

## radical nostalgia.

m.abrahamson

*Survivors of the twentieth century, we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic.*

Reblogs and retweets will not bring about a Brutalist revival, and such a renaissance has never been the ambition of *Fuck Yeah Brutalism* (FYB), the Tumblr photo blog I have been operating since December 2010. Contemporary taste is unprecedentedly fickle, and the images posted on FYB, distributed on thousands of blog walls and message boards, are now even more disposable than trading cards.

Architecture, whether we like it or not, has been condensed to a collection of images consumed not in the relative isolation of a book, journal, or even an architecture-only website (how quaint), but as part of the ever-more-thunderous stream of content bombarding each of us on a daily basis.

Social networking tools like Tumblr enable users to collect (or, perhaps more accurately, hoard) dozens and sometimes even hundreds of images per day from a variety of sources, compiling blogs that are staggeringly eclectic and visually overwhelming. On blogs of this type, photographs of buildings might find themselves sandwiched between contemporary couture and a Fauvist painting, a hip-hop video and an illustrated recipe for cranberry scones. Though selected by the blogger, these juxtapositions are anything but curated; everything is given equal importance in a seemingly limitless montage. Is there any meaning at all to be found in these maddening streams of content, these narcissistic maps of mutable desire? In what way might this labour be thought of as in any way productive?

In comparison to such omnivorous blogs, FYB is visually and temporally unremarkable: its content is carefully selected, and its pace positively glacial. Unlike others, however, it has done one very specific thing well enough, and long enough, to develop a following: I have posted one high

quality period photograph every day for the last year and a half. Just how significant Brutalism happens to be in this equation is unclear. Given the same selectivity and consistency, any style of architecture would likely have been equally successful.

Certainly, Brutalism produced a large number of architectural images that are beautiful and often provocative. But today, showing these now decayed and dirty buildings in their pristine, ideal state inevitably generates a haunting nostalgia.

For those of us younger than the buildings themselves, this nostalgia has no object. Having never experienced this period for ourselves, would we even recognise the return of its mentalities or its aesthetics?

**In The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym differentiates between two different modes of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Reflective nostalgias present a vision of the past that can be ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary, a form of passive resistance that underlines the tremendous gulf between the present and past instead of attempting to bridge it. In drawing the past into the present as evidence, reflective nostalgia provokes new potentialities for the future by awakening the imagination.**

Telling ourselves stories that account for our distance from the past, we tend to identify precisely what we perceive to be missing from the present. Whether political idealism, disciplinary consensus, or just plain old money to build things, we project our desires onto the past and, in the process, realise what we want from the future. It is this type of productive nostalgia that FYB hopes to provoke. Make of it what you will.

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## concrete morality.

j.self

*Ethics and aesthetics are one.*

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.421

Brutalism blossomed in the UK at a moment when post-war social order was being radically redefined; gender roles and class structures were shifting, and the communal task of total war had unified the nation (as it will perhaps never be unified again). Six years saturated by death produced both the realisation of our shared humanity and a sense of newfound egalitarianism.

British cities were especially devastated by bomb damage, and there was a pressing need for vast amounts of urban housing. In the 1950s Brutalism emerged as a tool of state-led reconstruction. Not surprisingly, the style is associated with national infrastructure, public housing, and governmental buildings.

In formal terms, Brutalism's modular spaces manifested a certain social desire: for a standardised society, cultural cohesion, the promotion of shared values, and a fair quality of life for all. The Brutalist citizen; therefore, has to be understood as an abstract egalitarian ideal, not (as is more commonly portrayed) an individual lost in a microscopic concrete cave of some gargantuan homogenous facade.

As Wittgenstein noted, there is a similarity between values and formal qualities in that neither are inherent properties of the world. A thing can be no more intrinsically 'beautiful' than an action can be 'good'. And just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so societal codes of morality are impermanent — imprinted briefly in the historical fabric of our public spaces. Accordingly, the significance of a style's death, and its inevitable rebirth, very rarely have much to do with its *aesthetic* as it does the *social ethic* implicit in its forms. It was the rise of free-market neoliberalism that spelled the death of Brutalism's form, and its philosophical function. Neoliberalism rejected Brutalism, because, in order to operate, it had

to visually justify a model of social inequality. John Rawls' 'difference principal' could never have been written in concrete — it took the hi-tech modernism of Foster's HSBC, or the sleek anonymity of the Bonaventure, to manifest the excitement and false dreams of trickle-down economics in architecture. Let's be clear, the Occidental rejection of Brutalism was primarily ideological, not stylistic.

**The existential crisis of contemporary post-Crash Britain is the struggle to come to terms with the rampant fiscal immorality of previous decades. Part of that struggle is the rejection of its token architectural trope: the icon, witnessed by an army of (ironically) raw concrete unfinished structures.**

Interestingly, Brutalism has made something of a comeback in recent years, attributable perhaps to a clichéd predictability that says recessions coincide with solidarity, while booms correlate with individualism.

From the hollow shells of Spanish holiday homes to the stillborn skyscrapers of Dubai or Ordos, what we are witnessing is an exhaustion of capital, caused by the collapse of the global late-neoliberal credit economy.

In Britain at least, Brutalism's renaissance corresponds to a certain social aspiration to recapture an idealised sense of civic solidarity, as it existed before 1979. While this aspiration can be dismissed as anachronistic and nostalgic, the return of Brutalism's aesthetic (as made evident in popular blogs like *Fuck Yeah Brutalism*, posting and archiving an endless stream of historical images) is highly specific to the ethics of our age. Passively subliminal, this imagery performs the very serious role of building a formal syntax to express the ethical zeitgeist currently consuming Western society.

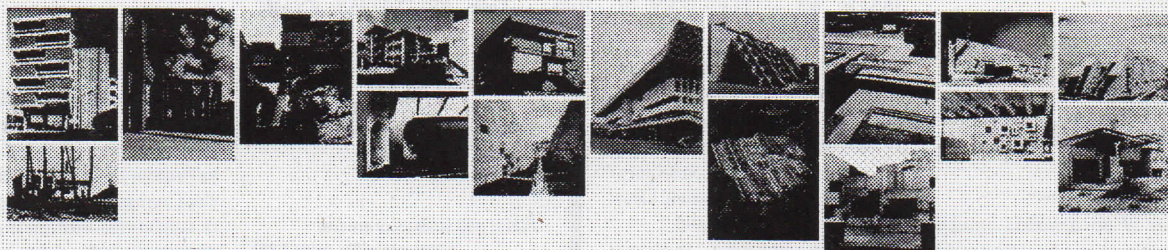
It is not, however, architects driving the Brutalist renaissance; perhaps we still feel too acutely the pain of the

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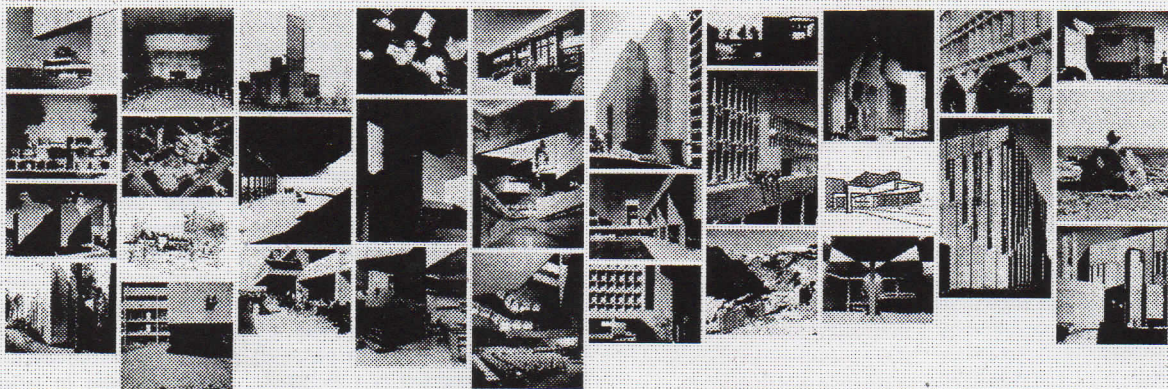
DECEMBER 2012

32 POSTS



NOVEMBER 2012

31 POSTS



OCTOBER 2012

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