AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONCRETE ARCHITECTURE

14—16.4.2019
THE BRUTALIST TURN
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My presentation will look into the intersection of New Brutalism and welfare state politics, using the case of Alison and Peter Smithson to unpack some of the dominant myths of the period. I will use some of my recent research findings to hypothesize that when looking at the British state welfare system, we are seeing not so much a universalist project of citizens’ emancipation but rather a continuation of disruptive development at the expense of lower-class communities in particular.

It was Kenneth Frampton who suggested a direct link between the New Brutalism and the welfare state in his famed Modern Architecture: A Critical
History (1980, 1985). Yet, the link is not quite substantiated in his seven-page discussion of the architecture of the Smithsons, and Stirling and Gowan.

I will first contextualize the case of Robin Hood Gardens and demonstrate its rather exceptional qualities, not only in terms of its architecture, but especially in terms of the local council policies and the larger history of the construction of the London Docklands and its immediate housing districts.

Secondly, I will highlight some of the propositions as conceptualized by the Smithsons for the welfare state-architecture nexus, and how they – at first optimistically, but also naively – developed their ideas over the years, from the cheerfulness of the House of the Future in 1956 to the pessimism of "The Violent Consumer" in 1974 and from embracing the ideas of the Labour politician and Minister for Health and Housing Aneurin Bevan as described in his book *In Place of Fear* (1952), to Team 10’s dismissive discussions of the “Labour Union Society” in the mid-1970s.

My presentation will conclude with a few observations concerning the afterlife of Robin Hood Gardens and the demise of the British system of planning and housing. I will also address the ruthless metabolism of a “superstar city” like London (Richard Florida, 2017), which devours its own architecture and history in its relentless striving for capitalist hegemony as driven by the speculative logic of global real estate surplus value.