

New Haven's Brutalist architecture is, well, brutal

IF you can, take a look at the underside of the extreme, constructivist melee caused by the new Interstate 95 bridge over the Quinnipiac River: huge concrete and steel elements are carefully choreographed and, yet, inherently violent in their dynamism.

About 50 years ago, a radical offshoot of modern architecture attempted to simulate this high drama. It was a brief blow out of over-the-top, build-out of which New Haven has an outsized portion.



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It was dubbed "Brutalism" in the 1950s by British architects Peter and Alison Smithson — not because of its obvious violent impact, but from the French "beton brut," a phrase used by the ultimate modern starchitect, Le Corbusier, to describe concrete formed by raw planks, a technique he used in many of his iconic designs.

In the 1960s, architectural historian Reyner Banham defined this movement as more of an attitude than a style. That attitude is "architect uber alles," where structure and shape are not so much abstracted into sculpture as given license for a roid rage of architectonic expression.

When I had breakfast with Peter Smithson in 1975, he seemed anything but a brutal man. He was extraordinarily polite, perhaps even timid. His only visible affect being that his jacket, shirt, tie and pants were all made of the exact same plaid material. This was somewhat disconcerting and, of course, directly analogous to the use of a "mono-material," not unlike the raw concrete that his Brutalist buildings used as a baseline for all "pure" architecture.

In America, the high-water mark for this style is the 1969 Boston City Hall designed by Kallman McKinnell Knowles. The building's obvious raw inhumanity became so odious to nonarchitects that the esoteric



appeal of the style's hyper-structural expression outraged the building's users. Some said it looked like a jail, others called it "the crate that Faneuil Hall came in."

The self-justifying arguments of Brutalist architects became laughable.

All architecture schools advocate for architects to be given full voice in defining their buildings. So it is with Yale University's architectural community, and the local setting for their unfettered innovation is our small city.

New Haven is a perfect size for cutting edge design to have maximum impact. Larger cities have a larger commercial base that typically panders to popular culture that dissipates the impact of the random tour de force building.

Smaller towns do not have the economic critical mass to build on a scale that places cutting edge design at center stage.

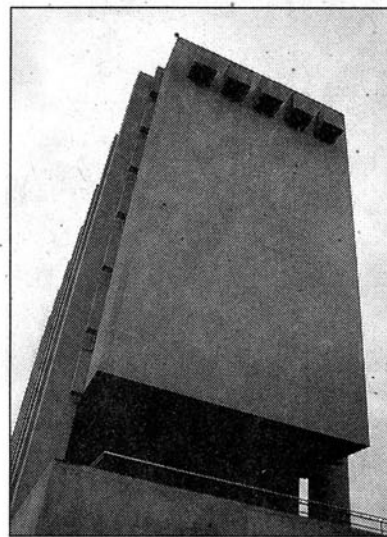
So, it is not surprising New Haven has a far greater percentage of Brutalist buildings than almost any other city of which I can think. The best examples include the former Art and Architecture Building, now Rudolph Hall at Yale (renamed for its architect, Paul Rudolph) where not only was concrete formed in a brutally raw manner, but has subsequently had its corrugated surface jackhammered into a sharp corduroy appearance.

Idealized Brutalism is best expressed where there is more structure and less enclosed space, such as the Yale University Tennis Center or the Air Rights



Register file photos

A tour of New Haven's Brutalist architecture would include, clockwise from top left, the Temple Street parking garage designed by Paul Rudolph and built in 1961; Rudolph Hall at Yale (with Rudolph himself in photo), built in 1963 (formerly the Art and Architecture Building); Yale University's Laboratory of Epidemiology and Public Health, designed by architect Philip Johnson and built in 1964; and the Knights of Columbus museum (formerly the Community Services Building) designed by New Haven architect Douglas Orr and built in 1965.



Garage — both of which lay their concrete structure proudly bare.

Rudolph's Temple Street Garage takes the same Brutalist aesthetic into a sinuous, sculptured softness.

Other buildings simply used the convenience of a single concrete answer to express raw geometric forms, such as John Johansen's United Church of Christ on Dixwell Avenue and

the nearby Dixwell Community Center by Herb Newman and Ed Cherry. Yale's Becton Engineering and Applied Sciences Center by Marcel Breuer and the Fire Department headquarters on Grand Avenue by Earl Carlin also use the Brutalist voice.

Having burned brightly over a 25 year run, Brutalism collapsed of its own overblown visual weight by the 1980s. Brutalism's excesses — born of context blind exuberance and obvious functional failures (remember the departed Coliseum?) — became obvious to even the staunchest advocates.

It's not often that a large scale stylistic movement in architec-

ture has the half life of the Disco Age, but attitude can deny reality only so long.

No matter how much the elite of the architectural world want a free pass to perfection, the vox populi have weight in a free market. Someone pays for every building, and unless the thirst for cool is slaked with enough Kool-Aid to blind funders to obvious miscalculations, no one, including Yale, wants to beat a dead horse.

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