

Brutalism Redux: Relational Monumentality and the Urban Politics of Brutalist Architecture

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Abstract: Brutalism is an architectural form that is experiencing somewhat of a revival of late. This revival focuses almost purely on its aesthetics, but there is an ethical dimension to Brutalism that often gets overlooked in these narratives. This paper therefore reanalyses the original concepts and ethics of brutalist architecture with a reaffirmation of the original triumvirate of brutalist ethics as articulated by Raynar Banham as monumentality, structural honesty and materials “as found”. The paper then articulates these through the literature on architectural affect to argue that brutalist ethics are continually “enacted” via a relational monumentality that brings the building and its inhabitants together in the practice of inhabitation. Using the case study of Robin Hood Gardens in London, the paper posits that a “brutalist politics” comes into light that can help catalyse a broader critique of contemporary neoliberalism.

Keywords: Brutalism, architecture, architectural geography, urban politics, affect

Introduction

Brutalism is not so much ruined as dormant, derelict—still functioning even in a drastically badly treated fashion, and as such is ready to be recharged and reactivated (Hatherley 2009:42).

In the summer of 2015, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) unveiled their latest exhibition, “the Brutalist Playground” modelled on the concrete playground at Churchill Gardens Estate in Pimlico, London (see Figure 1). The installation was an attempt to rediscover the utility of brutalist form through a ludic and celebratory “twist” to its major material component, concrete. The installation coincides with the recent popular revival of Brutalism as an architectural style (Beanland 2016; Grindrod, 2013; Harwood 2015; Hatherley 2009, 2011). But more than simply celebrating a historical architectural form that is in danger of being lost to the wrecking ball, the broader advocacy of Brutalism also stems from (or *needs* to stem from) a tangible critique to the swinger of that wrecking ball; namely the relentless wave of neoliberal gentrification.

More specifically, despite the recent nostalgic revisiting of Brutalism as architectural *form*, many of these narratives are devoid of Brutalism’s powerful aesthetic and political critical *concept*. Many brutalist buildings (often the much-maligned so-called “sink” council estates) are being demolished and new, late-capitalistic and homogenous (often glass and composite-clad) towers erected in their place.



Figure 1: The Brutalist Playground Installation at RIBA (source: author's photo). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Some heritage institutions are resisting this and campaigning to get many brutalist buildings listed in an attempt to preserve their architectural iconography. Some have been successful (such as the listing of the Preston Bus Station in the UK in 2013), while others have not (such as Birmingham Central Library being denied listed status twice in 2002 and 2007). In both these cases (and many more in Europe and the US), the rhetoric has been one of preserving a historical architectural form against the forces of contemporary urban development. But the history of Brutalism is far more than this; it incorporates a radical aesthetic of anti-beauty (Murphy 2012; van den Heuvel 2004). It was a conceptualisation of an architecture both materially and ethically critical of the dilution of the prevailing post-World War Two European welfare state provisioning via the broader “modernist” movement (While 2006). Essentially, brutalist advocates saw this as too frivolous, whimsical and not progressive enough for the welfare needs of the post-war era (Clement 2011). In more recent times though, critics of Brutalism point to its dehumanising and belittling qualities (see Hanley 2007; Tucker 2014). This has also translated into a political rhetoric that largely blames Brutalism (and indeed the broader modernist architecture of the post-war welfare state) for the decline of many housing estates and antisocial behaviour that blights many cities. However, such rhetoric has reduced Brutalism to a *style*; one that can be dismissed as “ugly” and “out of date”. Because of this, Brutalism’s ethical ideology has been lost and so needs to be recuperated in the service of the style’s defence. Furthermore, Brutalism can have an added *political* ethic that can critique the current era of neoliberalism. In effect, Brutalism as political architecture is, as Hatherley (2009:42) stated with the quote that opens this paper, “dormant ... and ready to be recharged”.

In this paper, I argue that while preservation is a critical process in attempting to stem the tide of postmodern architectural homogeneity that characterises the current processes of super-gentrification, there is a need to go further in analysing Brutalism’s ideological and conceptual merits to add an *ethical* dimension to the existing rhetoric. In so doing, I attempt to revive the brutalist critique; but refocus it on contemporary neoliberal urban practices. To do so, the paper will proceed

in four stages. First, it will reanalyse the original brutalist literature, and champion Reyner Banham's (2011) original (and, I argue, currently overlooked) triumvirate of brutalist ethics; monumentality, honesty of structure, and material rawness. Second, these ethics will be used to critically engage with the burgeoning literature of architectural affect, positing Brutalism as partly resistive to the "pure relationality" of architecture (Cairns and Jacobs 2014) via its monumental qualities. Third, the paper will use a London-based case study to exemplify how this brutalist ethics manifests a "relational monumentality" via a case study of Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar, London. The paper will conclude as to how a brutalist ethics can help catalyse a broader political critique of contemporary neoliberal urban development.

A Critical History of Brutalism

The term "Brutalism" can be traced back to a Swedish architect Hans Asplund who, in 1949 upon viewing a housing project in Uppsala called Villa Göth, was struck by the "bloody-mindedness" of the design, and called it "nybrutalism" (new brutal). The term stuck as aspiring architects from the rest of Europe (notably the UK) visited the building. This included a young couple, Alison and Peter¹ Smithson, who were the architects most synonymous with the term, using it to describe one of their first projects, a school in Hunstanton in Norfolk, UK finished in 1954. From then, Brutalism as an architectural concept can be said to have "started". But the manifesto for Brutalism came from an article in *The Architectural Review* in 1955, written by Reyner Banham entitled "The New Brutalism", which first positioned its *raison d'être* (Clement 2011; Stalder 2008). It was a piece that alluded to the prevailing procedures of post-war societal renewal, focused as they were on the modernist architectural tradition. Architects schooled in the Miesian and Le Corbusian tradition of modernism were being commissioned to design a wide range of housing, civic and cultural provisions across Europe and to a lesser extent in the US (some of these traditions, including brutalist design, made their way to the colonial worlds of India and North Africa) (Forty 2013; van den Heuvel and Risselada 2004). However, the Smithsons and other brutalist protagonists (such as Jack Lynn in the UK and Paul Rudolph in the US) saw the modernist tradition being "watered down" with frivolous design and becoming a poor parody of Swedish "new empiricism" (which characterised large swaths of their social welfare architecture). As a result, Banham used the word "new" in reference to the original phrase by Asplund, but also as a satire of the Swedish new empiricism, as well as what he saw as an unnecessary cleavage of history into "new" and "old".

Banham championed New Brutalism as an architectural form that could save the discipline from the perceived follies of modernist practices. He argued that:

The definition of a New Brutalist building ... exclude[s] formality as a basic quality if it is to cover future developments and should more properly read: 1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3. Valuation of Materials "as found" (Banham 2011:28).

New Brutalism was an architectural ethics that espoused memorability, as well as honesty in structure and material rawness. So, materials were important of course,

and indeed the similarity of the English word Brutalism to the French “béton brut” (meaning raw concrete) catalysed a simplification of the definition of “Brutalism” to the mere use of concrete as a construction material (exacerbated by Le Corbusier’s famous Unité d’habitation in Marseille, which became emblematic of a brutalist style). However, Brutalism’s origins and its ideology stem from far more than simply its materiality. It is based on an architectural ethics that is about the power of the image, its clear and transparent exhibition of structure and the value of the materials “as found”. The Smithsons and other New Brutalism protagonists saw it as a more ethical way of inhabiting (Hatherley 2009) because people are invested in the *maintenance* of that image. The structure of a building was limited to what was needed to operate; the “rest” was to be inflected by human inhabitation; in so doing it was not a “solutionist” form, but heralded from a functionalist tradition that was “pre-historical” (Murphy 2012:82). As has been noted, “the bare structure was ready for dressing by the art of inhabitation” (van den Heuvel 2004:19). This is a trope taken from the origins of the brutalist ethic itself, as Banham (2011:25, emphasis added) originally noted “what moves a New Brutalist is the thing itself, in its totality, and with *all its overtones of human association*”. This was no more evident in the many brutalist proposal drawings and exhibitions, in which their buildings had as many people in them as possible, “so that the human presence almost overwhelmed the architecture” (Banham 2011:12).² As Hatherley (2009:36) has noted when alluding to Banham’s essay, Brutalism was, and still is, “totally immersed in everyday life”.

Therefore Brutalism’s materiality is concerned with how it associates with its inhabitants; its logicity is on full show. For example a concrete wall is easier to decipher as a wall than one covered in tiles or wallpaper, or the movement from one level to another is usually most efficient via a liner staircase rather than an ornate spiral staircase (but not always). In other words, the conceptual “distance” between the material and its function is as small as possible in Brutalism. Moreover, the “rawness” of the materials used (i.e. “as found”) further relates inhabitants with the production of the building. On many brutalist buildings the imprint of the plywood casing used in construction is visible on the concrete, the bricks used are unsmoothed, or wooden components are unvarnished. When describing the recently built “Homes for Change” co-operative housing estate in Manchester, UK, Hatherley (2011:130) says, “you can still read the labels on the bottom of some of the blocks cantilevered out over the entrances, and mortar bulges rudely out between cheap yellow brick”. The totality of a brutalist building comes together (and is held together) through the assemblage of materials, but also affects, inhabitants and their subjectivities. So, the “visibility” of the production process (in effect, the building “showing its working”) further exposes the *coming-into-being* of the building, hence melding the politics and aesthetics of the resulting “totalising” imagery.

Because of its functionality, (relative) ease of construction and nod to modern utopian living, New Brutalism was championed as an architectural movement that could aid European countries’ (to a lesser extent, the US’) rebuilding in the 1950s and 1960s. In so doing, it became culturally synonymous with many of the post-war housing developments, particularly in the UK and France (Hollow 2010).

However, the social decline of many of these housing estates from approximately the 1970s onwards was seen as a direct consequence of the harsh, dehumanising habitual style of the buildings themselves (Coleman 1985; Hanley 2007; Jencks 1984). Lees (2014) discusses the Aylesbury Estate in South London (which is largely, but not entirely, a brutalist architectural environment) that has been seen by successive UK governments as emblematic of social decline. She argues, “the council estate played a symbolic and ideological role as a signifier of a spatially concentrated, dysfunctional underclass” (Lees 2014:924). Sebregondi (2012:340) when discussing the now-demolished Heygate Estate (the sister estate to Aylesbury) similarly notes that “30 years of stigmatisation in political discourse and popular culture has established the council estate as a page already turned in the city’s history”. And in the US, the destruction of the socially blighted Pruitt-Igoe housing estate in St Louis was declared by Jencks (1984) as the death of modern architecture and hence the birth of post-modernism. This is despite recent scholarship arguing that the social decline of these estates has more causal mechanics in political disinvestment strategies rather than a particular kind of architectural space (Gray and Mooney 2011; Lees 2014; McKenzie 2014; Slater 2014; Wacquant 2008; While 2006).

The very term “Brutalism” with its complicated and conflicting etymological history (outlined above) has perhaps not helped its own rapid malignisation, with critics easily able to seize upon its “brutal”, “brutish” or relatedly “monstrous” characteristics. Such a vernacular was recently seized upon by David Cameron (when he was prime minister of the UK), who used the word “brutal” when deriding the many council estates across the country, he viewed as being in need of demolition (Cameron 2016). The continual diffusion of the term by architecture professionals, urban planners, cultural commentators and prime ministers meant that it further began to lose its ethical connotations and became a popular discourse of aesthetics (Hatherley 2009; Scalbert 2000). It had been reduced to a cultural, architectural and artistic touchstone that strung together a myriad of different kinds of buildings that had no association other than what had become known as a broadly defined “brutalist style” (Macarthur 2005; Scalbert 2000). Such a style was (and still is) largely perceived as “ugly”: “Brutalist buildings are still regularly voted the most hated buildings in Britain in popular polls. This public disdain translates into political disdain, which translates into demolitions” (Wilkinson 2014:np). However, the “ugliness” of Brutalism is part of its intrinsic ethics; the totalising style was deliberately “anti-beauty”.

Another aesthetic quality of Brutalism is its “ruthless logic”. Banham (2011:22), when discussing the Smithson’s first ever building, the Hunstanton School in Norfolk, UK, argued:

Whatever has been said about honest use of materials, most modern buildings appear to be made of whitewash or patent glazing, even when they are made of concrete or steel. Hunstanton appears to be made of glass, brick, steel and concrete, and is in fact made of glass, brick, steel, and concrete.

So it is the uncompromising use of “raw” materials that characterises Brutalism, but it is not always concrete (indeed the Hunstanton School used very little concrete).

Many brutalist buildings have used brick, but in doing so, the brickwork is vividly present, each brick visible in how it contributes to the whole. Additionally, the style of Brutalism is often thought to be largely industrial in scale. The scaling up of city building that the ideology of New Brutalism forwarded is clearly evident in many of the large-scale housing projects and civic buildings it produced; indeed for construction of the Preston Bus Station, a concrete factory was erected on site and then dismantled once the building was finished (Toogood and Neate 2013). Many other examples of brutalist developments espouse the “industrialisation” of housing provision. However, many of these developments belie such characterisation in employing fine craft skills to add important brutalist details. As Forty (2013:234) notes, “the roughness of Brutalist architecture ... generally required unusually high standards of workmanship”. For example, the concrete interior of the Barbican Centre in London was finished by workers who pick-hammered the still-wet concrete in order to give it the “rough” pitted texture that exists today (Grindod 2013). Such an undertaking was slow, expensive and in complete contrast to the perceived view of Brutalism as a highly industrialised building technique based on efficient use of resources. Such deliberate “totalising” anti-beauty and uncompromising logic, however, is part of its ethical and political utility and it pervades brutalist buildings as part of their *affective* capacity.

Geographies of Architecture

The last few decades of social scientific inquiry has viewed buildings and architecture more broadly as representative of a particular idiom. The Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in Paris (Harvey 1979), the Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles (Jameson 1984), the New York skyscraper (Domosh 1988) and phallic skyscrapers in general (McNeill 2005) have been used rhetorically in a deconstruction of the building’s architectural aesthetic to expose the prevailing social, political, capitalistic and/or cultural metanarratives at play. Specific architectural genres have also been similarly excavated, such as British modernism (While and Short 2011), postmodernism (Harvey 1987) and tropical modernism (Jazeel 2013). Additionally, Zukin (1993) has detailed how the professionalization of the architectural and design industries, coupled with the growing desire of urban management structures to compete on a global scale (due to the onset of urban entrepreneurialism [Harvey 1989]) saw many “iconic” buildings constructed in the world’s global cities competing for an increasingly mobile elite transcapitalist class (Sklair 2006). All of these arguments underscore the neoliberalised process of architectural production, and how it unilaterally prioritizes economic gain as the goal to which architecture should strive (see Kaika 2010; McNeil 2005).

The literature on architecture has been advanced in recent years with the introduction of non-representation and affect into architectural geographies (see Kraftl 2010 for a far-reaching overview). Lees (2001) called for a more critical geography of architecture, one that examines architecture beyond the building itself (and its capitalist production) and extends into the spaces of interaction, sociality and entanglement that the building has with the people who use it to live, work, play, react, subvert and so on. She argued that we need to “appreciate the embodiment of

gestures of emancipation within the formal imagery of a building” (Lees 2001:75), in essence to maintain the connection, however complicated, between a building and its user (see also Imrie 2003). This “call” saw much of the subsequent architectural geography literature focus on how “the multiple technologies and inhabitants that make up buildings elude and exceed representational strategies” (Kraftl 2010:407). Analysing the way in which a building’s *affective* capacity continually acts upon us to instil a particular emotional state (i.e. how some buildings make us feel “homely”, even though they may not actually be our home [Kraftl 2006]), has been at the forefront of much work on the critical geographies of architecture. Without revisiting the large (and ever-growing) literature on affect in its entirety, affect is socio-spatial phenomenon that is “pre-cognitive” (Thrift 2004). Kraftl and Adey (2008:228) have argued it can be thought of as a “sense of push in the world” that has tangible resultant human behavioural and emotional changes. In relation to architecture, they go on to argue:

One function of buildings is to attempt to stabilize affect, to generate the possibility of precircumscribed situations, and to engender certain forms of practice, through the design and the planning of buildings, including aspects such as form and atmosphere (Kraftl and Adey 2008:228).

Hence, far more than statically symbolising a political event or the desires of capitalism, buildings continue to assert a “power” beyond the architect’s intentions in far more affective ways via narratives that evoke certain behaviours, be that habitation, consumption, relaxation, awe and so on (Kraftl 2006; Merriman 2016).

Along with the design capabilities of the architects which have the power to direct the usage and interactions people have with a building, the tacit “ability” of that building to stabilise, maintain or indeed engineer affect (Thrift 2004) can exceed the initial design process, and as such is a *critical* part of any architectural analysis (Kraftl 2010; Lees and Baxter 2011). Indeed, it must be *critical* precisely because it cannot be allowed to slip into, and even justify, a narrative of architectural determinism that plagued the urban planning discourses of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the work of Oscar Newman (1972) in the US and Alice Coleman (1985) in the UK came under critical scrutiny for suggesting that building design was the cause of social problems (Till 1998). Instead of heeding these critiques, however, the UK and US governments of the time blamed inner-city decline on poor urban design rather than structural socio-economic inequalities, increasing poverty and the onset of neoliberalism; thereby justifying their demolition (see Jacobs and Lees 2013). Utilising the theories of affect within architecture then has the potential to risk a similar architectural determinism that obfuscates the agency of more structural and socially infused processes such as austerity politics in local council housing provisioning, structural inner-city poverty or institutionalised classism and racism (which have all been shown to contribute to the perceived anti-social behaviour in council estates [Lees 2014; McKenzie 2014; Slater 2014]). Brutalism then, by espousing Banham’s triumvirate has a political utility in allowing the wider structural socio-economic forces to be more “visible” precisely because the building “shows its working”. Of course, a brutalist building has an affective capacity; that is

the architect's intention. But the potency of Brutalism's ethics, its memorability, rawness and honesty, exposes the building's affective processes and encourages a *relation* to them, thereby maintaining the building's overall *monumentality*.³

Brutalism's critics often suggest that the only way to appreciate it is to necessarily buy into its ethical discourse (Jencks 1984). As Tucker (2014:np; also see Brockington and Cicmil 2016) argues: "You can only really appreciate the results of Brutalism ... if you have already bought into the theory and believe in it. Otherwise, absent the extremist and fundamentalist ideology, the building comes across as terrifying and threatening". This, however, I argue, is exactly the kind of *affective* capacity (i.e. its socio-spatial "sense of push" [Kraftl and Adey 2008]) that makes Brutalism an even more political architectural form. It is precisely because of its "extremist" ideology (of memorability as an image, clear exhibition of structure, and valuation of materials as found) that makes it an important antithetical discourse to the current wave of contemporary urban development schemes that seeks to move in the opposite direction, i.e. to *conceal* its affective capacities. Moreover, the reasons why Brutalism is considered "terrifying and threatening" is because the architects' designs are specifically demanding a reaction to and an immersion in the building far more than in other forms of urban architecture. For example Ernő Goldfinger, the architect of the Balfron Tower in London, when issuing a press report in May 1968 having lived in the building for two months,⁴ said: "the success of any scheme depends on the human factor—the relationship of people to each other and the frame to their daily life which the building provides" (Goldfinger 1968:np). Relating to the "frame" of the building is evidence of the architect's desire for people to attach their own meaning to the building after its completion. In essence it forces people to partake in the architecture itself more so than any other form; it encourages people to take notice of their surroundings and to engage in (sub)conscious decision making processes as to how they will receive and act in the building, something which Jacobs and Merriman (2011) articulate as "dwelling with" rather than "dwelling in". It invites an active participation rather than a passive reception of it—it could be argued therefore to be very much a *relational* architecture.

This leads to work by other architectural geographers who utilise poststructurally inspired ontologies as a means to articulate architecture. For example, Cairns and Jacobs (2014:65) argue, "architecture ... is an expressive and materialized assemblage, part of a wider relational field". However, this "new" geographies of architecture thinking does see somewhat of a resistance to a totalising image (see Jacobs 2006) that Brutalism purports. An absolutist aesthetic (or memorability as image), as Cairns and Jacobs (2014) point out, negates a relational epistemology of architecture and is more in keeping with "organismic thinking". Building upon the work of De Landa (2006) and assemblage theory more broadly, they argue:

... organismic thinking is part of a wider tradition of social theory that overemphasises coherent totalities ... Thought about in architectural terms, this would consist of seeing the building as a coherent whole, to be understood as a relatively autonomous and essential thing (an idea held very succinctly in the architectural idea of the "completed building"). De Landa replaces this with a Deleuzian-inspired sensibility of "relations of exteriority" (Cairns and Jacobs 2014:65).

One of the qualities of Brutalism is that despite relating with inhabitants, it takes on a more absolute and totalising *imagery*. This is because the totalising memorability of an architecturally structured image is an important ethical consideration of Brutalism's political discourse; indeed it has "a disdain for harmony but not for *structure*" (Hatherley 2009:36, emphasis added). For Brutalism's detractors though, this powerful and totalising image has overwhelmed any sense that it can be a relational architecture (see Jencks 1984). In the postmodern architectural world as well as the contemporary architectural geography literature, an image as totality is often seen as artistically and conceptually antithetical.

Critically for the main arguments of this paper though, for a brutalist politics to emerge, the "anti-beauty" of a total image is fundamental. Even Banham and the New Brutalists recognised this: "For the New Brutalists' interests in image are commonly regarded, by many of themselves as well as their critics, as being anti-art, or at any rate anti-beauty in the classical aesthetic sense of the word" (Banham 2011:25). This is why many brutalist buildings will be identifiable as a "thing" in its entirety, with that "thing" often espousing monumental qualities. Hence we see brutalist buildings resembling a ship (the Engineering Building in Leicester University in the UK for example), an inverted ziggurat (the Birmingham Central Library, UK and the Boston City Hall in the US), a bunker (Third Church of Christ Church in Washington DC), an assault vessel (the Research Institute for Experimental Medicine [RIEM], Berlin), a centipede (a housing block in Moscow), and many others.

The totality and monumentality of the image is important in Brutalism, but the structure and relational connections it has with its inhabitants and surroundings is critical to forming its political utility; "it thrive[s] on a dialectic of the purist and the fragmented, montage and the memorable single image" (Hatherley 2009:30). This dialectic is fundamental to Brutalism's ethics; the relationality that its "raw" affective capacity invites, is a necessary characteristic of its totalising image and monumentality. Fundamentally, it is this tension between relationality and totality that renders Brutalism's affective capacities far from "deterministic" (something that a fuller engagement with affect would perhaps slip into). So Brutalism's absolute and totalising aesthetic is *produced* and *maintained* by its relationality. A building's image as a fort, a centipede or a ship is one thing, but more important is the subjective totality implied by the architect (of social housing, the welfare state, anti-corporatism, civic life and so on) that is *maintained* by its inhabitant's continual engagement with that building's ethics. It can dominate at first, but the totalising image filters through the affective capabilities of the building as the inhabitants perform the buildings' function. The rawness of the materials and honesty of the structure implores a continual "dressing by inhabitation" (van den Heuvel 2004), and so the monumentality of the building is simultaneously given and performed. In this way, Brutalism is more in tune with an architectural geography that would not yield to pure relational aesthetics, but rather "keep the material and immaterial in balance" (Lees and Baxter 2011:117). As such, rather than *replacing* the totality with pure relationality, Brutalism would see the totality as an aesthetical coagulation of relationality.

In order to add weight to these arguments and highlight how Brutalism espouses this "relational monumentality", the next section focuses on ethnographic work in

one of the more famous brutalist structures in the UK, Robin Hood Gardens in Tower Hamlets in East London. When researching tropical modernism in Sri Lanka, Jazeel (2013:100) found that an “architects intent regarding his or her work is only one part of the larger equation” and that “the architect is just one part of the broader circulations of meaning that built space develops as it pervades daily life and imagination”. Utilising this ethos as well as echoing Lees (2001) and Jacobs et al. (2012) who also conducted ethnographic research with the affective resonances of buildings (beyond the architects’ intentions), I immersed myself in RHG individually, with former residents, and by leading student groups. Additional data have been gleaned from archival material (such as the RIBA Archives in London and online accounts). Together, the methodology was designed to produce a “biography” of the building of sorts, to investigate the ways in which the relational monumentality of Brutalism’s ethics can be evidenced.

Relational Monumentality: Robin Hood Gardens

Brutalism’s ethics outlined thus far demarcate it as an architectural form that is less concerned with beauty, and more with giving inhabitants the ability to relate and continually perform the architecture of the building they inhabit. It is clear therefore why the Smithsons and other early protagonists saw Brutalism as critical of creeping frivolity and a lack of honesty in modernist design (Clement 2011). One such building to engender this critique is Robin Hood Gardens (hereafter RHG) in East London (see Figure 2), which was Peter and Alison Smithson’s only housing project ever to be built. The Smithsons were part of the “Independent Group” of artists and architects in the 1950s concerned with exploring contemporary culture “as found”



Figure 2: Robin Hood Gardens, London (source: author’s photo). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Massey 1995). One of the group's first projects was an exhibition entitled "The Parallels of Life and Art" in 1953. The kernel of Brutalism's emphasis on socialised spaces was highly evident, with part of the exhibition stating that "the assumption that community can be created by geographic isolation is invalid, and the principal aid to social cohesion is looseness of grouping and ease of communication" (Smithson et al. 1953:np). Such a grand vision of social life they transposed onto RHG:

This building for the socialist dream was for us a Roman activity and Roman at many levels—including state bureaucracy, heroism, aqueductal engineering, dealing with repetition, bold statement working with landforms, it provides a place for the anonymous client, it wants to be universal, greater than our little state—related to greater law (Smithson and Smithson 2001:296).

The vision of the building as a "bold statement" and "relating to a universal greater law" is a fundamental aspect to RHG and pervades its architectural affect, and one that is monumental, but relationally so.

The London County Council commissioned the housing estate in 1963 to replace the Grosvenor Building, itself a product of a rehousing initiative to relocate people affected by slum clearance in the late 19th century. By 1972 the first tenants had moved in (*Municipal Dreams* 2014). The site of RHG sits in between two busy roads, and so the Smithsons were keen to create a site of tranquillity among this bustling urban setting. They proposed two quasi-sinuous buildings that enclosed an open green space (the central mound of which was created with the rubble of the original Grosvenor Building). The Eastern building had ten floors, the Western seven, in total providing 213 flats (Sandes 2015). Given the surrounding roads the Smithsons designed the site so the living spaces looked out onto the inner garden, to reduce noise and air pollution. Indeed, the Smithsons designed the flats deliberately so as to allow people the opportunity to watch over family members' and friends' children in the open spaces. The Smithsons argued that:

the kitchens are so planned, so the mother can keep an eye on a two-to-three year old child playing out on the access deck on one side, and also from time to time, look down onto the other side into these play spaces which are intended for the somewhat older children (Smithson and Smithson 1970:8m55s).

Such communality between residents is a sentiment that many former inhabitants have testified to (in public consultations, interviews and press articles). Phrases such as "a strong sense of community", "children could play near their homes" and "the layout of the buildings made everyone feel safe" have been recorded in Tower Hamlets' council meeting minutes,⁵ and in interviews with former residents; the sociality that the site inculcated is clearly evident in the testimonies of those who lived in RHG (but tellingly, not in the accounts of third party visitors charged with evaluating it (e.g. Stewart 2008).

Despite the clear decay and vandalism at the site today, it is awash with evidence of the building's design being "honest", with the details of the communal spaces being attentive to resident's daily activities. For example, "the building also explains its use, in that whenever you need to take hold of something, or move around some woodwork or concrete element, then there is a smooth rounded corner"

(Smithson and Smithson 1970:13m01s). Also, during site visits, upon entering the lifts at first, they feel cramped and claustrophobic. When taking students around the site, many will comment on how scared they are of the lifts, with some refusing to get in at all. However, on other visits with former residents, they would often speak of how the cramped and rather awkward shape of the lifts encouraged people to talk to one another. Negotiating children and prams out of the lifts meant that people *had* to talk to one another; in effect, they were social spaces because they caused people to communicate. In addition, the rubbish chutes were deliberately placed at regular intervals so as to avoid the temptation to leave rubbish outside doors, or worse, throw it over the side of the building. With holes big enough for sacks of household refuse, but small enough to discourage the “fly-tipping” of bulky items that can disrupt the refuse collection process, they operated to smooth the ejection of household waste from the site. However, the cessation of regular collections and maintenance meant that they backed up, the lids were not replaced (which caused malodour to drift down the streets in the sky) and waste fell out onto the floor (see Figure 3). Refuse chutes, in 1972, were a brand new technology, and one which a particular elderly resident commented were “a luxury”, and symptomatic of the design of the building being futuristic and in keeping with the needs of a (then) modern social housing block. Their degradation today is a reminder of the



Figure 3: The untended, now trash-strewn and lidless rubbish chutes of RHG (source: author’s photo). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

lack of maintenance and upkeep that is seen as part of the deliberate mal-governance of the site to facilitate its demolition.

The fact that the apartments looked inward meant that the “streets in the sky” were on the outside of the building (see Figure 4). They spread the length of the building, creating a line of sight that incorporates the exterior spaces of all the apartments on the same floor. These communal spaces were an important part of the Smithsons’ design, and a major fulcrum in the debate that surrounded the first attempt at listing of the building (Stewart 2008). The Smithsons were adamant that these streets had to be of a certain size to accommodate pedestrian circulation and maintain a line of sight to help reduce crime. Those not in favour of listing RHG argued that the streets in the sky was not a new concept in 1972, with much better examples at the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield in 1961 (Powers 2008; Stewart 2008). The design of the streets is undoubtedly similar, but the streets are a critical part of the residents’ relationship to the building as they blurred the boundaries between the private spaces of the flats, and the public open space (Brennan 2015). They allowed the people to *relate* to one another; “The deck itself is wide enough for the milkman to bring his cart along or for two women with prams to stop for a talk and still let the postman by” (Smithson and Smithson 1970:12m58s). The streets also included “pause places”, alcoves slightly off the



Figure 4: The Streets in the Sky at Robin Hood Gardens (source: author’s photo). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

main walkways which the Smithsons hoped residents would personalise (evidence of which still exists today).

The Smithsons' use of the walkways was deliberate so as to have relational monumentality. Relational in that it espoused communal living; monumental because they produced a totalising aesthetic as well as producing a singular ethic of social housing writ large. Specifically, the design actively and deliberately encouraged people to engage with one another in situ; the very space they lived in was both their private home but also a place of communication and social interaction (as exemplified by the proximity of the apartments, the pause spaces and the streets in the sky). The building was to be "greater than our little state" (Smithson and Smithson 2001:296), and hence shun the increasing push for private and isolated lives and encourage communal, civic living.

Such a "bloody-minded" vision by the Smithsons extends far beyond its mere building design. The outside open green and play spaces of RHG clearly show the brutalist characteristics of the monumental–relational nexus. The monumentality of the buildings is reflected, less by deliberate design, but more via the affective *relation* the space has with the communal ethos of the surrounding two buildings. In other words, the affect of Brutalism that encourages an active relation with the building spills out onto the spaces in between the buildings. This is evident with the grassy mound in the middle of RHG's open space (seen to the right in Figure 2), which while having monumental qualities (i.e. being physically dominant in the space, and also historically, by being cast from the rubble of the site's former building), encourages interaction that with many of my site visits was ludic, reflective and often contemplative.

RHG then espouses the brutalist ethics of monumentality, honesty of structure and rawness of materiality, ethics that the Smithsons were fixated upon instilling into the site. Moving around the site today, it is difficult not to be intoxicated by the social monumentality that the architects intended. Their ethical philosophy, which can be traced back to their work with the Independent Group, meant that RHG was designed very much as a social housing experiment. The layout of the flats, the streets in the sky, the communal outdoor spaces, they were all specifically and carefully designed so as to inculcate a "building for the socialist dream" (Smithson and Smithson 2001:296). Hence, the political architecture of RHG is acutely evident via its brutalist ethics of a relational monumentality; it was built as *social* housing. The production of the GLC Householder's Manual even gave specific instructions on how to live and play in the building (Powers 2010), arguing "it is your turn to try and make it a place you will be proud to live in" (*Architectural Design* 1972:570). While today, this seems overly deterministic and draconian, it was part of the "bloody-minded" vision of a utopian social housing future.

RHG (and indeed modernist housing estates more broadly) muddied the public–private divide, which is often too clinical a division in other types of housing design (such as terraced housing with walled gardens, or gated communities). The broader critiques of this brutalist and modernist design (Coleman 1985; Jencks 1984) balked at such pseudo-public space, and championed fully private living. Coleman's ideas translated into one of the most important housing policies in the UK in recent times, the Right to Buy Scheme (initiated by Thatcher in 1980, a keen

reader of Coleman's work). The privatisation of social housing that this policy inculcated forms the broader ideology of neoliberalism writ large (Marcuse and Madden 2016), and was resurrected by David Cameron in 2016 to the further detriment of the social housing stock in the UK. This is why RHG, with its social housing ethos built-in to the brutalist architecture by the Smithsons, counters such neoliberal rhetoric. It is not without problems of course, but a resident survey undertaken by an active inhabitant found restoration an overwhelmingly preferred option to demolition (Hurst 2009). Indeed, the consultation document that recommends the building obtain a "certificate of immunity" from listing in 2008 by Peter Stewart Consulting has zero references or quotes from residents. It quotes architectural critics and planning officials, but nowhere are the desires of the residents or their affection for the building taken into account, which again exemplifies the divorce of aesthetics and ethics. RHG is deliberately social—the walkways, the pause spaces, the lifts, the trash chutes, the open spaces, the manual, the leading architectural details—are all part of the Smithsons' ideal of how housing should be built.

Given the continued growth and global dominance of London, specifically Canary Wharf that is less than a mile away, RHG occupies prime real estate property. The prevailing neoliberal logics that govern housing policy in the UK have only exacerbated since Thatcher's Right to Buy was introduced, and as such, RHG is under increasing pressure to be demolished and make way for housing that is befitting of the financial workers who are keen to live near to their place of work (or "yuppidromes" as Hatherley [2014] describes them). The current plan is to build "Blackwall Reach" in its place, which is a fully privatised and gated development with currently no plans for social housing (only "affordable housing" which is anything but for local residents [Christophers 2014]). At the time of writing, RHG still stands with six families still living there, so while its eventual demolition date is still unknown, the wrecking ball is immanent. This is despite interjections from high prolife architects arguing for preservation, resident-led surveys that overwhelmingly supported renovation over demolition and citywide social housing campaigns deriding the process as social cleansing, and part of a broader neoliberalised gentrification of London's East End (Watt 2013; Watt and Minton 2016). RHG undoubtedly had problems; the stairwells were uncompromisingly small, the streets in the sky ended up not being as wide as the Smithsons wanted them to be and they did not connect levels together, and it suffered from financial difficulties during construction which led to poorer grade concrete being used, which is now crumbling (*Municipal Dreams* 2014). But its brutalist ethics ooze *affectively* from the space; it has an atmosphere that defies its bustling urban location. Its history is one of social and communal living, developed from a very brutalist ethics. Such ethics though are ever more difficult to find, let alone build in the hyper-neoliberalised cities of today, but that does not mean we should stop trying.

A Brutal Politics

Hatherley (2011:87, emphasis added) has argued that Brutalism "*was a political aesthetic, an attitude, a weapon, dedicated to the precept that nothing was too good for ordinary people*". But now, as he goes on to argue, it has been reduced

to an architectural “style”, a quaint, perhaps kitsch indulgence that is the purview of those rich enough to afford it. Brutalism is far more than an architectural “style”. This paper has argued that it has ethical and aesthetic qualities that are more nuanced than both the narrative from the preservationists and its critics register. Brutalism is an architectural style that may well be “anti-beauty” (Hatherley 2009; van den Heuvel 2004), but its ethics encourages an open dialogue between building and inhabitant. It is imposing and total in its image, but such totality is a product of relationality and its human associations, and the material rawness and honesty of its structure gives it an ethical transparency (as the case studies of RHG exemplified). Given that there has been a call for “architectural geographers [to] turn more fully towards human subjectivity in their analyses of the lived experiences of buildings/architecture” (Lees and Baxter 2011:117), Brutalism can be positioned as a critical interlocutor in the debate. All this means that Brutalism has a *political* utility.

It is political because there are a number of possibilities for re-engaging with Brutalism as a critique of contemporary neoliberal urban form, as its ethics align with radical geographical practice, and urban activism more broadly. Across London, for example, there are scores of anti-gentrification groups, social housing champions and a general network of activists who are continually campaigning against neoliberal urban development, with more being formed regularly as further sites in London are earmarked for gentrification (see Watt and Minton 2016). Their protests, when coupled with radical geographic scholarship, can make a tangible difference in the lives of many. A brutalist ethics speaks to many of the overarching narratives of these protest groups, but specifically in two realms; in terms of its commitment to social housing (exemplified via RHG), and also as a radical tradition of artistic activism via architectural design.

First, a brutalist politics could utilise the ethical discourse outlined in this paper as a means to champion the specificities of social housing, public space and community interaction. The case study illuminated how RHG’s entire design ethos stemmed from a brutalist ethics that positioned sociality as the key, monumental ethos. Brutalism is unapologetically social and civic, particularly in its housing projects (see also Park Hill in Sheffield, the now demolished Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis, Alexandra Road Estate, Balfron and Trelick Towers all in London, plus many more). Given the rapid decline of social housing in the UK, brutalist buildings with the ethical commitment outlined in this paper can stand as beacons of a utopian sanguinity of a more socialised and communal housing landscape; one that actively and unapologetically shuns the privatisation of space and the deleterious individualisation of home life.

Second, urban political scholarship of late has been grappling with the growing artistic resistance to neoliberal urbanisation via the processes of occupation (Vasudevan 2015), radical democracy (Purcell 2013) and urban subversion (Mould 2015). They have all been highlighted as means by which people and collectives are using creative and artistic methods of resisting the perceived injustices of contemporary urban development. However, much of these actions tends to miss how *buildings themselves* can be a means through which resistance is performed. Architecture as cultural critique has been a force in counter-cultural politics since

the Situationists, with Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon as a prime example (Mould 2015), but other notable projects include those from Cedric Price (Göbel 2014) and Archigram (Pinder 2011). However, many of these projects were deliberately conceptual and rarely made it into built form and indeed deliberately avoided it. While such conceptual critique is absolutely vital, there is a place for Brutalism in this broader spectrum of artistic urban practices, perhaps most readily because unlike many of these experimental designs, some brutalist structures were actually built thereby translating critical artistic practices into physical urban form (and highlighting the inherent problems and challenges that entails).

Brutalist structures with their commitments to social housing and actualised creative resistance processes, have stories to tell. These stories are a powerful reminder of how urban space *can* be built with an ethical discourse that puts the building's ability to relate to people above its ability to relate to capital. Brutalism, as has been argued throughout this paper, has a relational quality that *requires* human interaction and a sense of ethical inhabitation, an urban citizenship rather than a passive consumption. The creation of relational-monumental inhabitation (be that a housing block, a civic collective or economic network) is just as much a characteristic of brutalist design as is the anti-beauty, concrete aesthetic form. Therefore, championing Brutalism requires adopting a political resistance to negation of that relational ethic. In sum, Brutalism has a politics which very much goes against the current swaths of neoliberal processes so rife in contemporary cities, and needs to be utilised as such.

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Endnotes

¹ Rumors have also surfaced that Peter Smithson's student-year's nickname was "Brutus". So Brutus + Alison = Brutalism.

² These days, architectural renderings are awash with people, but they are often engaging in overt acts of consumption; drinking coffee, clasp shopping bags, and so on. But such renderings are also now emblematic of capitalistic property development processes, and visualize how the building/space will be consumed rather than inhabited. It also must be noted that for the Smithsons' "Parallel of Life and Art" exhibition in 1952, they infamously insisted that the Hunstanton Building be photographed devoid of people and even furniture. Arguably though this was more for artistic purposes, many of their proposal drawings featured people heavily.

³ Brutalism's affective capacities are therefore more in line with how Bissell et al. (2012:707) articulate them when they argue that affect is not always a manipulative force of a more "hidden" capitalist agenda; it is an "interplay of revealing and concealing".

⁴ Goldfinger lived in the Balfron for two months in 1968 after it was completed. Critics argue that he hated it so much that he moved (Hanley 2007), but the research that I conducted suggests that he was only ever going to be there for two months as part of an experiment, as he

wanted to get the “feel” for the building so he could “correct any flaws in the future” (Hanley 2007).

⁵ See Meeting of Strategic Development Committee, Thursday 15 March 2012, 7.00 pm (item 6.1): <http://moderngov.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=33865> (last accessed 12 July 2016).

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