

New Brutalism and the Myth of Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to shed new lights on the New Brutalism through re-orienting attention to the repeated evocations of Japan in Alison and Peter Smithson's writings since the 1950s. In these articles, the Smithsons did not only present Japanese architectural tradition as a yardstick of the Modern Movement and hence New Brutalism, but also took pride in the fact that their understandings of Japanese culture were based on the mass media. This study examines how New Brutalism was simultaneously shaped by mass media's post-war media boom and their portrayal of Japan. It suggests that Japan had several efficacies for New Brutalism, including as an inspiration for mass-produced architecture and mass-produced culture. The problems associated with their references to Japan will also be considered.

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KEYWORDS:

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Introduction

In January 1955, the *Architectural Design* (*AD*) printed a one-page editor note on New Brutalism.¹ This is the second piece dedicated to New Brutalism in the magazine, following a short article on the Smithsons' SoHo House published in December 1953 when the term was first coined.² The 1955 *AD* article also predated Peter Reyner Banham's seminal essay on New Brutalism, in the December issue of the *Architectural Review* (*AR*), by eleven months.³ The date of publication and the format of this 1955 *AD* article signified its importance, suggesting it could be seen as the "manifesto" of New Brutalism – which was later confirmed by Banham in his 1966 publication *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*⁴

The 1955 *AD* manifesto was co-authored by Alison and Peter Smithson and *AD*'s then technical editor Theo Crosby, an ally and close friend of the couple.⁵ Crosby wrote the introduction and conclusion which bracketed seven sentences, presented as "a definition or statement" of the movement, written by the Smithsons. In the introduction, Crosby explained New Brutalism was "a re-valuation of those advanced buildings of the twenties and thirties whose lessons (because of a few plaster cracks) have been forgotten."⁶ In order to revive the spirit of the Modern Movement, Crosby added, New Brutalism learnt from historian Rudolf Wittkower's study on "the formal use of proportion" and from Japanese architecture a "respect for the sensuous use of each material."⁷

In the article, more than half of the passages by the Smithsons was dedicated to discussion on the importance of Japanese architecture. They suggested that the main instigators of the Modern Movement including Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe, were all "seduced" by Japanese architecture.⁸ The importance of New Brutalism, the Smithsons stated, was that it also used the "underlying ideas, principles, and spirit" of Japanese architecture as its yardstick.⁹ Through this shared reverence to Japanese architecture, the Smithson concluded, "the Brutalism is the only possible development *for this moment* from the Modern Movement."¹⁰

Using their recently completed Hunstanton School as an example, the Smithsons argued that New Brutalism "probably [owed] as much to the existence of Japanese architecture as to Mies."¹¹ They pointed out that New Brutalism was inspired by Japanese's approach to "FORM (capitalised in original)" as "part of a general conception of life, a sort of reverence for the natural world and, from that, for the materials of the built world."¹² Through Japan, they concluded that New Brutalism "[saw] architecture as the direct result of a way of life."¹³ The manifesto also outlined the critical agenda of New Brutalism was to elevate the handling of "Materials" as an "intellectual appraisal."¹⁴ Moving beyond an honest usage of material in

1. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (January 1955).

2. Peter Smithson, "House in SoHo, London", *Architectural Design* (December 1953).

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

4. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Academy Press, 1966): 48.

5. Crosby shared a flat with Peter Smithson from 1948 and when Alison and Peter married in 1949 Crosby became their neighbours. Stephen Parnell, "Brute Forces", *Architectural Review* (June 2012); Theo Crosby, *Night Thoughts of a Faded Utopia*, in *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 197-99.

6. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (January 1955): 1.

7. *Ibid.*; Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Wiley, 1998, 3rd ed.).

8. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (January 1955): 1.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

construction, the Smithsons proposed, New Brutalism sought “a realisation of the affinity which can be established between building and man.”¹⁵

The Smithsons and Crosby’s ambition was clear: they sought to distinguish New Brutalism from other competing expressions in post-war Modernism. They established New Brutalism as a movement that found “its closest affinities, not in a past architectural style, but in peasant dwelling forms.”¹⁶ This evocation of peasant dwellings could be seen as a reverberation of the influence of Mediterranean architecture on Le Corbusier, Sigfried Giedion and other members of the *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne* (CIAM IV), reinforcing the claim that New Brutalism would be the only heir to the Modern Movement.¹⁷ Many similarities emerged when reading this manifesto in conjunction with Banham’s later but more influential article on New Brutalism. For example, the Smithsons’ statement on “Materials” could be interpreted as the basis of the “as found” ideal.¹⁸ The call for seeing “the direct result of a way of life”, found in the *AD* article, also echoed Banham’s emphasis on the “Image”, as “the thing itself, in its totality, and with all its overtones of human association.”¹⁹ These similarities signposted the importance of this *AD* manifesto, suggesting it should be regarded as an important benchmark in the formulation of New Brutalism.

The Smithsons’ admiration of Japanese architectural culture, however, was curious in the post-war context. In particular, Peter Smithson had experienced first-hand the Japanese war aggressions through his service in India and Burma as part of the Queen Victoria’s Own Madras Sappers and Miners. Equally worthy of noting was that neither Crosby, Alison or Peter Smithson had in-depth exposure to Japanese culture nor had any of them been to Japan when the *AD* article was published.²⁰ In the manifesto, Crosby and the Smithsons had acknowledged this issue by declaring they did not intend to evoke an accurate understanding of Japanese architecture. They added a footnote explaining their perception of Japan was through mass media, writing: “The Japanese film ‘Gate of Hell’ showed houses, a monastery and palace, in colour for the first time.”²¹

Using this reference to media as a starting point, this paper argues that the statements made by Crosby and the Smithsons embodied Roland Barthes’ almost contemporaneous critique of myths in mass culture.²² In the *AD* article, the trio formulated Japan as a signifier of an advanced architectural culture but in so doing also mythicized Japan. The manifesto’s reconceptualization of early 20th-century Modernist architecture through Japan could also be regarded as a process described by Barthes as “through the concept” – the New Brutalism – “a whole new history is implanted in the myth.”²³ The discussions found in the *AD* article also suggested that the Japan of New Brutalism was a signifier that linked with several previous systems, including Japan employed by the

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Academy Press, 1966).

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

19. *Ibid.*, 360.

20. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Academy Press, 1966): 46.

21. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, “The New Brutalism”, *Architectural Design* (January 1955): 1.

22. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, 2nd ed.).

23. *Ibid.*, 117.

Modernist avant-gardes and Japan in post-war mass media. Through Barthes' framework, this article re-examines the New Brutalism manifesto and subsequent writings by the Smithsons. How can we understand their evocation of Japan in the broader context of post-war media culture? What were the motives that drove the Smithsons and Crosby to a process of mythologization? What else will emerge in the field of vision when we examine New Brutalism through the vantage point of myths?

Gate of Hell and the "Discovery" of Japan

The *AD* manifesto, at first glance, seemed to focus more on the importance of Japanese architecture than on what New Brutalist architecture was. Banham noted this issue in his *New Brutalism: Ethics or Aesthetics*.²⁴ He explained Japan was merely "severing to illustrate the sense of the sudden discovery of a whole culture capable of carrying, as naturally as clothes, a traditional architecture whose spatial sophistication seemed light-years beyond the capacity of the West."²⁵ By presenting Japan as a discovery, the Smithsons and Crosby could then rebuild the history and remodel the culture of Japan to suit their needs. This "discovery" of Japan could be regarded as symptomatic of Western media's portrayal of the country. According to media scholar Philip Hammond that, in spite of the War, "a truism about British media reporting of Japan is that there is not much of it."²⁶ In British media, not only the Japanese were distant; they were also different. Unlike Germany which was presented simply as an enemy, the reporting of Japan tended to include a mythization of the Japanese's unthinkable loyalty, fanaticism, and even barbarism.²⁷ This difference was also sometimes underscored by racial overtones.²⁸ This portrayal, moreover, enabled Japan to become a continuous source of discovery and rediscovery in Western media.

This distance from an authentic understanding of Japan also meant that audiences could perceive Japanese culture through their own gaze. In the case of the Smithsons and Crosby, they consumed the film *Gate of Hell (Jigokuon)* mostly through the lens of Modern architecture. Directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa, the film was about an ill-fated romance between a samurai and a noblewoman. Their relationship was unravelled alongside political upheavals in the royal palace. In the movie, characters moved and talked between spaces partitioned by panels and curtains, presenting a radical sense of openness and transparency. Moreover, the events in the film unfolded in an environment where the boundary between interior and exterior spaces were blurred, showcasing a spatial complexity that the Modernists would hanker after.

What Crosby and Smithsons found in *Gate of Hell* was not only the spatial quality of an advanced architecture but also a means of referencing the past without appearing to be anachronistic or nostalgic.

24. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Academy Press, 1966): 46.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Philip Hammond (ed.), *Cultural Difference, Media Memories: Anglo-American Images of Japan* (London: Cassell, 1997): ix.

27. *Ibid.*, xiii.

28. Richard Weight, "Losing The Peace: Germany, Japan, America and the Shaping of British National Identity in the Age of Affluence", in *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited*, edited by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (London: Routledge, 2004): 210.

One may even argue that a retrieval and revitalising of the past was what first brought post-war Japanese film to international attention. As Jasper Sharp noted, the first post-war Japanese films that won international awards including *Rashomon* (1950), *Ugetsu* (1953), and *Gate of Hell* were all *jidai-geki*, or period dramas, even though two thirds of the films produced in Japan at the time were actually “modern plays.”²⁹ A retrieval and revitalising of the past could also be found in other influential Japanese film of the same period, including Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Although the film was set in the Edo period (1603-1868), its exploration into fundamental human iterations and emotions could readily resonate with the post-war audiences. Similarly, in *Gate of Hell*, Kinugasa used the supposed stern formality of nobility life in 12th century to contrast the agonies and passion in the love affairs between the main characters. Moreover, post-war Japanese films had also been praised for reviving the techniques and aesthetics of silent films of the early 20th-century. In Japanese films, the Smithsons and Crosby did not only find a sophisticated architectural space that they yearned for but also cinematography that bolstered connection with early 20th-century avant-gardes. In short, post-war Japanese films provided a means of retrieval for New Brutalism.

This retrieval was also used, in the *AD* manifesto, as a contrast against conditions in post-war Britain. In the introduction to the article, Crosby expressed his distaste of Modernist architectural expressions of his time,

For many years since the war we have continued in our habit of debasing the coinage of M. le Corbusier, and had created a style – ‘Contemporary’ – easily recognised by its misuse of traditional materials and its veneer of ‘modern details, frames, recessed plinths, decorative piloti.

The use of *Gate of Hell* as a critique and contrast was not limited to discourse in Modern architecture, but also the everyday environment in post-war Britain. *Gate of Hell* was one of the first films made with Kodak Eastmancolour, and the first colour Japanese film to be screened outside of Japan. It was described by the *New York Times*’ film critic as “in colour of a richness and harmony that matches that of any film we’ve ever seen.”³⁰ It was of particular appeal to the Western architects because Kinugasa, as film critic Tadao Sato notes, “places emphasis on the beauty of forms.”³¹ In post-war Britain, the amazement posted by the colour film would probably be even more staggering. In the early 1950s, Britain was still in rationing and its urban landscape was still scarred by war-time destruction and reconstruction.³² The contrasts between the colour found in the mass media and the grim everyday surroundings were part of the reason that Crosby and the Smithsons were drawn to films, magazines, advertisements and other mass media culture.³³

29. Jasper Sharp, *Japanese Widescreen Cinema: Commerce, Technology and Aesthetics*, PhD Dissertation (Sheffield: Sheffield University, 2003): 11.

30. Bosley Crowther, “The Screen in Review”, *The New York Times* (December 14, 1954).

31. Tadao Sato, *Japanese Cinema and the Traditional Arts: Imagery, Technique and Cultural Context*, in *Japanese Cinema and the Traditional Arts: Imagery, Technique and Cultural Context*, by Linda Ehrlich and David Desser, translated by Ann Sherif (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994): 165–86.

32. Anthony Vidler, “Another Brick in the Wall”, *October*, no. 136 (2010): 105–32.

33. Barry Curtis, *From Ivory Tower to Control Tower*, in *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 221–27.

At stake was that the colour of the film, emphasised by Crosby and the Smithsons in the *AD* article, can be understood as another attempt to mythicize Japan. A passage by Barthes in his critique of the 1954 Italian film *Lost Continent* (*Continente Perduto*) could be employed as an appropriate description for this,

Colouring the world is always a means of denying it (and perhaps one should at this point begin an inquiry into the use of colour in the cinema). Deprived of all substance, driven back into colour, disembodied through the very glamour of the 'images', the Orient is ready for the spiriting away which the film has in store for it.³⁴

In the 1955 *AD* manifesto, a similar process was at work: aspects of Japanese architecture and culture were mapped against tenets of Modernism. The original meanings and motivations of Japanese architecture and culture were emptied out, and their value was to be found within the discussion of Modern architecture.

This emptying-out of history was not only found in cinema and the New Brutalism manifesto but could also be seen as part of a more wide-spread phenomenon in the portrayal of Japan in post-war media. According to journalist Daniel Ben-Ami, Japanese culture was often presented not as a product of human activities and preferences of the time, but something that had already been determined and bearing down upon the people.³⁵ Using anthropologist Ruth Benedict's influential 1946 publication *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as an example, Ben-Ami pointed out there was a tendency to cast Japanese culture as constant. Japanese culture was not seen as something that evolve, despite the fact that the country had undergone a similarly rapid modernisation and industrialisation process as many Western countries.³⁶

This ahistorical approach was also found in the architectural press coverage of Japan in the immediate post-war era. Until the early 1950s, Western architectural magazines were dominated by only two types of articles on Japan: surveys of war damage and introduction of ancient Japanese architecture and gardens.³⁷ Only in the mid-1950s that reconstruction and contemporary architectural works took a more prominent place in Western architectural magazines. While this affirmation to history and ancient culture could be seen as a reaction to the rupture created by the War, it also created a danger in a highly selective reading of the past. In the Smithsons writings, we found not only an ahistorical but also a historicist approach towards Japan. A year after the manifesto, they reiterated the efficacy of ahistorical Japan in their influential article "But Today We Collect Ads."³⁸ They wrote,

To the architects of the twenties, 'Japan' was the Japanese house of prints and paintings, the house with its roof off the plane bound together by thin black lines. (To quote Gropius, 'the whole country

34. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, 2nd ed.): 94.

35. Daniel Ben-Ami, *Is Japan Different?, in Cultural Difference, Media Memories: Anglo-American Images of Japan*, edited by Philip Hammond (London: Cassell, 1995): 11.

36. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946).

37. Publications includes: Samuel Newsom, "Secrets of Japanese Gardens", *Asia and the Americas* (June 1946); "Japanese Living Room", *Architectural Review* (June 1947); "Defense of the Imperial Hotel", *Architectural Forum* (January 1947); Charlotte Perriand, "Une Habitation Au Japon", *Techniques et Architecture* (1946).

38. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "But Today We Collect Ads", *Ark: Journal of the Royal College of Art* (November 1956).

looks like one gigantic basic design course. In the thirties Japan meant gardens, the garden entering the house, the tokonoma.³⁹

39. *Ibid.*

In the statement, the Smithsons traced the progress in Western Modernism, yet Japanese architectural culture remained in its traditional form. Moreover, they also percolated the view that the success of the Modern Movement was in debt to the lessons offered by traditional Japanese architecture.

This paradox was also indicative of an inherent contradiction within New Brutalism. As Crosby and Smithsons had explained, they posited New Brutalism as a movement came after the supposed eclipse of the Modern Movement. As a result, they struggled to make connections with past architectural styles and expressions since the value of history had been denied by the Modern Movement. The eternal and ahistorical quality of Japan offered an outlet for Crosby and the Smithsons to connect with the past – including the early 20th-century Modernist avant-gardes – without explicitly stating the value of history. The *AD* manifesto's entanglement with history had been pointed out by Reyner Banham in his 1955 *AR* article, where he expressed his concern about New Brutalism's "academicism."⁴⁰ In the first passage of the article, Banham also asked the question of "What has been the influence of contemporary architectural historians on the history of contemporary architecture?"⁴¹ Banham's concern was also a response to another "lesson" mentioned by Crosby in the *AD* article: the studies conducted by historian Rudolf Wittkower into formal proportions.⁴²

40. Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Review* (December 1955).

41. *Ibid.*, 354.

42. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (January 1955): 1.

Rudolf Wittkower's 1948 *Architecture in the Age of Humanism*, as Wittkower himself observed, had "caused more than a polite stir" in post-war British architecture.⁴³ In the polemic publication, Wittkower re-examined the architecture of Alberti and Palladio, suggesting Classical architecture was not frozen geometrical rules but a set of principles that subjected to invention and innovation.⁴⁴ Wittkower's study also exposed the tension between an architect's creative faculty and his supposed responsibility to the patrons and the cultural discourse of his place and time.⁴⁵ These arguments found in Wittkower's work served as an invaluable framework for the younger generation of architects to critically examine Modern architecture. The "stir" caused by *Architecture in the Age of Humanism* was further accentuated by debates initiated by Wittkower's student Colin Rowe's work on Modern Movement's indebtedness to Palladian architecture and Mannerism, including "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" which was published in the *AR* in 1947.⁴⁶ Wittkower and Rowe's studies, for the post-war architects, bore several efficacies: not only did they establish the Modern Movement as part of the living tradition of Classicism; they also injected new energy into post-war Modern architecture. Wittkower's study, in particular, served as a means to reconcile the pursuit for rationality and the call for human-centric design in post-war

43. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Wiley, 1998, 3rd ed.): 1.

44. Chapter II of *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* discussed the progress and evolution of Alberti's design. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Wiley, 1998, 3rd ed.): 33-35.

45. *Ibid.*, 57-71.

46. Colin Rowe, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa", *Architectural Review* (March 1947).

Modernism. The *AD* manifesto's method of revisiting a distant past, Japan, in order to justify their movement could be seen as an echo of Wittkower's method.

In the *AR* article, Banham's focuses had been on undermining the influences of Wittkowerian influence and to steer the discussion on New Brutalism towards a POP sensitivity that he advocated.⁴⁷ According to Peter Smithson, as well as historians of post-war British architecture, the interest in proportion in the guise of a "Palladian Revival" had waned by 1957.⁴⁸ However, this shift should not be mistaken as a turn away from the study of proportion and symmetry in the discussion of New Brutalism. The Smithsons, as the following part of this paper illustrates, would continue to use traditional Japanese architecture to retrieve cultural values that the Renaissance proportional systems could not offer. Hence, in his 1966 *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic*, Banham shifted his attention and argued the *AD* manifesto's emphasis on Japanese architecture and peasant dwelling was to him "confusing and/or misleading."⁴⁹ He also suggested Crosby and the Smithsons' understandings of Japan was through the reading of Bruno Taut's already biased and problematic study *The Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (1936).⁵⁰

Japan and Standardisation

Although Banham was deniably right in his criticism of the flimsy understanding of Japanese architectural culture found in the *AD* manifesto, he also obscured an important message the Smithsons and Crosby took from Taut's study on Japan.⁵¹ In his twenty-page long and unapologetically biased historiography of Japanese architecture, Taut distinguished two "lines" of traditional Japanese architecture: one positive represented by the standardised architecture of Ise Shrine and resulted in the Katsura Temple. [Fig. 1] The "negative line" was epitomised by the Shrine and Temples of Nikko where construction degenerated into decoration.⁵² In short, Taut's study of Japanese architecture was through the lens of architectural Modernism which celebrated "cleanness, clarity, simplicity, cheerfulness and faithfulness to the materials of nature."⁵³

Taut went on to argue that the most valuable aspect of Japanese architecture was, through "perpetual repetition" of the structure, both physically, ceremonially and spiritually, they created an architecture that had no caprice of contradiction.⁵⁴ Using Ise Shrine – a temple rebuilt every twenty years – as an example, Taut argued that flexibility and simplicity found in standardised architectural elements was what elevated the structure into architecture.⁵⁵ It is also worthy to note that standardisation and industrialised production of architecture was an issue rooted in Crosby and the Smithsons' practices at the time. As a technical editor of the *AD*, Crosby was responsible for the content regarding building construction and

47. Dirk Van den Heuvel, "Between Brutalists. The Banham Hypothesis and the Smithson Way of Life", *The Journal of Architecture*, no. 20 (2015): 293–308.

48. Million Henry A., "Rudolf Wittkower, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism: Its Influence on the Development and Interpretation of Modern Architecture", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 31 (1972): 83–91.

49. Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Academy Press, 1966): 46.

50. Bruno Taut, *The Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1936).

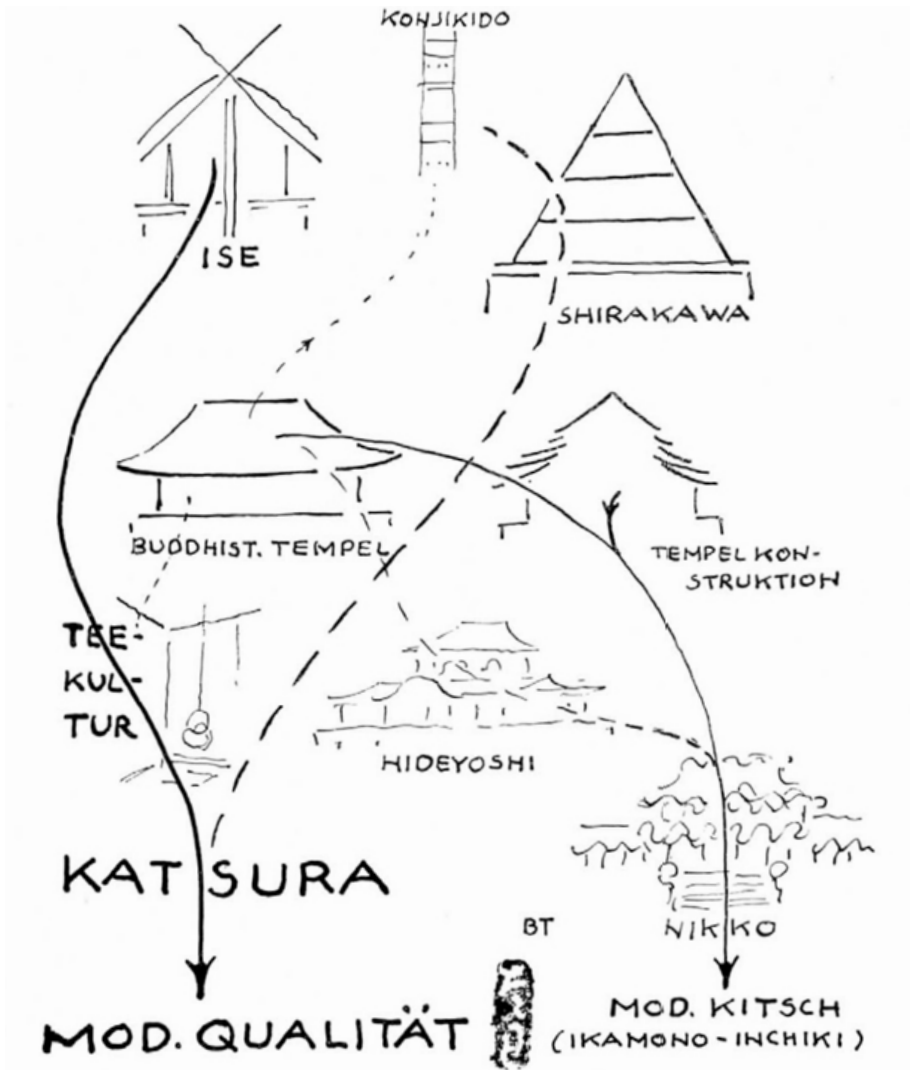
51. Peter Smithson also mentioned the influence of Jiro Harada's *The Lesson of Japanese Architecture*, first published in 1936. It was unclear whether the Smithsons had come across the book before the Second World War or acquired a copy when the book was republished in 1954. Peter Smithson, Catherine Spellman, and Karl Unglaub, *Peter Smithson: Conversations with Students* (NJ, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005): 24-25; Alexander Soper, Alexander, "Book Review: The Lesson of Japanese Architecture. By Jiro Harada", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 15 (1955): 127–28.

52. Bruno Taut, *The Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1936): 25.

53. *Ibid.*, 9.

54. *Ibid.*, 15.

55. *Ibid.*, 13.



1. The positive line, which begins in the Isé Shrines, was not diverted in consequence of Buddhist influences; but the principle of rational construction as represented in Shirakawa was later destroyed. Buddhism — particularly Zen — contributed in the Tea Ceremony a spiritual aesthetics which for the second time (that is, after Isé) brought Japanese architecture to a zenith in the Palace and garden of Katsura.

The negative line, in which the degeneration of construction into decoration was intensified by the rulers' orders for ornamentation, comes from the Buddhist temple.

[25]

FIG. 1 Letter sent by Coderch to Alison Smithson in 1967.

technology which the magazine's long-term editor Monica Pidgeon was less knowledgeable about.⁵⁶ He was, therefore, directly and frequently exposed to developments in and criticism of post-war building construction. Meanwhile, the construction of the Hunstanton School also led Alison and Peter Smithson to encounter the opportunities and difficulties presented by standardisation, which had been elucidated by Philip Johnson in his review of the building (1954).

This discussion on standardisation and industrialised production of architecture also reconciled the two aspirations of New Brutalism: Japanese architecture and Wittkower's study.⁵⁷ Published in 1949, Wittkower's *Architecture in the Age of Humanism* was immediately incorporated

56. Interview with Kenneth Frampton, April 2015.

57. Theo Crosby, Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (January 1955).

into debates about the mathematical rationality of architecture in post-war Britain.⁵⁸ Wittkower's analysis of Palladio's use of perfect numbers, proportion, and symmetry was put into contention with Le Corbusier's contemporaneous publication *Le Modulor*, which articulated an alternative mathematical rationale.⁵⁹ These debates were set against the backdrop of rapid development in the standardisation and mass production of architecture. Therefore, one may conclude other than serving as a link between New Brutalism and the early 20th-century Modernist avant-gardes, Japanese architectural tradition also functioned as a viable precedent of standardised architecture.

Perhaps equally important was that portrayal of Japan also provided a model for the New Brutalists' call for an architecture that could respond to mass-produced culture. (A. Smithson and Smithson 1957) In Taut's study, Japanese architecture was used as a critique of Western consumerism.⁶⁰ The Japanese house dwellers, according to both Taut, were only allowed to express their personality in the tokonoma, an alcove where arts and decoration are placed and changed seasonally. Taut presented the tokonoma as a self-evidential critique of the Western bourgeois interior:

No reminiscences attach to dark corners, and Western "cosiness" is lacking as well as much furniture, carpets, curtains, table-cloths, cushions, pictures, wallpapers and so forth. Just as the air in the room is completely changed by being open to the outside, so the reminiscences attached to the walls and corners – reminiscences which all too easily oppress the inhabitants – are erased as though impressed in dough.⁶¹

In his praise for tokonoma, Taut offered an analysis that echoed with Walter Benjamin's criticism of the burdened cluttered Western bourgeois interior.⁶² In light of the post-war consumerism boom, these criticisms had a new-found relevance to Crosby and Alison and Peter Smithson. The integration of tokonoma in a standardised Japanese construction demonstrated how to maintain individual expression in a mass-produced environment. It also provided an alternative to the mass culture, often seen as an American importation, in post-war Britain.⁶³

Despite his biased views, Taut's study of Japan had mostly situated within the country's history and religion. There were also attempts, in the book, to reflect on Western scholars and visitors' analysis of Japanese architecture. However, in his attempt to claim that Japanese architectural tradition as a knowledge that could be familiar and hence adaptable to Western civilisation, Taut had also inadvertently planted the seed for the mythization of Japan. He wrote of Japan

Here one is dealing not with engineering but with architecture, such as is the case with the Parthenon where the last definite form has also been created – there in marble and here in wood

58. Eva-Marie Neumann, "Architectural Proportion in Britain 1945–1957", *Architectural History*, no. 39 (1996): 197–221.

59. Le Corbusier, *The Modulor: A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

60. Bruno Taut, *The Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1936).

61. *Ibid.*, 11.

62. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978): 155.

63. Barry Curtis, *From Ivory Tower to Control Tower, in The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 221–27; Richard Weight, "Losing The Peace: Germany, Japan, America and the Shaping of British National Identity in the Age of Affluence", in *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited*, edited by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (London: Routledge, 2004): 203–22.

and straw. Just as the Parthenon receives its form, as to proportions and profiles, from the clear and transparent air of Greece, so the Ise Shrine receives its form from the thickly humid and rainy air of Japan.⁶⁴

Taut's evocation of air, rain, marble, and straw could also be seen as sympathetic of Barthes' critique on how "all things are alike" in the media portrayal of non-Western cultures.⁶⁵ Barthes observed that in Western media coverage "the rites, the cultural facts, are never related to a particular historical order, an explicit economic or social status, but only to the great neutral forms of cosmic commonplaces (the seasons, storms, death, etc.)."⁶⁶ In Barthes' terms, Taut had "naturalised" Japanese culture in order to argue the rationality found in Japanese architecture was universal to architecture from different cultures and geographical conditions.

Japan beyond New Brutalism

Perhaps more at stake was that this "naturalised" Japan was what Crosby and the Smithsons took and formulated as a congenital essence of their movement. In 1961, they would present their Japan on a stage dedicated to the discussion of standardised architecture: the 6th Union of International Architects (UIA) Congress. Conspicuously entitled "An Architecture of Technology," the Congress was hoping to use standardised prefabrication as an issue that could bridge architects from the two sides of the Cold-War divide.⁶⁷ Crosby was the designer of the Congress' pavilions and catalogue, of which Peter Smithson contributed an essay.⁶⁸ In the article, Smithson argued that the contemporary discussions on prefabricated architecture were misinformed. Before pursuing higher quantity and quality in prefabricated buildings, he pointed out, architects should first ask the question of *what* to fabricate. Smithson explained that even the more successful building projects based on prefabricated standardised parts, such as the English school programmes, "have failed to develop an appropriate language to fully communicate that base, or to investigate the aesthetic implications of their technology."⁶⁹ Smithson urged architects to find a language and an appropriate expression for architecture in the emerging "technological society."⁷⁰

Smithson's discussion was accompanied by a photo of a Japanese palace, making their view that Japanese architecture would offer invaluable knowledge to contemporary debates in standardised and prefabricated building explicit [Fig.2]. A short, manifesto-like passage was inserted between Smithson's article and the photo, stating,

In a period of rapid increase throughout the world of population, of technological potentials, Above all, of expectations, the architect's problem is
Not only to provide shelter for ever-increasing numbers,

64. Bruno Taut, *The Fundamentals of Japanese Architecture* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1936): 15.

65. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, 2nd ed.): 95.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Miles Glendinning, "Cold-War Conciliation: International Architectural Congress in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s", *The Journal of Architecture*, no. 14 (2009): 197–217.

68. Crosby, Theo, ed., *The Architecture of Technology* (London: Whitefrairs, 1961); Id., "Conclusion: 1961 UIA Congress", *Architectural Design* (November 1961).

69. Peter Smithson, *Untitled*, in *Architecture of Technology*, edited by Theo Crosby, n.p. (London: Whitefrairs Press, 1961).

70. *Ibid.*

To organise the complexities of traffic communications,
But to create the possibility of a higher quality
Of life for the individual citizen in a mass society.⁷¹

71. *Ibid.*

Smithson's rhetoric could be read as a reverberation of their 1957 declaration that "Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work."⁷² In the UIA Congress, not only did Smithson and Crosby suggested Japan was a model for standardised architecture but also a reflection for the industrial conditions in the post-war world.

72. "Opinion: New Brutalism", *Architectural Design* (1957).

This usage of Japan as a reflection for post-war industrial culture could also be found in popular mass media of the time, including the epic war movie *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The story unfolded around a group of British prisoners-of-war who were forced to construct a railway bridge across the River Kwai in Burma. The main plot followed Colonel Nicholson who supposed to represent the British industrious value and their dedication to engineering; but eventually met his tragic end with the bridge detonated killing many more innocent lives. Historian Richard Weight, for example, argued that the dynamics between the British colonel and the Japanese commander Saito in *Bridge on the River Kwai* should be seen as metaphors for "the mass production techniques that the Japanese borrowed from the Americans and honed after the war."⁷³ He pointed out the early conflict between Nicholson and Saito should be recognised the Japanese "attempt to (symbolically) at least blur class boundaries in order to inspire more efficient 'team' working practices."⁷⁴ Although it was unclear whether the Smithsons and Crosby had watched *Bridge on the River Kwai*

73. Richard Weight, "Losing The Peace: Germany, Japan, America and the Shaping of British National Identity in the Age of Affluence", in *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited*, edited by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (London: Routledge, 2004): 211.

74. *Ibid.*

In a period of rapid increase throughout the world of population,
of technological potentials,
Above all, of expectations, the architect's problem is
Not only to provide shelter for ever-increasing numbers,
to organise the complexities of traffic communications,
But to create the possibility of a higher quality
Of life for the individual citizen in a mass society.

В наш век быстрого прироста населения всего мира, увеличения его
технологических возможностей, а прежде всего и общих ожиданий, проблема
архитектора не только в том, чтобы дать кров все большему числу людей и
справиться со сложностями транспорта и связи, но и дать каждому отдельному
человеку массового общественного строя возможность лучшей жизни.

Pendant une période d'augmentation rapide
de la population mondiale,
une période de possibilités technologiques, et
par-dessus tout de grands espoirs le problème de l'architecte est
non seulement de fournir des abris pour des habitants en
nombre sans cesse croissant,
de surmonter des difficultés d'organisation et
de transmission mais aussi
de créer pour l'homme moyen les possibilités d'un
niveau de vie plus élevé dans une société orientée vers la masse.

En una era de rápido aumento en la población mundial,
de avance tecnológico y, sobre todo,
de esperanzas, el arquitecto debe resolver el
problema de proporcionar abrigo a un número creciente
de personas, de organizar las complejidades del tráfico
y de las comunicaciones y
de, en suma, deparar una vida más perfecta al
ciudadano en una sociedad comunal.



FIG. 1 Letter sent by Coderch to Alison Smithson in 1967.

at the time, they shared the view that the Japanese approach to labour and work could offer new synergy to post-war industrial culture.

However, despite its many efficacies, the citation of Japan in New Brutalism was often too obscure and self-referential. Other than the UJA catalogue, in 1961 the Smithsons would also guest-edit a special issue of the *AD* entitled "The Rebirth of Japanese Architecture."⁷⁵ This article was written as a record of their first visit to Japan and included their dialogue with Japanese architects including Kenzo Tange.⁷⁶ It is thus notable that in the first page of the issue, the Smithsons declared "for a proper understanding of Japanese architecture a visit to Le Corbusier's India was an obvious prelude."⁷⁷ This statement could be seen as a reiteration of their claims in the 1955 *AD* manifesto but was also their acknowledgement of how deeply entrenched they were in the mythologization of Japan. This revelation also reflected the changing condition in the discourses about Japanese architecture. A younger generation of Modernist including Kenzo Tange and Kunio Maekawa had taken increasingly notable seats in international architecture. Therefore, not only it became more problematic to neutralise and mythologise Japanese architecture, but also that the new myths might have displaced the old myth of New Brutalism.

In the following decade, the Smithson would revisit the Japanese architectural influence in at least two occasions. Their 1973 publication *Without Rhetoric: an Architectural Aesthetic 1955-1972* began with a reprinting of the January 1955 *AD* manifesto.⁷⁸ A footnote had been added to the discussion of Japanese architecture, where Alison and Peter Smithson clarified that New Brutalism has "not much to do with the Brutalism that popularly became lumped into the style outlined in Reyner Banham's *The New Brutalism*, Architectural Press, 1966."⁷⁹ This addition could be attributed to the shifting personal and intellectual affiliation between the Alison and Peter Smithson, Banham, and Crosby; but it should also be understood that the lesson of Japan was still integral to the Smithsons' approach to architecture.⁸⁰

In 1977, Alison and Peter Smithson reused Japanese architectural tradition as the concept and representation in their proposal for the Riverside Apartments Competition. Again, they took pride in their superficial understanding of Japanese culture, stating that the Japanese figures in their drawings were cut out of a postcard from the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁸¹ In the description of the project, they revisited the tokonoma ideal:

Layering, layers, screening: even support structures being consciously layered-up in space and capable of change and extension of meaning by further layers to be added or taken away. The dressing of seasons... the decoration by the event...these are some of our oldest established themes.⁸²

75. Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The Rebirth of Japanese Architecture", *Architectural Design* (February 1961).

76. Nicholas Bullock, *Building the Post-War World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain* (London: Psychological Press, 2002): 126.

77. Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The Rebirth of Japanese Architecture", *Architectural Design* (February 1961): 55.

78. Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic, 1955-1972* (London: Latimer New Dimension, 1973).

79. *Ibid.*, 4.

80. Dirk von den Heuvel points out that the Smithson were irritated by Banham because he published *The New Brutalism* without consulting them. Dirk Van den Heuvel, "Between Brutalists. The Banham Hypothesis and the Smithson Way of Life", *The Journal of Architecture*, 20 (2015): 297, 306. Anne Massey suggests that the Smithsons' break from Banham might contribute to the Smithson couple's absence from the film dedicated to the history of the Independent Group, *Father of Pop* (1979). Anne Massey, *Out of the Ivory Tower: The Independent Group and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013): 106-7. In the early 1970s, Crosby and the Smithsons were also collaborating on an urban regeneration project at Cherry Garden Pier, Bermondsey.

81. Peter Smithson, "AD Profile: Milbank", *Architectural Design* (1977).

82. *Ibid.*

The competition entry, emphasising the regularity and openness of the plan, echoed explicitly Taut's description of Japanese architecture which "as the air in the room is completely changed by being open to the outside."⁸³ The Smithsons did not win the competition, and the surviving drawings were published as the back cover of the AD in 1977. This revisiting of Japan could again be seen as a reflection of the conditions of British architecture of the time. By the mid-1970s the Modernist dominance in British architectural design had faded, and the rejection of hard-line aesthetic could be found in various realms of design.⁸⁴ The answer to consumerism's impact on architecture remained murky, while the economic climate of 1970s Britain seemed to pose a further challenge to the nation's continuing architectural development. However, at the moment when the Modern architecture was declared dead by younger architectural polemicists, this reference to the origin of Modern architecture by the Smithsons garnered little attention in the architectural field.⁸⁵

Conclusion:

The analysis of the Smithsons writings from 1955 to the 1960s suggested that Japan had been functioned as an inspiration and also a reflection on post-war architectural discourse. However, it is also important to note that New Brutalism did not only draw information from the media portrayal of Japan; they also employed the methods of mass media to articulate and promote their movement. This re-alignment of architecture and media could be attributed to their desire to offer something new and unprecedented, as well as to avoid a direct reference to past architectural styles. It could also be seen as a reflection of the architects' entrenchment with the modern agenda of creating an architecture of mass appeal. By adapting its methods, the New Brutalists hoped that their movement could connect with everyday life in the same ways as the mass media.

However, as the discussion of New Brutalism developed, we could also find that the Smithsons and Crosby had been increasingly aware that they were mythologizing Japan. Their writings in the 1961 *AD* special issue could be seen as an acknowledgement to this fact.⁸⁶ Due to this mythologization, the discussion on New Brutalism had also become more and more self-referential – an observation that was made early on by Banham in his 1955 *AR* article. In addition to Banham's criticism the Smithsons "talked only to each other," this study suggests the Smithsons' attitude can also be regarded as what Barthes diagnosed as "to live to the full the contradiction of [their] time" and to "make sarcasm the condition of truth."⁸⁷ New Brutalism accepted the myth created by mass media, entered into it and in doing so, mythicized itself.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Andrew Saint, "Review: Houses from the Factory: System Building and the Welfare State 1942-74", *Construction History*, no. 6 (1990): 85–89.

85. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

86. Alison Smithson, and Peter Smithson, "The Rebirth of Japanese Architecture", *Architectural Design*, (February 1961).

87. Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism", *Architectural Review* (December 1955); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, 2nd ed.): 11.