

Brutalism

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (January 2021)



Horta de Ebro, Pablo Picasso, 1909

For a long time, I thought that the architectural style known as *Brutalism* was so called because it was brutal. Its very

architects called it Brutalism, and even wore the label proudly, which seemed to me odd: for why would anyone want to be known as brutal? This in turn raised the question as to the nature of a culture in which brutality could possibly be seen as virtuous.

Certainly, brutalism is to architecture what American pit bulls are to dogs, that is to say ugly, menacing and aggressive. Recently, there has been a concerted attempt, almost a propagandistic campaign, to persuade us that these concrete blockhouses are not merely innovative (*that* they were, alas!) but beautiful.

There is a curious thing about the glossy photographs of brutalist buildings that are published in a spate of expensive books intended to persuade us that our initial reaction of horror is wrong: they are entirely abstract in the sense that no human figure is allowed to sully them, indeed there is nothing with any possible reference to humanity in them that could spoil the geometry of the conception behind the buildings, as if architecture were merely a three-dimensional Mondrian painting rather than a built space in which human beings made their lives, or some part of their lives. The buildings are portrayed as vast empty tombs, but without the grandeur (or archaeological interest) of the Pyramids.

Of course, my assumption that Brutalism wore the badge of its inhumanity, its brutality, proudly was quite mistaken. The term *brutalism* has, or at least had, nothing whatever to do with brutality, but rather with *béton brut*, that is to say raw concrete, though perhaps, for reasons I will explain, it should more accurately be called *béton armé brut*, that is to say raw reinforced concrete.

I was pleased to learn that I shared my misapprehension with a German philosopher teaching in France, Anselm Jappe, who has just published a brilliant little book

titled *Béton*, Concrete. Really, to have been accurate, it should have been titled *Béton armé*, Reinforced Concrete, but titles of books have a logic of their own: they must not only reflect the content of a book, but attract readers to the book in the first place.

Professor Jappe once thought, like me, that the term *Brutalism* was a reflection of the nature of the architecture itself, for brutal on the eye and on the normal feelings of everyone except its adepts and praise-singers it usually is.

The author of the book, which I hope will be translated soon into English, is a Marxist of some description, and towards the end of the book there is a short disquisition on reinforced concrete as a kind of material trope for, or manifestation of, capitalism as an



economic system, that seems to me irrelevant to the rest of the book: though I feel pretty sure also that the author himself would not agree with me, and indeed would probably claim that his reflection on concrete as a manifestation of capitalism was actually the most important, the essence, the whole point of his book. Well, authors are often mistaken about the virtues and defects of their own works, a phenomenon that Doctor Johnson captured in his advice to writers, to the effect that when they came across a passage in their work that they thought particularly fine, they should strike it out.

Let me first mention the difference between concrete and reinforced concrete, to get it over with. The Romans used

concrete to great effect: the Pantheon in Rome being a particularly noted example that has withstood the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune for two millennia. But concrete without reinforcement (by steel) is a material that imposes limits on its use. It could never have become the dominant building material that it became in the post-war world. Only when reinforcement by steel did it become an aid to inhuman gigantism. Of course, the desire for such gigantism is different from the mere possibility of it: for what is possible is not necessarily inevitable. But the extent to which we have created an environment dominated by reinforced concrete, which I shall henceforth refer to simply as concrete, is remarkable. In my view, it represents not so much capitalism, *pace* Professor Jappe, as a technocratic attitude to life consequent upon an accelerating loss of religious faith—a faith which, incidentally, I don't have myself.

As the author points out, concrete has a severely limited life-span. It never ages, it merely deteriorates, and buildings (as well as bridges and other edifices) that are constructed of it require more maintenance than buildings constructed hundreds of years earlier. Increasingly in concert with this limited life-span, which was not appreciated at first, buildings are not even *intended* to last long. They are more or less disposable, and look it. Once they have fulfilled their particular purpose, which has now ceased, they can simply be demolished and replaced by others for other purposes, the buildings themselves never having evoked any affection because they never had any virtue in the first place, were identical to untold numbers of others and were more likely to have been hated than loved. For modern Man, the present and the immediate future, at most, is all that there is, so it is hardly surprising that his architecture so often has the look of the temporary about it. Even where the constraints of time and money scarcely exist, as in, say, the new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, or the *Philharmonie* in Paris, the buildings have about them the look

of an elaborate but gimcrack *bidonville*, or perhaps of a practical joke practised on the public, as if daring the public to expose its ignorance and incomprehension by laughing at it. In fact, the builders of the *favelas* in Brazil often—indeed, usually—have more and better aesthetic sense than the most celebrated of contemporary architects.

It is a long time since I learned to abominate concrete. When I was a student, nearer to fifty than forty years ago, I used to visit an old lady (who in fact was only three years older than I am now) as a kind of social service. Students were given a list of lonely old people and asked to befriend one of them. Often the relationship became very intense, especially on the lonely old person's side, and I still have dozens of letters that my old lady wrote to me.

They were in the hand of someone who was obviously unused to writing. She had been born in rural Ireland in the last years of the nineteenth century and had known poverty of a depth quite unknown now. Her husband, a manual worker, had died several years before, and her son had moved away. She was not highly educated, but she had perfect manners and was of a generosity she could ill-afford. I never visited her without her having 'put up a salad,' for me, as she expressed it.

She had been parked by the housing authorities in the ground floor flat of a large concrete tower block which had just been built (it is now demolished), supposedly to raise the living standards of former slum-dwellers.

In a certain sense, it did just that: she now had dependable hot water, and also warmth. I despise neither of these things. But they came at a great cost and could have been provided in ways other than the way in which they were provided, for example by modernising the little terraced house in which she had until then lived. (When she was rehoused, she had no say in the matter, good was to be done to her whether or not she wanted it to be done to her, like a doctor dealing

with an unconscious person in the emergency department.) No one, perhaps, could have foreseen that the demand for single-person households was about to explode, and these little terraced houses, suitably adapted, would have made very good housing for single people.

Despite the advantages of her new home, which was allocated to, rather than chosen by, her, there were many dispiriting aspects of her new environment. The ceilings were oppressively low. The hallway to the building was bare and cold. The lifts (elevators) were used immediately as public lavatories. The building itself was, in effect, a huge concrete box with aluminium framed windows, similar to scores of other such boxes. The space between the tower blocks, with composite stone paths through a lawn on which children were not supposed to play (because, as the notice put it, 'this is an amenity to be enjoyed by all'), acted as a kind of wind tunnel, such that if there was any more than a faint movement of air, an old lady like she could not go out for fear of being blown over.

I cannot say with absolute certainty that the social pathology that then manifested itself in this environment was not present before, but I rather doubt that when she had lived in her slum she existed in such a state of fear. In her slum street there had always been informal social control of neighbours by each other, while at the same time personal privacy was maintained; but stacking neighbours up vertically instead of having them spread horizontally was destructive of any sense of solidarity or neighbourliness, all the more so when none of the people had chosen to live where they were but had been billeted on their homes like an army in a foreign land. A young single man living in a street might forge some kind of friendly relationship with his neighbours, or with his community; but a young single man living on the seventeenth floor is left to his own resources, which in all probability are not very great. Social isolation and social pathology in

these circumstances go hand in hand.

Without concrete, such tower blocks as my elderly lady's could not have been built, certainly not by the thousand. Some other, more imaginative and more humane way of ameliorating the slums would have had to be found. The bureaucrats thought that the good life, at least for the proletariat, consisted of central heating, hot water and a certain number of square or cubic metres of space for each inhabitant, so that concrete was a heaven-sent answer, for there was no cheaper or quicker way of enclosing space in sufficient quantity to house the poor proletarians. And when they realised their mistake, they thought that the answer to the new problem of social breakdown was community centres: in the case of the one built as an afterthought near to my elderly lady's flat being a raw concrete bunker, damp, dark and chilly, that looked very like a bomb shelter. It was used mainly by drunks to relieve themselves when they couldn't quite make it as far as the entrance hall to their tower own block, and as a convenient place for drug-dealing. Nothing that could ever have created community feeling ever took place there.

The cold regard of the technocrat is perfectly aligned with the cold regard of the Corbusian architects (and their successors), and between them they have housed countless millions in what in effect are battery farms for humans. But the kind of technocracy that leads to this, with concrete as its material ally, is certainly not unique to capitalism, as Professor Japp would have to maintain to be consistent. It was social democracy that started the concrete pouring, at least as far as housing was concerned, and it was often Keynesian economics that created the demand for ever more concrete; moreover, anyone who visited the Soviet Union, or has been to its successor states, could hardly fail to notice the incontinent use of concrete there, almost as if a concreted-over field were proof of the superiority of socialism, like

the triumph of an athlete in the Olympic Games.

In other words, I don't think that we can explain the mania for concrete by any particular economic system: it seems to be both multicultural and multi-ideological. But there is so much worth reading in Professor Jappe's polemic (it is very well-written), it is so thorough and knowledgeable an intellectual characterisation of reinforced concrete as a social, aesthetic, and ecological phenomenon, that I would make it compulsory reading in schools of architecture—that is, as a second-best to closing those schools down

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)<