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## The Brutal Myth

Stephen Parnell ([stephen.parnell@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.parnell@newcastle.ac.uk))

The architectural press is an essential component of architecture's mythmaking. Magazines offer the potential for regular exposure and rapid turnover of ideas: while publication in a magazine validates the work, being consistently published over a period of time normalizes the ideas and their authors into the collective unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Magazines lie closer to the immediacy of the daily newspaper (or today's even more immediate online content) than lengthier, more expensive and considered, less disposable and circulated books. Books – especially the hardbacks of the post-war period – carried a single considered and consistent message, which if accepted or acclaimed, became the canonical narrative and a landmark by which to navigate the field. While the magazines, in particular the popular post-war British monthlies *The Architectural Review (AR)* and *Architectural Design (AD)*, could act as a conduit for the dissemination of emerging ideas, they were also heteroglossic and could simultaneously create a site for debate and disagreement.<sup>2</sup> If myths are the narratives by which we navigate our world<sup>3</sup> – collective tales and values embedded in our unconscious that help us generate meaning – then the architectural press is one of the – if not *the* – most influential instruments for architects and their works to become naturalized and embodied in architectural culture.<sup>4</sup> However, the obvious fact that magazines and books don't write themselves needs re-asserting: there is usually a tight-knit, small "favored circle" of mythmakers who establish their favorite myths in the press: the historians, critics, editors, photographers, educators, and architects themselves.<sup>5</sup> Becoming part of this favored circle offers great power and opportunity to argue for what architecture should be. This article will specifically examine one particular myth – considered

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Carolyn Kitch, "Models for Understanding Magazines," in *The American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects*, ed. David Abrahamson (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995), 9–21.

<sup>2</sup> "Heteroglossia" is defined as "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" in M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, New edition (University of Texas Press, 1981), 269–422; I have described these two roles of the magazine as a "playground" and "battleground" elsewhere, see: Steve Parnell, "Architecture Magazines: Playgrounds and Battlegrounds," in *Common Ground: A Critical Reader*, ed. Kieran Long and Shumi Bose (Venezia: Marsilio, 2012), 305–8.

<sup>3</sup> Following the Miriam Webster dictionary definition, I am taking "myth" to mean "a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon" or "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone" but not a story that is unfounded or false.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, unpublished PhD theses such as: Susan Lichtenstein, "Editing Architecture: Architectural Record and the Growth of Modern Architecture, 1928-1938" (Doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 1990); H el ene Lipstadt and Harvey Mendelsohn, *Architecte et Ingenieur Dans La Presse: Polemique, Debat, Conflit* (Paris: CORDA - IERAU, 1980); Eva Hurtado Tor an, "Las Publicaciones Peri odicas de Arquitectura: Espa a 1897-1937" (Doctoral thesis, Universidad Polit cnica de Madrid, Escuela T cnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, 2001); Steve Parnell, "Architectural Design, 1954-1972: The Contribution of the Architectural Magazine to the Writing of Architectural History" (Doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2002).

as a narrative that has emerged around a set of beliefs or people – that is today enjoying a resurgence in interest: that of the New Brutalism.

The movement's original architects, Alison and Peter Smithson are themselves arguably one of the biggest myths of architectural culture today.<sup>6</sup> As Charles Rattray has argued, although the Smithsons didn't build much, they published prolifically, especially in *AD*. This has enabled their myth to persist until today: a whole discourse has emerged around them and the ideas and groups associated with them.<sup>7</sup> However whereas Rattray chose to emphasize the individual architects' "charismatic intelligence", dogged persistence, and belief in their own importance, I prefer to look at the significance of the network of people around the architects who both assisted and obstructed them in their endeavor to mythologize their own position in architectural history.<sup>8</sup>

In the fall of 1948, Peter Smithson started studying at the Royal Academy Schools in London and shared a flat with South African architect Theo Crosby, whom he had bumped into that summer in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence.<sup>9</sup> When Peter Smithson married Alison Gill, they took the ground floor and Crosby moved upstairs.<sup>10</sup> Crosby and Smithson shared an intense and close friendship that would continue for many years and the Smithsons effectively became Crosby's surrogate family in Britain, "theirs to dominate, theirs to command, something like your family's attitude to you, which makes them almost kin."<sup>11</sup> In 1953, when Crosby was working for Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, he broke his arm in a motorbike accident and due to being unable to draw, was "gently fired."<sup>12</sup> The Editor of *AD*, Monica Pidgeon, was advertising for a replacement for her co-editor and Peter Smithson encouraged Crosby to apply, buying him a suit for the interview. According to Pidgeon, Crosby got the job, ahead of a shortlist consisting of Douglas Stephen, Joseph Rykwert, and Eric Brown, because of his interests in art and his visual sensibility.<sup>13</sup> Crosby started at *AD* in October 1953 and his first issue as Technical Editor was that of December. There he published the Smithsons' unbuilt design for a House in Soho, in which they claimed that "had this been built it would have been the first exponent of the 'new brutalism' in England."<sup>14</sup> Peter Smithson later

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<sup>6</sup> See Steve Parnell, "Reputations: The Smithsons," *The Architectural Review*, February 2012; and Charles Rattray, "What Is It about the Smithsons?," in *An Architect's Guide to Fame: A Collection of Essays on Why They Got Famous and You Didn't*, ed. Paul Davies and Torsten Schmiedeknecht (London: Architectural Press, 2005), 3–16.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the issue of *OASE* (no. 51) dedicated to them in June 1999; *October* 136 dedicated to Brutalism (Spring 2011) and *October* 94 dedicated to the Independent Group (Fall 2000), as well as innumerable dissertations, articles (including this one), talks, seminars, conferences, and lectures.

<sup>8</sup> Rattray, "What Is It about the Smithsons?," 7, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Smithson, NLSC: Architects' Lives. Peter Smithson, interview by Louise Brodie, September 4, 1997, F5951 Side A, British Library Sound Archive.

<sup>10</sup> On 18 August 1949: Elain Harwood, "Smithson, Peter Denham (1923-2003)," *Oxford DNB Article: Smithson, Peter Denham*, January 2011, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/96708>.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Crosby, *Matthew a Memoir* (London: Haus Books, 2009), 50.

<sup>12</sup> Theo Crosby, "Night Thoughts of a Faded Utopia," in *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (London: MIT Press, 1992), 197.

<sup>13</sup> Monica Pidgeon, NLSC: Architects' Lives. Monica Pidgeon., interview by Charlotte Benton, April 29, 1999, F7494 Side A, British Library Sound Archive. Eric Brown was then the Head of the Kingston School of Architecture, Douglas Stephen was about to start his own successful architecture practice in London, and Joseph Rykwert was starting out on a successful career in teaching and writing.

<sup>14</sup> Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "House in Soho, London," *Architectural Design*, December 1953, 342.

acknowledged that Crosby had become the “channel” for publishing their work and this was the beginning of a long relationship with *AD* which benefited both parties.<sup>15</sup> Just as the architects needed the exposure and validation that such a professional magazine could offer, the upcoming magazine needed to publish the latest work from the architectural avant-garde. And the Smithsons, having won the competition for Hunstanton School – by then nearing completion – were heralded as “the bell-wethers [sic] of the young throughout the middle fifties.”<sup>16</sup> Through their close friendship with Crosby, the Smithsons were able to embed themselves in the collective *habitus* of architectural culture by frequent publication of (usually) their ideas and (occasionally) built works.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the 1950s, the Smithsons had established an impressive CV, as a 34-year old Peter himself outlined in a letter to Charles Eames:

Born 1923.

Practiced [sic] architecture since 1950 with wife ALISON.

Inventor of ‘New Brutalism’

Member of C.I.A.M. & destroyer of ditto.

Founder of ‘TEAM X’

Designer of Hunstanton School & ‘House of Future’ etc. etc.

Writer on Town-Building theory

Since 1957, 5th year Tutor at ARCHITECTURE [sic] ASSOCIATION SCHOOL LONDON.<sup>18</sup>

Claiming to be the “destroyer” of CIAM and “founder of TEAM X” is quite an assertion, but it’s the “inventor of ‘New Brutalism’” that I would like to focus on in order to unpack how this particular myth has been passed on yet deviated from the architects’ original intention.<sup>19</sup> Somewhat ironically, while the architects wrote themselves into architectural history through sheer omnipresence and force of character, their well-publicized ideas became corrupted as they were adapted by others.

Myths cannot be imposed on an unsuspecting audience: the ground needs to be prepared to accept a myth’s seed and be nurtured to let it grow and then reproduce. In post-war Britain, the context was that of a dissatisfied generation of young architects wanting to rebuild the world in their own modern image. After the “dowdy” Festival of Britain (according to Smithson), and the emerging Townscape campaign emanating from the *AR*,<sup>20</sup> the group of architects and artists that surrounded the Smithsons and that worked at the London County Council Architects’ Department gathered at

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<sup>15</sup> Smithson, NLSC: Architects’ Lives. Peter Smithson, September 4, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Reyner Banham, “Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945-1965,” in *Concerning Architecture: Essays on Architectural Writers and Writing Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. John Summerson (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 270.

<sup>17</sup> Between December 1953 and November 1975, something was published about or by the Smithsons work on average in every other issue of *AD* magazine.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Smithson to Charles Eames, June 16, 1958, II:23, The Papers of Charles and Ray Eames, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>19</sup> CIAM and TEAM X are two other well-documented architectural myths, the latter of which Alison Smithson herself edited the account of: Alison Smithson, ed., *Team 10 Primer* (London: Whitefriars Press, 1965); This was a reprint of Alison Smithson, “Team 10 Primer,” *Architectural Design*, December 1962. For the history of CIAM, see Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism 1928-1960*, New edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> For more on Townscape, see: *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 5 (October 2012); John Pendlebury, Peter Larkham, and Erdem Erten, eds., *Alternative Visions of Post-War Reconstruction: Creating the Modern Townscape* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, ed. Mathew Aitchison (Getty Research Institute, 2010).

the Institute of Contemporary Art and became the Independent Group.<sup>21</sup> It was within this dissatisfied milieu that the New Brutalism was born: if the Smithsons were its parents, its midwife was Reyner Banham. Art historian, fellow Independent Group member, and *AR* critic, Banham was an ambitious writer who wasn't afraid to color outside of the lines and who, as Jonathan Meades recently noted, "would have trampled on his grandmother to snuggle up to a passing trend."<sup>22</sup>

Crosby published the Smithsons' New Brutalist manifesto as *AD*'s editorial in January 1955.<sup>23</sup> However Banham's article from that December's *AR* has become more embedded in the movement's mythology – probably due to it being a longer, more considered piece appearing in the more widely circulated and established magazine and due to it forming the basis of his later book – which has been well rehearsed and ossified as accepted architectural history.<sup>24</sup> In the article's introduction, Banham wrote,

What has been the influence of contemporary architectural historians on the history of contemporary architecture?

They have created the idea of a Modern Movement [...] and beyond that they have offered a rough classification of the 'isms' which are the thumb-print of Modernity into two main types: One, like *Cubism*, is a label, a recognition tag, applied by critics and historians to a body of work which appears to have certain consistent principles running through it, whatever the relationship of the artists; the other, like *Futurism*, is a banner, a slogan, a policy consciously adopted by a group of artists, whatever the apparent similarity or dissimilarity of their products. And it is entirely characteristic of the New Brutalism [...] that it should confound these categories and belong to both at once.<sup>25</sup>

Recognizing that the New Brutalism had the potential to be something important as Britain's "first native art-movement since the New Art-History"<sup>26</sup> – even its first native architectural movement since the Arts & Crafts<sup>27</sup> – Banham wanted to be its historian. A battle for ownership of the emerging myth ensued. For him, the New Brutalism was a "label" to apply, and for the Smithsons, a "banner"

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Smithson, NLSC: Architects' Lives. Peter Smithson, interview by Louise Brodie, October 10, 1997, F5956 Side A, British Library Sound Archive. Another well-established myth: Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain 1945-59* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); David Robbins, ed., *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> Francis Hanly, "Bunkers, Brutalism, Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry" (BBC4, February 20, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism," *Architectural Design*, January 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Especially by Anthony Vidler – see, for example, Anthony Vidler, "Troubles in Theory V: The Brutalist Moment(s)," *Architectural Review*, February 2014; Anthony Vidler, "Re-Writing the History of the Recent Present: From the New Empiricism to the New Brutalism" (Lecture, AA PhD Open Seminar Series, Architectural Association, November 26, 2012), <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2017>; Anthony Vidler, "Brutalism, Ethic or Aesthetic?," *CLOG*, 2013; Vidler, "Re-Writing the History of the Recent Present: From the New Empiricism to the New Brutalism"; See also Laurent Stalder, "'New Brutalism', 'Topology' and 'Image': Some Remarks on the Architectural Debates in England around 1950," *The Journal of Architecture* 13, no. 3 (July 2008): 263–81; and Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, New edition (MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," *The Architectural Review*, December 1955, 354.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>27</sup> Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: The Architectural Press, 1966), 134.

to march under. However, no “New Brutalist” buildings then existed, except for the Smithsons’ self-acclaimed Hunstanton School. As late as mid-1957, one tongue-in-cheek letter on the pages of *AD* queried, “Does the ‘New Brutalism’ really mean anything other than the architecture of the Smithsons? [...] a criticism of the buildings would be a deal better than a criticism of their theories.”<sup>28</sup> So the definition of what constituted a New Brutalist building was still very much up for grabs and Banham would shortly take it upon himself to construct its canon in a quasi-autobiographical manner by writing its “obituary”, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*<sup>29</sup> The duality of the subtitle could be considered a direct reflection of the two attitudes to the movement – the architects’ ethical version as opposed to the aesthetic of the art historian – and he characteristically closes down the argument in favor of his own position by writing in his envoi that “it is very clear that the biggest and most important fact about the British contribution to Brutalism is that it is over.”<sup>30</sup>

Curiously, neither the first building in Banham’s canon, the Smithsons’ Hunstanton School, nor the penultimate, their Economist cluster in London, which Banham accused of signaling its demise, readily look like they belong with the rest of the highly textured buildings of béton brut and rough brick that comprised the proposed canon: their inclusion appears to be merely down to their authorship. Surprisingly, as the Smithsons’ close friend Robin Middleton noted in his review of the book in *AD*, Banham did not consult the Smithsons in its writing.<sup>31</sup> This allowed him to claim his aesthetic version as the true myth of the New Brutalism with the words, “for all its brave talk of ‘an ethic, not an aesthetic’, Brutalism never quite broke out of the aesthetic frame of reference.”<sup>32</sup> The Smithsons could only point out Banham’s errors of interpretation and fact, at least according to their own Brutalist sensibilities, in a weekly publication now filed away in a forgotten volume.<sup>33</sup>

The lack of a unified definition for the New Brutalism has been identified by Dirk van den Heuvel who has charted the shifting ideas of the Smithsons over the years, from “the sheer architectural and material to the urban and mobile” and from “Brutalism” to “Conglomerate Ordering”.<sup>34</sup> He notes that Banham’s all-important characteristic of “Memorability as Image”<sup>35</sup> never appeared in the Smithsons’ vague attempts at a definition and he catalogues the moments when the Smithsons adamantly denied the version of Brutalism that Banham was proposing, from their riposte in the *Architects’ Journal* and *Without Rhetoric* to the much later interview between Peter Smithson and

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Armitage, “Letters to the Editor,” *Architectural Design*, June 1957, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Its postscript, entitled “Memoirs of a Survivor”, mentions his disappointment with the ultimate result and he notes that “In retrospect, it [Banham’s 1955 article] reveals only too clearly my attempt to father some of my own pet notions of the movement.” Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 1966, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. The “ethical” definition of Brutalism refers to a statement by the Smithsons in *AD*: “Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical.” - see Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, “The New Brutalism: Alison and Peter Smithson Answer the Criticisms on the Opposite Page,” *Architectural Design*, April 1957, 113. In contrast to Banham, I interpret “ethical” as derived from “ethos” rather than in line with the idea of morality.

<sup>31</sup> Robin Middleton, “The New Brutalism or a Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” *Architectural Design*, January 1967, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 1966, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, “Banham’s Bumper Book on Brutalism,” *Architects’ Journal*, December 28, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Dirk van den Heuvel, “Between Brutalists. The Banham Hypothesis and the Smithson Way of Life,” *The Journal of Architecture* 20, no. 2 (April 2015): 300.

<sup>35</sup> Banham, “The New Brutalism,” December 1955, 361.

Hans Ulrich Obrist where Smithson objected that “Brutalism was not what Banham was talking about.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet in the half century since Banham’s book appeared, the critic’s aesthetic has predominated as the Brutalist myth at the expense of the architects’ ethical version, despite the latter’s vast output of published material (and handful of buildings). This could be because the architects constantly changed their ideas about the situation “as found”, or it could be down to their respective personalities, or because Banham literally wrote the canon-forming book. Equally, it could be because the aesthetic – especially that of the highly textured, crisply shadowed, beautifully composed photograph of a Brutalist building – is far more easily transmitted via the printed page than the ideas embedded in words. As Joan Ockman recently pointed out, “an image travels faster than an ethos,” especially a vague, misunderstood and mistranslated ethos.<sup>37</sup> And in the current context of today’s mythmaking apparatus – tumblr, twitter, flickr, blogger, and so on – this could be one reason why Brutalism is enjoying a resurgence of popularity amongst a new generation. “Going viral” is the latest way of making myths and the Smithsons, Banham, and Brutalism are all highly contagious viruses in today’s architectural culture searching once more for “another architecture”.

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<sup>36</sup> For the Smithsons’ response, see Smithson and Smithson, “Banham’s Bumper Book on Brutalism”; and note 6 in Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: Architectural Aesthetic, 1955-72* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973), 6; Also Peter Smithson and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Smithson Time: A Dialogue* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 17; Cited in van den Heuvel, “Between Brutalists. The Banham Hypothesis and the Smithson Way of Life,” 297.

<sup>37</sup> Joan Ockman, “The School of Brutalism: From Great Britain to Boston (and Beyond),” in *Heroic: Concrete Architecture and the New Boston*, ed. Mark Pasnik, Chris Grimley, and Michael Kubo (New York: Monacelli Press, 2015), 31.