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SYMPOSIUM: The Open Hand: A Call for Civic Debate

The Open Hand: A Call for Civic Debate, 16 - 17 May 2014
Keynote Speakers: Vikramāditya Prakāsh & Stephen Zepke



Gavin Hipkins, Leisure Valley: The Open Hand (detail) 2013

The Open Hand: A Call for Civic Debate

Behind what is often held to be cold, utilitarian and disposing Brutalist architecture, emerging in the 1950s and waning in the 1970s, is perhaps a spirited, socialist-utopianism. Ambitiously, if not ironically, Brutalism aspired to propagate reform and an egalitarian society. Le Corbusier, hero of béton brut, cast this body-politic formally as an Open Hand in his major commissioned project of Chandigarh. Vikramāditya Prakāsh links Le Corbusier's Open Hand to questions of power and the ontological genesis of moral work. For Prakāsh, "the Open Hand was Le Corbusier's apolitical answer to the world of politics, embodying his conception of the Open Hand formally and apolitically, the Open Hand was intended as a call to civic debate and collaborative action:

It expresses a philosophy, the result of a life of study, of struggles, of defeats, of victories... the open hand became a crowning point of what I called the contemplation hollow, a place to discuss public affairs far from officials, elected or imposed... The hand is open to give and receive. It's a sign of optimism in this world of catastrophe. (Cited in Barsac, 1987)

In his well-known essay *The New Brutalism* (1955), Reyner Banham emphasised that New Brutalism was marked by three primary characteristics: the memorability of images, clear articulation of structure, and expression of material difference. Banham discussed these terms specifically in relation to the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, who were working in post-war Britain, as key proponents giving definition to New Brutalism. For the Smithsons, rather than being simply stylistic New Brutalism was in essence ethical, meaning the whole problem of human associations and relationships was at stake (Smithson, A & P, 1957).

We may read the Open Hand as a memorable image that symbolises civic debate and collaborative action, and in this consider Stephen Zepke's (2012) provocation that a modernist insistence on the production of the new may produce a utopian projection of a 'people to come'. We are then left with some questions: from today's perspectives, how do we relate to the ethics and aims of Brutalism, within and beyond architecture? How do we represent the inhabitation of 'Brutalist' modernism? Does the aging 'body' of modernist work call for preservation? Should we be cautionary, celebratory or protesting? How do current ethical and cultural paradigms affect the way we inhabit public space today, in light of the lessons of modernism generally and the Open Hand specifically? How can we present a utopian projection of a 'people to come' as a political imperative for our horizontal futures?

Convenors: Rafik Patel and Charlotte Huddleston School of Art and Design AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand.

The Open Hand: A Call for Civic Debate is programmed alongside the exhibition *Leisure Valley* by Gavin Hipkins at ST PAUL St Gallery, AUT University, 4 April – 17 May 2014.

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