

## THE SAD END OF NEW BRUTALISM

The Second World War, which should have made the world safe for that one great architecture, true to the twentieth century, only made it cosy for the pragmatic development and commercial exploitation of the ideas for which two generations of pioneers had fought. In many parts of the world after 1945 various regional, related offspring of the central movement went through a similar life-cycle, though not quite simultaneously. Scattered pockets of believers engaged in brief and not very violent skirmishes with public taste to establish or re-establish the tenets of modern architecture. Impatience for a quick decision led to some concessions being made, both consciously and unconsciously. Then the believers were joined by many others and in no time formal recognition was gained. Almost immediately an unexpected wave of popularity carried modern architecture to heights of worldly success undreamed of in pre-war Europe.

However, it was no longer the same thing. The purity was gone. The principles were one by one set aside and practice quickly declined into relative decadence of various kinds: in the USA to an effete arcaded prettiness, in Scandinavia and England to picturesque cottage-mongering, in many other places to tasteless featuristic ornamentation. Success spoiled modern architecture. But not completely. Even in the darkest hours the spirit of the real architecture, true to its new social attitudes and new technological methods, never really died. It was kept alive in the side channels away from the mainstream, in earnest talk and little publications, and in drawings for competitions or other dream projects that would never be built.

In this sort of night studio life the spirit flickered on. A fairly inevitable reaction to the weakness of all the watering-down set in, and the true spirit flared up again. The different blazes which ignited around the world about the same time—it was the middle of the 1950's—showed rather different sparks and colours. Yet, unlike as they looked, they were strongly linked by motive. Kenzo Tange reacting against modern *shibui*, Paul Rudolph or Louis Kahn reacting against the growth of which Yamasaki is the blossom, the Smithsons reacting against early Roehampton, and other links of the chain-reaction in many places, all produced works which had in common at least one thing: the quality of aggressive candour.

It was no coincidence, of course, that this was precisely the quality with which Le Corbusier, just a decade

earlier, had reacted against the most tiresomely elegant of all European cultures. All these architects wanted to emphasize, with the assurance of mass, their new stand against compromise and any kind of pandering to popular aesthetic conventions. Le Corbusier took obvious pleasure in rubbing the smug taste of Parisians with rough, raw concrete and pouring pots of his hideous off-primary paints into the wounds. Not really sadistically; only to make absolutely certain that everyone got his message.

The exciting story of this revival of the rebellious spirit of early modern architecture may either be taken chronologically, or dissected by regions or personalities or visual sub-fashions, or sub-divided into personal intellectual theories. Whichever standpoint is taken, the same people, events and buildings inevitably will be cited again and again to show a different aspect of the development. If for instance one wants to make the point that regionalism lingers on despite the levelling influences of this century, then quite a number of interesting observations can be made about the points where British, Continental, Japanese and American works, all in this same genre, depart from one another. Or if one cares to take a stand on the most thoroughly discussed and documented of the theories associated with this return to strength, then those same buildings may suddenly seem all of a kind. All will look to be New Brutalist.

Dr. Reyner Banham, taking a steady central position on this stand in his book,\* sees evidence of the English section of this movement radiating influence out to at least three corners of the earth. Not that his is a boisterous book, bragging about the extent of the influence of the peculiarly English thing called New Brutalism; on the contrary, in the end it leaves behind a wistful, almost haunting sense of sadness. Nevertheless, Dr. Banham wanted, as well as to tell a chapter of recent history, to establish a point without which the chapter might seem unworthy of a full-dress book. The point was, of course, that the impact of this one regional phenomenon was world-wide. That he submits his case with skill goes without saying, and if it was an impossible task it was still well worth the try. For the New Brutalism was certainly the most articulate of all the attempts to re-establish the original integrity and strength of modern architecture that occurred after the soft decade following the war. Yet it cannot be inflated more than that.

\**The New Brutalism* By Reyner Banham. London, 1966: The Architectural Press, 80s

Dr. Banham's book is sub-titled *Ethic or Aesthetic?* with a question-mark that warns of indecision and remains in the air till the end. Necessarily so, for the movement was both, but separately. As an ethic New Brutalism was, however valid, only one of the strongest links in a chain; as an aesthetic it was, however refreshing, only an indefinite indication of honest goodness. It was not extreme. Compared with the triumphant redundancy of the Japanese development, British New Brutalism was positively timid. To try to define it any further is to destroy its individuality, for it did not even claim originality. Most of the buildings that are called New Brutalist are, proudly, derivatives of either the Maisons Jaoul or the Unité d'Habitation, or both. Dr. Banham's selection is by no means arbitrary but is extremely personal. To represent Japan he illustrates only Maekawa. Certainly he indicates in the text that Kenzo Tange was somehow peripherally involved, yet the fact that not one of Tange's buildings seems quite to qualify for the Brutalist fold indicates the finesse of the argument. Dr. Banham explains that several Brutalist buildings have elevated pedestrian 'streets' or decks, and bridges through space ('... one of the few Brutalist thumb-prints that is not directly derived from Le Corbusier,' he notes, '... an important tell-tale'). Yet even this idiosyncrasy cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of membership; otherwise Paul Rudolph's building for Yale Arts and Architecture, with its internal death-drop gangway, would have had an honoured place. Instead it is mentioned in a way that suggests it was blackballed. Scarborough College by John Andrews near Toronto would also seem to qualify by virtue of its multi-level internal streets, stripped concrete, and most memorable image. Other omissions add to the indefiniteness: there is in Dr. Banham's book no mention of vast areas of the globe, including all America outside the USA. There is no reference to any timber building. Yet at the same time in the examples shown there is so much diversity of visual style that one is led finally to the suspicion that the aesthetic of New Brutalism can be found in anything that was built by Alison and Peter Smithson or in anything that in Dr. Banham's opinion looks as if it might have been built by Alison and Peter Smithson in circumstances other than their own.

It could even mean a Cadillac, c. 1954 vintage, seen in a cutting from an American glossy magazine. (The reader is shown this historic pin-up. It depicts the attenuated object of desire being gazed upon by a socially rising young couple who are thinking, 'Maybe this will be the year.' Admirers will have noted that another Cadillac, still of the tail-fin era of the 1950's, figures quite largely in Alison Smithson's first novel, which was published almost simultaneously with Dr. Banham's book). This Cadillac cult was, or is, only a sort of masochistic, ironically anti-brutal, pop deviation of New Brutalist interests; half-joking yet with a degree of genuine admiration. However, if the scope of the movement is to be considered broad enough to include cars, it is odd that Dr. Banham's account spurns that most basic of all vehicles, the Citroen *Deux Chevaux*, which does in fact enjoy the formal recognition of the Smithsons. Four or five of these little brute cars appear in one of the most engaging pictures in the book. They are nuzzling up like puppies

against their spiritual master, the Unité d'Habitation, but their presence is not noted.

The definition of the New Brutalist ethic appears much clearer than that of the aesthetic. It had almost nothing to do with being brutal. It was a revival and a tightening up of the code of early functional-structural morals. Its success was in its timing and in the catchy name. 'The New Brutalism' unquestionably carried meaning in the dispiritedly busy drawing offices of the late 1950's. It meant more than just 'Brutus' and more than 'brutal' or 'brutalist'—words that linger on today as clichés associated with any dull reproduction of *béton brut* or any bad carpentry. It was the adjective that gave the name its special force. The noun was bold and powerful yet the 'new' relieved it with a slightly ironic twist. One understood that the brute force was to be applied in this movement at the intellectual level. Here was a challenge to all that was pretty and weak, a fierce fight back to first principles of twentieth-century building for use. Yet the resulting architecture was not to be necessarily physically brutal. It had only to be basic. It could employ any methods and materials, even plastics and polished metal, if they were used basically. This meant freedom from all aesthetic inhibitions, yet the discipline of a virtually religious respect for the nature of methods and materials, and for the realities of functional parts. None of this was new, and the unoriginality is of course the weakness of the argument for New Brutalism as an independent movement. Even in most matters of detail it relied heavily on Le Corbusier dogma, and its attitude to him was dotting rather than constructive. Anything he built after 1945, even if not illustrated, may be considered as belonging within the New Brutalist movement—and yet not categorically of it, for he, as master, was exempt from classification. New Brutalism could even swallow his Modulor and his use, when it suited him, of the exceptionally anti-brutal, and not at all basic, Golden Section. The relevance of such aesthetic notions, often so romantically and irrationally advocated, is not explained, and one is led back to the suspicion that the only straightforward and consistent rule followed by Dr. Banham was that New Brutalism was anything the Smithsons permitted. In any event, his official if unauthorized history is essentially, despite the guest appearances by a galaxy of international stars, an oblique view of an episode in the life of the Smithsons. And it is with this pointedly personal note that the element of sadness enters, for it is a story of outstanding architectural talent frustrated or frozen by social conditions.

Dr. Banham makes a good deal of the Smithsons' pretty ordinary Sugden house built at Watford in 1956, but in fact the evidence of absolutely authentic, categorical New Brutalist work is confined to one ageing building, the Hunstanton school, which was an exception anyway since it followed Mies rather than Le Corbusier. There were also some drawings that, on the evidence submitted, would have been in any good world translatable into very good architecture. However, as this book fails to acknowledge, though the epilogue perhaps hints at it, this is not a good world in which architecture can flourish by goodness alone. It is only a reasonable world for traditions and a marvellous world for visual fads. The real problem

facing the Brutalists and their colleagues round the world was not ethical or aesthetical so much as practical. Paper dreams never make good architectural history. When faced with the workaday politics connected with a building in the West End, the Smithsons bent their principles too far to keep Banham with them. But they got something built. They knew that the heroic 'swagger' of Brutalism which was good for the lecture platform, or for a competition entry or for a small house, had to be modified slightly for a school, more for a public building, and almost completely re-written for St. James's Street, where stuck-on stone was better appreciated.

So it happened that the day on which the Smithsons achieved a worldly success with a fine piece of practical professional architecture, New Brutalism died. The building was just a 'craftsmanly exercise within the great tradition' as Banham rightly observes. It was the end of their personal stand for absolute basic architecture. It was a retreat, as Banham sees it, to art of some sort, and that is a pretty serious accusation coming from him. Thus the author who fostered New Brutalism and without whom its message would never have spread even half as far as he proposes it did, finally kills it with his own hand on page 134 in the year 1964.

The sadness of this was underlined by the Smithsons' reply to the book, which appeared promptly in *The Architects' Journal*. The Smithsons were understandably hurt that a full-dress account of their movement should be written without their sanction and should be in one sense premature yet at the same time so final. So they felt obliged to dissect it and record 'errors of fact' of private significance. For example, they wrote: 'The history of the "street deck" is wrong in important details in this book. . . . The word "deck" appears for the first time anywhere (outside a boat) on our Golden Lane competition drawings of 1952. . . .' Apparently the Brutalist studies of American pop magazines did not extend beyond the Cadillac advertisements to the well-worn sun deck of the homemaker pages. They also contributed a touch of further confusion to the definition of the style by calling, in effect, the back of Alvar Aalto's dormitory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1947-8) 'probably the first true Brutalist building,' while ignoring the same building's *Art Nouveau* front. Yet they did not dispute the Banham thesis that a real New Brutalism, or an ethic of building technology, must exclude art, and they seemed ready to agree that the New Brutalism was dead.

If the movement ever had a tentative claim to an independent aesthetic, the Banham book, by attempting to inflate that too far, exploded it. The formal announcement of the death at the end of the book really meant only the abandonment of the argument. Yet the other part of Brutalism, the ethic, was happily independent, and had no need to die along with the over-strained aesthetic argument. Between 1953 and about 1963 there was 'a sense of certainty about what to do,' wrote the Smithsons in italics in their answer to Banham; but after 1963 'all problems seemed to take further depth and a period of conscious personal retraining set in. . . .' In other words, perhaps, innocent confidence was broken by confrontation with the politics of building. However, there is no suggestion

of disillusionment with, or abandonment of, the ethic. Dr. Banham blames architects, with their narrow, restricting traditions of artistic creation, for the non-appearance still of a real architecture based—to take his penultimate words—on 'a working morality' of 'the relationship of the parts and materials of a building.' Yet the buildings and events in his book, and their failure to conquer the world, may be interpreted in another way. In the period under consideration the principles and spirit of architecture—the real thing—were re-established, so that by about 1963 there was no serious disagreement in all circles where architecture was taken seriously. It is true that the evidence all around us might seem to argue the contrary. Our period is marked by many buildings which are superficially based on (Miesian) technology but are garnished with anonymous neo-ornamentation. It also supports a more photographed, smaller number of buildings which are Expressionistic monuments to their architects. Between these extremes there are countless shades and deviations. Yet I am convinced that the shortcomings and the variety result from the insensitivity of many architects and the wilfulness of a few others, rather than from a fundamental split in ideology.

The overwhelming majority of architects throughout the world still ostensibly and sincerely subscribe to a code which characterizes what still may be described as the modern movement. However incompetent architects may be in converting this code into solutions to practical problems, and however convenient it may be at times to forget it, or whimsically renounce it, the code is ingrained in the twentieth century and its calls to conscience persist: fulfil the function of the building within itself and within society; respect the nature of materials and structural realities; press technology and methodology into higher efficiency; renounce all historic allusions and irrelevant beautification. It is a call to basic building goodness, and it is not calculated to stifle the art or expression of architecture. On the contrary it provides an intellectual basis for work of widely divergent emotional character: clean or complex, reposeful or exciting, genteel or brutal. Nevertheless, the final article of the code requires that the thing being expressed should be the true nature of the building, not the ego of the architect.

Yet although all this was tacitly accepted again in the 1960s, the code was still hard to live up to, and its translation into building was still limited by lack of popular understanding. It had not been demonstrated well enough or often enough to have the confidence of the non-architects of this world who commission most architecture. The greatest hope of every architectural evangelical movement like New Brutalism is that it will lead the world away from seductive aesthetic pleasures to the pure intelligence of building. The failure of New Brutalism, along with all other parallel ambitious efforts to this date, was that it preached almost exclusively to the converted. It was a would-be 'sort of social dialogue' (the Smithson phrase) that remained an architectural monologue. The problem still with us is to build our accepted ethics into that 'working morality' for day to day building. Then many kinds of architecture, including the Smithsons' art and that anti-artistic other architecture of Reyner Banham, might flourish.