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Between Brutalists. The Banham Hypothesis and the Smithson Way of Life

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This essay revisits the debates on the New Brutalism as it emerged in Great Britain in the early 1950s. The shifting positions of its main propagators, Alison and Peter Smithson and Reyner Banham, are scrutinised through a re-reading of the polemics of the period and its aftermath. Conventionally, Banham's ground-breaking essay of 1955 'The New Brutalism' is used as a starting-point for a unified history of New Brutalism. However, as it turns out, the Smithsons and Banham held very different opinions about the direction of the New Brutalist project. Whereas Banham advocated an integration between architecture and the latest technologies, the Smithsons sought to combine modern architecture with a multiplicity of tendencies within British culture, reaching back to Arts and Crafts concepts, among others. To open up the discourse and to measure the various shifts, the essay discusses the concept of 'Image', identified by Banham as one of the key concepts of New Brutalism, in relation to the various statements made by the Smithsons. In contrast to Banham, the Smithsons defined New Brutalism by laying emphasis on the material qualities of architecture and the aspects of process and making in architectural construction. This was related to their ambition to redesign the system of relationships between the everyday, domesticity, labour and the larger society. In short, it was a different 'way of life' that was behind the Smithsons' project for New Brutalism.

Introduction

Today, New Brutalism enjoys renewed interest. On the web for instance, one finds blogs, Facebook groups and websites that celebrate Brutalist architecture, such as the one with the slightly awkward name of 'Fuck Yeah Brutalism'. Extensive coverage by lifestyle magazines is provided by *Wallpaper* and *Monocle* amongst others, which reproduce the image of Brutalism as a mixture of forgotten State-communist mega-structures and James Bond glamour. Perhaps, the photographic fictions of the Belgian artist Filip Dujardin capture the current 'image' of the New Brutalist outlook in the most eloquent way (Fig. 1). In his photographic depictions of

architectural phantasies we see a preference for daring cantilevering volumes, bare concrete and an industrial look, all combined with a touch of decadence, a hint of the sublime. Dujardin's images are both Utopian and dystopian at once it seems, a very clever and paradoxical combination, and probably necessarily so, after the twentieth century and the experience of total war and total mobilisation. For this should always be kept in the back of one's mind: that the New Brutalist project, its ethic and aesthetic were rooted in both the trauma and hope of the immediate post-war years in Europe.¹

Images like the ones of Dujardin also make clear how the 'image' of Brutalism is changing, once

Figure 1. Filip Dujardin,
'Untitled' from the
series 'Fictions', 2007
(© Filip Dujardin).



again. During the heyday of post-modernism in the 1980s, Brutalism had fallen from grace. But now, Brutalism is a cool thing again, swanky, fashionable, even though its appreciation is certainly not undisputed considering the vast amount of buildings that are demolished or under threat of demolition, including one of Brutalism's foremost housing projects: Robin Hood Gardens designed by Alison and Peter Smithson. Yet, at the same time, the lasting controversy adds to the attraction. For many lovers of Brutalist architecture its controversy is ultimate proof of its avant-garde character and revolutionary potential.²

The controversial status of Brutalism and the Brutalist image is not a new thing. On the contrary, Brutalism was born from controversy, even though the first appearance of the term in print, in the pages of *Architectural Design* in December, 1953, concerned the design of a very modest house by the Smithsons for themselves (Fig. 2). After this first publication, a fierce debate on the qualities of the New Brutalism, its possible meanings and its disputed origins unfolded in an endless series of 'Letters to the Editors' and editorial comments in the two leading journals in England, *The Architectural Review* and the aforementioned *Architectural Design*.³

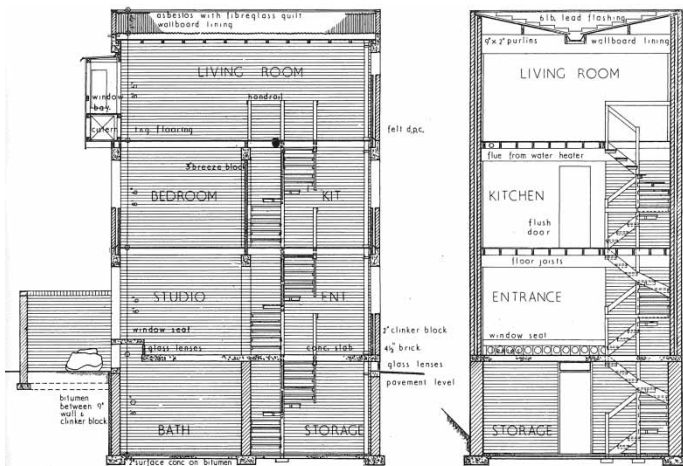
Controversy as well as provocation are part and parcel of New Brutalism and its place within the architectural media. The controversial nature of Brutalist architecture and its imagery was also recognised by popular culture quite early on. For instance, in Michelangelo Antonioni's movie 'Blow-up' (1966) we come across the Smithsons' Economist building or in Stanley Kubrick's 'A Clockwork Orange' (1971) the London Thamesmead estate is

prominently and notoriously present.⁴ Both are highly disturbing films as we know, particularly when it comes to classic Brutalist tropes: the complicated interrelationships between image, representation and reality in the case of 'Blow-up', and the ideals of modern architecture and welfare state planning vis-à-vis the anti-social urges of a new consumer class in the case of Kubrick's masterpiece.

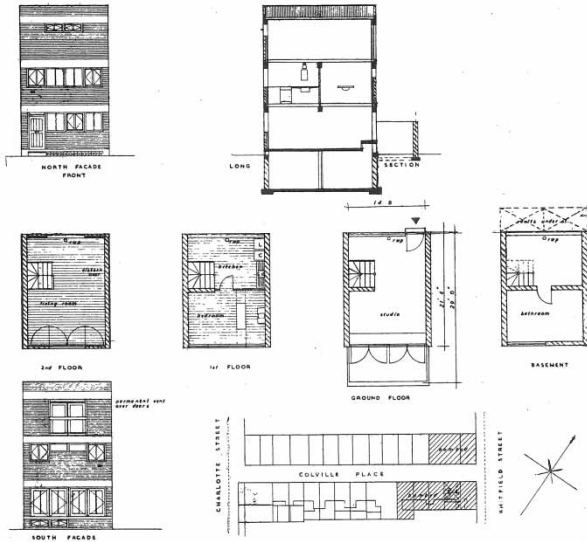
Unsurprisingly, the historical New Brutalism and how it emerged in Great Britain in the early 1950s had very different aspirations from the current revivals. And even though 'Image' with a capital 'I' was one of the central components of the tentative theoretical underpinnings proposed by Reyner Banham, a certain Brutalist 'style' as a formal vocabulary to be recycled in the world of fashion and media was far removed from the New Brutalist agenda for the future of modern architecture. Retracing the formation of New Brutalism in those early years is not to prove the current interpretations wrong, but rather to demonstrate that we are looking at a chain of re-inventions and re-appropriations. In the vein of Raymond Williams, who described such a chain of re-inventions of the Picturesque tradition as crucial to understanding the English sensibility regarding the processes of modernisation (in his renowned *The Country and the City* of 1973), the re-surfacing of debates over New Brutalism might be understood as symptomatic of the British absorption of modern architecture. The notorious split between 'ethic or aesthetic' is part of it, as is the speculation about a connection between social aspiration and architecture.

There are at least two things that seem to stand in the way of a careful mapping of the dynamics of the

Figure 2. Alison and Peter Smithson, House in Soho, London, as published in *Architectural Design* (December, 1953; © Smithson Family Collection and *Architectural Design*).



Above: Sections (scale 16 ft. = 1 in.). Below: plans and elevations (Scale 24 ft. = 1 in.)



HOUSE IN SOHO, LONDON

Alison and Peter Smithson

“The attempt was made to build in Central London, and failed because of difficulty with adjoining owners. It seemed that a series of Trusts held the surrounding land (all bombed) but it turned out to be one man who intended to build kitchens to the left, W.C.’s to the right and restaurants to the rear—this contract was about to be signed after nine months’ work.

On the normal city site costing between 15s. and 25s. per sq. ft. one can apparently do little different from the Georgian, but it was considered that a different internal order must be visualised. The air and sunlight of the attics in the daytime suggests that living quarters should be up top, with the bathroom in the cool of the dim basement.

It was decided to have no finishes at all internally—the building being a combination of shelter and environment.

Bare concrete, brickwork and wood. The difficulty of uncelled rooms was satisfactorily overcome by the disposition of rooms which were also placed high up or low down according to light-sunlight desired.

Brickwork may suggest a blue or double burnt or coloured pointing; but the arbitrary use of colour and texture was not conformed with, and common bricks with struck joints were intended. The bars and colour variation have some sort of natural tension when laid by a good bricklayer.

In fact, had this been built it would have been the first exponent of the “new brutalism” in England, as the preamble to the specification shows: “It is our intention in this building to have the structure exposed entirely, without internal finishes wherever practicable. The Contractor should aim at a high standard of basic construction as in a small warehouse.” P.D.S.

Erratum: The four houses shown above were inadvertently incorrectly listed in the contents of the front cover of last month’s issue of “A.D.”

Brutalist discourse. First, there is the persistent assumption that Reyner Banham's essay of 1955 on New Brutalism provides a unified theory, whilst the Smithsons' writings (and writings by others I should add) are suppressed or simply overlooked. Secondly, continuities are suppressed, such as those to Arts and Crafts ideas. Affinities between the generations of modern architects are also suppressed, because the rhetorics and the competition of the time would not allow any room for any historiographical subtlety. As a last remark on methodology, however, to focus on the debates between the Smithsons and Reyner Banham is not to say there were no others. For instance, Kenneth Frampton quite aptly characterised the situation of the period as the 'English crucible', a confluence of many actors and different social circles, from Banham's house in Primrose Hill to the editorial offices of *The Architectural Review*, from the Festival of Britain to the Independent Group, from the ICA to the LCC, from James Stirling to Alison Smithson and so forth.⁵ Nevertheless, within the early history of New Brutalism and its invention in Britain, the Smithson-Banham axis was crucial, and a first retracing of their differences of opinion about the New Brutalism might help in understanding the dynamics at play within British modern architecture.

'Brutalism was not what Banham was talking about'

Regarding the history of New Brutalism, historians conventionally rely on the ground-breaking essay by Banham published in 1955, in which he tried to construct the theoretical foundations of the new 'movement'.⁶ Equally conventionally, Banham's

proposition to view 'Image'—more specifically 'Memorability as an Image'—as the first of the three key characteristics of the New Brutalism is embraced and reconfirmed by historians when reconstructing the 1950s' debates.⁷ However, the Smithsons seemed to have envisaged a different project for New Brutalism, even though criticism between the two parties remained subdued until the 1966 book on New Brutalism by Banham, for which he forgot to consult the Smithsons.⁸

When perusing the statements made by the Smithsons on Brutalism one comes across a very late interview that Peter Smithson gave to the Swiss critic Hans Ulrich Obrist. The year was 2000, Alison had died seven years before and Reyner Banham twelve. The interview was published in 2004, a year after Smithson's own death. In it he simply noted that 'Brutalism was not what Reyner Banham was talking about'.⁹ Smithson never challenged his friend and historian of New Brutalism in such unveiled terms, but when re-reading his and Alison's review of Banham's 1966 book on New Brutalism with these words in the back of one's mind, the disagreement hidden behind the ambiguous and jocular tone of the text becomes all too clear.¹⁰

There is more evidence of a falling out between former friends. A footnote in their 1973 book *Without Rhetoric* also indicates the Smithsons' discontent. To the remark 'the root of our way of seeing and thinking about things that we called New Brutalism' they added the swipe: 'Not much to do with the Brutalism that popularly became lumped into the style outlined in Reyner Banham's *The New Brutalism*.'¹¹ Other testimony comes from Louisa Hutton, who worked in the Smithson office

in the mid-1980s. She noted how Peter Smithson remarked that Banham 'didn't terribly like what we did, he drifted when our work did not fit his hypothesis'.¹² And as a final instance perhaps, there is a second unpublished review of Banham's book in the archive, a 3-page typescript, which was written for the Fabian magazine *The New Statesman* but not accepted.¹³ Reading it one can understand why, because it was so fuming with anger toward the 'Bold Brut' Banham, that the weekly's readership would never have guessed what the whole rant was really about. The text expanded its critique to a broad discussion of the state of affairs in 1960s' Britain which was basically and generally identified as one of 'blockage': in terms of the Government of Harold Wilson, of Cold War politics, but also in terms of the conservative kind of aesthetic control that architects faced in Britain.

What is happening in this initially subdued, yet later open criticism towards Banham? How did the Smithson work *not* fit the Banham hypothesis as Peter Smithson put it, and what exactly was Brutalism to the Smithsons if it were not what Banham was talking about? At this point, it should be noted also that the Smithsons had already made two other statements of withdrawal regarding New Brutalism and how it was interpreted by other architects and critics, one in 1966, the other as early as 1957. The 1966 statement was made in *Arena*, the journal of the AA School, which devoted a special issue to the Smithsons. It was edited by Jeremy Baker and included a chronological overview of the projects and texts of the architect-couple.¹⁴ Characteristically, the Smithsons inserted various comments into this overview. Next to their

design of the Soho House, which had occasioned the very first appearance of New Brutalism in print, the Smithsons remarked:

The phrase 'New Brutalism' was actually invented whilst we were writing this text for the Soho House. We had never heard it before. Brutalist to us meant 'Direct': to others it came to be a synonym for rough, crude oversized and using beams three times thicker than necessary. Brutalism was opposite, necessary to suit the new situation, like Kahn's work at Yale. That wasn't rough or crude or oversized.¹⁵

As early as April, 1957, the Smithsons had made a similarly critical remark, as part of one of their most quoted statements on Brutalism, which more or less concluded the first phase of Brutalism. It was a response to a panel discussion dedicated to New Brutalism, and just as the Soho House it appeared in the pages of *Architectural Design*. It concluded with the words: 'Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.'¹⁶

When one starts to unpack the various statements then, the ones from *The Architectural Review*, from *Architectural Design*, but also from the *Architects' Journal*, the *Architects' Year Book* series and so forth, all in order to try and map the various conceptualisations and transformations of the term, one comes across many such contradictory moments. It should be noted, perhaps, that this is not a problem in itself. It is not the task of the historian retroactively to construct an unified project as so eloquently demonstrated by Manfredo Tafuri. On the contrary, such agonistics only help to explain the dynamics at play, whereas any sort of unification

of positions cannot. Following the various statements on Brutalism then, one gets an idea of the shifting agenda of the 'Brutes', not only by turning to Banham's famous essay of 1955 and his later apocryphal accounts of the Independent Group history, but also by retracing the writings of the Smithsons in those years.

From a reverence for materials to town planning and back again

The Smithsons' statements on the New Brutalism were always published as part of the correspondence and the editorial listings on the first pages of *The Architectural Review* or *Architectural Design*. Sometimes they were simply integrated into editorial comments by others (Banham or Theo Crosby most notably); they were never published as an autonomous manifesto or in other formats, thus adding to the confusion, a confusion which was sometimes created quite consciously, all in order to stay ahead of the game of words that was being played.

The first description of the Smithsons' idea for the New Brutalism concerns a certain 'warehouse' aesthetic applied to the domestic context of the Soho House as already mentioned. Later descriptions allude to commercialism, car design and advertising, and to the modernist indebtedness to traditional Japanese architecture—human association, a social programme and ethical imperative come in only at a slightly later stage, as do the issues of urban planning and mobility.¹⁷ Following the Smithsons' trail the following periodisation of New Brutalism emerges, although it might be more appropriate to speak of a clustering of moments rather than a

strictly linear development with clear beginnings and endings.

The first series of moments is marked by the Smithsons' early statements explaining New Brutalism from 1952 to 1955; key issues revolve around the material qualities of architecture. As a domestic warehouse, the Soho House was to have no internal finishes wherever practicable, whilst the 'root' of the New Brutalism as the Smithsons saw it, lay in a 'reverence for materials—a realization of the affinity which can be established between building and man'.¹⁸ The collaborations within the Independent Group, and Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi in particular, occur around the same time (1951–56), key moments being the by-now famous two exhibits of 'Parallel of Life and Art' in 1953 and 'Patio & Pavilion' in 1956.

The years 1956–57 hold a pivotal moment then, in the sense that the Smithsons definitively shifted their interest from the Independent Group to Team 10 and with that from the artistic to the urban, although, of course, one can never completely uncouple those strands. One thinks of the Smithsons' competition entry of 1952 for Golden Lane in particular. Although here again, one can distinguish between the initial design of 1952, which entailed a singular housing block, and its subsequent re-conceptualisation as an urban vision for the 1953 CIAM Conference in Aix-en-Provence, for which the Smithsons produced their Urban Re-identification grid famous for its integration of Nigel Henderson's photographs of playing children. 1956 marks the last collaborative work between the Smithsons, Henderson and Paolozzi, namely the 'Patio & Pavilion' exhibit, while at the same time the Independent

Group had stopped its gatherings. When the Smithsons said 'Patio & Pavilion' was 'built to our drawings and "inhabited" by Nigel and Eduardo in our absence, as we were camping on our way to CIAM at Dubrovnik', this is not just a cheerful holiday anecdote about the 1950s and how friends worked together in mutual trust.¹⁹ It is also the Smithsons' way of saying that a shift took place here, from the ICA meetings to the CIAM conferences and Team 10.

With that, we can distinguish a shift from the sheer architectural and material to the urban and mobile. In the late 1950s the Smithsons intensely focused on issues of town planning with such important essays as 'Cluster City' (1957) and 'Mobility' (1958), and their project for the Hauptstadt Berlin competition (1957–58).²⁰ In addition to this, in the 1957 statement on Brutalism as ethic rather than style, we read: 'From individual buildings, (...), we moved on to an examination of the whole problem of human associations and the relationship that building and community has to them.'²¹ Apparently, with the ethic comes a shift away from singular buildings toward town planning. Indeed, in an interview in 1959 for the Italian journal *Zodiac*, the so-called 'Conversation on Brutalism' between Alison and Peter Smithson and another famous architect-couple, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, we read Peter's words that now 'the essential ethic of brutalism is in town building'.²²

When the Smithsons' Economist building was finished in 1964 the whole New Brutalism discourse unwinds. There was a debate as to whether the building was crypto-picturesque (Banham's position), an example of *Americana* (the proposition of

Kenneth Frampton), in line with Townscape principles (Gordon Cullen in *The Architectural Review*) or still Brutalist (as supported by Robin Middleton).²³ Eventually, Banham's 1966 book closed off the whole period. As a self-acclaimed 'survivor' he suggested that the 1955 essay should be read 'cum grano salis'.²⁴ According to him, the whole Brutalist search for *une architecture autre* had ultimately failed. This combination of definition and dismissal was a characteristic Banham tactic, one he repeated in the case of his seminal book *Megastructure* among others.²⁵

However, from the 1970s onward, when the Smithsons had moved to their new home Cato Lodge, which provided Alison with a minute archive room and office space of her own, the Smithsons started to look back and wrote their own history, while redefining all sorts of their earlier propositions, including New Brutalism. We see a return here to their interest in the material. The urban in the sense of large-scale town planning seems to be completely abandoned or suppressed, yet it re-emerges as the construction and continuance of the actual physical, material fabric of cities, their networks and buildings. This new interest is summarised by a new banner in the early 1980s, namely the one of Conglomerate Ordering, which never caught on in quite the same way as New Brutalism did.²⁶ It involved the redefinition of architecture and the urban as the creation of purely sensorial environments, of 'built-places' (and not buildings) that go beyond the sheer visual. Since we see so many of the Brutalist tropes re-appear in what the Smithsons called the 'canon' of the Conglomerate Order, it can be argued that this is actually

the Smithsons' re-definition of the New Brutalist programme for their 'reverence for materials' and the 'realization of the affinity between building and man'.

Among the various retrospective reflections of the 1980s and later, one finds once again substantial confirmation of the centrality of material qualities of Brutalist architecture. The more straightforward ones are the following examples. There is an unpublished sheet dated 1986: "'The Fifties"—The Materials Sacred to Brutalism'. It simply reads:

Concrete blocks—laid and pointed like ashlar masonry.

Reinforced concrete—off smooth shutters.

Stainless steel—sheets, tubes, pressings, fixings.

Timber—in framing and detailing, left natural finish.

Common plywood and blockboard—left natural finish.

Enamelled metals—vitreous, stoved, (and powder-polyester, 1970's–80's).

Polysulphide pointing—to absorb movement.

Galvanised mild steel—sheets, tubes, pressings; left natural finish.²⁷

There is another statement also trying to capture the architecture of the 1950s, which is also included in the Smithson book *The 1930's*:

What signals the end of the architecture of the period of the bicycle? (the 'twenties)

The arrival of the grey and the brown. (the 'thirties)

What signals the end of the grey and the brown?

The arrival of the raw..... (the 'fifties)

raw brick

raw block
raw steel
raw paint
raw marble
raw gold
raw lacquer.²⁸

And famously, in the Smithsons' 'As Found' statement from 1990, the only bit of writing that explained their idea of the 'As Found', we read that they 'were concerned with the seeing of materials for what they were: the woodness of wood; the sandiness of sand.'²⁹

Finally perhaps, a remark by Peter Smithson during the interview with Obrist:

Brutalism simply means—I am repeating some of what I said earlier about Soane's vaults: the quality of a plaster ceiling is entirely different from a concrete ceiling, in every way. And Brutalism is not concerned with the material as such but rather the quality of the material: what can it do? And by analogy: there is a way of handling gold in Brutalist manner and it does not mean rough and cheap, it means: what is its raw quality?

And in response to Obrist's question regarding the Smithsons' relation with Japanese architecture: 'Brutalism is certainly related to the ethos of Japanese building construction. To be corny, the Japanese ask: What is the quality of running water? And that is Brutalist thought.'³⁰

Here, in 2000, the wheel has come round again, Brutalism is a certain 'raw' quality, perhaps a warehouse aesthetic of bare materials as in the case of the Soho House of 1952.

What about the Banham Hypothesis?

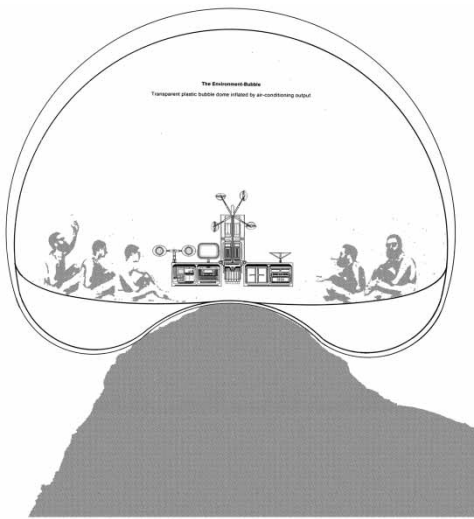
Such intense interest in the qualities of materials cannot be found in Banham's writings. On the contrary, for argument's sake one might contrast the Smithson Soho House with Banham's essay 'A Home is not a House' of 1965, which included François Dallegret's iconic image of the 'environment bubble' as an illustration of Banham's ideas concerning the dissolution of a tectonic architecture and the domestic realm governed by the 'sentimental' and the 'habits of mind'.³¹ Banham's bubble is a techno-primitivism that identifies architecture with the new 'hardware' of the twentieth century to be inhabited naked as Dallegret demonstrated so aptly, with the only protection being an almost immaterial 'membrane' as part of the air-conditioning control system (Fig. 3). Next to the New Brutalism, this concerns the other half of Banham's project for the Independent Group, namely Pop, which he would continue in the 1960s when he started to support Archigram's work.

Just like their falling out over the New Brutalism, there was a falling out between Banham and the Smithsons in the late 1950s over Pop and the possibility of a Pop architecture.³² Next to the New Brutalism, British Pop or Pop Art was the other major invention to emerge from the Independent Group events.³³ To Banham, both Brutalism and Pop must have belonged to the same project, at least in the mid-1950s. They were both attempts at conceptualising the events he was witnessing within the Independent Group meetings and exhibitions. But already in his review of the 1956 show 'This is Tomorrow' at the Whitechapel Gallery, we see a split in his appreciation of the Brutalist aesthetics of resistance (as

Kenneth Frampton called it), embodied by the Patio & Pavilion exhibit, versus the optimism of a futuristic Pop architecture as demonstrated in the Smithsons' House of the Future, also from 1956. Banham dismissed the Patio & Pavilion exhibit, calling it 'most submissive to traditional values'.³⁴ He clearly preferred the House of the Future, just as he favoured the 'pop' exhibit by Richard Hamilton, John McHale and John Voelcker in the 'This Is Tomorrow' show, for the way it mixed images of Marilyn Monroe and Robbie the Robot with Bauhaus optic effects and music from a jukebox.³⁵

The dispute over Pop in relation to a different notion of the New Brutalism was reconfirmed in the 1970s when Peter Smithson stated in an unpublished interview with Reyner Banham for the 1976 film 'Fathers of Pop' that he considered his and Alison's position as 'fundamentally anti-pop'. A bit later the Smithsons withdrew from the whole film project, which was one of the first myth-making portrayals of the Independent Group.³⁶ Despite the Smithsons' interest in advertising, fashion and consumer culture as exemplified by their House of the Future and their much quoted text 'But Today We Collect Ads' (once again of the same year 1956), eventually, the couple entertained a view on the possible architectural language for the new consumer society that was very different from Banham's, in terms of class, of consumer sensibilities and of the role of technology.

Banham's notion of Image deserves additional remarks with regard to the Smithson position on the New Brutalism (and perhaps Pop, too). One does not quite encounter straightforward discord or contradiction here, yet it seems the Smithsons



developed a very different approach nevertheless. First of all, the Smithsons didn't make the notion of 'Image', or anything similar a central notion in their argument for Brutalism. It was simply absent from all their statements on the New Brutalism. Naturally, this doesn't mean the Smithsons were uninterested in the topic of images. Quite the contrary, in a retrospective statement from the 1990s Peter Smithson noted that: 'Image was the favourite word of the period... "a good image" was the highest possible praise, for a newspaper photograph, for an advertisement... in fact for anything'.³⁷

Still, 'Image' as proposed by Banham was not one of the central terms when they wrote about Brutalism, or architecture and the city. They would rather talk about patterns and clusters, geometries and tex-

tures, processes, traces and remembrancers. They were looking for structures or systems beyond the singular image or the 'sheer visual'. This is also why and how the Smithsons looked at contemporary arts and their collaborations with Henderson ('the image-finder' according to the Smithsons) and Paolozzi. In their *Uppercase* publication of 1960 they put it like this: 'It was necessary in the early '50's to look to the works of painter Pollock and sculptor Paolozzi for a complete image system, for an order with a structure and a certain tension, where every piece was correspondingly new in a new system of relationship'.³⁸

This is key, the search for a complete image system and a new system of relationship; not the image itself, but how to accommodate the multitude of images. That is what we see in the installation 'Parallel of Life and Art', and that is what we read in the Smithsons' statements on New Brutalism which refer to the multiplicity of Dada or American advertising surpassing Dada, the new painting of the villa at Garches, the 'new and bouncy clothes' of our consumer culture, or its perfect totem, the car. Their comments on New Brutalism allude to how these 'systems' and this 'order' both trigger and accommodate new games of associations that then produce new insights and new ideas for a possible order. This idea of an associative and regenerative system of relationships (for an 'order' with a 'structure', etc.) was then transplanted to the realms of the domestic and the urban.³⁹

A way of life

As a conclusion I would like to return to the Soho House of 1952. The house combined family rooms

Figure 3. François Dallegret's drawing 'The Environment-Bubble', 1965, from Reyner Banham, 'A Home Is Not a House', *Art in America* (April, 1965); © François Dallegret).

with a studio space for work. Why exactly did the Smithsons propose a warehouse aesthetic for their first house-cum-architectural studio space? Why is it a domestic workshop rather than an industrialised house, the seminal modernist paradigm? Not only do we see a very different understanding of the role of technology, as in the case of Banham for instance, but we also touch upon one of the major contested premises of capitalist production, namely the relationship between producer, industry, society and the unknown quantity in the equation: the user, consumer or inhabitant. Eventually, this question also concerns the production and consumption of 'images', in architecture, but also in our culture of late-twentieth century society in general, our society of the spectacle and its persistent phantasmagoria.

I would argue that the Soho House and its austere warehouse structure of brick, bare concrete and wood embodied a lifestyle and design philosophy based on Arts and Crafts morality. In some of the Smithsons' statements on the New Brutalism we find an emphasis on the 'making' and 'craft'. They explicitly noted that this was not the kind of vernacular craft as a formal tradition, but the 'making' or the 'doing' itself. In an unpublished typescript on Brutalism (from 1954), Alison Smithson explained that to her 'the doing is the craft. The doing must not be confused with the built form.'⁴⁰ In vernacular building then she recognised how the 'doing' of the architecture, the handling of materials and the making process were directly linked to a way of life: one famous and much-quoted Brutalist proposition by the Smithsons was that 'architecture was the direct result of a way of life'.⁴¹

The Smithsons' notion of 'a way of life' can be related to sociology, the work of Wilmot and Young, the impact of their walks with Henderson through the East End of a bombed London and Henderson's wife's work as a sociologist, just as it might be related to the writings of Raymond Williams, his culturalism and the classic essay of 1958 'Culture is Ordinary'. But it also goes back to the very strong British traditions in design and design education. Here, we encounter the thorough influence of William Lethaby and the British Arts and Crafts on the Brutalist ethic of the Smithsons. Lethaby would speak in the same way about 'the doing' and the 'making' as they did. The very same sort of morality we find, for instance, in Lethaby's collection of texts and lectures in *Forms of Civilization*.⁴² Lethaby's interest in 'common art', which is not an 'affair of a few but everybody', how it is part and parcel of domestic, everyday life and founded in labour, resonates throughout the Smithsons' writings, especially the ones on housing and domestic life. Such common art concerns the 'right way of making things and the right way of doing things', to start with 'laying the breakfast table'. To Lethaby a work of art is nothing but a 'well-made boot, a well-made chair, a well-made picture'. And 'design (...) is simply the arranging how work shall be well done.' When Alison Smithson sums up her idea of the 'essence' of the modern movement, this is what it all boils down to: 'basic necessities raised to a poetic level: the simple life, well done'.⁴³

Lethaby holds a hinge position between orthodox Arts and Crafts ideas and the Brutalists, since he would not reject industrial machine production as such, unlike William Morris or John Ruskin, while

maintaining their moral imperative regarding honesty and authenticity in design. The influence of Lethaby was surely not a coincidence, since Alison's father was trained by Lethaby at the Royal College of Art.⁴⁴ And Lethaby's ideas about how the home was also a base for labour and how a meaningful way of life could only be built on home-based labour were a real-life experience and example for Alison Smithson.

Why this continuity of Arts and Crafts notions is suppressed by the Smithsons from their statements is an object of speculation. The impact of the Arts and Crafts legacy on the Smithsons' work and thinking resurfaces only twice in statements made by Peter Smithson: in one interview he mentions how the 'direct influence of Ruskin, through William Morris' was 'alive in his parents' morality',⁴⁵ and in a lecture on 'Architecture as Townbuilding', in which he slips the remark that he sees Morris' *News from Nowhere* not as socialism, but as 'about sensibility'.⁴⁶ The most obvious answer might be that the editors of *The Architectural Review*, Nikolaus Pevsner and James Richards in particular, had already appropriated the Arts and Crafts (especially the figure of Morris) for their own campaigns for a 'soft', Anglicised version of modern architecture, first the New Empiricism, then Townscape.⁴⁷ Within the polemics of the time, and Reyner Banham trying to provoke his elder colleagues of the *Review*, such a suggestion, that the New Brutalism was also a continuation of Arts and Crafts sensibilities, would have made a most unconvincing case.

Yet, with this affinity between Arts and Crafts and Brutalism in mind, or at least the Smithson version of

Brutalism, let us reconsider their statement that the root of Brutalism lay in a 'reverence for materials—a realization of the affinity which can be established between building and man'.⁴⁸ It quite naturally coincides with the quotation from Le Corbusier that opened Banham's essay of 1955: '*L'architecture, c'est, avec des matières brutes, établir des rapports émouvants.*'⁴⁹ Yet, it is not only Corbusian poetics to which the Smithsons aspire. The 'affinity' between man and building should also be understood as an ambition to redesign the relationships of production and consumption. Although today we identify the Brutalist aesthetic with the welfare state programmes of the post-war period, in fact its ethic is in opposition to such large-scale government-led bureaucracy, which planned to bring about a new sort of controlled consumer society.⁵⁰ Hence, the Brutalist ethic as embodied by the Soho House holds a latent political project. It concerns the ambition to redesign precisely the system of relationships between the everyday, domestic life, labour and the larger society, including the production and circulation of 'images'.

Acknowledgement

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Notes and references

1. Beatriz Colomina has stressed this on various occasions; Ben Highmore elaborated this in 'Rough

- Poetry: Patio and Pavilion Revisited', *Oxford Art Journal*, 2 (2006), pp. 269–90.
2. For instance, in the writings of Owen Hatherly starting with his *Militant Modernism* (Winchester, UK/Washington, USA, Zero Books, 2009).
 3. Debate also spilled over to the pages of the *Architects' Journal*, the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, as well as to the book series published by Paul Elek, the *Architects's Year Book*.
 4. For the former, see: S.C. Kenley, 'Enfants dans la rue et le Land Rover sur le Deck. Le concept de "connectivité urbaine" dans les projets d'Alison et Peter Smithson', in: B. Fayolle Lussac, R. Papillault, eds, *Le Team X et le logement collectif à grande échelle en Europe. Un retour critique des pratiques vers la théorie* (Pessac, MSHA, 2008), pp. 47–73; the latter connection with Kubrick's film was also made by the curators Sam Jacob and Wouter Vanstiphout of the British contribution to the Venice Biennale, 2014, 'A Clockwork Jerusalem'.
 5. K. Frampton, 'The English Crucible', in: D. Camp, D. van den Heuvel, G. de Waal, eds, *CIAM Team 10. The English Context* (Delft, TU Delft, 2002), pp. 113–129.
 6. Obviously, this happens in those cases where Banham's steps are retraced: eg, Anthony Vidler in *Histories of the Immediate Present* (2008) and Nigel Whiteley in *Reyner Banham. Historian of the Immediate Future* (2002). One finds this reliance on Banham's 1955 essay and the concept of 'Image' also in Laurent Stalder's excursion into possible definitions of New Brutalism: L. Stalder, '"New Brutalism", "Topology" and "Image": some remarks on the architectural debates in England around 1950', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 13, nr. 3 (2008), pp. 263–81. Most recently, Claire Zimmerman and Victoria Walsh curated a modest Exhibition at Tate Britain entitled 'New Brutalist Image 1949–55'.
 7. R. Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review* (December, 1955), pp. 355–61; the two others being more generic modernist propositions: 'Clear exhibition of Structure' and 'Valuation of Materials "as found"'. For more on this see: Claire Zimmerman, 'From Legible Form to Memorable Image: Architectural Knowledge from Rudolf Wittkower to Reyner Banham', *Candide*, nr. 5 (2012), pp. 93–108.
 8. As communicated to me by Robin Middleton, close friend of the Smithsons and former editor of *Architectural Design*; R. Banham, *The New Brutalism. Ethic or Aesthetic?* (Stuttgart, Karl Krämer Verlag, 1966).
 9. H.U. Obrist, *Smithson Time* (Cologne, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004), p. 17.
 10. A. and P. Smithson, 'Banham's Bumper Book on Brutalism', *The Architects' Journal*, 28 (December, 1966), pp. 1590–1.
 11. A. and P. Smithson, *Without Rhetoric. An Architectural Aesthetic 1955–1972* (London, Latimer New Dimensions, 1973; Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1974), p. 6, note 6.
 12. L. Hutton, 'Godparents' Gifts', in *Architecture is not made with the brain'. The Labour of Alison and Peter Smithson* (London, Architectural Association, 2005), p. 56.
 13. A. and P. Smithson, 'Review of "The New Brutalism" by Peter Reyner Banham. Bold Brut Bottled by the Man Banham' (typescript in Alison and Peter Smithson Archive, Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University, dated 1 December 1966, revised 21 April 1967); a hand-written note on the typescript says 'commissioned & later refused by New Statesman'.
 14. *Arena. The Architectural Association Journal*, vol. 81, nr. 899 (February, 1966).
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
 16. *Architectural Design* (April, 1957), p. 113: Banham built on this statement when he subtitled his 1966 book 'Ethic or Aesthetic?'

17. Smithson's statements appeared in: *Architectural Design* (December, 1953), p. 342 (the very first issue Crosby was involved as a so-called technical editor); *The Architectural Review* (April, 1954), pp. 274–5; *Architectural Design* (January, 1955), as part of the editorial; *Architectural Design* (April, 1957), p. 113.
18. *Architectural Design* (January, 1955): already noted in a typescript dated Oct 2, 1954 and signed by Alison as singular author; in *Without Rhetoric* almost the same quotation appears, but 'reverence' is replaced with 'respect'.
19. A. and P. Smithson, 'The "As Found" and the "Found"', in, D. Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge Mass., The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 201–2.
20. 'Cluster City' appeared in: *The Architectural Review* (November, 1957), pp. 333–6; 'Mobility. Road Systems' in *Architectural Design* (October, 1958), pp. 385–8.
21. *Architectural Design* (April, 1957), p. 113.
22. P. Smithson, A. Smithson, J.B. Drew, E.M. Fry, 'Conversation on Brutalism', *Zodiac*, 4 (1959), pp. 73–81.
23. R. Banham, 'Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945–1965', in, J. Summerson, ed., *Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing* (London, Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1968), pp. 265–73; G. Cullen, 'The "Economist" Buildings, St. James's', *The Architectural Review* (February, 1965), pp. 115–24; K. Frampton, 'The Economist and the Hauptstadt', *Architectural Design* (February, 1965), pp. 61–2; R. Middleton, 'The New Brutalism, or a Clean, Well-lighted Place', *Architectural Design* (January, 1967), pp. 7–8.
24. R. Banham, *The New Brutalism*, op. cit., p. 134.
25. R. Banham, *Megastructure. Urban Futures of the Recent Past*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1976).
26. This was developed in exchange with Giancarlo De Carlo and the Summer Schools of ILAUD from 1977 onward and in which the Smithsons participated; see for more: A. and P. Smithson, *Italian Thoughts* (Stockholm, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, 1993).
27. One-page typescript from the Smithson archive: P. Smithson, "'The Fifties". The Materials Sacred to Brutalism' (dated 30 July 1986).
28. From the Smithson archive, an annotated, one-page typescript by P. Smithson, marked 'date unknown, probably '60's.'; it is integrated into: A. and P. Smithson, *1930s* (Lauenförde, TECTA Möbel/Berlin, Alexander Verlag, 1985), p. 78; the reference to the 1950s is left out here.
29. A. and P. Smithson, 'The "As Found" and the "Found"', in, D. Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group*, op. cit., p. 201.
30. H.U. Obrist, *Smithson Time*, op. cit., pp. 17–18.
31. R. Banham, 'A House is not a Home', *Architectural Design* (January, 1969), pp. 45–8; first published in April, 1965, in *Art in America*.
32. R. Banham, 'A Propos the Smithsons', *The New Statesman* (8th September, 1961), p. 317; Peter Smithson, quoted in, D. Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group*, op. cit., p. 73.
33. Literature on the Independent Group has expanded somewhat since the 1990s, but David Robbins' *The Independent Group* (1990) is still an excellent introduction to the various tendencies within the Group.
34. R. Banham, 'This is Tomorrow', *The Architectural Review* (September, 1956), pp. 186–8. The Smithsons wrote a reply as late as 1966 in *Arena. The Architectural Association Journal*, vol. 81, nr. 899 (February, 1966), a special issue on the Smithsons' work compiled by Jeremy Baker.
35. With the shift from Brutalism to Pop one also touches on a shift regarding the Brutalist notion of 'Image' and that of the Pop image: to elaborate this fully

- would go beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps it might suffice here to note that due the impact of Rudolf Wittkower's book *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1949) the Brutalist image was related to the conceptual or *conchetto* as also propounded by Banham in his 1955 essay 'The New Brutalism', that is the Image is close to a direct manifestation of architectural (or artistic) principles of ordering. This is unlike the Pop image, which celebrates its qualities of surface and exchangeability in the flow of images. The image of Marilyn Monroe or Robbie the Robot is not a 'conchetto' as such, whereas a Brutalist 'Image' by Nigel Henderson or Eduardo Paolozzi is.
36. Penny Sparke, producer of the film, mentioned that the Smithsons (and Paolozzi) withdrew, refusing to cooperate on Banham's project (conversation with the Author during the Tate Conference on the Independent Group, London, 23rd-24th March, 2007).
 37. P. Smithson, 'Team X in Retrospect' (manuscript from the Smithson archive, dated 1 October 1993; revised 1994-2001), p. 2.
 38. *Uppercase*, n. 3 (1960), reprinted as *Urban Structuring* (London, Studio Vista/New York, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1967), p. 34.
 39. For more on this see: D. van den Heuvel, 'As Found: The Metamorphosis of the everyday. On the Work of Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Alison and Peter Smithson (1953-1956)', *Oase*, nr. 59 (2002), pp. 52-67; as well as in 'Picking up, Turning over and Putting with...', in, D. van den Heuvel, M. Risselada, eds, *Alison and Peter Smithson — from the House of the Future to a house of today* (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2004), pp. 13-28.
 40. A. Smithson, unpublished typescript dated Oct 2, 1954.
 41. *Architectural Design* (January, 1955), as part of the Editorial.
 42. W.R. Lethaby, *Form in Civilization. Collected Papers on Art and Labour* (London, Oxford University Press, 1957; second edition): especially the essays 'Architecture as Form in Civilization', 'Housing and Furnishing', 'What Shall We Call Beautiful?' and 'The Foundation in Labour'.
 43. A. Smithson, 'Beatrix Potter's Places', *Architectural Design* (December, 1967), p. 573.
 44. Alison's father was Ernest Gill, a teacher and director of the South Shields Art School, as mentioned in: J. Baker, ed., 'A Smithson File', special issue, *Arena. The Architectural Association Journal*, vol. 81, nr. 899 (February, 1966), p. 180; the Royal College archives confirm Ernest Gill's graduation in 1912.
 45. W. Vanstiphout, 'Mart Stam's Trousers. A Conversation between Peter Smithson & Wouter Vanstiphout', in: Crimson, M. Speakes, G. Haddes, eds, *Mart Stam's Trousers: Stories from behind the Scenes of Dutch Moral Modernism* (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1999), p. 134.
 46. P. Smithson, 'Architecture as Townbuilding—The Slow Growth of Another Sensibility' (typescript dated 1972), p. 3.
 47. For the editorial policies of *The Architectural Review*, see: E. Erten, *Shaping 'The Second Half Century': The Architectural Review 1947-1971* (PhD thesis, The MIT, February, 2004).
 48. *Architectural Design* (January, 1955), *op. cit.*
 49. R. Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review* (December, 1955), pp. 355-61.
 50. Evidence for the Smithsons' critical appreciation of the welfare state system is found in many of their writings, amongst others in their anthology *Ordinariness and Light* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1970) and the preface to the 1968 edition of the *Team 10 Primer* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1968).