

BRUTALIST ARCHITECTURE

A particular strand of Modernist Architecture in the 1950s and 60s was called Brutalism by Rayner Banham in a 1955 essay. Before him Le Corbusier decided to leave the concrete structure of his Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles bare, in its original state and named it, *béton brut* [=crude concrete].

Many modernist buildings around the world followed this example and up to the mid- 1970s brutalism was often the style of UK universities and government buildings. A new aesthetic of bare concrete developed. However, the use of the term *brutalism* saw many transformations becoming rather negative. The Cambridge English dictionary calls it "a building style in which buildings are large and heavy looking and often made of concrete"!

This definition seems to have been influenced by the appearance of several important buildings in the country, with bare exposed concrete. Prominent examples are the Barbican Centre and the National Theatre in London. Unfortunately, the surface of exposed concrete is affected by the weather and often looks dirty.

However, a great number of other larger modernist buildings rely on concrete for their structural elements, such as columns and beams, but are clad in some way. Shirehall in Shrewsbury is such an example, which carries a cladding of small square aquamarine mosaics. It is therefore questionable whether one can speak of it as a brutalist building, especially with all its cladding and the long unbroken lines of windows which make it feel light and well balanced.

In fact, modernist architecture attached itself more closely to minimalism and abstraction which dominated the Arts, after the two world wars, clearly as a direct or indirect consequence. The brutalist features were abandoned and a variety of new means of expression was introduced including forms and materials. We are still in a period of architectural transition including several failures like all the now demolished multi-storey buildings and the Grenfell Tower with its flammable cladding.

Simultaneously, the nostalgia for old forms and more beautiful buildings is growing steadily as expressed in listing of buildings, conservation areas, heritage agencies and the *build beautiful* Commission.