

# **Brutalism**

**simple, honest, and functional buildings**



ICC Berlin Parking Garage, Photo by: *Philipp Weindich*

# Background

## The term *Brutalism*

The British architects Alison and Peter Smithson coined the term in 1953, from the French *béton brut*, or “raw concrete”, a phrase used by Le Corbusier to describe the poured board-marked concrete with which he constructed many of his post-World War II buildings.

The term gained wide currency when the British architectural critic Reyner Banham used it in the title of his 1966 book, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, to characterize a somewhat recently established cluster of architectural approaches, particularly in Europe. The architectural style known as Brutalism and the architectural and urban theory known as New Brutalism may be regarded as two different movements, although the terms are often used interchangeably.

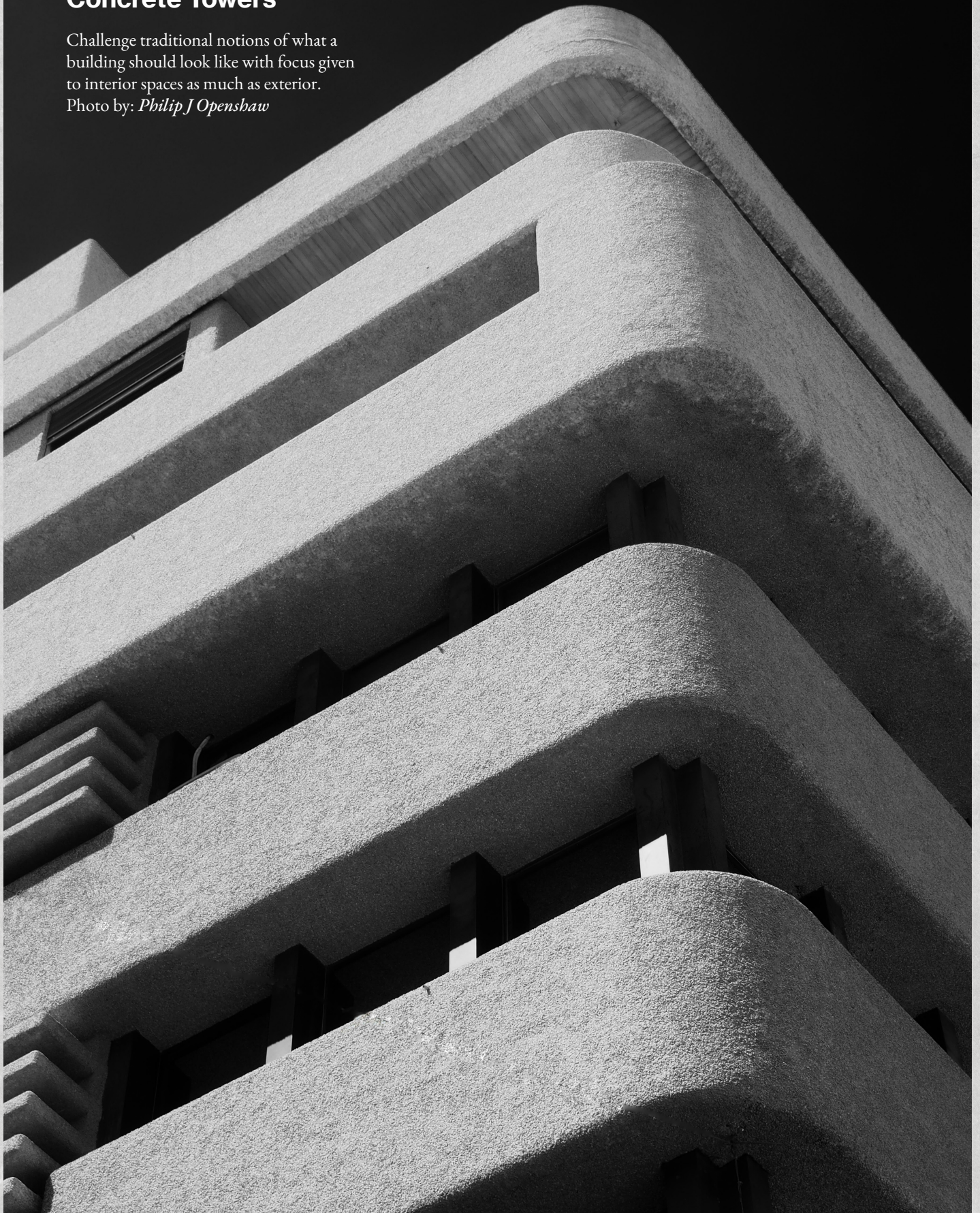
The New Brutalism of the British members of Team 10, Alison and Peter Smithson, is more related to the theoretical reform of the CIAM (in architecture and urbanism) than to “*béton brut*”. Reyner Banham formulated this difference in the title of his book: “The New Brutalism - Ethic or Aesthetic?”

Brutalism officially started around this time period and quickly spread. The trend was picked up by English architects where the style was further honed by Alison and Peter Smithson. Together they are particularly known for East London’s Robin Hood Gardens council housing complex. Completed in 1972, it was built from precast concrete slabs and though built with the Smithsons’ ideals for ideal living, it never quite lived up to its goals. In 2017 the eastern block was demolished as part of a refurbishment plan. But to show how far Brutalism has come, the Victoria & Albert Museum acquired three stories of the demolished building.

## Concrete Towers

Challenge traditional notions of what a building should look like with focus given to interior spaces as much as exterior.

Photo by: *Philip J Openshaw*



## Modular Stairs

Reoccurring modular elements representing specific functional zones, distinctly articulated and grouped together into a unified whole.



# Characteristics

Brutalist buildings usually are formed with striking repetitive angular geometries, and, where concrete is used, often revealing the texture of the wooden forms used for the in-situ casting. Although concrete is the material most widely associated with Brutalist architecture, not all Brutalist buildings are formed from concrete. Instead, a building may achieve its Brutalist quality through a rough, blocky appearance, and the expression of its structural materials, forms, and (in some cases) services on its exterior.

*Unfinished concrete.  
Geometric forms.  
Unconventional propositions.*



For example, many of Alison and Peter Smithson's private houses are built from brick. Brutalist building materials also include brick, glass, steel, rough-hewn stone, and gabion (also known as trapion). Conversely, not all buildings exhibiting an exposed concrete exterior can be considered Brutalist, and may belong to one of a range of architectural styles including Constructivism, International Style, Expressionism, Postmodernism, and Deconstructivism.

Another common theme in Brutalist designs is the exposure of the building's functions—ranging from their structure and services to their human use—in the exterior of the building. In the Boston City Hall (pictured right), designed in 1962, the strikingly different and projected portions of the building indicate the special nature of the rooms behind those walls, such as the mayor's office or the city council chambers. From another perspective, the design of the Hunstanton School included placing the facility's water tank, normally a hidden service feature, in a prominent, visible tower.



Boston City Hall *Kallmann McKinnell & Wood 1963*



# Honesty:

**an uncompromising desire to tell it like it is,  
architecturally speaking.**

# Meaning

## *More Than a Building, A Philosophical Approach*

**H**onesty in materials was allied to the rough, prosaic goals of social democracy. Brutalism is, as the critic Michael J. Lewis has pointed out, the vernacular expression of the welfare state. From Latin America to Europe to South Asia, Brutalism became the style for governments committed to some kind of socialism, the image of “the common good.” When the most representative building of our era is 432 Park Avenue, Rafael Viñoly’s elegant middle finger of a luxury condo tower, the tallest in the world, looming ominously over Manhattan, it is bracing to revisit a period when planners sought out the best, most avant-garde-minded architects to build libraries, city halls and public housing.

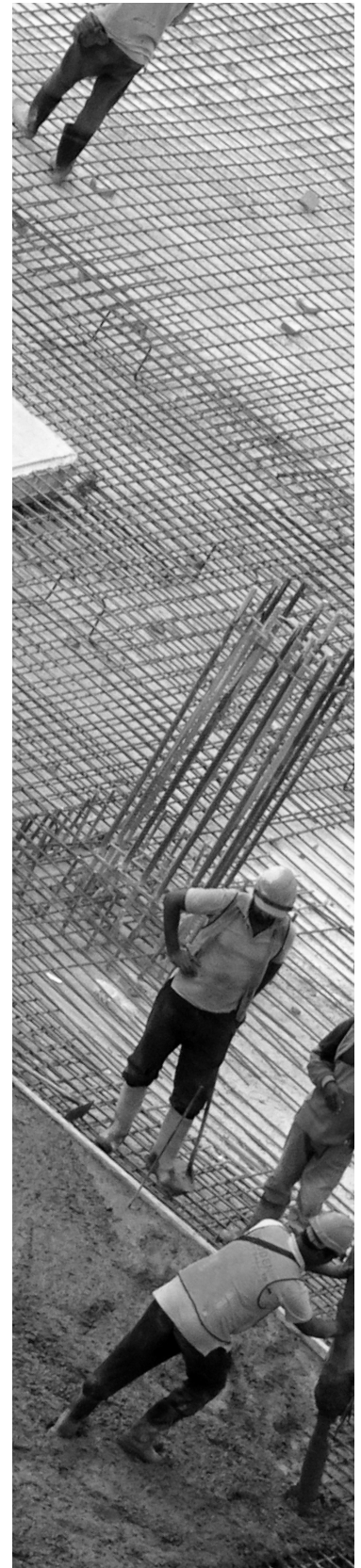
The Modern movement in architecture had supposedly been predicated on truthfulness in materials and forms, as well. But as a dreary stroll down Park Avenue will remind you, Modernism swiftly became a gutless orthodoxy, its high ideals devolving into the rote features of the International Style, a repetitive and predictable series of gestures (curtain walls or ribbon windows, recessed plinths, decorative piloti, windswept plazas, ornamental lawns and flat shimmering pools).

**W**hat was and still is appealing about Brutalism is that it had a kind of purity to it. For their first large project, a school in Hunstanton, and in subsequent projects, such as the Economist building in central London, the Smithsons went back to the lessons of the modern masters, to Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier: to build transparently, cleanly and truthfully. “Whatever has been said about honest use of materials,” Banham wrote in a 1955 article, “most modern buildings appear to be made of whitewash or patent glazing, even when they are made of concrete or steel.” The Smithsons’ project at Hunstanton, by contrast, “appears to be made of glass, brick, steel and concrete, and is in fact made of glass, brick, steel and concrete.”

New Brutalist projects are even being built with distinct monumental concrete volumes, though the revival is often branded as “Neo Brutalism.” No one knows exactly why Brutalism has become fashionable once again, but Brad Dunning of GQ has an interesting theory:

“Maybe the movement has come roaring back into style because permanence is particularly attractive in our chaotic and crumbling world.”

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There's no question that Brutalism looks exceedingly cool. But its deeper appeal is moral. In the words of Reyner Banham, it was an attempt to create an architectural ethic, rather than an aesthetic.

