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OBJECTIVE RESONATOR OF REALITY

OBIEKTYWNY REZONATOR RZECZYWISTOŚCI

Abstract

In the mid-twentieth century, the Smithsons developed the New Brutalism – the architectural program in which truth was a fundamental value. This concept was most noticeable in the treatment of materials, structure and technical elements. However, the *As Found* idea had meaning beyond the sincerity of the material. It was associated with a specific design method in which the architect became a kind of neutral resonator of the situation. The aim of the article is to show the New Brutalism as a pursuit of truth in architecture and to present theoretical foundations and practical results of this aspiration.

Keywords: theory of 20th-century architecture, brutalist architecture, New Brutalism, As Found

Streszczenie

W połowie XX w. Smithsonowie opracowali program Nowego Brutalizmu, w którym prawda była podstawową wartością. Koncepcja ta była najbardziej dostrzegalna w sposobie traktowania tworzyw, konstrukcji i elementów technicznych. Jednakże idea *As Found* miała znaczenie wykraczające poza szczerłość materiału. Wiązała się ze specyficzną metodą projektową, w której architekt stawał się niejako neutralnym rezonatorem zastanej sytuacji. Celem artykułu jest ukazanie Nowego Brutalizmu jako dążenia ku prawdzie w architekturze oraz wskazanie teoretycznych podstaw i praktycznych rezultatów tego dążenia.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria architektury XX wieku, architektura brutalistyczna, Nowy Brutalizm, idea As Found

1. INTRODUCTION

Brutalist architecture was an architectural trend of global scope and multi-faceted characteristics. It began to develop in the 1950s, and in the next two decades it resulted in expressive, complex forms. Their authors had the goal of achieving a spectacular and moving effect, reflecting their creative ambitions and showing artistry. This fact may surprise, given the beginnings of brutalist architecture. At its root lies, after all, the program of New Brutalism, which assumptions were far from such a subjective approach to design. The creators of New Brutalism wanted to rely on ethical values such as honesty and truth. These values were to emanate from the works of architecture in a direct and immediate manner. The role of the architect was limited in a way due to the necessity of objective reception of reality and consistent compliance with design conditions.

The purpose of this article is to show New Brutalism as a pursuit of truth and its basic attributes – sincerity, simplicity, directness. The most important ideas and principles from

which these aspirations came as well as the ways in which they became apparent will be presented. The last part of the article is devoted to changes in creative values and priorities that occurred during the transformation of the current.

2. NEW BRUTALISM – GENESIS

New Brutalism was an architectural trend which was created in Great Britain after World War II. Its theoretical foundations were developed by young artists who contested the main currents of post-war English architecture¹.

World War II was a tragedy that affected the course of human history. After its end, the political, economic and social situation of many countries changed. Changes also took place in the field of culture and art. However, unlike the period after the end of World War I, characterized by creative energy and the search for new artistic ideas, the turn of the forties and fifties proved to be much less fruitful in this aspect. This also applied to architecture. At that time, such innovative architectural trends as thirty years earlier (modernism, expressionism, constructivism) did not develop. Rather, the continuation of pre-war tendencies was visible. The post-war trauma caused stagnation and reluctance to create new architectural ideas.

An example of a country in which this situation prevailed was Great Britain. Foreign troops never entered the island, however, English society suffered strongly from the effects of the war. Young artists were the first to recover from the post-war shock. Their experiences were as tragic as the rest of the people, but they tried to use them creatively by looking for new solutions that suit harsh reality. Some of them formed an artistic group called the Independent Group, which played a leading role in shaping the theory of New Brutalism. Luca Molinari emphasizes that: “The physical ruins and psychological traumas of the war deeply affected the lives of the Independent Group artists, the Smithsons, James Stirling and Reyner Banham.”² Other members of the group also experienced dramas that left their mark on their work and way of creating. Eduardo Paolozzi used debris and rubbish from bombed buildings to make the sculptures, and Nigel Henderson placed objects found in these places on his photograms. It is hard to disagree with Anette Busse’s statement that: “Without war there would be no brutalism – the war created it.”³

After the war, two architectural trends dominated in England. Modernism continued, but the forms of the buildings became more decorative and corresponding to common taste. The apogee of this style, known as Contemporary Style or Soft Modernism, were buildings erected in 1951 for the Festival of Britain exhibition. Robert Maxwell wrote about it: “The style of the Festival of Britain seemed at best sentimental, at worst, effete. It lacked seriousness. It was bland, and it was parochial. Modern architecture had been sold short in Britain.”⁴ The second trend was New Humanism, in which attempts were made to return to traditional

¹ The genesis of New Brutalism was presented by the author in more extensive way in the monograph: W. Niebrzydowski, *Architektura brutalistyczna a idee Nowego Brutalizmu*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Białostockiej, Białystok 2018, pp. 43–62.

² *Brutalismus. Notes by Luca Molinari on the Berlin Symposium*, <http://www.abitare.it/en/architecture/2012/06/13/brutalismus-notes-by-luca-molinari-on-the-berlin-symposium/> (access: 17.04.2013).

³ A. Busse, *I – Was ist Brutalismus?*, Baumeister, February 2014, p. 82.

⁴ A. Powers, *In a riposte to New Brutalism’s revolt against the Festival, Alan Powers puts the case for its contemporary values*, *The Architectural Review*, July 2011, pp. 78–79.

English architecture. The forms were inspired by brick buildings with steep roofs, decorations and arched windows.

Both of these styles met with a negative reaction from young architects. Alison and Peter Smithson, Alan Colquhoun, William Howell, Colin St John Wilson and Peter Carter strongly protested against New Humanism and clichéd Soft Modernism. They were disappointed with the post-war tendencies in architecture and thought that they were unsuitable for new times, and therefore artificial and false. The Smithsons wrote that: “[...] the majority of architects have lost contact with reality and are building yesterday’s dreams when the rest of us have woken up in today.”⁵ In contrast, architecture should truly match present conditions and people’s everyday lives – it should “be objective about reality.”⁶ Thus, it can become a tool helpful in recovering society from post-war trauma and reviving a sense of identity.

The theory of New Brutalism was formed as a result of discussions among members of the Independent Group, as well as through their joint exhibitions, such as “Parallel of Life and Art” (1953) and “This is Tomorrow” (1956). It was influenced by new trends in art, including *art brut* and *musique concrète*, which were based on the search for authentic, uncontaminated values. *Art brut* was a term introduced by Jean Dubuffet. He defined it as art created by people without artistic education. Works of *art brut* were to show the true creative power inherent in every person, which over time is suppressed and distorted by social norms or the educational system. The basis of *musique concrète* was recording the real sounds of everyday life. The composers discovered these previously neglected sounds and used their potential to create innovative music pieces in which they rejected melody, scale and harmony.

Smithsons’ and Banham’s articles in which they criticized architectural trends based on false assumptions were also of great importance for the formation of New Brutalism. Even the name “New Brutalism” was a polemical response to the term “New Humanism.” It was first used in the article published by Smithsons in December 1953 in “Architectural Design.” The authors described the project of their building in London’s Soho district and stated: “In fact, had this been built it would have been the first exponent of the New Brutalism in England [...] It is our intention in this building to have the structure exposed entirely, without internal finishes wherever practicable. The Constructor should aim at a high standard of basic construction as in a small warehouse.”⁷ This raw aesthetics became one of the most important features of New Brutalism. There is no doubt that it resulted from the desire to objectively reflect the real, difficult living conditions of post-war society. After all, according to the Smithsons, art, including architecture, was to be a parallel of everyday life: “We see architecture as the direct result of a way of life.”⁸ Anthony Vidler emphasizes that: “New Brutalism was born out of the post-war culture of ‘austerity Britain.’”⁹

3. TRUTH OF MATERIAL

The use of ordinary building materials and the display of their unfinished surfaces was one of the most discernible features of New Brutalism and the embodiment of the pursuit of

⁵ R. Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, Reinhold Publishing Corporation, New York 1966, p. 71.

⁶ A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *The New Brutalism*, Architectural Design, April 1957, p. 113.

⁷ A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *House in Soho, London*, Architectural Design, December 1953, p. 342.

⁸ T. Crosby, *The New Brutalism*, Architectural Design, January 1955, p. 1.

⁹ A. Vidler, *Another Brick in the Wall*, October 2011, vol. 136, p. 106.

truth. Each material was supposed to show only what it really is. Architects appreciated the unsophisticated materials and their natural, raw textures. They used them in their original condition, without any surface treatment – as found. This assumption was undoubtedly linked to the post-war economic situation in Great Britain and the limited availability of high-quality building materials. This was confirmed by the Smithsons opinion: “In a society that had nothing. You reached for what there was, previously unthought of things. We were concerned with the seeing of materials for what they were: the woodness of wood, the sandiness of sand.”¹⁰ With this desire to see the most basic, primary essence of things came a distaste of the simulated. According to the New Brutalists, all imitations were worthless and meaningless, because the value of the thing was in itself.

The most available building material in England at that time was brick. Using it, the Smithsons built the Secondary School in Hunstanton in the years 1949–1954.¹¹ Also, Sugden House in Watford was built of bricks, in the years 1955–1956 – in addition, low-grade bricks, “badly burnt, cracked and chipped”¹² (Ill. 1). Other young architects also used this material. Examples are the housing complex in London’s Ham Common district completed in 1958 according to the project of James Stirling and James Gowan, as well as another London building – “Old Vic” Theater Workshops erected in the same year according to the project of Lyons, Israel and Ellis (Ill. 2). It should be noted that the texture of raw concrete, which is a symbol of the brutalist sincerity of the material, began to dominate British projects at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. *Béton brut* was in the sense of New Brutalism a doubly honest solution – reflecting both the material of the building and the material of the formwork.

Theoretical assumptions of the trend actually allowed the use of any type of material, provided that its use was dictated by objective premises. Peter Smithson, on the accusation that New Brutalism excluded many materials, including all smooth ones, replied: “The business of materials ‘as found’ does not imply a rejection of marble and plaster and stainless steel. Let’s face it, you can get a direct effect out of the most simple material.”¹³

It should be emphasized that the imperative of using materials as found was the last point in the definition of New Brutalism presented by Banham in his article in 1955. The second point was the “clear display of the structure.”¹⁴ The building’s structure was to be visible in its form in the most direct way. Construction solutions were simple, building elements had primitive shapes and were combined together without sophisticated details. The New Brutalists wanted the building to show how and using what materials it was constructed. In addition, they wanted to show how it works – hence the display of installations and technical components. Most installations – water, sewage, electricity – were visible inside. Roof water drainage elements – gutters, downpipes, gargoyles – were exposed outside. The method of making carpentry and window frames, stairs and balustrades, as well as lighting elements was as simple as possible and shown to users. Undoubtedly, the precursor building in this

¹⁰ A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *The “As Found” and the “Found”* [in:] D. Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 201.

¹¹ The construction of the building was significantly delayed due to the use of a steel structure and rationing of steel supplies for the construction industry.

¹² J. Sławińska, *Ruchy protestu w architekturze współczesnej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, Wrocław 1995, p. 27.

¹³ A. Smithson et al., *Conversation on Brutalism*, Zodiac, 1959, no. 4, p. 81.

¹⁴ R. Banham, *The New Brutalism*, *The Architectural Review*, December 1955, p. 361.



III. 1. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, Sugden House in Watford, 1955–1956; photo by Joshua Abbott



III. 2. Lyons, Israel and Ellis, „Old Vic” Theatre Workshops in London, 1958; photo by author

respect was the Secondary School in Hunstanton (Ill. 3). Banham wrote about the sincerity of its solutions: “Water and electricity do not come out of unexplained holes in the wall, but are delivered to the point of use by visible pipes and manifest conduits. One can see what Hunstanton is made of, and how it works, and there is not another thing to see except the play of spaces.”¹⁵

4. AS FOUND

It should be emphasized that “as found” was not limited to the principle of using raw materials and displaying technical solutions. It was actually the idea with a much broader meaning, which in fact became the foundation of New Brutalism. It was the As Found idea that gave New Brutalism the character of “radical philosophy reaching back to the first concept of the building,”¹⁶ seeking the basicity and objective start of each design task. As Found was a specific approach to architecture in which values such as truth and directness are extracted.

Designing in accordance with the As Found idea required the rejection of stereotypes, common meanings, accepted methods and always starting from scratch. It was also associated with the ability to look at the world objectively, taking into account its entire complexity. John Voelcker explained As Found as follows:

It can only be understood as a re-orientation of spirit in which the specialist-architect who aimed at putting the built world into a pre-determined and pre-planned order has been replaced by the man-architect, who is almost passively receptive to the sequence of situations in which he finds himself, and who relies on the social validity of his plastic responses to those situations. A kind of resonator that builds in response to a complicated poly-incidence of conditions.¹⁷

This is how the New Brutalists understood the imperative of being objective about reality. They tried to determine true nature of location and conditions in which a building was to be built, and reflect it in a project. Therefore, the aspect of truth and sincerity concerned not only material and construction, but constituted the essence of the theory of New Brutalism. The architects aimed to perceive the world as a whole, bypassing the usual patterns and concepts. Peter Smithson summed up this avoidance of subjectivity: “As Found is a simple matter; it’s about being careful.”¹⁸

The Smithsons claimed that New Brutalism was to be ethics. However, this phrase should not mean a precisely defined moral code. Ethics for the Smithsons was rather the necessity of neutral, impartial view of the world and a sensitive response to real conditions. A cliché, routine, compliance with certain aesthetic rules or stylistic doctrines would be a negation of this ethics. The program of New Brutalism, based on the ethical assumption understood in such way, was supposed to bring a fundamental change in terms of design results. Since the real, objectively assessed conditions of each project task are virtually unique, it is impossible to create two identical works. This means that each building must be an individual, original

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 357.

¹⁶ R. Banham, *School at Hunstanton*, *The Architectural Review*, September 1954, p. 153.

¹⁷ J. Voelcker, *Letter*, *Architectural Design*, June 1957, p. 184.

¹⁸ After: C. Lichtenstein, T. Schreggenberger (eds.), *As Found – The Discovery of the Ordinary*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zürich 2001, p. 14.



III. 3. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, Secondary School in Hunstanton (water tank and chimney in the center of the photo), 1949–1954; photo by Xavier de Jauréguiberry



III. 4. Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, The Economist Buildings in London, 1964; photo by author

design response. The result of the architect's actions becomes, as the Smithsons called it, "a specific solution for a specific situation"¹⁹ or, as Banham wrote, "a unique solution to a unique situation."²⁰ It is important to stress the importance of the As Found idea in the theory of New Brutalism. It meant not only the lack of routine, but also the rejection of uniformity and universal solutions characterizing the International Style.

It can be considered that the Smithsons in their realizations obtained results consistent with the As Found idea. The Upper Lawn Pavilion in Fonthill Abbey, built in 1961, grows from the 18th-century stone wall in an almost organic way. In the Economist Buildings, constructed in London in 1964, all corners are cut at an angle of 45 degrees (Ill. 4). This is a direct reference to the bay window (typical for England), which is visible in a historic building included in the Economist complex. The lowest of the designed buildings complements the historic frontage of St James's Street and exactly matches its height. The meandering space between all buildings was used not only as a passage between streets, but also as a meeting place for users of the facility.

5. CONCLUSION

The As Found idea in the first phase of brutalist architecture, when the principles of New Brutalism, including the apotheosis of ordinariness, played a very important role, resulted in simple forms and unpretentious solutions. They corresponded to post-war realities, especially "austerity Britain." In later years, complex, expressive, even bombastic forms began to dominate. They radically emphasized some aesthetic effects, e.g. heaviness, massiveness, and exaggeration.

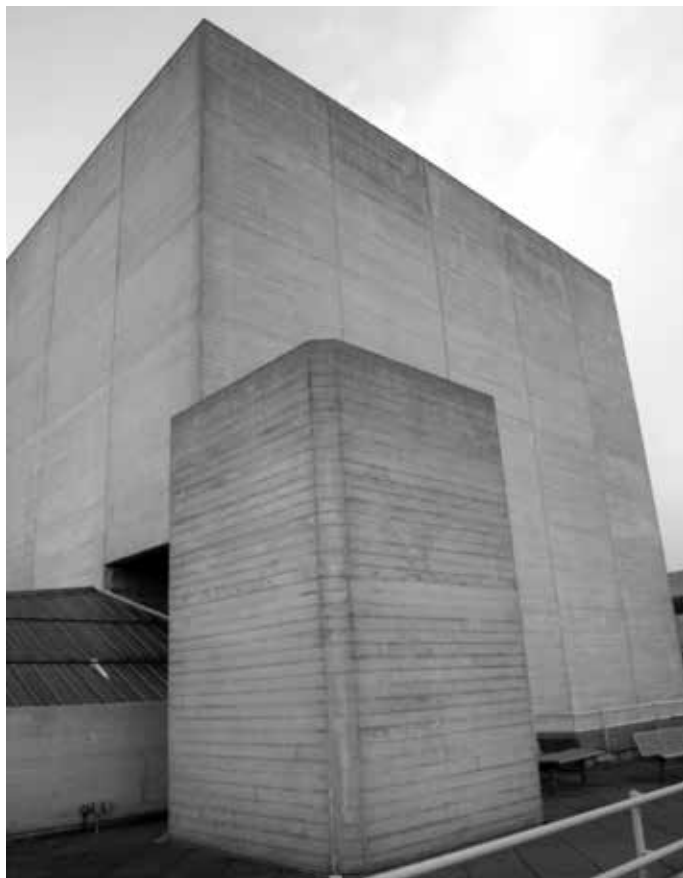
The question arises whether it was a rejection of the As Found idea and its objectivity. To some extent, yes. In 1966, Banham himself regretted that New Brutalism ceased to be ethics at some point and became an aesthetic²¹ – the brutalist style. In many cases, subjective factors prevailed during design. The brutalist style began to gain more and more popularity, so the use of its characteristic formal elements became fashionable. Service towers, hanging corners, reinforced concrete gargoyles, bush-hammered concrete textures appeared in buildings regardless of situation. As a leading design assumption, some architects adopted the desire to individualize and dramatize forms. They stopped believing that a true reflection of the specifics of the situation would naturally bring such effects. The superficiality and formalism previously criticized by the New Brutalists mastered a certain part of the brutalist architecture.

On the other hand, it cannot be definitively concluded that the search for truth has been completely forgotten. Certainly, the realities changed, and perhaps that's why the forms of the buildings were different as well. It should be remembered that, according to the As Found idea, architects were required to objectively assess the changing situation. So, were the brutalist bunker buildings of the 1960s no real answer to the reality of the Cold War? Their massive, closed forms gave a sense of security and defense (Ill. 5). While, complex compositions of sculptural forms corresponded to the aspirations of developing societies, built a sense of community and inspired people to creative activities (Ill. 6).

¹⁹ A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *Cluster City: A New Shape for the Community*, The Architectural Review, November 1957, p. 334.

²⁰ R. Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic..., op. cit.*, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 134.



Ill. 5. Denys Lasdun, National Theatre in London, 1967–1976; photo by author



Ill. 6. Dušan Kuzma, Museum of Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica, 1964–1969; photo by author

In the first few months of 2020, our reality changed again globally. The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has changed social behavior and many aspects of human life. It seems that this situation will be reflected in architecture. This time, architects will simply be forced to an objective reception of changing conditions and specific responses to them. Perhaps it will result in broad (12-foot) street-decks, such as those designed in 1952 by the Smithsons as access to the flats of the unrealized Golden Lane Housing Estate. At that time, their width provided a place for integration and neighborhood meetings, today it may be necessary due to social distance.

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