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The Local Conditions of a Global Material

Concrete is ubiquitous. Its plasticity allows for nearly limitless forms. Its mutability results in numerous different appearances. Readily available and accessible, it can be found across the globe. It is, perhaps, nowhere quite as ubiquitous as in cities. In the late post-war years, after the dissolution of CIAM and the rejection of International Style Modernism, with its fey white stucco forms, Brutalism offered a new paradigm for urban reconstruction. Its forms were monumental and heroic, its materials straightforward and robust. Though the provenance of the term “Brutalism” seems forever unsettled—Brut as a nod to Le Corbusier’s *Beton Brut* (*raw concrete*), or as a play on Peter Smithson’s rumored AA nickname “Brutus,” or, even further, derived from Hans Asplund’s use of “Nybrutalism” in referring to the small cabin of his contemporaries Bengt Edman and Lennart Holm—concrete would prove to be a favored material of Brutalism for its dynamism of form, its versatility of function (structure/enclosure/partition) and its unapologetic appearance.¹ Nearly 50 and 60 years old today (and thus entering what might be considered architectural old age), many of the built works of this post-war movement are struggling to meet contemporary standards of performance and aesthetics. Increasingly

Opposite: Viljo Revell, Toronto City Hall, Toronto, 1961-65.

caught between the conflicting imperatives of preservation and urban renewal, a number of these structures have already been demolished and still more await the wrecking ball.

For the past year I have traveled in search of concrete left exposed—what Reyner Banham described as *'bloody-minded'* buildings, those raw and rugged specimens of the late post-war era associated with the Brutalist movement.² Neither a farewell to Brutalism nor a rallying cry for its continued relevance, my fieldwork sought to discover what subtleties are embedded in such a prolific material. Indeed, it is quite often simply the appearance of fair-faced³ concrete that most contributes to a building being labeled as Brutalist (whether justly in the minds of its architects or not). Yet even if the boundaries of this debated term remain muddled, its exposed concrete proved to be a constant guiding thread in my travels. This rather specific pursuit offered a control of sorts; it presented an opportunity to examine a single material across a range of cultures, climates and conditions. The raw, unforgiving concrete of the Brutalist era was my compass.

Regardless of the designers' intentions, or of their allegiances to whichever architectural movement, the very intentioned use of concrete as a finish material signaled an explicit sort of new modernity: that short window of time in the mid-century when Brutalism reigned and concrete's use seemed universal in its built application, serving as a structure, envelope and partition. The material's versatility allowed for an appealingly authentic and honest architectural expression. As Boston City Hall architect Michael McKinnell explains: "When you build in concrete what you see is what you get. The building is concrete, it is made in concrete, it is structured in concrete."⁴

On hour-long bus rides through sprawling Sao Paulo, as a lonely pedestrian in Los Angeles, or winding my way through narrow Scottish streets, I traced strange routes through each city. The specificity of my

itinerary offered insight into each city's unique relationship with this pervasive construction material. Concrete provided a lens through which to examine the nuances of so many different and distinct cities. Reflected in each city's unique constellation of concrete is a snapshot of built history, evident in the large voids left in bomb-ridden post-war London, the linear creep of mid-century development along Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, or the establishment of a civic heart in downtown Toronto. Far-flung in some cities and clustered in others, most of the buildings sit in sharp contrast to their context, rifts in the urban fabric. Across borders and oceans they are typically more like each other than their surroundings.

These dense behemoths echo each other across the globe, ambassadors of some anonymous realm where all is modern and concrete. Yet they are, undeniably, products of their own cities: their aggregate composed of local earth, their forms shaped by hands of local workers. A familiar global formula composed of explicitly local ingredients—in many cases, of the very ground the building has displaced. As Bartlett historian Adrian Forty asks: "Faced with any piece of concrete, does it at once join us to a universe of all other concrete things, or is it, alternatively, a local occurrence, attaching us to the particular place it happens to occupy? Or might it not do both at once?"⁵

I found comfort in the vague familiarity of these rugged beacons of exposed concrete (a constant in so many strange new places) and delight in each example's specificity. Up close, each building is surprisingly nuanced, revealing of region, climate, culture, and age. Not simply grey nor flat nor bland, through their common material these buildings share an immediate kinship with one another yet possess a rich identity of their own.



London

In London, reputed birthplace of Brutalism, I found the concrete varied yet exacting. From Erno Goldfinger's fastidious concrete specifications (numbering over 40 pages long) to Denys Lasdun's precise and refined board-work at the Royal National Theatre (where no board was used more than twice, lest the grain become too matted and dull), there is remarkable attention paid to the material's finished expression. London is a city that is simultaneously very old and very new. Near remnants of London's historic City Wall, a large swath of post-war reconstruction pairs mid-century concrete skywalks (those pedestrian overpasses so popular in the 1960s, so desolate today) with Roman weathered stones that compose the ancient wall. Towering glass skyscrapers creep into the city's skyline, making narrow pre-war streets feel all the more narrow.

Beneath the Barbican, tucked in a mechanical accessway, I discovered a series of test finish sample swatches. Stretching nearly 20 feet, the vast range of the myriad concrete finishing techniques demonstrates the ambition Chamberlin, Powell and Bon held for their concrete. Not simply selected for its inexpensive cost, this was a material that offered malleability of appearance and allowed for specificity of intent. Their bespoke bush-hammered solution would surely be impossible today by both safety and cost standards: pneumatic drills were used to chip away the finish surface by hand (with workers suspended as much as 30 stories in the air), exposing the dark granite aggregate beneath to create the signature rough and dark mottled finish.

Opposite: Erno Goldfinger, Trellick Tower, London, 1966-72.



Glasgow

In Glasgow and Edinburgh, where the climate tends towards the perpetually soggy, concrete is predominantly precast. The city scale is modest, its concrete buildings more sparse and clustered within its university campuses and shopping centers—both of which underwent significant development in the later post-war years. “For Let” signs and placards announcing extensive renovations or even demolition adorn many of the buildings, indicating their unwelcome presence. From beneath my umbrella I observed concrete surface after surface, all of a similar texture. While the color and tone of the exposed aggregate varies on each building, nearly all share the same pebbly finish. Over tea with a local graduate student studying Scottish Brutalism, I learned this resemblance is quite strategic and is in fact a reaction to the same damp weather I experienced each day. The prevalence of precast is largely a result of London-based architects wanting to skirt extended curing times in the frequently wet weather. Through chemical processes (retarders applied to the surface of the formwork) the large aggregate is exposed, giving the surface a rough grainy texture, whose appearance remains roughly the same rain (mostly rain) or shine.

Opposite: Keppie Henderson & Partners, Rankine Building—University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 1969.



São Paulo

The stark sun in São Paulo was a welcome contrast to the grey climate of the United Kingdom. A city scaled for the car—sprawling and scattered—it is populated by bland apartment towers or heavily fortified single-family homes. Historical building stock is few and far between. Concrete is omnipresent here: the fabric of the city. The bright days cast the concrete in deep shadow, highlighting its expressive surfaces. Mostly site-cast, its texture is rich, its handcraft more tactile and explicit. Though included in many Brutalist surveys, most of the São Paulo-based Paulista school architects (such as Vilanova Artigas, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, and Lina Bo Bardi) rejected association with the movement. Their designs are also distinct from the earlier iconic works that earned Brazil's modern architecture global recognition such as Neimeyer's flat, sinewy curves found in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia. The Paulista School's methods in concrete were ones of political expression: the finish work is notably crude and unrefined, but the forms are ambitious and inventive, thus said to reflect the state of Brazilian society at the time (struggling financially and without many resources, yet willfully advancing nonetheless).⁶

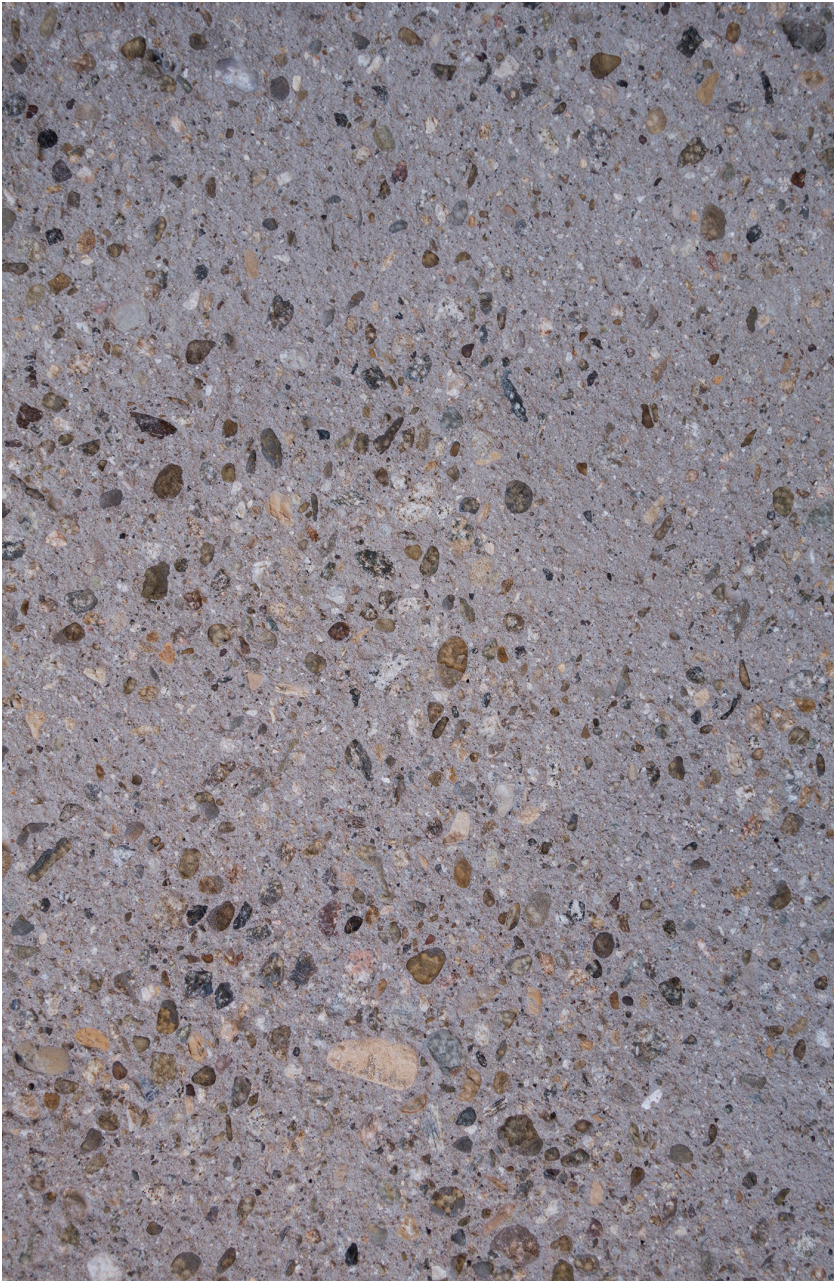
Opposite: Paulo Mendes da Rocha, MuBE – Museu Brasileiro Da Escultura, São Paulo, 1986-95.



Toronto

Toronto's great volume of concrete was constructed not so much as an act of re-building (like the many other cities grappling with post-war destruction), but rather an act of nation building. Its resulting pervasiveness is remarkable, forming civic icons as well as small neighborhood schools and community centers. Toronto is indeed a younger city with its downtown largely developed in the mid-century, save for the Old City Hall which was almost torn down in the 1960s when the new City Hall was built. Now beloved, the Romanesque revival structure of the Old City Hall was then considered dated and dowdy—a sequence of events rather familiar today. As the editors of *Concrete Toronto* (a compendium of Toronto's mid-century concrete) explained to me, concrete was considered a democratic material in Canada—humble, affordable and accessible. Yet within this significant quantity of concrete, the diversity of surfaces is notable and remains markedly experimental in nature. Rather than acquiesce to a certain sameness, Canadian architects challenged themselves to exploit the possibilities and potential of this one quite modest material. Given that many of these buildings were erected when Canada was prosperous after the war, they were constructed well and remain in good condition despite some of the most dramatic annual climate swings of any region I visited.

Opposite: John Andrews, Scarborough College, Toronto, 1963-65.



Los Angeles

In the greater Los Angeles area—that patchwork place, a metropolis composed of contradictions, where no one building type or style can claim to be common—I was struck by the monotony of the concrete. The textures are flatter and more homogenous, lacking the rich tactility I observed in so many other cities. Here, the use of concrete feels more inevitable than deliberate, an aesthetic nod to the global threads of Brutalism but not a truly spirited engagement. The uniformity of surfaces recalls the stucco so prevalent in the Los Angeles area, rather than the plasticity and versatility of concrete: its use is a covering or a cladding; its application superficial, rather than audacious, and expressive as in many of the more seminal Brutalist buildings which assert the authenticity and roughness of the material.

Opposite: A. C. Martin & Associates, Emmet L. Wemple, St Basil's Catholic Church, Los Angeles, 1969.

Epilogue

Concrete is the material of modernity; the material of industrialization; the material of infrastructure; the material of the banal. Yet a close examination of this pervasive material on a global scale reveals an abundance of complexities. Embedded within the surfaces of post-war concrete is an eloquence quite often unheard or unrecognized.

Concrete, particularly when left raw, is a uniquely expressive material. In the dullness of its everyday existence, its walls speak to its own construction, its own inception. In its tone and texture, one can read the ground of which it was composed, the material within which it was cast—inherently local manifestations. Still, concrete is persistent across the globe. Amidst this ubiquity, the specificity, the tailored nature of each of these concrete structures is easily missed.

Concrete strikes a compelling balance: it is neither a strictly global, nor strictly local material, but in fact some strange mixture of both. Within this material so often overlooked—the background, the ambient material of so many urban environments across the globe—there is a deep richness, a resonance. One simply needs to look a little closer.

[Endnotes]

1. British architects Peter and Alison Smithson are often credited as the progenitors of the phrase “New Brutalism”—indeed theirs is the first published use of the term. Writing in 1953 they invoked the phrase to describe a small house project in London, which eschewed “internal finishes” in favor of a “warehouse aesthetic”. Journalist Jonathan Meades, however, contends that their introduction to the locution was courtesy of Hans Asplund. For more see: Alison and Peter Smithson, “House in Soho-London,” *Architectural Design* (December 1953), p. 342. Also: Jonathan Meades, “Bunkers, Brutalism, and Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry with Jonathan Meades,” *Post-war Architecture*, BBC (London: BBC Four, February 20 2014).
2. Reyner Banham, New Brutalism’s most prolific chronicler, defined it by three metrics: “1, Formal legibility of plan; 2, clear exhibition of structure, and 3, valuation

of materials for their inherent qualities 'as found.'" Lest this straightforward list serve at the expense of more complex nuances, he clarified: "In the last resort what characterizes the New Brutalism in architecture [...] is precisely its brutality, its *je-m'en-foutisme*, its bloody-mindedness." For more see: Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism," *Architectural Review* (December 1955), p. 357. Also: Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966).

3. "Fair-faced" (or "architectural") concrete is a construction terminology for concrete intended to be left exposed and serve as the final finish material, rather than be covered over or cladded.

4. Michael McKinnell, Interview by Mark Pasnik, "An Interview with Michael McKinnell," *Heroic: Boston Concrete 1957-1976*. <http://www.overcommander.com/heroic/essays/an-interview-with-michael-mckinnell>. September 2009 (Accessed November 2014).

5. Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 103.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 127.