologically charged Unité model took on the connotations of a 'symbol of L.C.C. dispute', as John Robert Fourneaux Jordan recalled in April 1952: 'a symbol of a controversy that is splitting the housing and planning division of the London County Council to the point of bloodshed.'[25]

The *Unité* of Marseille was interpreted according to the parameters of the political criticism directed against Le Corbusier. It became an expression of values contrary to the social-democratic model of reconstruction brought back to Howardian theories or Scandinavian examples. The ideological connotations assigned by the 'softs' to the Unité urban model are evident in the considerations of the most conservative members of the London County Council, such as Cleeve Barr, Oliver Cox and Robin Rockel. In pointing out the negative characteristics of the *Unité*, which they described as 'arbitrary', 'monumental' and 'abstract', they advanced a lapidary judgement, stating, '[I]n Moscow Corbusier is accused of Fascist tendencies.'[26] Still alive in the British debate, underlying the accusation of Fascism directed against Le Corbusier, was the cultural trend ascribable to Socialist Realism.

New Empiricism, Marxist ideology, Socialist Realism and the Unité model became the poles of divergence that determined the whole course of the debates of the 1950s and took concrete form in the achievements of the London County Council between 1951 and 1955: on the one hand, in the projects for Ackroydon Estate and Alton East Estate, designed under New Empiricist influence; on the other, in the estates on Bentham Road, Alton West and Loughborough Road, commonly referred to as 'pro-Corbu' and which even Pevsner admitted fell under the label of New Brutalism.[27] The clash of the 'softs' and 'hards' culminated in discussions on the ideological implications of the *Unité*. The 'softs' publicly accused the 'hards', particularly Colin St. John Wilson, who had defended the model of the 'vertical city',[28] of metaphorically 'throwing mud at Stalin' in front of a crowd of one hundred London County Council architects who witnessed a

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24 London County Council Division, "Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation", *Architectural Review* 109 (May 1951): 292–300. A report of the main contributions relating the discussion on Le Corbusier in Britain are collected in, Irena Murray (ed)., *Le Corbusier and Britain: An Anthology* (Abingdon: Oxon, 2009).

25 John Robert Fourneaux Jordan, "Marseille Building Experiment: Symbol of L.C.C. Dispute", *Manchester Guardian*, September 1952. Fourneaux Jordan was described by Banham as 'the most substantial exponent of the Ruskian Left', in Reyner Banham, *Revenge of the Picturesque: English Archtiectural Polemics, 1945-65*, Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 266.

26 London County Council Division, "Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation", 299.

27 Nikolaus Pevsner, "Roehampton, LCC Housing and the Picturesque Tradition", *Architectural Review* 125, no. 750 (July 1959): 21–35.

28 Colin St. John Wilson, "The Vertical City", *The Observer*, 17 February 1952.

sharp polarization: 'Communists versus the rest'.[29]

In this sense, the criticism of the *Unité* by Frederic J. Osborn, promoter of the Garden City Movement and president of the Town and Country Planning Association, focused on one of the principles of the *Ville Radieuse* in order to debunk its urban vision.[30] Osborn bluntly described Le Corbusier's 'vertical city' as a sociological failure owing to 'monumental' and 'colossal' aspects that in his eyes were disproportionate and dictated exclusively by a 'romantic mechanicistic phantasy'. Osborn's criticism revealed to what extent the anti-mechanistic stances of a fringe of 19th-century Marxist culture were still valid in the paradigm of the Howardian 'low-rise' model of land occupation. In the same way, he ridiculed the *pilotis* for their disproportionate dimension, writing, 'The stilts struck me as needlessly swollen, rather brutal, more anxious to demonstrate the colossal quantity of material they are carrying than to 'free the ground'".[31] In associating the adjective 'brutal' with the Lecorbuserian vision, Osborn seemed to confirm the sarcastic tone of the term New Brutalism in London's Marxist circles.

The association of 'brutal' characteristics with the *Unité*'s moral demands was also reaffirmed in a December 1952 article that appeared in *The Times* under, in this context, a telling title: 'Radiant City Lawsuit. Complaint of Brutal Realism'.[32] The article briefly discussed the international controversy surrounding the *Unité* and reported on Le Corbusier's trial acquittal from charges brought against him by the Société pour l'Esthétique Générale de la France, which had declared the *Unité* contrary to French morality. The 'brutal' values undermining traditional aesthetic canons resounded in the framework of the ideological debates over the reconstruction in which the respective supporters of the Garden City, Scandinavian New Empiricism, and Le Corbusier's *Unité* participated. The 'brutal realism' confirmed the climax of associations that would lead within a year to a clarification of all the criticism associated with the *Unité* under the definition of New Brutalism. Leading this clarification were the Smithsons, for whom *The Times* article played a decisive role.[33]

The New Brutalism: 'A Term of Communist Abuse'

The definition of New Brutalism which became famous is not the sarcastic

29 Banham, "The New Brutalism", 356; see also Sarah Menin and Steven Kite (ed.), *An Architecture of Invitation* (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005); Stephen Kite, "Softs and Hards: Colin St. John Wilson and the Contested Vision of 1950s London", in Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman (ed.), *Neo-Avant-Garde and Postmodern. Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond* (London: YC British Art, 2010): 55-78.

30 Frederic J. Osborn, "Concerning Le Corbusier. Part I", *Town & Country Planning* 20, no. 99 (July 1952): 311–16; Frederic J. Osborn, "Concerning Le Corbusier. Part II", *Town & Country Planning* 20, no. 100 (August 1952): 359–63.

31 Osborn, "Concerning Le Corbusier. Part I".

32 "Radiant City Lawsuit: Complaint of Brutal Realism", *The Times*, December 4, 1952.

33 The article is kept in the Smithsons archives, Alison and Peter Smithson Special Collection, Loeb Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA, folder G059. In 1966 Alison pointed out that the origin of the definition of New Brutalism came from reading an article published in the *Times*. Jeremy Baker, "A Smithson File", Arena, Architectural Association Journal 82, no. special issue (February 1966); Alison and Peter Smithson, "Banham's Bumper Book on Brutalism, Discussed by Alison and Peter Smithson", *Architects' Journal* 144, no. 26 (28 December 1966): 1590–91.

one born in the London County Council circle, but the one based on the short publication authored by the Smithsons in 1953[34] and, above all, on Banham's 1955 article, 'The New Brutalism'.[35] When, in December 1953, Alison Smithson publicly used the term New Brutalism for the first time to describe the unbuilt design for the House in Soho, the term's ideological connotations disappeared and the debate was refocused on architectural issues.[36] In her brief description, probably co-authored with Peter Smithson, Alison Smithson confirmed the desire to root the New Brutalism in the principles of English culture and the tradition of bricks and craft, but to revise them in the light of a synthesis of different contemporary cultural and artistic impulses. In essence, architecture was reduced to a simple 'structure exposed entirely'. Its radicalism consisted of domesticity conceived 'without internal finishes' and with visible ducts. The New Brutalism in its first definition infers, in the abolition of the differences between inside and outside, a roughness capable of overcoming the conventions of the domestic environment.

Whilst for the Smithsons the New Brutalism was a firm a-political stance, Banham considered its origin in the wake of controversy and discussion among the various factions of the London County Council. 'It was somewhere in this vigorous polemic that the term The New Brutalism was first coined,' he affirmed in 1955 after summarizing the different ideological positions of the British debates.[37]

The understanding of the origins of the New Brutalism in England cannot be separated from the committed intentions underlying Banham's role to promote and support the Smithsons. In fact, Banham's article is undeniably a manifesto of precise cultural and critical thinking, reflecting the debates and controversies that characterized London in the 1950s. Different ideologies and cultural epicentres were evoked in the article, ranging from the genesis of New Art History, to the experience of the Independent Group, to the technological-fantastic universe of the Futurists or American mass consumer products. The crucial epicentre in the context of the article was London's academic and cultural world, to which Banham undoubtedly belonged, and which resonated in some of his positions. His most radical criticism was against the 'softs' and 'Professor Wittkower' with his book *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. These were the poles of the debate that help to understand the ideological scope repeatedly evoked and placed at the origin of the New Brutalism.

'The New Brutalism' could even be considered Banham's manifesto against a forced alignment of a political orientation with an architectural style, as well as against the abuse of academic and historical references. Indeed, Banham

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34 P.D.S. [Alison Smithson], "House in Soho", *Architectural Design* 23, no. 12 (December 1953): 342. The article was authored by Alison, as she made clear in 1966: "The piece was initialed A.M.S. in typescript, but this was mistranscribed, in error or as an anti-feminist editorial gesture, as P.D.S. This is how one comes to found a movement." in Smithson, *Banham's bumper book on brutalism, discussed by Alison and Peter Smithson*.

35 Banham, "The New Brutalism".

36 P.D.S. [Alison Smithson], "House in Soho".

37 Banham, "The New Brutalism".

made clear since the beginning of the article that what seemed to have shaped the origin of New Brutalism was exactly the 'new battle of styles', characteristic of the early post-war years, which entailed the association of political ideologies with architectural values. Banham took a precise position against the 'softs', those who, according to him, had reduced New Brutalism to an ironic category in order to mock a specific trend of the Modern Movement and profess a new picturesque and vernacular architecture dictated by a certain interpretation of the British Marxist ideal.

Banham confirmed the Swedish origin of the New Brutalism and the ideological opposition that this term engendered amongst the participants in the London debates:

> There is a persistent belief that the word Brutalism (or something like it) had appeared in the English Summaries in an issue of Bygg-Mastaren published late in 1950. The reference cannot now be traced, and the story must be relegated to that limbo of Modern Movement demonology where Swedes, Communists and the Town and Country Planning Association are bracketed together as different isotopes of the common 'Adversary'.

The intent underlying Banham's article was twofold: to historicize the phenomenon of New Brutalism, by acknowledging several chronological phases linked to precise references and debates; and to clarify and articulate the phenomenon in order to make it operational. Banham expressed this dual intention through a liberation of the definition, first from its ideological components and, second, from the discipline of stylistic categories.

While recognizing the disparaging origin of the definition of New Brutalism, Banham intended to release the term from any political connotations and redeem it from any negative assumptions derived from the disengaged nature proposed by the Smithsons. In particular, Banham targeted Marxist ideology, of which the 'People's Architecture', the influence of Socialist Realism summarized by the definition of New Humanism, and the enthusiasm for Swedish architecture had become synonyms. What Banham criticized was not Marxist political ideology itself, in which he recognized some valid ethical arguments, but its declination into a series of retrograde and conservative architectural styles, belonging to an outdated political line rooted in 19th-century Marxist doctrine, outmoded even in contemporary Soviet Union. Banham retraced the salient moments of this controversy, lashing out the communist wing of the London County Council, calling their operation a 'Communist abuse':

> [New Brutalism] was, in the beginning, a term of Communist abuse, and it was intended to signify the normal vocabulary of Modern Architecture—flat roofs, glass, exposed structure—considered as morally reprehensible deviations from 'The New Humanism,' a phrase which means something different in Marxist hands to the meaning which might be expected. The New Humanism meant, in architecture at that time, brickwork, segmental arches, pitched roofs, small windows (or small panes at any rate)—pictur-

esque detailing without picturesque planning. It was, in fact, the so-called 'William Morris Revival', now happily defunct, since Kruschev's reversal of the Party's architectural line, though this reversal has, of course, taken the guts out of subsequent polemics. But it will be observed that The New Humanism was again a quasi-historical concept, oriented, however spuriously, toward that mid-nineteenth century epoch which was Marxism's Golden Age, when you could recognise a capitalist when you met him.

Banham's criticism towards Communists circles and his interests in the aesthetics and expendability of American consumer goods, in which he saw the democratization of design, may suggest an ambiguous political orientation. Only in the 1960s Banham clearly revealed a 'Left-oriented' political tendency, even though he was openly opposed to loyal adherence to dogmatic positions.[38] He confessed his ambivalent political orientation in a 1964 article, in which he explained the links between his passion for Pop and his political views:

> Now if this is where we came from, it left us in a very peculiar position, vis-à-vis the normal divisions of English culture, because we had this American leaning and yet most of us are in some way Left-oriented, even protest-oriented … people whose lightweight culture was American in derivation, and yet, in spite of that, were and are, of the Left, of the protesting sections of the public. It gives us a curious set of divided loyalties. We dig Pop which is acceptance-culture, capitalistic, and yet in our formal politics, if I may use the phrase, most of us belong very firmly on the other side'.[39]

In this sense, Banham operated an engaged criticism aimed at reversing hierarchies and established moral values as a deliberate discursive strategy against a culture invaded by the spectre of ideology. Even if his political views remained silent, in his articles clearly emerged his active role in promoting and intellectually framing anti-establishment groups such as the Independent Group, or 'antagonist' architects such as the Smithsons. Banham's committed criticism and political orientation was later confirmed by his wife Mary Banham, who recalled that 'he was a supporter of the Labour party all his life. There was a long family tradition of left-wing politics.'[40]

Banham's cultural line is thus recognisable as an anti-establishment 'lone voice', typically hostile and subversive towards even the institutions with which he collaborated, such as the Institute of Contemporary Art directed by Herbert Read or the conservatism of *Architectural Review*.[41] For the purpose of entangling the hidden links between ideology and the New Brutalism's trajectory, what is important to note is the declared coincidence between the 'non-Marxist'

38 For Banham's political views, see Adrian Forty, "Reyner Banham, 'One Partially Americanized European'", in Louise Campbell (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Architecture and Its Histories*, (London: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 2000): 195–205.

39 Reyner Banham, "The Atavism of the Short-distance Mini-Cyclist", in *Living Arts* 3 (1963): 91-97.

40 Mary Banham, interviewed by Corinne Julius, *National Life Story Collection: Architects' Lives*, British Library Oral History, 2001, part 10/19.

41 Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

position, the origins of New Brutalism's definition, and the interest not only in Le Corbusier but more precisely in his *béton brut* and the artistic constellations rooted in that technique, including Art Brut. 'Among the non-Marxist grouping,' Banham wrote, 'there was no particular unity of programme or intention, but there was a certain community of interests, a tendency to look toward Le Corbusier, and to be aware of something called le *concrete brut* … and, in the case of the more sophisticated and aesthetically literate, to know of the Art Brut of Jean Dubuffet and his connection in Paris.'[42]

Ethics vs. Politics

The definition of New Brutalism, purged of ideological attributes and declined by Banham in a series of principles, was further reworked by other critics with the intention of inferring operational principles that contributed to the affirmation of a style. Precisely against this possible stylistic drift, the Smithsons intervened in 1957 with a note to affirm the ethical essence of New Brutalism and to reiterate the need to consider that definition as a dynamic device irreducible to canons or dogmas.[43] The affirmation of New Brutalism against a possible stylistic drift was based, on the one hand, on an ethical stance, and on the other on the poetics of 'as found'. The concept of 'as found', as theorized by the Smithsons, prevents with its intrinsic mechanism the translation of architectural choices into a recognizable style linked to a-priori forms and the use of a single material. The Smithsons conceived their concept of 'as found' as the bearer of a decisive ethical component: the rediscovery of 'quality' and 'honesty' of materials, which coincided with the 1950s phenomenon that the Smithsons described as an inclusive 'arrival of the raw: raw brick, raw block, raw steel, raw paint, raw marble, raw gold, raw lacquer.'[44] The moral responsibility of New Brutalism appears in the words of the Smithsons as the necessity to consider 'the whole problem of human associations and the relationship that buildings and community form has to them.'[45] This statement implies a critical vision in which architecture, as a form of culture, encompasses social patterns and political processes.

It should also be stressed that the definition of New Brutalism was considered by the Smithsons not as a static entity, but as an evolving concept. The typescript for their January 1955 manifesto, in fact, read this way: 'New Brutalism looks for roots not in a past style:life:philosophy, but in this moment of life. It will take many forms because of this finding moment'.[46] The Smithsons brought the

42 Banham, "The New Brutalism", 356.

43 Alison and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson Answer the Criticism on the Opposite Page", *Architectural Design* 27, no. 4 (April 1957): 113.

44 Peter Smithson, untitled typewritten document in preparation for the book The 1930s, dated: 'date unknown, probably '60s'. *Quoted in Dirk van den Heuvel, Alison and Peter Smithson: A Brutalist Story, Involving the House, the City and the Everyday (Plus a Couple of Other Things)*, PhD Thesis (Delft, TU Delft, 2013): 179.

45 Alison and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson Answer the Criticism on the Opposite Page".

46 Alison and Peter Smithson, Untitled Document, October 2, 1954, E009, Alison and Peter Smithson Special Collection, Loeb Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA. The document was prepared for the editorial in *Architectural Design* 26, no. 1 (January 1955): 1.

debate back to ethical principles and to a conception of New Brutalism as an intention, an attitude and a much more complex device that could not be limited to the expression of exposed concrete. For this reason, the concept of 'real architecture' and the need to affirm a 'new attitude' consisting of a 'non-classical aesthetic' was often reaffirmed by them as a bulwark against stylistic drifts. With this stance it is clear that for the Smithsons New Brutalism did not consist of a revolutionary action against traditional canons, but rather of the evolution of the principles of the first Modern Movement. Any other declination would have entailed the risk, as they noted, of reducing that 'attitude' to a 'style'. 'Up to now,' they stated, 'Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.'[47]

For the Smithsons the ethical essence of architecture consisted of a concept they summed up in an anti-historicist statement: 'Brutalist to us meant "Direct". To others it came to be a synonym for rough, crude, oversized and using beams three times thicker than necessary. Brutalism was opposite, necessary to suit the new situation.'[48] In their view, an architecture defined as 'direct' entailed a dualism that expressed a maximum fidelity to the nature of materials, and encouraged the search for a specific response to a specific case and discouraged the concept of an a priori architecture. The ethical essence of New Brutalism therefore consisted in the absolute coherence between the construction system and the expression of the building, and in contemporary techniques combined with a necessary social responsibility that extended to urban planning. 'From individual buildings … we moved on to an examination of the whole problem of human associations and the relationship that building and community has to them.'[49] That New Brutalism was destined for an ethical and social dimension capable of transcending the limits of the individual building would be revealed in 1959, when the Smithsons declared, 'The essential ethic of brutalism is in town planning.'[50]

For Banham, New Brutalism continued, even during the 1960s, to presuppose first and foremost a critical and subversive reaction to the establishment. 'The Brutalists … are neither leftish nor insular,' he stated in 1961, specifying that 'the first target of the Brutalists could not have been more specifically leftish and insular—the so-called William Morris Revival.'[51] What allows the definition of New Brutalism to take a radical position, 'overriding [a] gentlemen's agreement',[52] is precisely the attack against the political control of artistic expressions established by London's cultural elites, which Banham defined as a 'local variant

47 Alison and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson Answer the Criticism on the Opposite Page".

48 Baker, "A Smithson File": 183.

49 Alison and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson Answer the Criticism on the Opposite Page".

50 Alison and Peter Smithson, Jane Drew, Maxwell Fry, "Conversation on Brutalism", Zodiac 4 (April 1959): 73–81.

51 Reyner Banham, "The World of the Brutalists. Opinion & Intention in British Architecture, 1951-60", *Texas Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1961): 129–38.

52 [Reyner Banham], "School at Hunstanton", *Architectural Review* 116, no. 693 (September 1954): 150–62.

of Zhdanov's Social Realism',[53] referring to the canons drawn up by Andrej Aleksandrovič Zhdanov for the control of Soviet cultural production in the late 1940s. Only the 'moral load' of the first Modern Movement, expressed through truth to structure and materials, could redeem an architecture otherwise dissipated in continuous revivals. 'If a piece of steel appeared to hold something up,' Banham wrote, 'then it did; if a wall was made of brick then it showed on both sides, no plaster, no paint; if water came from a tap it got there through a visible pipe.'[54]

In the theory of New Brutalism enunciated by Banham, alongside the truth to structure and materials—summarized by the formula 'as found'—composition became a crucial step to counteracting the 'leftish' vision, crystallized in the recovery of the Picturesque and expressed through an 'informality of plan' that for Banham took on the features of a 'soft-touch architecture'. In the phase identified as 'early Brutalism', Banham recognized a 'demand for more formal design' that had prompted the Smithsons to take an interest in Wittkower's diagrams and Rowe's subsequent readings, from which the composition of symmetrical and 'compact' plans, such as those of the school in Hunstanton and the House in Soho, derived.

Precisely this 'formal legibility of plan', elected by Banham as the first quality of the early stages of New Brutalism, became the conceptual fulcrum against which he expressed his fiercest criticism. In contrast to the 'formal' aspects, Banham supported a cultural and artistic agenda against the traditional canons of beauty, defended by London's socialist cultural elite, defined in a mocking manner as 'Anglo-pink intelligentsia'. Concepts such as 'anti-art' and 'anti-beauty' allowed the emancipation from pure geometry and the evolution of composition towards an 'a-formalism' informed by recourse to 'topology.'

All of Banham's reasoning on New Brutalism leads to the conclusion that traditional academic principles are outdated. His criticism was aimed at prompting an architecture open to the invention of a new form of modernity, in which the 'plan' was replaced by the concept of 'image' and the structure by a matrix of relationship, while the materials were innervated by the anti-artistic principle of 'as found'.[55] Only through these three principles could the architecture of New Brutalism, according to Banham, succeed in overcoming the historicist components evoked by Wittkower or Pevsner, and free itself from the dogmas of an ideological and political vision.

The act of replacing political attributes with ethical ones was reiterated by

53 It is to note that Banham here misused the term "Social Realism". "Social Realism" refers to an artistic current that took hold internationally around the 1930s and that focused on the depiction of the "real" problems of the working class. "Socialist Realism", instead, was the official aesthetic doctrine of the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the mid-1950s.

54 Banham, "The World of the Brutalists. Opinion & Intention in British Architecture, 1951-60".

55 'The definition of a New Brutalist building derived from Hunstanton and Yale Art Centre, above, must be modified so as to exclude formality as a basic quality if it is to cover future developments and should more properly read: I, Memorability as an Image; 2, Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3, Valuation of Materials "as found." Remembering that an Image is what affects the emotions, that structure, in its fullest sense, is the relationship of parts, and that materials "as found" are raw materials' (Banham, "The New Brutalism", 361).

Banham in his famous 1966 *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic?*, a book whose subtitle already poses the emblematic question about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.[56] Banham framed the New Brutalism discourse in the light of a generational clash and particularly in response to the 'Communist doctrine' and the positions of his master Pevsner. According to Banham, Pevsner was the spokesman for a 'purely visual' recovery of the historicist elements of the English Picturesque, in virtue of the 'firm tradition of British Liberalism, democracy and common law.'[57]

Although some principles of the English New Brutalism took up concepts or models advanced by figures like Pevsner and Richards—such as the 'warehouse aesthetic' or the principle of 'judge every case on its merits'—what Banham emphasized was the desire of the new generation led by the Smithsons to found new principles in order to radically respond to the question of reconstruction. The 1946 New Town Plan, the 1951 Festival of Britain, the various historicist revivals advocated by *Architectural Review* seemed in the Smithsons' eyes provincial attempts to reiterate a fictitious image of a traditional England, destroyed by the tragedy of war, through sentimentality and nostalgic compromises. As Banham wrote, 'It seemed of absolutely trivial value to a younger generation to whom the given elements of the planning situation seemed to be social chaos, a world in ruins, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, and what appeared to be a complete abandonment of architectural standards on the part of their elders.'[58]

Banham's book also helped to clarify some of the Smithsons' cryptic claims. For example, 'architecture needs to be objective about reality' should be understood, Banham explained, as a desire to free architecture from political and ideological dogmas that clash with the great course of international architecture marked by the masters of the Modern Movement. 'Like many others of their age,' Banham wrote, 'they [the Smithsons] were trying to see their world whole and see it true, without the interposition of diagrammatic political categories, exhausted "progressive" notions or prefabricated aesthetic preferences.'[59] The need to deduce architecture 'as a direct result of a way of life' contributed to a new aesthetic of everyday life that admitted disparate and sometimes subversive influences, ranging from vernacular to pop, as well as a renewed technological consciousness of the 'second machine age,' once again purged of ideological instances. Through the enhancement of technological processes, considered by Banham to be 'morally, socially and politically neutral',[60] the architecture of New Brutalism could eventually free itself from political dogmas.

Banham's fascination with American commodities, cars and the multidisciplinary and subversive universe staged in the exhibition 'Parallel of Life and Art'

56 Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*.

57 Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, 11.

58 Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, 12.

59 Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, 47.

60 Reyner Banham, "On Trial 5: The Spec Builders—Towards a Pop Architecture", *Architectural Review* (July 1962): 42.

became a polemical act against the Left:

> 'Not only were "progressive" habits of thought still dominated by older, anti-American members of the Left, but from the time of Sigfried Giedion's book "Mechanisation takes Command", or even earlier, the styling of US commercial products had been specifically regarded as "bad design", so that to admire it in public was to adopt an anti-conformist or "angry young man", attitude. But for those whose views had not been polarised by the politics of the Cold War (or the politics of Modern Architecture) it was possible to admire the Cadillac or Plymouth for non-polemical reasons.'[61]

The phenomenon of New Brutalism culminated for Banham in the dead-end dilemma expressed in the book's subtitle. In an attempt to provide an answer to the emblematic battle between ethic and aesthetics, Banham could not but admit, with disappointment, that, at the end of the 1960s, Brutalism was reduced to 'just an affair of exposed concrete', consumed in the reiteration of the Lecorbuserian model. Despite Smithsons' heroic attempt not to crystallize New Brutalism into a style, and despite Banham's recognition that 'the ethic behind the aesthetic was British', ultimately 'it was Le Corbusier who printed his personal style upon the word'.[62] Among the various values that Banham recognized to New Brutalism only ethics resisted, the only bulwark erected against the conservative ideology of a Left with values that Banham continued to consider retrograde. 'The face of the world does not conform to the Brutalist aesthetic,' he wrote, 'but the conscience of the world's architecture has been permanently enriched by the Brutalist ethic.'

61 Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, 63.

62 Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, 75.

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Fig. 1

Peter Reyner Banham, Nikolaus Pevsner and John Summerson. from: Nikolaus Pevsner, "Modern Architecture and the Historian, or the Return of Historicism", RIBA Journal, April 1961.

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Fig. 2

Reyner Banham the 'lone voice' crossing the desert

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