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The Hard and the Brutal: A Journey through Parisian Brutalism

In 2016, I and the photographer Nigel Green (working together in the art practice collaboration Photolanguage), were commissioned by the publisher Blue Crow Media to research and illustrate a Brutalist Map of Paris. This article reflects on the period of research, of site exploration and recording that led to the production of the map, and a recent journey of return to social housing projects by Jean Renaudie and Renée Gailhoustet. Our response to Parisian brutalism was not simply architectural and historiographic, but emphasised the peripatetic and experiential circumstances of the commissioned journey, as a project of urban, photographic documentation. The 'official' architectural itinerary also engendered a project to return to and reassess the notion of brutalist material aesthetics in general terms and in relation to the contemporary city 'as found'.

We sought to apply an understanding of brutalism across the period of the journey in its totality. That is, we did not reserve our 'brutalist' attention only for those periods within the 'privileged' sites of authored architecture, but undertook to traverse Paris according to a brut itinerary. While the map itself reflects exclusively the architectural aspects of this research, a parallel exhibition at the *Institut Français* in London also explored the intersections of the architectural sites and the wider urban foray.

A selection of images were presented within the main library space of the *Institut Français* as the cover images of an imaginary French architectural journal, *La Revue Générale Brutaliste*, bordered by invented 'editorial' titles and notations. Printed on hand-made Japanese paper, these postured as archival items from the history of the fictional journal (from the 1950s-70s), with its cover design evolving as if over time in a manner inspired by the covers of period editions of journals such as *L'Architecture D'Aujord'hui*. Of the ten covers, two featured anonymous 'found objects' and 'brutal gardens', incorporating the fallen, the discarded and neglected urban spaces as part of an 'official' legacy of the brutalist 'canon'. The edition titles and 'editorial notes' also sought to open the presentation of the examples of architectural brutalism beyond the expected language of architectural history and authorship to more indeterminate, speculative modes of expression, registering contingent urban details and events of a 'brutal' character. These included found graffiti, signage and the comments and exhortations of individuals encountered at the site.

The project began, and still grapples with, a question of definitions: the identity or criteria of a brutalist building or space and how, in our case, to transfer a certain historical understanding and experience of brutalism from the UK context (British buildings, British criticism), to the Parisian one. Necessarily, we returned to critic Reyner Banham's definitions of Brutalism within his essay of December 1955 in *The Architectural Review*, 'The New Brutalism'. We encounter there a quite fluid set of terms, aesthetic genealogies and qualifications, almost exclusively directed to establish the brutalist credentials of the work of a single architect: the British practice of Alison and Peter Smithson. Significantly, this originating thesis of brutalism was not conceived with recourse to the medium of concrete, but through the steel and panel system construction of the Smithson's Hunstanton School in

Norfolk, and through the production of imagery, in relation to exhibitions produced by the Independent Group, principally, *The Parallel of Art and Life*, which included the work of photographer Nigel Henderson.

Rather than functioning as the basis of an architectural movement as such, 'The New Brutalism' article is perhaps better understood as a discursive vehicle for Banham's broader project of cultural criticism at that time, a temporary scaffolding erected in the episodic activities of journal criticism and then discarded when the focus of Banham's critical allegiances shifted. That said, one *can* extract from Banham a set of working principles for identifying brutalist buildings, such as the occasion requires: the 'memorability' and, indeed, the 'ruthlessness' of the spatial system as image (that is, the clarity of a building's visual identity, and formal legibility as a programme); the clear exhibition of structure; and of materials *as found*. Diversely activated within that set of values is also a general propensity toward primitive or essential material expression, in the association of the term *beton brut* (raw concrete) adopted from Le Corbusier, to Art Brut and Arte Povera.

The Australian architectural historian John Macarthur makes the point that Banham's articles in this period were published within the wider frame of a set of editorial campaigns in *The Architectural Review* from the 1930s onwards championing, through diverse and sometimes contradictory forms of expression, the revival of the 18th century aesthetic category of the picturesque, as the basis of a renewed urban aesthetic of dynamic contradistinctions. Banham's declared stance was to reject *The AR*'s concerns for the picturesque as a parochial reaction to modernity. Macarthur, on the other hand, refers us to a broader understanding of the spectrum of the picturesque as inclusive of a theory of ugliness and disgust, a longer philosophical reflection on material aesthetics to which brutalism can quite plausibly be understood to be an extension. Within the context of this programme of aesthetic reflection on the tensions between new forms of post war modernity and, broadly speaking, Romanticism, Macarthur defines brutalism as a form of '*hard picturesque*, which is the aesthetically challenging, as opposed to a soft and facile picturesque, which panders to familiar sentiments'.

One would have to concede that with the arrival of projects like the brutalist map series, and the abundant appreciation of brutalist architecture on social media, its status as 'hard' aesthetic is itself transitioning, or has already transitioned toward something more 'familiar'; that brutalism has lost its shock value, its inherent material and aesthetic force of critique as an antithesis to dominant, 'soft', aesthetic sensibilities. However, this also signals a moment at which we can re look and reassess the impact of the work of the period and, importantly, to begin a process of more acute differentiation within the common categorisation, through acts of return, reflection and re-presentation.

Within our documentation of Paris and acts of 'return' we sought to re propose and reposition the material values of the 'as found' and the 'hard'. We explored 'authored' and 'anonymous' urban formations with equal interest, and looked to differentiate a 'hard' from 'soft' brutalism – pockets of the 'hard picturesque' persisting or reconfiguring within the recognised or authored sites of the architectural itinerary.

The work of Nigel Henderson provides a useful bridge between brutalism as an ambition for reductive rigor within material and architectonic expression and that of its manifestation as urban observation and representation. The historian Andrew Higgott proposes that the brutalist values in Henderson's photography have to do with the recording of an 'authentic inhabitation' of the city, the witnessing of its incident and patterns of life. While we should be wary of the photograph as a means to access sociological truths, Henderson's photography provides a useful point of convergence for many of the complex cultural vectors of the time, in the way it channels older picturesque, Surrealist and Dadaist concerns, alongside the emergence of pop culture and a new socio-political awareness of its urban subject matter, emphasising a heightened material awareness of the city as a space of accretion and contingency. Henderson's concerns parallel those of the Smithsons in their complex reflections on the social and environmental implications of the 'as found' sensibility, which continued into the 1990s and across the spectrum of their built, written and graphic production.

The Map: A Material Itinerary

To journey in search of the 'brutalist' architecture of Paris – and to now follow the itinerary of the map – is to traverse expansively to the limits and beyond the Parisian *Périphérique* in all directions, to the new town zones of the 1960s and 70s. Bobigny, Créteil, Ivry and parts of la Defense were the particular sites of our attention. The brutalist element of Parisian urbanism does not represent a simple shift in the style and materiality of the city's renewal or extension – a brutalist strata within an accumulation of historical styles – but was also an attempt to manifest wholly new Parisian environments: satellite cities of a new, *multi-polaire* solution to urban growth.

Examples of brutalism within the city centre are rare. The concrete, concertina-like conference building within Breuer, Nervi and Zehrfuss's UNESCO complex (1958) is perhaps the most powerful example. This is, itself, disconnected from the surrounding historic city of the seventh *arrondisement* by the perimeter fencing and landscaping of UNESCO site, subject to a layered condition of *cordon-sanitaire*. The brutalist mapping of Paris (its making and subsequent retracing) requires a migration to new cities; journeys into enclaves of alternative urbanism, that, on one's return to the centre, leave a dream-like impression on memory – the sense that one had ventured to a space of sufficient difference as to be of a parallel history to the present reality.

The map itself proposes as a 'coherent' itinerary across diverse sites; its format neutralises the many contradictions in identification that the commission engendered. The application of a nomenclature of brutalism to a period of production spanning 30 years, across periods of changing material technologies and economies of labour produces, of course, as many misalignments as compatibilities.

Within a purely 'architectural' pursuit of the 'as-found' the apprehension and expression of the conditions of the building site, the moment of assemblage, is paramount; that is, the creation of a material expression at the intersection of labour and the medium of construction. Historian Adrian Forty provides a diverse discussion of the 'discourse of concrete' in the modern and late modern periods as a combination of the trace of both the ‘primitive and the sophisticated’ in the dialogue between engineering or ‘system’ and its execution.

The term *beton brut* itself derives originally from an item of correspondence by Le Corbusier and describes the material finish of his later works in the post World War 2 period, particularly the *Unité d’Habitation* in Marseilles. Whilst the notion of the material finish ‘as found’ has come to define brutalism within the current understanding of the canon, and even traced back to William Morris, craft revival and the authentic expression of materials, it was more so a product of the conditions of the building site, the fact that there were multiple contractors working on the *unité*’s construction, with different levels of skill. A similar material discourse is in evidence at Le Corbusier’s *Maisons Jaoul* in western Paris, Neuilly-sur-Seine (1951 – the earliest building recorded on the Brutalist map). Here, within a ‘raw’ palette of materials, the trace of the making hand is discernible in the cementing of the brick joints, the working of the exposed sections of the concrete slab (producing an expression of the barrel roof profile and of the lower floor slabs on the end elevations, like a section cut). However, Forty notes that there is a level of contradiction between means and ends at the *Maisons Jaoul* in relation to materials, in that the brick work was executed by a skilled and experienced craftsman, but who was instructed to conduct the work with a loose hand; and that a less experienced contractor for the concrete made a particularly bad job of the first-floor concrete slab and then overcompensated with a very precise and crisp moulding of the roof slab. The loose hand of the skilled, the over-compensation of the less capable; a now largely indecipherable material and ideological dialogue between restraint and excess, across the professional classes of design and construction.

A housing complex by Paul Bossard in Créteil (1962) could be seen to express something approximate to Le Corbusier’s treatment of materials at the *Maisons Jaoul*. Forty, also makes interesting observations here about the logic of construction. For, with *Les Bleuets*, as they are called, (the Cornflowers) there is a combination of the hand-made with the precast panel system. Bossard evolved the design from his student diploma project and, against the norms of professional roles within the French building industry, undertook to design the precast system himself and oversee in detail its assemblage on-site. The large pieces of shale embedded in the roughly textured concrete panels were placed by the construction workers at the site whilst the concrete was still wet, with the variability of skill in this process of rapid, ‘primitive’ appliqué embraced as a part of the material ethos of the project.

Forty, with reference to the work of architect Vilanova Artigas in São Paulo, makes a useful comparison between the play of the primitive and the sophisticated across European and South American brutalism. For Artigas, as Forty quotes, the ‘ideological content of European brutalism […] brings with it a cargo of irrationalism’. Within this ‘cargo’ is the conceit of the persistence of an aesthetic of austerity – of the ‘primitive’ inflection of the hand of the unskilled labourer – way beyond the actual period of post war material shortage in Europe. Within South America, on the other hand, unskilled labour remained a fundamental part of the economics of the building site.

However, whilst a late Le Corbusian aesthetic may have continued to influence the manipulation of the concrete surface well into the 1970s in brutalism within aspects of architectural practice in the UK, the scene in Paris by no means yields evidence of such an allegiance. In assembling the itinerary of the map we quickly realised the necessity of abandoning this particular material relationship to the trace of manual labour as an essential benchmark of the *brut* and, instead, attempted to reconfigure the terms of brutalism according to the material and technological cultures of the precast system and the machined surface. Here I focus (among the many possible examples) on our encounters with the work of Renaudie and Gailhoustet.

The 'combinatory system': material futurity and 'unmappable' zones.

Within the multi-phased project at Ivry and subsequent, smaller developments at la Cité Rateau, la Courneuve by Renaudie (1984), and la Cité de la Maladrerie, *Aubervilliers* by Gailhoustet (1984), it is the complexities of the plan and its social 'thesis' – to be achieved at scale – that dominate the material and constructive regime. Through the vertical layering of a triangulated or 'star-shaped' plan, subsequently subjected to morphing actions of cut and rotation, Renaudie and Gailhoustet's architecture accedes to a radical principle of 'difference'. The 'combinatory system' of *Les Étoiles*, as Iréné Scalbert has identified it, of over-lap and interconnection, proposed a unique space for every household, that prioritised the spaces of collective living over provision for the individual, allowing complexity and irregularity within the plan to generate an evolving appropriation of space, from interior to exterior. The work of spatial complexity, variation and interrelationship – the 'effect of one apartment configuration upon another necessitated never-ending adjustments' – is ultimately directed toward the aim of facilitating self-management by the inhabitants within the evolution of different patterns of communal encounter and life across the commercial, profession and domestic strata of the *cité*.

Certainly, at Ivry and the other Parisian sites of Renaudie and Gailhoustet's 'combinatory' architecture, the 'honesty' of material expression in relation to structure and the trace of labour is not an absolute value. In these sites, one might suggest, there is no conception of a 'model' or ideal viewer/ beholder; no desire to play with the perceptual acuity of a sophisticated eye at a material level; there is no concession to material conceit in Artigas's terms. One might claim, by contrast, that there is a more genuine 'democratisation' of material aesthetics in Renaudie and Gailhoustet's work, by the priority afforded to the pragmatics of the constructive task toward the achievement of hitherto unattained spatial complexity *en masse*.

Another way of reflecting on the 'discourse' of the material surface here is with recourse to time, its 'positioning' in relation to temporal categories. Material surface phenomena on this mode of later brutalist work is, for the most part, not indexical of the actions of making and of labour on the building site. Whilst surfaces bare the traces of use and abuse and of weathering over time, in a purely architectural and constructive sense the materials of Renaudie and Gailhoustet do not register the past tense in this way. Concrete surfaces are of a serviceable smoothness, with no particular level of attention to precision in the finish (being neither especially precise nor 'loose'). A concrete render is commonly used to protect facade and structural members at street level and also facilitates the use of colour in the later phases of Ivry. Large, bespoke, precast panelling defines much of the housing façade and exhibits an equally pragmatic materiality – a robust agent of spatial tectonics in service of the speculations of the plan. As a speculative space, anticipatory of an as yet unknown future of social relations, one might conclude that, indeed, the material traces of the past as an ‘as found’ aesthetic and ideological implication of labour, have no place. The present (or temporal immediacy) of the material and spatial system is thus made ‘neutral’ in this sense, in support of the project’s programmatic futurity.

In the final section I reflect on our encounters with a particular category of space within the work of Renaudie and Gailhoustet, the complex threshold spaces between the architecture of the ‘combinatory’ system and the surrounding urbanism.

As producers of the brutalist map we capture the external, iconic image of the architecture of our itinerary. As architectural tourists / day trippers to the work of Renaudie and Gailhoustet we cannot, of course, speak of an experience of the architecture as inhabitants of the interior life of the ‘combinatory’ system. However, we can, as travellers within the urban conditions at its fringes, validly report back our experience of the terms of its contact, or, indeed, *contract*, with the wider city, in the spatial ‘inter-zones’ and thresholds of transition from the ‘older’ or ‘normative’ urban order to the space of ‘difference’. Spending, sometimes uneasy periods in these zones, we recorded them with uneven levels of care and detail. I return to them now in the realisation that they comprise the conflicting combination of attributes that would define them as pockets of the ‘hard picturesque’ of the contemporary city; difficult urban space persisting within the more formally recognised and accepted ‘brutalist’ environment; an ‘ugly’ brutalism, one that has evolved, not toward broader, popular acceptance, but a yet more virulent state of repulsion: unmappable. They are frequently traversed spaces, serving a successful domestic interior, and yet are also subject to the effects of failure and withdrawal as urban spaces. They are highly wrought spaces of architectural authorship, of extreme spatial and material deliberation, but also of contingency and decay, and a programmatic hybridity that defies easy assimilation.

Cité Rateau presents a dynamic, fragmented cliff face to its main urban interface with rue Rateau, whilst to the rear the scheme cascades down from 7th to ground floor in the overlapping and constantly shifting orientations of the terracing characteristic of Ivry. The street frontage is deeply incised and hollowed, a space of transitional access to the apartments at ground floor and successive deck levels, with staircases visible as their own volumetric expressions behind the frame of the outer facade panelling. The volumes of the apartments break beyond this framework at higher level in a stepped rhythm descending to meet the more diminutive housing around it, and anticipating the more complex volumetric arrangements behind.

The ground floor of this façade yields a surprising complexity as one journeys through it and extends in places to the depth of something more like an under-croft. The material palette is more variegated than that of the earlier Ivry, with brick and seemingly more provisional breeze-block sections appearing amid the cast concrete, concrete panelling and render. A mid-grey paint occurs intermittently, picking out a sequence of surfaces as if there had been an attempt, not to colour code the surfaces according to architectonic performance, but to lead the eye through complex recessional plains, to tempt engagement in a scopic exploration. (It is likely, of course, that this spatial play of grey is not original, but a later effort of maintenance, which pursues and erases the interventions of graffitists.)

Here structure morphs into screen and 'decoration' with columns diversely shaped – splayed and spread as if they were assembled from something like the splintered fragments of the façade panelling system. Staircases and horizontal, first floor connecting walkways further fragment the visual field and are, in turn, supported by a smaller, seemingly ad hoc structural system of columns, like concrete props or scaffolding. Despite Renaudie and Gailhoustet's incredible capacities of spatial imagination and draughtsmanship, one cannot help but think that this is a space beyond drawing, beyond specification, and perhaps in part given over to the contractor to provide improvised solutions based on practical knowledge.

Only a single figure traversed this space during our visit – a loan female seemingly unsure of her destination. Post boxes in one section of, what was apparently conceived originally as an open 'foyer', seemed to have been long abandoned. Almost all of the fenestration at the ground level was closed with an industrial grade metal shuttering, and it was unclear what type of space, or combination of spaces, was behind it: domestic, storage, commercial or studio.

This complex space of circulation, screen, shelter and structure would seem to provide myriad opportunities for appropriation: for concealment, for storage; for the chance encounter or the ambush; the improvised event and activity, industrious or celebratory and social. Yet, the space seemed hollowed and left latent. Although suggestive in equal measure of a space of urban deviancy and of architectural festival, it played host to neither. The materials of the architecture of 'difference' had the appearance of being merely scenographic here, the vacated shell of the propositional thesis. Less the connecting tissue of the 'combinatory' system to the surrounding city, such spaces now appear like the uncertain buffer zones between Renaudie and Gailhoustet's utopianism and the spaces of the everyday.

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