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AVANT-GARDE OF MASSIVE PLASTICITY

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Abstract

The subject of the research was the connection between avant-garde trends in art – such as *art brut*, *art autre*, *musique concrete* – and brutalist architecture. The aim was to show the ideas, principles and solutions common to brutalism and art. The most important of them are presented in the conclusion of the article. Both theoretical and practical aspects of the architecture and avant-garde art of the 1950s and 1960s were studied. A detailed analysis of three brutalist buildings with art-related functions was also carried out.

Keywords: avant-garde art, brutalist architecture, theory of architecture of the 20th century

Streszczenie

Tematem badań było powiązanie awangardowych kierunków w sztuce – takich jak *art brut*, *art autre*, *musique concrete* – i architektury brutalistycznej. Celem było wskazanie idei, zasad, i rozwiązań wspólnych dla brutalizmu i awangardowej sztuki. Najważniejsze z nich przedstawiono w podsumowaniu artykułu. Badano zarówno aspekty teoretyczne, jak i praktyczne architektury oraz sztuki lat 50. i 60. XX w. Przeprowadzono także szczegółową analizę trzech budynków brutalistycznych o funkcjach związanych ze sztuką.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura brutalistyczna, sztuka awangardowa, teoria architektury XX wieku

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the passage of time, brutalist architecture still raises controversy and is ambiguously assessed. The prevailing opinion is that it was intentionally ugly, unresponsive to the needs of users, and unfriendly. In fact, the assumptions of its creators were different. It was supposed to be related to people's way of life, positively influencing them, and correspond to the harsh nature of the epoch. Brutalist architects did not pursue ugliness either. Although it must be admitted that their leading aesthetic idea was not beauty, but evoking emotions of the observer. They achieved this thanks to expressive, complex forms characterized by visual heaviness. Reyner Banham wrote that brutalism was “the architecture of massive plasticity and coarse surfaces”¹. This statement, while largely accurate, is of course a simplification. Undoubtedly, due to uncompromising formal effects and radical creative ideas, brutalism should be described as the avant-garde trend of the twentieth century.

¹ R. Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York 1966, p. 47.

A particularly important issue is the connection of avant-garde directions in art and brutalist architecture, especially in its initial phase. Knowledge about this aspect of the genesis of brutalism is not sufficiently deepened. The concepts and doctrines of artists and architects, works of avant-garde art and buildings, and even specific artistic techniques (e.g. used in painting and sculpture) and architectural solutions were analyzed. Thus, both theoretical and practical aspects of the architecture and art of the 1950s and 1960s were studied. For the purposes of this study, detailed analysis of three brutalist buildings with art-related functions were also carried out.

The brutalist trend in architecture began after the Second World War. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson as well as Le Corbusier are considered to be its precursors. For the development of brutalism, the avant-garde trends in the art of that time were as important as the concepts and buildings of these architects. Innovative artistic ideas were an inspiration, especially for architects of the young generation and helped to break the stagnation in post-war architecture. Therefore, the relationship between brutalist architecture and art was extremely deep and was not solely based on aesthetic issues. It was about common rudimentary principles, values, and goals.

The Smithsons, while working on their doctrine of New Brutalism, searched for these goals with the various artists gathered in the Independent Group (IG). This association started its activities in London in 1952. All its members wanted the language of painting, sculpture, literature and architecture to be moving, not just pleasant. Le Corbusier, as one of the few great masters of interwar architecture, cut himself off from the International Style and made a turn in his work. Already *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille (1947–1952) showed radicalism and uncompromising nature comparable to the character of the new avant-garde art.

2. BRUTALISM AND AVANT-GARDE TRENDS IN POST-WAR ART

Avant-garde trends in art were largely shaped by the harsh reality of the post-war world and the wartime experiences of its creators. They recognized that the Second World War was such a global tragedy that it definitely ended the previous epoch and changed humankind.

French artist Michel Tapié believed that art must correspond to the new times and reject the established rules and styles. In his book “*Un art autre*”², published in 1952, he presented works of art created spontaneously. They had very expressive forms that were not subject to traditional compositional rigour.

Tapié included Jackson Pollock among the representatives of art autre. The American created his works under the influence of internal impulses. His Action Painting consisted of splashing and dripping paint onto large canvases spread on the floor. He used not only brushes but also poured paint directly from the can or smeared it with his hands. Pollock emphasized the importance of material and emotions united in a unique creative process.

Jean Dubuffet believed that knowledge of styles and techniques as well as adherence to composition rules made it difficult for artists to express themselves. He noticed that genuine art is created by people without artistic education, and even mentally ill people. In 1949, Dubuffet described such works as art brut (in the article “*L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels*”). The works of art brut could also be created by professional artists, if they were

² M. Tapié, *Un art autre: où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel*, Gabriel-Giraud et fils, Paris 1952.

able to reject the norms binding them and use their original, unspoiled creative power. An example was Magda Cordell working together with the Smithsons in the Independent Group³.

But it was two other artists who were Smithson's closest collaborators in the Independent Group. Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, together with this couple of architects, developed two exhibitions that laid the foundations of brutalism – “Parallel of Life and Art” in 1953 and “Patio and Pavilion” in 1956. Moreover, Henderson in his photographs dealt with the problem of “time, place, decay, and movement”⁴. These aspects were crucial for brutalist architects as well, and Henderson's photos were used by the Smithsons to explain their ideas at the CIAM meeting in 1953. Paolozzi, on the other hand, became famous for his expressive sculptures, which reflect ideas that are also characteristic of brutalism, such as *As Found* and the sincerity of the material. Paolozzi worked with ordinary materials, including concrete, and preferred rough textures.

Musique concrete was another extremely influential trend in avant-garde art. Pierre Schaeffer experimented with sounds as found or rather “as recorded”. He recorded them directly on the streets of cities and then, using them, he composed music that broke all the classic rules of melody and harmony.

Brutalist architecture was also radically innovative and unconventional. It must be admitted, however, that it was a very complex trend. Not all brutalist architects followed the same set of rules. Many of them moved away from this style over time. Nevertheless, some ideas and assumptions were common to avant-garde art and brutalist architecture, especially in its beginnings and in its heyday, that is, in the 1950s and 1960s. The most important of them are briefly discussed below.

The first idea to be presented is the rejection of the existing rules. Art autre proved that such a breakdown can be revolutionary and uncompromising. Some architects wanted similar changes in their field. Reyner Banham envisioned the emergence of a completely new “other architecture” – “une architecture autre”. In his book “The New Brutalism” he wrote: “There was something in the air in the middle of the nineteen-fifties that suggested that a really subversive trend was emerging, something that the traditions of architecture could not absorb, and it was to label the intimations of such a trend (...) that the present author coined the term ‘une architecture autre’ in December 1955”⁵. Of course, rejecting the old rules did not mean that there were no rules at all. Brutalist architects have developed their own new ordering principles: form resulted from the circulation of users; internal functions were articulated in facades; solids were juxtaposed in a contrasting way; repetitive elements created (sometimes interrupted) rhythms; materials were exposed; their textures were rough and sensual, etc.

The architects took some of these principles from simple, folk builders, just as avant-garde artists drew from the works of uneducated people. Vernacular architecture inspired many architects. This was reflected in the heaviness and roughness of the forms and the use of natural, raw materials. Moreover, the architects tried to reject stylistic patterns, analyze the situation objectively and always start a project from scratch.

The works of many avant-garde artists, such as Pollock, were a reflection of the creative process and the nature of the material. Architects acted similarly when designing brutalist

³ C. Lichtenstein, T. Schregenberger (eds.), *As Found – The Discovery of the Ordinary*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2001, p. 157.

⁴ K. Frampton, *N. Henderson: I.C.A. Gallery*, October – MIT Magazine, 2011, no. 136, p. 49.

⁵ R. Banham, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

buildings, which demonstrates the idea of sincerity. The work of architecture showed what materials it was made of and what its load-bearing structure is. The building process was often mirrored in the façades as the formwork joining lines and mounting holes were left in the cast concrete walls. The exposed technical elements and installations presented how the building works. The articulation of the internal functional layout of rooms and communication spaces in the form of a building was also a sign of sincerity, as it showed how the building is used.

The problem of material was particularly important in brutalist architecture. Architects preferred ordinary, simple materials: concrete, brick, stone, and sheet metal. In this aspect, the similarities with post-war avant-garde art were very evident. Artists also employed prosaic materials – sand, mud, rubbish, asphalt and even found objects. Paolozzi used everyday objects to make his sculptures – electrical parts, damaged forks, broken toys – and called his work “metamorphosis of rubbish”⁶.

Surfaces made of harsh materials were usually left unfinished. The brick walls were picturesque thanks to the multicoloured bricks joined carelessly. The concrete textures remained raw and mirrored the formwork used. Often the arrangement of the shuttering boards was such that the surface was three-dimensional and relief-like. It should be emphasized that the textures of many brutalist buildings were not only rough but also had defects. The above issues confirm the idea of glorifying the ordinariness in brutalist architecture.

3. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED BUILDINGS

Buildings with all possible functions were erected in the brutalist style – from monumental churches and town halls, through residential buildings to public toilets. Brutalist architects also designed many art-related buildings: museums, art galleries, and art schools. On the example of three such projects from different countries from the 1960s, further analyses will be carried out, presenting brutalism as an avant-garde architecture ideologically close to the avant-garde art of that period. The following buildings will be discussed: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge (1959–1963) designed by Le Corbusier, Municipal Exhibition Pavilion “Bunker of Art” in Kraków (1959–1965) designed by Krystyna Różyska-Tołłoczko, Hayward Gallery in London (1964–1968) designed by Norman Engleback.

In the 1950s, a school of visual arts began operating at Harvard University in Cambridge near Boston. The dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Josep Lluís Sert, who was associated with brutalism, suggested that Le Corbusier should design its headquarters. The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA) was supposed to be the first building erected in the USA by the great Swiss architect. Le Corbusier came to Cambridge in 1959 to learn about the investor’s expectations and to see the location. In the same year, he started designing and his main collaborator became the Chilean architect Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente.

Both Le Corbusier and de la Fuente were also painters. Moreover, Le Corbusier was interested in Pollock’s Action Painting. He developed a specific sculptural method which he described as Action Sculpture. Le Corbusier and his friend Tino Nivola waited for the ocean to flow out on Long Island, made a form out of wet sand and objects found on the beach, and

⁶ After: B. Highmore, *Image-breaking, God-making: Paolozzi’s Brutalism*, October – MIT Magazine, 2011, no. 136, p. 87.

then poured plaster over it. The shape of the sculptures created in this way resulted from the properties of sand, and their rough texture reflected its structure and grain. Similar features were characteristic of Le Corbusier's buildings and their concrete textures with an imprint of the formwork.

Also in the CCVA building, Le Corbusier used concrete, despite pressure to use brick which was the dominant material in the neighbouring historic buildings of Harvard Yard. The construction, supervised by Sert, was completed in 1963. The opening of the building was accompanied by an exhibition of Le Corbusier's paintings, but the architect himself was absent and before his death in 1965 he did not manage to see his work.

The CCVA was built among Georgian Revival buildings. Quincy Street runs on its west side and Prescott Street on its east side. Le Corbusier decided to connect these two streets with a specific promenade in the sky. This concept was implemented using the ramp in the shape of the letter "S". The ramp starts at street level and runs parallel to it at the beginning. Then it turns towards the building and, rising upwards, pierces it on the fourth-floor level. At this point, it transforms into a landing that leads to the main entrance to the CCVA. On the other side of the building, the ramp has a similar shape and goes down.

The form of the CCVA, its functional and spatial layout and the way of its integration into the surroundings were subordinated to the idea of movement, the basic emanation of which was the ascending and descending ramp. The circulation of users became the essence of architecture, an element that crystallized the entire structure of the building. It was the same with many brutalist buildings. It seems that the genesis of this idea goes back to the 1953 exhibition "Parallel of Life and Art" by the Smithsons, Paolozzi and Henderson. It consisted of 122 photographs on boards arranged in a seemingly chaotic manner. The boards were hung in such a way that they could not be seen at the same time from anywhere in the gallery and that people would not perceive the exhibition as a unified whole. Visitors were forced to go to a specific place and observe individual boards from a proper angle. The authors of the exhibition stated: "In short, it forms a poetic-lyrical order where images create a series of cross relationships"⁷. Finding these relations (based on both visual similarity and dissimilarity) was the responsibility of the visitors and determined their understanding of the unconventional principles of the exhibition composition. "Parallel of Life and Art" showed how the "new visual order" (exhibition subtitle) can become a model for the new architectural order. Undoubtedly, Le Corbusier attempted to introduce new ordering rules in the CCVA building.

Although Le Corbusier analyzed the context and place, the relations between the new building and its surroundings are certainly not harmonious. Le Corbusier used both unconventional formal assumptions as well as compositional principles that violated the historical layout of Harvard buildings. The new building is twisted in relation to the neighbouring ones, it has a different form, and it is built of a different material. The idea of uncompromising contrast was one of the most expressive in the works of Le Corbusier and one of the principles of the avant-garde art of those years.

The form of the CCVA building is composed of many various solids. Taking into account the classical principles, their arrangement is chaotic and confusing. The central part of the building is made up of stacked cuboids, while the side parts are solids with a round geometry (Ill. 1). There are also two towers with staircases and lifts in the building. Some solids

⁷ N. Henderson, E. Paolozzi, A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *Parallel of Life and Art: Indications of a New Visual Order*, ICA Exhibition Catalogue, London 1953.

grow directly from the ground, and others are raised on pilotis. Many of the outer walls are completely windowless. Other façades are heavily glazed. Some of the windows are “ondulatoires” (characteristic of Le Corbusier), that is, glass panes divided by dense vertical muntins made of concrete. The windows, which are set back into the façades, are shaded by diagonal brise soleils. Unfinished concrete was left on all wall surfaces. Its texture is less rough than in other Le Corbusier works due to the use of plywood shuttering. The lines of joining the formwork elements and assembly holes are exposed, which gives the effect of a geometric pattern on the walls.



Ill. 1. Le Corbusier, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, 1959–1963; photo by the author.

To properly understand the form of CCVA, endemic criteria should be applied during its analysis. It must be remembered that this form was determined by the circulation of users, and especially the views opening from the ramp crossing the building. Entering the ramp from Quincy Street, the observer first comes across a massive service tower which obscures the rest of the building. The bend of the ramp is accompanied by the curving wall of one of the rounded solids. Then the view opens onto piling up cuboids. The observer gets so close to the building that he can touch the texture of the concrete walls. Opposite him, there are brise soleils protecting the windows (Ill. 2). Being at the top of the ramp, the observer can see through the large glazing interior of the building and the artists working in it. There are several such perceptual paths in CCVA. You can learn how the building is organized by walking around it, walking underneath it, or just passing it through the ramp.



Ill. 2. Le Corbusier, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in Cambridge, 1959–1963; photo by the author.

The Municipal Exhibition Pavilion in Kraków was one of the first brutalist buildings constructed in Poland. The pavilion was designed at the same time as the CCVA. Just like the work of Le Corbusier, the building was located in a historic setting. Even though the pavilion was integrated into the urban fabric in a more classic way – complementing the street frontage – it caused a lot of controversies. The inhabitants of Krakow were shocked by its massive and primitivized form and called it “Bunker of Art”, which became the official name of the pavilion.

Interestingly, the architect Krystyna Różyska-Tołoczko acted here like avant-garde artists using found objects. The pavilion was erected on the site of the demolished old buildings. However, one of them survived, albeit in a very bad condition. The architect decided to save its fragment and incorporate it into a new structure. The form of Bunker of Art is very simplified. It actually consists of one rectangular solid. Most of the façade is completely windowless. Only in the upper part of the building, there is a narrow strip of windows. The main facade is divided only by the preserved wall of the historic tenement house.

The sculptor Antoni Hajdecki participated in the design of the facades. The concrete walls were cast in a specially shaped formwork. The horizontal formwork boards were placed in different planes and trimmed differently. Their imprint created a relief that extended uninterruptedly throughout the building (Ill. 3). The three-dimensional treatment of the façade surface gave an extremely expressive textural effect and provided a strong chiaroscuro.

Brutalist architects often experimented with enhancing the impression of rough concrete and used relief surfaces. The surfaces of the buildings resembled the uneven textures of Alberto Burri's paintings or Paolozzi's sculptures. Dubuffet argued that texture is an artist's way of expressing emotions. In his paintings, he spontaneously applied paints (or other materials) in thick, rough layers. He believed that the painter's natural gesture was smearing, not smoothing.



Ill. 3. Krystyna Różyska-Tołoczko, Municipal Exhibition Pavilion “Bunker of Art” in Kraków, 1959–1965; photo by the author.

In the facade of the Bunker of Art, the main entrance was clearly articulated. It is covered with a curved reinforced concrete roof, which smoothly transforms into a platform-bridge leading to the door (Ill. 4). The slick surface of the canopy contrasts with the rough walls. The bridge is also a communication element, the articulation of which emphasized the importance of movement and circulation in brutalist architecture.

Curiosity influences the movement of people in an architectural space. It largely guides users to different places and views. This aspect was used by brutalist architects when designing extremely complicated and surprising building complexes. One of them was South Bank Center in London. Its main parts were the Queen Elizabeth Hall (designed by Hubert Bennett) and the Hayward Gallery (designed by Norman Engleback and his associates). Moreover, the complex was connected with the neighbouring brutalist National Theater designed by Denis Lasdun. The whole thing created a megastructure – a solution combining the architectural and urban scale, which was also characteristic of brutalism.



Ill. 4. Krystyna Różyska-Tołłeczko, Municipal Exhibition Pavilion “Bunker of Art” in Kraków, 1959–1965; photo by the author.

The Hayward Gallery, completed in 1968, is of particular interest to this research. Its sculptural form deviates even more than that of the CCVA from the conventional principles of composition. Unexpected heaps of heavy masses, contrasting combinations of elements and dramatically overhanging blocks are an incentive to visit – walk around, above and under the buildings (Ill. 5). All these pedestrian routes are accessible through a system of sidewalks, terraces, bridges, tunnels and stairs carefully developed by architects. The researchers of brutalist architecture emphasized that the designers of the Hayward Gallery “were not trying to create a building in any conventional sense but rather a sequence of extended places and events along a route”⁸. It should also be noted that the individual solids that make up the building contain specific functions. This is an exemplification of the principle of articulating the internal functional system in the architectural form.

Despite the prestigious character of the Hayward Gallery, a prosaic material – concrete was used to shape its facades. Architects introduced so many types of concrete textures that the building seems to be a catalogue of concrete surfaces or a study of the properties of this material (Ill. 6). This type of relationship between the material and the form was visible in avant-garde sculptures, including the works of Paolozzi⁹. At Hayward Gallery, architects also applied innovative textural solutions. An example is the precast cladding panels, made of concrete and crushed Cornish granite with joints filled with polysulphide filler¹⁰.

⁸ A. Vidler, *Learning to Love Brutalism*, Docomomo Journal, 2012, vol. 2, p. 4.

⁹ A. Kitnick, *The Brutalism of Life and Art*, October – MIT Magazine, 2011, no. 136, p. 63.

¹⁰ M. Bäcker, E. Heinle, *Building in Visual Concrete*, Technical Press, London 1971, p. 167.



Ill. 5. Norman Engleback, Hayward Gallery in London, 1964–1968; photo by the author.



Ill. 6. Norman Engleback, Hayward Gallery in London, 1964–1968; photo by the author.

4. CONCLUSION

The conducted research made it possible to identify the principles and ideas common to brutalism and avant-garde art.

The most important concept was the attempt to reject the previous rules. Some architects, especially the younger generation, were looking for “other architecture” – “architecture autre”, which was supposed to be as radical in this respect as “art autre”. This turned out to be utopian to a large extent, as architecture, however, is a different field than art. Buildings are not abstract works, but real objects with a utilitarian purpose and an appropriate structure. Such revolutionary changes were not possible in architecture. Although it must be admitted that avant-garde brutalist architects introduced compositional principles, building forms and aesthetic solutions never known before.

Other important ideas are:

- ordering rules based on the movement and perception of people,
- glorification of ordinariness,
- primitivization of forms,
- use of ordinary materials,
- sincerity of the material,
- roughness and rawness of textures,
- the principle of contrast.

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