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## BRUTALIST CONNECTIONS: WHAT IT STANDS FOR

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## ABSTRACT

The term Brutalism has been applied to a wide range of modern architecture buildings designed in the 1945-75s decades. Until recently, although the term was easily employed by several laymen and scholars sources, it had been very much overlooked or disregarded by the canonical architectural historiography. In the beginning of the 21st century it is again becoming possible, for many reasons – and the distance in time is not the less important one – to reexamine Brutalism as a dispassionate research subject: the proper use of the term and the architecture it stands for. The ideas and hypothesis here displayed are being investigated and discussed inside a broad research on mid-20th century Brutalist buildings, that already includes an ample group of hundreds of examples, situated in many places all over the world. It strives to open up its perception and to acknowledges Brutalism as a world-wide phenomenon. It proposes that, although polemical, the term Brutalism may be applied as convenient device to index these buildings in order to name and qualify a specific architectural trend of mid 20th century. It also aims to re-examine those buildings “by themselves” and to reconsider them as singular knots of a network of connections, inside the wide and complex web of modern architecture cultural and professional realm of that moment. The information on some of this buildings have already been processed and the results may be browsed at the research website at [www.brutalistconnections.com](http://www.brutalistconnections.com).

**Keywords:** Brutalism. Distant readings. Mid-20th century modern architecture

## BRUTALIST CONNECTIONS: WHAT IT STANDS FOR

Having been caught in a limbo of relative oblivion and misinformation, Brutalism is a topic much in need of a thorough revision. The so-called Brutalist architecture remains a relatively unknown episode of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture; in some circles the mere notion of its possible existence would still be received with severe suspicion. With a lack of more concerted debate and examination, Brutalism has become a narrow outdated tag, whose understanding has been limited to the fastidious repetition, from one author to the next, of the same old quotes - for the most excerpted from Reyner Banham's remarkable book of 1966, and secondarily, from the critical historiographical revisions written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's last quarter. Alas, from a contemporary point of view, none of these sources can be considered as absolute, or at least, as unbiased. Their assertions are supported on a limited sample of works designed by a reduced number of architects and ignore the astounding spreading of brutalist works, from its very early start, on all continents. Its most authorized commentator, Banham, defines himself in his book's epilogue as a "survivor", and candidly claims that his relate was not a dispassionate one. As for the finisecular architectural historians currently used as reference on the subject, several circumstances worked together to prevent them from obtaining a more detached overview on Brutalism. They are trapped in their historical condition as immediate heirs of the deep crisis sweeping Modern Architecture during the 1980s, which was aggravated by the near shadow of the old deceased masters, and by their proximity with the subject, plus the attrition provided by the criticism of the more polemical and less interesting late brutalist manifestations.

A concerted study of Brutalist architecture "in itself" – and not only through the indirect reflection provided by previous ossified opinions, biased quotes and a narrow perception of a limited group of examples -, and its standing as a world-wide phenomenon has been hitherto quite effectively blocked. And even when it indirectly happens – for example, when respectable authors care to examine the 1950-70s brutalist architecture built in their respective places – more frequently than not the term "brutalism" is avoided, or plainly ruled out, as inappropriate - or taboo. Alas, without accepting the same name to tag slightly different but mostly similar experiences, scattered all over the world, turns it difficult to compare them, and to acknowledge the significant and quite extended Brutalist connections.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a pervasive mood of marked reluctance, perhaps more accentuated in the European and Anglo-Saxon world, against reconsidering Brutalism from other points-of-view - as if the subject was already and unquestionably defined; in any case, any tentative is dismissed as not worth the effort. A possible reason for such *parti-pris* against debating brutalism - the use of the term and the works that may be indexed under its cover – and

for reviewing the issue from a positive stand, may sprout from the controversies raised by Brutalist buildings' dark side – like, for example, the problematic maintenance of rough exposed concrete surfaces. Another bias against Brutalism would perhaps come from the neoliberal political point of view, which spread around the world from the 1980s on, and would not see with good eyes the institutional and governmental clientele demands, which represented the majority of the Brutalist buildings customers<sup>1</sup>.

All these constantly repeated commonplaces and biases may be considered outworn - but not so the bare facts on the buildings themselves. It is often very complicate to deal with Brutalist buildings in a daily basis: their rough exposed concrete surfaces - built half a century ago, without the benefit of recent technical developments on the technique - do age badly. Their experimentalist attitude is more prone to technical and functional failure than an average building. In addition one has to cope with their taste for poor detailing, derived or not from its typical scale exaggeration and its sometimes clumsy monumentality, applied even to the smallest buildings. Most of all, it is complicate to live and prosper inside the relative inflexibility of their design propositions: “Brutalist” buildings were mostly meant to stand, not to change, making it very difficult to adapt them to new circumstances and uses.

Against the tide, a new generation of young and not-so young architects from all over the world has been, in the last decade or so, partially claiming the Brutalist heritage to themselves, and re-using some of its tropes in their own contemporary propositions. For sure, their attachment works as a good propaganda, helping to open up the interest on Brutalism. But instead of simply celebrating the fact, let's be careful and aware of possible deceptions: to request a legate without having properly examined it, may befit a very tricky situation.

In some cases – as for example in my city of São Paulo, Brazil – it has even led to spurious patched up historiographies that hastily presume the existence of a continued, unbroken trend connecting the 1960s and today's architecture inside a single cohesive “Paulista School” - which is of course a purely mythical construct. Such presumption has worked very effectively as a prestige device, aimed to hype the impact of a new generation of very talented architects. Maybe it was an opportune tool, for it is very difficult to be heard when you live down south and still wants to share the global scenario either. Anyway, there is no unrelenting Paulista School without expiring validity date, established since forever until to-day.

And there is no Brutalist architecture any more: Brutalism is already, at least since the last 30 years or so, a historical subject. As so, any contemporary architects from anywhere in the world, who feel gratitude to those masters and their amazing buildings, are certainly allowed to absorb, transform and reuse that heritage; which do not prevent them to also being indebted to several other different legacies, coming from many other times and places, all of them and combined in a unique mixture that conforms the originality of their contemporary stand.

So, coming back to Brutalism, let's begin by stating that this study is not meant to validate the present, by means of a collect call to the past. Nevertheless, I assume a position that the construction of contemporaneity is based as much on new demands as on a selected revision of a chosen assort of past achievements; and that some of them may have been too hastily proscribed, and need to be properly reexamined. This study tries to help this revision, and the enlargement of the disciplinary boundaries, by trying on learning from the multitudinous, varied and still not exhausted manifestations of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern architecture.

This study intends to reexamine a limited, but even so, very ample quantity of works and facts related to Brutalism, whose collection and examination may suggest some intriguing concluding issues. The first is that apart from Le Corbusier forwardness, exemplified in his post 2<sup>nd</sup> WW early seminal contribution (which s not static, but keep on changing along his last 20 years), Brutalist buildings do appear at quite the same time, in a multi-continental spread, happening since the very beginning of the 1950s or even slightly before. Although it is not the most prevalent trend in the 1950s, the number of its examples increased logarithmically in the 1960s, and quickly conformed a quasi-“language”, shared by several architects that help to develop and diversify it in one hand – and in the other, to reduce it to some formal procedures that eventually tended to wear off. With no clear-cut origin (except Le Corbusier’s), its quick spreading in the 1950-60s suggests the presence of a wide world web of “brutalist connections” – whose existence was embryonically perceived by Banham 1966’s book. The Brutalist expansion is in debt not only with Le Corbusier’s examples, but to an certain extent, to the contributions of Mies Van der Rohe’s and Frank Lloyd Wright. But it is also obliged to the influence of other very important personages who, until recently, have been considered as secondary. As for example, Marcel Breuer, Paul Rudolph and Gordon Bunshaft in the US; Clorindo Testa and SEPRA (Santiago Sánchez Elía, Federico Peralta Ramos y Alfredo Agostin) in Argentina, Vilanova Artigas and Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil; Mario Pani, Abraham Zabludovski and Teodoro Gonzalez de Leon in Mexico – to name just a few among many others.

This work is an effort of comparative architecture, on a world wide basis, which makes it a complicate proposition and certainly weakens its strength: it is easier to be precise when considering an isolated building, and much more difficult to try and propose connections and panoramas. Anyway, it is perhaps a necessary assignment. It is not complete, and it will never be: it is a task to be done and redone, mostly with the help of other contributors, including friends, colleagues and more formal bibliographical references coming from everywhere. It does not intend to be original, but to follow and complete some leads that were left open and wanting. And most of all, it does not intend, not even in dreams, to propose a final word on the subject. It just longs to raise the tip of a somber veil that has descended over Brutalist architecture since the 1980s; and its strives to do so in a clear, rigorous and critical way.

In this study, Brutalism is defined by the set of characteristics able to be found in brutalist works. This is certainly a circular paradox; but if it succeeds, it may become a pragmatic approach.

Although it has to study the previous theoretical contributions on the subject – and of course, Banham's are a priority - it gives preference to facts, dates and buildings to construct its hypothesis and conclusions. As so, it is incompatible with any kind of "a priori" ideological approach. Instead, it makes a huge effort to start from each work and to progress into the collective of works, carefully considering the design dates. If it tries to extract some appropriate, but even so, provisional generalizations, it does not intend to reclaim a "movement" - which probably had never existed in the Brutalist case. Finally, this study is a work in progress and a never ending quest. Most of all, it has no purpose outside itself: it is just - as any other research - the discharging of a restlessness, a personal determination to try and clarify some issues, just for its sake, and for the pleasure of appreciating some good pieces of architecture.

### **ON THE USE OF THE TERM "BRUTALISM"**

Although the term Brutalism was coined relatively recently, it is not easy to analyze it and to try and disentangle the multiple layers of meanings it has acquired along the last half century or so<sup>2</sup>. Anyway, such a task would not be possible without first revisiting Reyner Banham's "The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?" (first published in 1966)<sup>3</sup>.

Banham's book is more-often mentioned and hastily quoted than critically read or studied - although it remains of paramount importance to understand some works and debates of the 1950-60s, specially but not only in Britain. Its significance is twofold: in the one hand, it is a successfully case of myth-making; on the other hand, it has several excellent qualities: it displays a suggestive survey of works that try its best to be of international scope; through the acknowledging of several brutalist buildings it achieves some splendid insights on their characteristics, and establishes the bases to understand Brutalism as a well disseminated language or 'quasi-style'; and last but not least, it coins the expression "brutalist connection" – which can be used, as we try to do so, as an interesting device to better understand the historical event of Brutalism as an architectural trend of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its worldwide quick spreading.

To Banham, Brutalism – or in his terms and that of his local generation, "New Brutalism" – was a "movement". It may be so considered when it is observed, with a magnifying glass and exclusively at the debates originated and nourished by the British "angry young" generation of architects, held and published around 1952-55. Departing from that restricted local basis – which he describes with smart accuracy and the enthusiasm of a fellow traveler - he vigorously endeavor to extends its boundaries and to promote the legend of the origin, precedence and predominance of British architects in the constitution, not only of the "New Brutalism" debates (or "movement"), but also, in a deft sleight of hand, of "Brutalism" in general.

Banham's book begins with a detailed but partial historical account, cleverly seasoned with some easy to remember anecdotes, very apt to beguile the reader. It then proceeds in a path whose aim

is not quite to arrive at a general definition of Brutalism (or even, of the “New Brutalism”), but to promote the young British cultural, artistic and architectural ambiance of the 1944–1964s - with a main, but not exclusive focus on the creative contribution of the architects Allison and Peter Smithson. It cleverly postpones the appearance of Le Corbusier to the second chapter; and while stating that “behind” New Brutalism there lies the “undisputed architectural fact” of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation at Marseilles, he fiercely criticizes the old master contradictions and avoids recognizing his influence on British “New Brutalism”. On the contrary, he gives the trophy of “first completed building to carry the title of ‘New Brutalist’” to the Hunstanton School (Allison and Peter Smithson, 1949-54), which obviously has no inspiration from Corbusier’s and lots from Mies Van der Rohe’s.

As seen from today, it is quite difficult to accept - except by the force of authority and tradition, first established by Banham himself – that the Hunstanton School can be remotely considered as a “brutalist” building: neo-palladianist, perhaps; with tints of some medieval schools traditions, maybe; influenced by the neoclassical tradition, surely - as was then suggested indirectly by Collin Rowe and directly by Philip Johnson. But the epithet of “brutalism” just does not easily suit it. Of course, Banham knows that - for he qualifies the School as “the most precise imitation of the building style of Mies van der Rohe to have appeared outside the USA”. Yet, he uses a lever to raise – and to make believe - such relatively incongruous connection (Hunstanton & Brutalism): he appeals to the “moral” realm. Quoting: “This puritanical exercise [Hunstanton] in the assembly of highly finished synthetic materials such as glass and steel, the ‘technological’ materials, may seem a surprising beginning [of ‘New Brutalism’]. Yet the morality that approved raw concrete of the ‘Unité’ could equally well approve the use that Mies Van der Rohe had made of steel, glass and brick...”<sup>4</sup>. To reinforce such a sliding trick, Banham establishes the second fold of his myth-making: he suggests the idea that Brutalism was essentially an “ethical” proposition, and not an “aesthetical” one.

While in his book’s title Banham maintains the question mark (ethic or aesthetic?) in the book’s last chapter (which very few people remember to quote...) he accepts his defeat and contradicts himself, stating that: “For all its brave talk of ‘an ethic, not an aesthetic’, Brutalism never quite broke out of the aesthetic frame of reference”<sup>5</sup>. He even admits his disappointment as naïve: “The ethic of Brutalism was a campaign of ‘mens sana in corpore sano’, but no-one should have doubted that the mind and the body would prove, ultimately, to be the mind and body which had always belonged to architecture. For a non-architect like myself to expect them to be otherwise was naïve”<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, if you ask any learned architect what Banham has said about Brutalism, you’d certainly receive as an answer that Banham affirmed (or even, ‘proved’) that Brutalism was an “ethic”, not an “aesthetic” - in detriment to the author’s last words. But maybe not to his spirit, for Banham obstinately insisted in believing his own mythmaking: ”somehow I intend to hide that I was

seduced, not by the Brutalism aesthetic but by its subsistent tradition of its ethical position, by the persistency of the ideal that the relationship between the parts and the materials of a building constitutes a practical moral – and for me this is still the validity of the New Brutalism”.

Of course, such kind of practical moral do preside the architectural design process of many Brutalist examples; but it is certainly not its exclusive privilege, for it can be traced back to other previous traditions and it is somehow an inherent mood of almost all Modern architecture early examples. And even before: the “truth to nature” and the “moral and material truth” is a debate already present in Ruskin and others, since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its prevalence has conformed one of the most basic theoretical questions that strive to delimit the architectural discipline itself since it had broken from being rooted on tradition into beguiling the innovation – and perhaps is as old as architecture: it is a notion that regularly reappears in the architectural scenario every other decade. As so, it is not exclusively attached to an epoch, a material, a technique or a trend. Brutalism may be fond of it too - but that alone is not enough an explanation to circumscribe its intrinsic peculiarities; which are, more quite and more precisely so – as any architecture cannot avoid to be – of plastic, structural, material nature; hence, belonging to the “aesthetical” realm.

Mixing hard information, excellent architectural readings of well chosen works, interesting contextual analysis, some very useful insights on the architectural characteristics of brutalist buildings and a careful display of his “personal beliefs”, Banham was extremely successful in a sort of triple layered mythmaking: that of Brutalism as “an ethic”; that of “New Brutalism” as the same thing as “Brutalism”; and that of both being of British origin and privilege. He was successful: there remains, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a pervasive belief that the term “Brutalism” can be correctly applied only in Banham’s limited sense (or more precisely, in the sense he suggests in the first half of his book); and that its use would be unjustified in other circumstances —even though Banham himself, if carefully read in all letters, did not completely hold such position.

Considering that and for the sake of clarity – and at least inside the realm of this study -, the term “New Brutalism” would be better distinguished from “Brutalism”. And the former had better be used only to identify the debates held by a young generation of British architects, in the post World War II, who were dissatisfied with the state of affairs and the ongoing tension between continuity and transformation of the modernist tradition, and had strived to propose other possible paths. Actually, this seems to be the sense in which the Smithson’s used the term in their texts, published around 1953, when it was first picked by Banham and used in an 1955 article - where and when he begins the extrapolation of the sense, later to be consolidated in his book.

Certainly, the use of the term “Brutalism” is very rare in the 1950s, as were the works it would later identify – or, in the case of the works, less rare than it seems, as a concerted research can easily demonstrate. But the name of a trend does not necessarily have to precede it, especially when one admits that Brutalism was never properly a “movement”: it does not hold on a previous doctrine, it does not appear after a manifesto and it does not start from an a priori body of procedures.

Brutalism begins, as it often happens with most architectural trends, by the practical experience; design and construction are meant primarily to attend the client's necessities, but they also benefit from new technical possibilities, take leads from suggestive plastic and structural developments, and propose innovative solutions that reflect and rebound inside the professional ambiance. In this case, the ambiance of the second and third generation of "modern" architects and engineers, already widely but thinly spread all over the world, defining a well-formed sort of professional élite, interconnected by publications, periodicals, travel facilities, interchange programs and, above all, the powerful wish to contribute to design "modernity".

After a slow beginning in the post 2<sup>nd</sup> WW years Brutalism gains momentum, by the divulgation in the specialized media of some exemplary works, and progressively pervades the panorama. Until it reaches a saturation point that makes it more "visible": it is only then that the critics, professors and commentators strive to find a name that would suit it – and Brutalism was it.

If we accept that Brutalism is not a movement per se, but an artistic/architectural trend, that tends to be perceived as that only when it has already enough good things to show; and if we care to organize a data base, filled with information about the buildings, and to display them by their design dates, the timeline that results has a quite different significance and arrangement than what is commonly acknowledged and reported on most historical guidebooks.

Its first manifestations can be traced from Le Corbusier's post-2<sup>nd</sup> WW propositions (and some of his pre-war, too). It is followed by outstanding examples set by several architects, working in many places, all over the world in the 1950s. Around 1959 onwards Brutalism emerges as a more recognizable trend, supported and validated by that set of initial exemplary works. Then, it is still not yet "a language" and so, it admits quite interesting variations (as it the case, for example, of "brick" brutalism). From then on there begins to appear some explicit statements linking some of these works to a possible "Brutalist" affiliation. Such affirmations never come from the authors themselves (who mostly disagree or despise such naming), but from commentators and critics; who often base their assessments on a detailed description of the works, and not from a priori body of doctrine - although in some rare cases a few timid attempts to try and create one can be detected. Banham's 1966 book also collects some of these accounts, including his own statements on Brutalism "as a style"<sup>7</sup>.

The use of the term Brutalism in a broader sense may be polemical, but it is not, as above suggested, inadequate. It may befit a subjective choice – but probably, a most adequate one – and may be applied to name a specific architectural trend of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century; and it may be used as a convenient device to qualify and index these buildings. Of course, each of these buildings may also be individually read and appreciated according to other agendas and interests. Anyway, the use of the term "Brutalism" may enhance the perception of these buildings as a collective entity, considering their proximities and similarities – and also, their slight differences – which are more easily perceived and better understood by comparison. And the name "Brutalism" may be used, in

a broad but not imprecise sense, to collect and understand their collective characteristics and peculiarities. That is the task we propose to proceed into, by the close readings of the works themselves. That is how our research currently proceeds; but here, for the lack of space and need of brevity, just some key considerations will be further presented<sup>8</sup>.

## **THE WORKS THEMSELVES**

In the last decade and half I have been collecting information about the main-stream architectural works designed and constructed between 1945-1975, with an eye for the ones whose characteristics may suggest their approach to Brutalism. After the completion of my doctoral thesis (2005) the search results are being included in a general database. At first, it displayed the information on the buildings of my city and country (São Paulo, Brazil) - which, since the beginning of the research, have always been considered in collation with other contemporary international works of the same period<sup>9</sup>. From then on the search has consistently outgrown the national boundaries, spiraling into including other South American, Latin American and North American countries. It has already been extended to other continents, but not yet in a more concerted way.

For each city I intend to visit, I organize a previous bibliographic survey, aiming to find and read the more comprehensive local and/or national architecture history manuals, architecture guides, local periodicals, books and recent investigations in course or completed. The available information is organized on lists, maps and itineraries in order to optimize the visit of the works. The buildings are photographed for documentation purposes. Further efforts are made, during the trip, to communicate with local colleagues who may be also interested on the subject (the 1945-75 period and Brutalism). Albeit in a highly imperfect process – and a most solitary and barely funded one – the search has already been able to include a varied, but still limited quantity of examples. Around 300 buildings of 20 cities were putatively accepted as “brutalist” and included in the database, and more than two thirds of them were actually visited. Part of the information on these buildings is already systematized and available to be consulted on the research website.

The data collected until now is being processed; but it already does corroborate the suggestions – or the hypotheses - of the research. It claims that a Brutalist architectural trend definitely occurred in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. That it seems to have appeared after 1948, slowly growing in the 1950s and fully emerging in the 1960s. That it was not, or that it has never become, an exclusive of even a prevalent trend, but that it shared the interest of the architects of that day along with other aesthetical and material possibilities. The research seems to corroborate that Brutalism was probably a most spread phenomenon, characteristic of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern architecture, in a worldwide basis - and that it is not peculiar of this or that country in particular. As far as the research has gone, it suggests that the trend does not appear with the same intensity, precocity and quality in any other place, since it is always present, anywhere, from at least after around 1960. The comparison of the design dates of the buildings reveals a quite amazing proximity

among themselves, that does not suggest the existence of a possible singular, and less so exclusive, place of origin; although the trend has obviously a kind of “patron saint” in Le Corbusier. Each brutalist manifestation, and in some cases, each group of Brutalist buildings of the same place and time, may share some specific traits, possibly by also making use of the contributions of other modern masters, and/or stimulated by some specific local conditions, arriving to different creative mixtures and setting up slightly different flavors. Another common trait seems to be the creative contribution and insights of very skilled engineers and builders, who had helped, in most cases anonymously, to configure the trend. In other words, the presence of very good structural engineers and the involvement of wise builders is characteristically important specially in the best cases - albeit their creative contribution is often submerged and absent from the authors official accounts, demanding some specific queries to unravel such “plain sight” secret. Other more daring or less broad conclusions could also be drawn from the data already amassed, but is warily waiting for counterproofs, more studies and further conceptual sedimentation.

The statements above are actually very difficult to prove – or disprove. But the hard information is quite easy to recheck – the buildings, their authors, their design dates, their characteristics. Based on them, the hypotheses degree of plausibility is progressively gaining strength.

Certainly, a concerted analysis of the worldwide architectural panorama of the 1945-75 cannot be done by a single individual: it depends on the direct or indirect contribution of several people situated in many varied places. Those first hand researchers have been laboriously doing the very important basic work of recollecting information, browsing public and private archives, re-reading old books and periodicals and publishing or making available their investigations on several buildings of that period, helping to construct or enlarge the boundaries of architectural history. Such chores need a scavenger heart and lots of time and patience, and it is a sheer luck that there are still so many people dedicated to those tasks. Without them, the ambitious effort of establishing some kind of comparative studies on modern architecture, like ours - aiming at a broader geographical scope - would be impossible. I am greatly indebted to all these colleagues, and I do apologize if they eventually feel that, sometimes, I have been reading their contributions in a quite seditious way.

A high respect and concern for the documents is the basis of any serious research, and that’s how it is always necessary to begin: by browsing again the documents. But the documents do not speak for themselves: they are waiting to be interpreted. As pointed by Marina Waisman: "although the objects of reflection come from the praxis, their problematic is not revealed in themselves in a clear and straightforward way. It is the effort of a deliberate consideration, by the act of formulating questions and queries, which in turn are based on concepts and ideas, that are apt to discover or reveal their underlying problems and issues; and that is how the findings are produced. Soon it will be praxis that respond - positively or negatively - to the questions or demands made by such reflections"<sup>10</sup>.

In architecture, perhaps the most important documents are the buildings themselves – and they too, are patiently waiting for our reflections. They are mute but indefatigable, and no one will ever be able to exhaust their potential: at anytime a fresh look will extract other perceptions and devise new ideas. The same documents, illuminated by other questions, will suggest further clarifications and will demand other revisions, from very modest adjustments to revolutionary ones. In order to let that happen it is necessary to empower new questions. If they are truly new, they will tend not to be well understood, at least at the beginning; but if one works on their potential, perhaps they would open their own proper way and clear a path into the maze of other previous ideas. All of that is only possible if one accepts, to begin with, that many things are still neither clear, nor said – and sometimes, are just composed by an amalgam of misleading half-truths. That incredulous or investigative mood feeds on a pinch of radicalism – in the literal sense of “going back to the roots”: meaning, by activating a disposition of looking again into the documentation. In this case, and most especially, looking at the buildings - to observe and interrogate. But also, into the texts – to try to disentangle their discourses in order to des-naturalize them.

Some boldness was needed to use a name not in its ordinary way, or in a manner not unauthorized by previous authors: that is the choice made by the research, when we have chosen to the use of the name “Brutalism”. But actually, up to the moment, this research has found out very few mentions of the term “brutalism” as used to qualify the buildings which were being designed and built before 1959 - except by Le Corbusier’s “béton brut” experiences and the “New Brutalism” British debates (where the term refers to a mood, more than to buildings). However, the research has found some few but quite interesting “brutalist” examples designed around 1948-1952 and a remarkable, if not excessive, quantity of works designed from 1953 to 1959. They are scattered in several cities from a dozen different countries, and correspond quite well to what will be called “Brutalism” in the 1960s; some of them are in fact very masterful exercises. After 1960 the use of the term “brutalism” is not so rare, and can be easily spotted on local or international periodicals, and it is frequently used in an effort to qualify the emergence of an increasingly large quantity of Brutalist works, conspicuously accepting the existence of a trend. And, if we may accept to use the tag to name the buildings designed after 1960, it seems easier, and not at all incorrect, to extend it backwards,.

There seems to exist an initial time lag after the famous Marseille example (1944-49) and before the appearance of the first outstanding Brutalist examples, that begin to occur around 1952-3 and mostly, after 1956-7. But only after 1960 there happens an apparently sudden and exponential emergence of Brutalist works in the majority of the places. This time lag, or hesitation, is complicate to explain, but it seems to lean on some underlying technical reasons, like the availability of the high performance concrete (the material and the technicians able to employ it) to current architectural uses.

It is also the astounding expansion of Brutalism “as a style” after 1960 the event that had probably prompted Banham into organizing his 1966 book on the subject. In the book’s second half, when commenting on the sprouting of Brutalist works, Banham tries his best to organize and display an international survey, giving examples from Europe, USA, Japan and Chile. That is when he uses the expression “the brutalist style”, and acknowledges “the variety of architectural expressions possible within the nominally Brutalist canon”. It is also when he suggests the existence of a “Brutalist connection” – which he tries to trace down to a possible British origin, even when he finds none. Although he does not mention other works, coming from elsewhere – perhaps for lack of information or brevity of space - there would be no logical impediment to include other buildings in the “canon” he proposes, when the results, circumstances, and dates are compatible.

The idea of a “Brutalist connection” seems very attractive. It may be used to give account of the simultaneous flourishing, in several countries and regions of the world, of works in tune with what was then already been tagged as “Brutalism”. It enables the definition and use of a quite flexible and open ‘canon’, able to reunite several works, though they are not necessarily affiliated to one another, or do not share a pertinence to a single central focus (except again, their obvious homage to the works of their patron saint Le Corbusier). The existence of a “brutalist connection” is also a difficult point to prove or disprove. But the other, somewhat contrary position – the uncritical acceptance of a supposed hierarchical precedence of a country (Britain, secondo Banham) may be easily dismantled by a very simple cross-checking of the design dates.

Such task is perhaps unnecessary; but let’s do it once and for all. Let’s compare the dates of the supposedly British “New Brutalist” projects enrolled by Banham and some of other Brutalist buildings found in other far away places.

Alison and Peter Smithson’s Hunstanton School (1949-52) may be excepted from the brutalist cannon, as was debated above; in any case, even if accepted, no other “brutalist” work seems to emulate it, so its supposed precedence on Brutalism would be a dead-end path. Banham also gives account of the Smithson’s drawings to the design competitions of Coventry Cathedral (1951), Golden Lane Housing (1952) and Sheffield University (1953), which were not actually constructed and were certainly not widely known. Therefore, the first possible actual built “brutalist” works in Britain, included by Banham in his book, and able to enable some kind of “exemplary” role are the brick examples. They have all been designed after 1956: the Sugden House (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1956, actually a neo-realist exercise that seems to dialogue preferably with the “people’s detailing” than with brutalism); the Lyttleton House (John Voelcker, 1956, of strong Scandinavian tones), the Terrace House at Hampstead (William G.Howell, Gillian Howell and Stanley Amis, 1956). Then it follows some brick and concrete examples designed after 1958, like the Jaoul’s affiliated Ham Common (James Stirling, James Gowan, 1958) and the Old Vic Theatre Workshops (Lyons, Israel and Ellis, 1958). Finally, the first all-exposed concrete British example included by

Banham would be the Bethnal Green Blocks (Denys Lasdun & Partners, 1957) and the Roehampton Housing (London City Council, 1959).

The dates above are parallel, and not precedent to, other similar examples from USA, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Brazil – to name a few places. Except that, in all these countries, one can also find earlier exposed concrete examples of certain consequence. To name a few: the Alemán Housing in Mexico DF (Mario Pani, 1948), the Córdoba Municipality in Argentina (SEPRA, 1953), the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Affonso Eduardo Reidy, 1953), and the Quinta Normal Housing in Santiago, Chile (Bresciani, Valdes, Castillo, Huidobro). This last example was consigned by Banham, but with a wrong design date (the correct is 1953, and not 1961, as registered by Banham). On that he also says that he does not understand how it would be a connection between the Chileans and Britain - and of course, there was none: instead, some of these very talented Chilean architects had actually worked at the famous Rue de Sèvres atelier.

Certainly, no one is proposing that those previous Pan-American experiences have influenced the British ones either. We are not in search of atonement, but of a more concerted and critic analysis of historical facts. The British Brutalism is as valuable as any other, as full of excellent propositions as its peers. And after all, even if there is no clear precedence of dates, the intellectual efforts of European and North American architectural periodicals to debate new trends and evangelize new believers, do counted a lot in the spreading of the good news and examples.

A significant device that has been largely used in our research is the checking of the design dates and their displaying in a timeline: it is quite interesting how much can be learned from that simple expedient. If it has unexpectedly acquired a quite subversive quality, and a quite powerful one, it is not at all and ideological construct. Dates matter, and they do tell something - but it is necessary to listen to them.

## **SUPERFICIAL DEFINITION OF BRUTALISM**

A concerted effort to collect information, to display the works on a proper timeline, to investigate and analyze each significant ‘brutalist’ work is perhaps a good attempt to try and found – or better, to construct – a more concerted definition of the term Brutalism. And, what it stands for, when it is considered from both and simultaneously a historical and a contemporary point of view. But it is quite possible that, even then, it would not quite provide the means for its unequivocal characterization. Most specially, what will probably elude the observer is the attempt to try and find a possible Brutalist ‘essence’ – to use Reyner Banham’s words.

Not having an unified essence, not being able to be considered as a ‘movement’, not being exclusive from a single place, or a political ideology, or a single material (even the pervading use of exposed concrete is defied by the ‘brick’ brutalism), not having been developed from some a priori

set of coherent discourses, Brutalism would perhaps be a phantom, a mirage, a non-entity with only negative non-qualities.

So, even after airing the panorama from old biases and after carefully studying a very large quantity of works, situated in many places, Brutalism may be a name only apt to make imprecise references about a collection of similar, somewhat related images of actual buildings, whose cliché - as pointed by William Curtis - is quite almost only the use of rough exposed concrete surfaces (and even that is marred by the brick “hard cases”).

The quasi-impossibility of pointing out at a “truly” definition of Brutalism, however, depends on what is being sought. If you are in search of an essence, you will be frustrated. But not quite so, if you admit other possibilities.

Here, we have proposed and adopted a quite radical - and at the same time, mostly matter-of-fact - definition. Instead of disregarding Brutalism - the name of the trend, and the trend itself - as something inappropriate or vague, we are proposing to consider it as an adequate device to obtain certain results – that tend to be of inclusive nature and fuzzy boundaries. From our point of view, it is not a lesser unimportant feature the fact that, by using the term, one can easily and without doubt communicate with other fellow architects, and with the public in general, which architecture, in time and space, we are talking about. Having considered that, we proposed that the term Brutalism may be adequately and precisely used, as long as it is agreed that what it is commonly referred to as “Brutalist” in architecture, is nothing more than the building’s appearance. By accepting such a non-essentialist definition, it may be possible to open up the subject, set it for an inclusive mode, and to apply the term to a wide number of different works, from different places, designed between 1945 and 1975 by a wide variety of architects of that period.

Paradoxically enough, the main feature that in fact connects all these buildings is not their essence, and not even their “structure”, but their appearance, whose perception is mostly given by their surfaces. Brutalist buildings are connected not by their supposed “inner” characteristics, or attributed significances, but by their extrinsic and verifiable exterior manifestations.

Such a radical and straightforward definition is not a perfect clockwork device, neither does it try to be. It is aimed to be able to encompass the broad variety of Brutalist works that may be found, anywhere, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period. It also aims to re-examine those works and to reconsider them, not from their presumable derivation from a single point of origin – which they are probably not – but as singular knots of a network of connections. Instead of keeping on adopting a canonical - but old, narrow and biased - narrative, we prefer to study Brutalism by its buildings. And we have preferred to consider them as manifestations of a wide and complex web, as the visible points of a common ground basis, that of “modern” architecture cultural network. Which, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century moment, was already able to manifest itself in several places in the world, roughly at the same time, with no clear regional precedence.

In principle this position is not an ideological one; neither does it derive from “regionalist” ideas: on the contrary, it tends to stress universality rather than locality. It is not based on pre-defined discourses, but on dates and facts: mostly, that of the design and the construction of the buildings themselves. It would like to be of use to many other researchers, and it may eventually be so. But it was constructed for a particular purpose: as a possibly proper explanation, in order to better understand the data already being collected, by an on-going, far-fetched and ambitious international research, focused on Brutalist buildings.

## PROVISIONAL FINALE

In the last half century or so, the current ideas on “Brutalism” have acquired a certain inertial quality that makes them tend to stay put, by idleness and dully repetition. So I’m quite aware that one needs more than simple arguments, and even, more than lots of outstanding evidences to make things change. After that, one must keep on pushing hard.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The preference given by that moment governments to the boldness and grandeur of Brutalist architecture is a phenomenon that, by the way, happens everywhere, regardless of each government’s political stand, since it happens along all its spectrum, from the extreme left to the conservative right: an easy to identify characteristic, at least when you care to look at 1960-70s Brutalist buildings situated all over the world.

<sup>2</sup> Further definitions by Banham and other authors have been minutely studied in the author’s doctoral thesis, “A arquitetura da escola paulista brutalista” (PROPAR-UFRGS, 2005), that may be downloaded at <http://www.lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/5452>.

<sup>3</sup> Banham, Reyner. *New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetics?*. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p.134

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p.135

<sup>7</sup> On the subject, see the author’s research website, [www.brutalistconnections.com](http://www.brutalistconnections.com) that collects and display the studies published in specialized periodicals, like for example, ZEIN, R. V. . Brutalism? A polemical name and its use to name a past trend of Brazilian architecture. *EN BLANCO*, v. 9, p. 6-13, 2012. (<http://revistaenblanco.es/EN/?m=201210>)

<sup>8</sup> See website for images and more detailed information about the buildings included in the research.

<sup>9</sup> The Brazilian examples are published at the authors doctoral thesis (Zein, 2005); they may be consulted also at [www.arquiteturabrutalista.com.br](http://www.arquiteturabrutalista.com.br)

<sup>10</sup> Marina Waisman. *O interior da História. Historiografia para uso de latino-americanos*. São Paulo:Perspectiva, 2013, p.39-40.