



# Brutalism: Ethic over Aesthetic

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**B**rutalism's aesthetic is associated with square apartments, monumental blocks, and a dehumanizing architectural style dominated by concrete. This style first became prevalent in postwar Great Britain and reflected the urgent need to rebuild cheaply and swiftly in the 1950s. The "New Brutalism" started as an experimental aesthetic exemplified by the prominent British architects Peter and Allison Smithson who continued to develop the style well into the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Robin Hood Gardens, a residential estate located in East London, is both their most well-known piece and representative of their Brutalist philosophy. Drawing from modernist influences such as Le Corbusier, they designed Robin Hood Gardens around the circulatory routes of residents and pedestrians rather than adhering to the "top-down" design philosophy popular

at the time. In other words, rather than planning buildings and waiting for the reactions of residents, their approach began with consideration of the potential inhabitants' perspectives. The English critic Reyner Banham, a close friend of the Smithsons, is one of the pioneer theorists behind this movement. He carved a niche outside of the then popular style of modernism by emphasizing the relation of a building to a person. According to Banham, the three principles that make up the brutalist aesthetic are: "1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3. Valuation of Materials 'as found.'"<sup>2</sup> Regarding the first principle, Banham explains "Where Thomas Aquinas supposed beauty to be quod visum placet (that which is seen, pleases), image may be defined as quod visum perturbat - that which is seen, affects the emotions."<sup>3</sup> Banham's

concept of “image” emphasizes that the sight of a Brutalist building does not need to please the eye, but rather elicit some emotion from the spectator.

### **Vitruvius’ Three Principles**

The question of whether beauty is a chief goal of architects is a perennial debate. The aesthetic styles loved in the past were noted for their beauty, their ornamentation, and their composition. A Brutalist building’s purpose, according to Banham, is to elicit a wide range of emotions from a viewer, not just awe at beauty. People who disagree with Banham might tout classical architectural theory as superior, but even classical theory makes room for the Brutalist perspective. The Roman architect and writer Vitruvius, for example, realized that there is more that goes into a building’s careful construction than just its beauty. Vitruvius, the earliest architectural theorist whose work is still widely read, backs this claim in book I chapter 3 of *De Architectura* (On Architecture) by listing the three principles that should be considered when building. These three principles are “soundness,” “utility,” and “attraction.”<sup>4</sup> “Soundness” refers to how firm and stable a structure is. “Utility” relates to how the building helps facilitate the use of space for its intended purpose. Lastly, “attraction” refers to the level of physical appeal the building has. Vitruvius connects beauty with symmetry, rightful proportioning, and the harmoniousness of the whole. Regarding design, Vitruvius writes: “Design is the apt placement of things, and the elegant effect obtained by their arrangement according to the nature

of the work.”<sup>5</sup> Each planned construction of a building contains its own criteria for “apt placement,” or what is considered the right combinations of ideas and details. While Brutalism’s achievements do not resemble the grandiose structures of ancient Greece, its design philosophy aligns with Vitruvius’ principles. Additionally, the aesthetic of Brutalism aligns clearly with Vitruvius’ principles of soundness and utility—with attractiveness being exchanged for Banham’s concept of “image.”

### **Skopje Archive**

An examination of specific brutalist buildings from the lens of Vitruvius’ theory shows how these structures can be understood through traditional architectural theory. For example, the Skopje Archive building, located in North Macedonia, is a public institution housing important records of the city. It was designed by Georgi Konstantinovski in 1966 (Figure 1) after an earthquake devastated the capital city. The building itself is composed mainly of concrete, which is a staple element in Brutalism. While perhaps not “beautiful” to some, the concrete infrastructure is specifically designed to withstand frequent seismic activity. The requirement of Vitruvius that a building ought to be stable is thus easily checked off. Regarding function, a quick look at its interior offers us a glimpse of what research and work might actually look like there (Figure 2). The archive building holds the records of Skopje and is mainly used by researchers and city workers. The interior consists of two large square areas with one rotated 45 degrees. According to architectural

theorist Mirjana Lozanovska: “This division reflects a separation of the functions: the entry and administration occupy the lower horizontal rectangular space (broad on entry), while the workshop area lies perpendicular to this in the upper rectangular space.”<sup>6</sup> Utilizing Banham’s idea of “image,” we can see the archive building as a representation of the collected history of the city firmly secured in strong material and form. Beyond mere function, many parts of this design are visually striking, such as the six-foot tower in the back and the stairwells visible to each of the upper floors of the main building. The building is particularly effective with its detail of adjoining stairwells and towers, with glass windows facing front to guide visitors to the main lobby.

The Skopje archive is more than just a pleasing sight; it is the city’s collective trauma from the disastrous earthquakes that destroyed the last city archive and its determination to rebuild. The new design, however, does not imitate the former building. Rather, it pays respect to it with its new, strengthened foundation. Its design is human-centered because its primary function as an archive necessitates that human agents be able to comfortably work in and easily navigate throughout the building. The inhabitants—not considerations of beauty—were at the center of the planning for the new archive.

### **Boston City Hall**

Boston City Hall (Figure 3), designed by American architect Paul Rudolph, faces constant threats of demolition as do many brutalist structures. The first im-

pression of the public was confused and quite negative. In an article by John Conti in the *Wall Street Journal* after its opening in 1969, one councilor described it as “Babylonia temple,” a nursing student called it a “fortress,” a cab driver complained there was “too much wasted space,” and one city hall secretary said he simply “couldn’t stand” all the concrete.<sup>7</sup> Boston City Hall is representative of numerous brutalist buildings that often receive calls for its demolition in the hopes that a “proper” construction may one day erase their memory. But what exactly do critics of Brutalism dislike? The cab driver bemoans the “wasted space,” but, as Conti notes in his article, “Its spaces are meant to be grand and permanent, symbolic of the democratic ideals of a city.”<sup>8</sup> One prominent feature of the building is a large set of pyramiding brick stairs in the south entry hall (figure 4). These stairs lead either outside of the building or into a much smaller ascending terrazzo stairway. What may at first appear to be a useless staircase became the setting of then Mayor Kevin White’s first press conference in the building. John Conti praised this element in his article: “So the stairway becomes an amphitheater. And as an amphitheater it is, in fact, delightful.”<sup>9</sup> As Conti observed, the building’s features are dynamic and adaptable; the staircase transformed into a dramatic space worthy of the mayor’s address to the people of Boston.

The emotions elicited by Boston City Hall ranged from solemnity and curiosity to skepticism and disgust. To only consider the element of beauty in this

structure overlooks its function for Boston. It is a unique building which serves its community. Bostonians go to city hall for other reasons than just admiring beautiful symmetry and ornamentation. The outside is domineering and massive, but the interior is welcoming and flushed with natural light. Once inside, the offices of the city staff can all be viewed from its atrium, a transparency that reflects Bostonians' long-held passion for democracy.

### The Sirius Apartments

The Sirius apartments were designed by Tao Gofers in 1980 (Figure 5). Constructed in Sydney down by the harbor bridge, these apartments offered affordable housing at a time when land and housing prices were soaring. By the 1980s, past housing practices could no longer keep up with the increased demand and the widening economic gap. As architect and scholar Russel Rodrigo observed, the only cost-effective means to address the problem was to "build higher."<sup>10</sup> The Sirius Apartments offered a novel solution. This complex incorporated both standard family units as well as units catering to all age groups. Each unit included open areas for residents to use for any outdoor desires they might have. All units also featured access to a communal roof garden and balconies that allowed for spectacular views of the opera house, harbor, and city skyline.

As soon as the Sirius complex became operational, it began to receive criticism. One local paper, the *National Trust*, dubbed it "the lump on The Rocks."<sup>11</sup> Mr. Landa, the former minister for the Depart-

ment of Planning and Environment which oversees city ordinances and building laws, called it "damned awful."<sup>12</sup> As The *Sydney Morning Herald* summed up the reception: "Some architects have criticized the design, motorists have complained that it cuts off Harbor views and some members of the public have suggested that the central tower be demolished."<sup>13</sup>

According to the actual residents of the Sirius Apartments, however, the new complex was a great success. One other commentator conceded some of the critics' points regarding the aesthetics, but also observed a certain class-based resentment underlying the public outcry: "Perhaps there is some merit in his criticism that the block spoils the line of the Sydney Harbor Bridge, but I cannot help detecting hints of a more general resentment which is perhaps leveled at those people who might win a place in this unique setting—people who ordinarily would never be able to afford harborside accommodation."<sup>14</sup> A full consideration of the Sirius complex—one that includes the many new opportunities it affordably offers residents—provides a new perspective on Brutalism. Judged by Vitruvius' criteria of "soundness" and "utility," the building was a hit. So why are critics so narrowly obsessed with the third principle, "attraction," the pure aesthetics of architectural structures? The "ethics" and "aesthetics" of architecture are two distinct categories that can be judged according to their own merits. In the case of Brutalism, both the ethics and aesthetics are defensible. In the public's mind, however, the

architect's role is often viewed primarily through an aesthetic lens. Architects have always been capable of designing for a balance of ethics and aesthetics; the Sirius apartments stand as such an example. According to the architect Simon Henley, one of Brutalism's lonely defenders, the "ethical dimension places the architect as intellectual and quasi-sociopolitical agent at the heart of the welfare state and its manifestations."<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Brutalism is not a monolith; its theory and application vary wildly. In the cases explored here, a common characteristic underlies each of the buildings. Each building considers the structure with people in mind. The Skopje archive holds crucial records for the city, and its design creates a bastion that will not succumb to seismic activities. Boston City Hall houses the representatives of the city and creates open, expansive spaces that are democratically transparent to a viewer. The Sirius Apartments address a housing crisis common to many cities by offering accommodations that are not merely sufficient, but also central and striking. Architecture that puts people first must contain an ethical dimension that guides how and why a structure is formed. Brutalism as an aesthetic might always be despised by some as a matter of taste, but to not see how these buildings strive for higher goods is to be blind to architecture entirely.

### End Notes

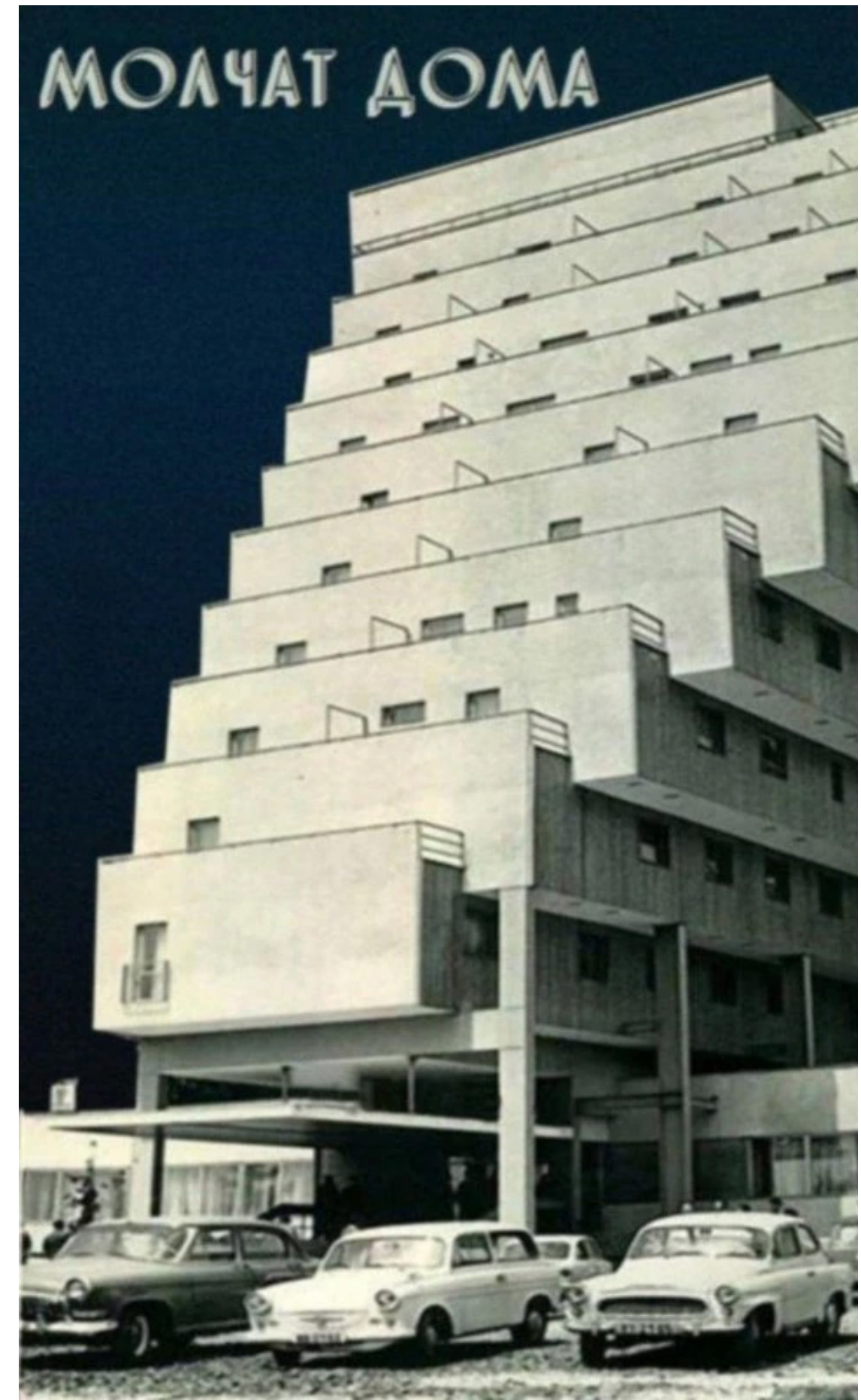
01. For a complete history of "New Brutalism," see Banham Reyner, *The New Brutalism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).
02. Ibid., 28.
03. Ibid., 2.
04. Vitruvius, *De Architectura* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931).
05. Ibid., 24.
06. Mirjana Lozanovska, "Brutalism, Metabolism, and its American Parallel" in Julia Gatley and Stuart King (eds.), *Brutalism Resurgent*. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 18.
07. John Conti, "A New City Hall: Boston's Boost for Urban Renewal," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb 12, 1969, 14.
08. Ibid.
09. Ibid.
10. Russel Rodrigo, "Aesthetics as a Practical Ethics: Situating the Brutalist Architecture of the Sirius Apartments, 1975-80" in Julia Gatley and Stuart King (eds.), *Brutalism Resurgent*. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 93.
11. Quoted in Joseph Glascott, "Eyesore was a Welcome Sight for Residents," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 20, 1980, 3.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

14. Quoted in Rodrigo, "Aesthetics as a Practical Ethics: Situating the Brutalist Architecture of the Sirius Apartments, 1975-80," 93.

15. Simon Henley, *Redefining brutalism*. (London: RIBA Publishing, 2019), 21.

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02. Conti, John. "A New City Hall: Boston's Boost for Urban Renewal." *Wall Street Journal*, Feb 12, 1969, p. 14.
03. Glascott, Joseph. "Eyesore was a Welcome Sight for Residents." *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mar. 20, 1980, p. 3.
04. Henley, Simon. *Redefining brutalism*. London: RIBA Publishing, 2019.
05. Lozanovska, Mirjana. "Brutalism, Metabolism, and its American Parallel" in Julia Gatley and Stuart King (eds.). *Brutalism Resurgent*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.
06. Reyner, Banham. *The New Brutalism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.
07. Rodrigo, Russel. "Aesthetics as a Practical Ethics: Situating the Brutalist Architecture of the Sirius Apartments, 1975-80" in Julia Gatley and Stuart King (eds.). *Brutalism Resurgent*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.
08. Vitruvius. *De Architectura*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931.



Molcaht Doma's Sudno, Featuring Brutalist Architecture

# Figures

Figure 1: Skopje Archive



Figure 3: Boston City Hall

Figure 2: Interior Layout of Skopje Archive

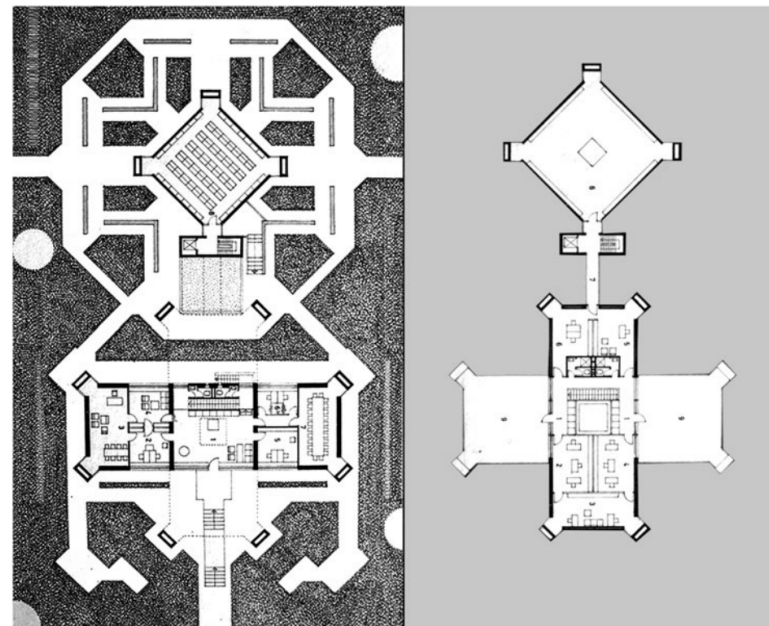


Figure 4: The Entrance to Boston City Hall



Figures



Figure 5: Sirius Apartments

