Brutal Texture

a 20th century Society Exhibition

Works on paper by Simon Hombersley
Brutal Texture

Brutalist buildings such as the National Theatre are among both the most loved and most hated of all Britain’s buildings. Many were controversial when they were built and continue to divide critics. But these buildings are increasingly valued as democratic, idealistic and of high quality.

Peter Ruback, Chair of the 20th Century Society: “The 20th Century Society campaigns to preserve and promote the best post 1914 architecture and design. The best Brutalist buildings are often misunderstood and much maligned, but these architects cared passionately about detailing and quality of design. Their buildings are an important part of our c20th architectural legacy and we’re delighted to support an exhibition that highlights, explains and celebrates the contribution of these architects to Britain’s built environment.”

Dr Banabas Calder, the leading expert on Lasdun: “Denys Lasdun gave the highest attention to the finishes of his buildings, from refined, glistening precast to the apparent roughness of board-marked in situ. However, even his rough textures were produced by careful carpentry and expert concrete-work. Many wrongly characterise post-war British architecture as a moment when quality was sacrificed to speed and economy. Hombersley’s focus on surface texture draws attention to the range and quality of craft which the leading architects and their contractors put into the seminal material of the period, concrete.”

‘Brutal Texture: a 20th Century Society Exhibition’ celebrates both the architects and the buildings they created, through a focus on the texture and decorative detail of these outstanding buildings.

The exhibition celebrates the work of leading c20th architects such as Erno Goldfinger, Alison and Peter Smithson and in particular Sir Denys Lasdun.
Sir Denys Lasdun – NT1
60cm x 80cm
Erno Goldfinger
Pair. 40cm x 60cm each
A Portrait of Sir Denys Lasdun
Six works, 60cm x 80cm each
Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, Herzog & de Meuron (with great respect to Doris Salcedo)
30cm x 40cm
Why Brutalism?

Why is it that we love the architecture and design of the mid 20th century? I’m sure that generational distance allows us to romanticise and idealise. But I think it’s more. I think there is something about Britain’s spirit in the decades after the Second World War that meets a need in us today.

Innovative and conservative architects exist side by side in any period. Some architects choose to play safe, or to cling to previous forms in the hope that a patrician accent from the past will somehow reassure. Reactionary, hierarchical, conservative, pastiche. Others seek to respond to new needs with new forms and language. But there does seem to have been a particularly explosive period of innovation in British architecture concentrated on the middle years of the 20th century.

A time when people actually believed in concepts such as society. When architecture was democratic and idealistic. When everyone’s living standards were improving. When politics mattered. When what science could create was valued over what it could destroy. When film was art. When art became accessible.

And I think we’re engaging with the idealism of the period in response to our own times. We live in a time when society is atomised, architecture is often cynical, poor are getting poorer, politics is pointless, science is scary, movies are blockbusters and art is a commodity. Perhaps we really just want to believe in something.

For me, Brutalism is the ultimate expression of that innovative idealistic spirit. Mine is not an uncritical adoration. There is good and bad architecture in any style. It’s true that some Brutalist buildings are dogmatic, bullying and inconsiderate. Mistakes are expensive in architecture and hard to hide.

But there is a body of work in Britain where architects created a new language, with new forms and new materials, for buildings with new purposes at a dynamic, exciting, progressive, optimistic time in our history. Even today these buildings excite, thrill, and say something democratic through both their form and their material – usually concrete, made with artisanal care and attention to detail. The arrow slits of Trellick and Balfron Towers. The board marked detail of the National Theatre. The bush-hammered concrete columns of the Barbican.

These are buildings that continue to inspire. They say something about a time when our attitudes to public space, and indeed each other, were very different from our attitudes today.

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www.brutal-texture.com

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