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BRUTALIST GAMES
INVOLVING PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

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A b s t r a c t

Brutalist architecture is widely regarded as gloomy and unfriendly. At its origin was the post-war austerity, but also a fascination with the child and its way of seeing the world. Therefore it is not surprising that the space and forms of brutalist buildings should be perceived by people moving along the routes designed by architects and discovering new views in a dynamic way. This peculiar spatial game is full of surprises and even jokes.

Keywords: theory and history of architecture in the 20ᵗʰ century, topological space, brutalism

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Architektura brutalistyczna powszechnie uważana jest za ponurą i nieprzyjazną. U jej genezy rzeczywiście stoi powojenna surowość, ale także fascynacja dzieckiem i jego sposobem widzenia świata. Nie powinno zatem zaskakiwać, że przestrzeń i formy brutalistycznych obiektów należy poznawać w ruchu, przemieszczając się wzdłuż dróg wyznaczonych przez projektantów i odkrywając nowe widoki. W tej swoistej zabawie przestrzenią nie brakuje zaskoczeń a nawet żartów.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria i historia architektury XX wieku, przestrzeń topologiczna, brutalizm

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1. Introduction

Brutalism was the architectural trend which was developed in Europe after the World War II. It quickly spread all over the world, reaching its apogee in the 1960s. Its decline in the 1970s was accompanied by criticism and condemnation. Some historians of architecture[1] claim that the worst in brutalism was the name, which gave it a pejorative connotation from the very beginning. Combined with the raw and massive forms of the buildings and the exposed concrete surfaces, it caused brutalist architecture to be deemed unfriendly and gloomy. Was brutalism really so deadly serious? Wasn't there place for playing with space and form? Did brutalist architects appreciate, however, the power of surprise, astonishment or even joke?

The conditions under which brutalism was born may explain its severity. The society in post-war England suffered poverty. James Graham Ballard, the British writer, reminisced on his return to his homeland in 1945: "Looking at the English people around me, it was impossible to believe that they had won the war. They behaved like a defeated population... Hope itself was rationed, and people's spirits were bent low" [1, p. 122]. It was in London where Alison and Peter Smithson developed their theory of the New Brutalism. It was supposed to be the architecture based on objective reception of reality and corresponding to the daily life of ordinary people. Anthony Vidler emphasizes that "the New Brutalism was born out of the post-war culture of 'austerity Britain'" [8, p. 106].

2. Movement and search for relationships

The New Brutalism rejected the existing principles of composition and proportion, looking for architecture reaching to the roots, to the basics – *une architecture autre* (other architecture). Crucial for the brutalists was a figure of the child, symbolizing a new life and a fresh perspective on the world. It was the child's perception of reality that became the main source of inspiration for them. "As Jean Piaget demonstrated at this time, children see topologically, and in channelling this view, New Brutalism began to move beyond the inherited geometries of Renaissance perspective into a spatial order characterized by affinity and spontaneity." [3, p. 5] When a child learns space, it is not guided by geometric features. A child instinctively finds some basic relationships, such as proximity, separation, continuity, closure, etc. "Alison and Peter Smithson [...] were able to look at the world with the intensity of a small child, and their work has shown us how to really see what is around us." [5, p. 137] This topological way of organizing a space, typical of brutalism, was used by the Smithsons for the first time in 1953 in the famous exhibition "Parallel of Life and Art". They created there a kind of game which was made up of 122 panels with black-and-white photographic enlargements. The game consisted of finding the links between the photographs. These relationships were not semantic in nature, but were recognized on a simplified, more immediate level – the level of form, which is based on the shapes, patterns and textures of the photographic images. Another element of the Smithsons' game was the arrangement of panels. They were placed at different heights – some close to the ground, some under the ceiling hanging at

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[1] Such as Michael Kubo, Chris Grimley and Mark Pasnik.

different angles. Alex Kitnick claims: "It would have been difficult to focus on one without another coming into view. Positioned in different ways, the photographs asserted themselves as physical entities, simultaneously engaging the space of the gallery and bringing about an increased emphasis on the subject's position within it. Shedding their status as solitary units, the photographs emerged as points in a three-dimensional matrix, creating a kind of 'architecture of images' or 'image ecology', a space in which they were able to reach out to one another to form various relationships of affinity and difference" [4, p. 73]. The observer was forced to move from place to place, to stand at a suitable angle relative to the individual boards, to move away from them, or to come closer. The aspect of movement, exploration of new views, and the search for relationships between elements forming the building became the most important feature of the spatial games of brutalism.

3. Spatial games of brutalism – examples

We can see this aspect in many brutalist buildings whose forms are seemingly inconsistent and overly complex. We can find the logic of their composition only by following the route, or more frequently many routes, planned by the architect. Le Corbusier in his only building built in the USA – the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge (1959–1963), subordinated the architectural form to the meandering ramp. This "sky-high promenade" in the shape of the letter "S" starts at Quincy Street, turns and rises upward piercing the building on the third floor level. On the other side it turns again and falls slowly to the level of Prescott Street. The route along the ramp arranges the comprehensible sequence of views of rectangular and oval concrete solids. Its culmination is the grid of sun-breakers on the highest wall (Ill. 1). There are also other ways of penetrating the building and the surrounding space, including the routes under the structure and under the solids raised on *pilotis*.

The movement of man is directed by curiosity. What is behind the next corner? What will I see at the end of the tunnel? These questions are asked by people passing through the South Bank Arts Centre – the building complex in London. The seemingly chaotic mass of concrete built in the late 1960s housed the Queen Elizabeth Hall (designed by Sir Hubert Bennett) and the Hayward Gallery (designed by Norman Engleback). "The real purpose of the quirky topology is not the earnest expression of building system but a playful invitation to romp around, through, over, and under the structures. Multilevel terraces and serpentine paths wrap the buildings like the tortuous promenades of a classical Chinese garden." [6, p. 101] The South Bank Arts Centre encourages people to play games involving physical movement to such an extent that its space has become a favourite place for skaters and skateboarders. More conservative users, unable to understand its idea, criticize the building. Charles Jencks explains to them: "The architects were not trying to create a building in any conventional sense but rather a sequence of extended places and events along a route" [9, p. 4]. One of these routes leads through the tunnel under the street to the adjacent building of the National Theatre (1963–1976). Here the movement of users is guided by the system of terraces connected by staircase-towers (Ill. 2). According to the idea of architect Denys Lasdun, terraces were supposed to be not only spaces of circulation, but also stages for various social activities. In this way, "the whole building could become theatre" [2, p. 545].

The concrete form of the National Theatre is also a game of associations, of which the most common is the association with rock strata. Gideon Fink Shapiro does not hesitate to

Ill. 1. Le Corbusier, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts – Harvard University, Cambridge (Mass.), 1959–1963;   Ill. 2. Denys Lasdun, National Theatre, London, 1963–1976;   Ill. 3. Paul Rudolph, Art and Architecture Building – Yale University, New Haven (Conn.), 1958–1964;   Ill. 4. Kallmann, McKinnell & Knowles, Boston City Hall, Boston (Mass.), 1963–1968

say that, "Brutalism embodied a yearning for architecture as formidable as mountains and as malleable as earth" [6, p. 101].This statement is also confirmed in the Art and Architecture Building designed by Paul Rudolph for Yale University (1958–1964). The building surprises not only with its geomorphic form which uplifts in the heart of New Haven, but also with other spatial solutions. The famous American architect liked surprises, played with users and checked their perceptiveness. Finding the entrance to Rudolph's building is often a challenge. In the Art and Architecture Building the main doors are hidden in the deep slit on the end of the architectural form (Ill. 3). Once inside another surprise awaits us. The interior is designed

on 39 different levels, which is not shown on the facades. Alexander Maymind called this solution "the vertiginous free-section" [6, p. 63] and identified it as Rudolph's significant innovation, comparable to "free-plan" or "free-facade". Rudolph not only entertains users with surprises, but also frightens. "Moving around the A&A Building, one frequently finds oneself on a walkway, balcony or staircase in close proximity to a drop that raises the frightening possibility of a fall. Also the jagged texture of its walls threatens injury if one brushes too hard against it. Confrontations with these suggestions of peril work to thrill and impel alertness" [7, p. 8].

4. Summary

Admittedly, brutalism was never expected to induce a sense of pleasure. Its spatial and formal games were rather supposed to thrill people and evoke emotions. Brutalism is not an easy architecture and it demands perceptual and physical effort. It forces people to move, to observe carefully and to search for relationships and affinities. The movement is the primary factor and this fact is reflected in the buildings. Circulation spaces are extremely big and oversized in most brutalist buildings. In their forms circulation elements are emphasized, e.g.: flights of stairs, ramps, staircase-towers, street-decks, or bridges. Sometimes these elements were treated in almost playful way – for example the hanging flight of stairs (Ill. 4) in the monumental Boston City Hall, designed by Kallmann, McKinnell & Knowles (1963–1968). It can therefore be concluded that despite its seriousness brutalism even joked sometimes, though it did so with a straight face.

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