

Beauty vs. Brutalism

By Bruce Bawer

Recently the *New York Times* ran an [essay](#) by art critic Michael Kimmelman under the headline “Paul Rudolph Was an Architectural Star. Now He’s a Cautionary Tale.” Rudolph, the subject of a current exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, specialized in brutalism, a style of architecture that was all the rage – among architects, anyway – in the 1960s and 70s but that is now (and, frankly, was always) regarded by most observers as cold, repugnant, and inhuman. In fact, some of the most celebrated structures by a man whom Kimmelman describes as “American architecture’s bright, shining light of the Kennedy era” are now being razed. About time.

What is brutalism? Brutalist buildings tend to be huge, ugly masses of concrete that give off more than a whiff of totalitarianism. They reject



delicacy, decoration, detail; they despise beauty. A 2019 [piece](#) by the editors of the Australian website Architecture and Design put it this way: “Powerful, imposing structures with an unpretentious and unapologetic aesthetic, yet standing out for their bold individuality, brutalist buildings are difficult to fall in love with at first sight.” What a riot of euphemism! For “powerful” and “Imposing,” read “oppressive”; for “unpretentious,” read “utterly lacking in aesthetic sophistication.” For “bold individuality,” read “indifferent to the needs or tastes of the ordinary people who will actually have to live or work in these things.” The Australian article notes that brutalism was “quite popular...from the 1950s up until the 1980s, especially in civic

projects and institutional buildings.” More precisely, it was popular with the brain-dead, lockstep government bureaucrats who sat on committees tasked with architectural matters and with their snooty professional advisors – namely, elitist architects and critics who had nothing but contempt for the above-mentioned ordinary people. The article goes on to describe brutalist structures as “visually heavy,” involving “exaggerated slabs,” “massive forbidding walls,” and “exposed concrete,” and as prioritizing “function over form, and stripped-back minimalism over flashy design.” These buildings, the article concedes, “are often seen as unfriendly, intimidating and even uninhabitable.” Uh, yeah. And then some. Which is no surprise, given that this kind of architecture owes a good deal to the example of the Soviet Union, which, as the Australian article acknowledges, routinely produced “buildings that were utilitarian, austere and soulless but low cost. Concrete was not only inexpensive, it also allowed speedy construction.”

As for Paul Rudolph, his most famous work is the Art and Architecture Building at Yale, where he ran the school of architecture. Fellow architects celebrated it. Critics in the mainstream media paid him due obeisance when the structure was completed in 1963. But the students who had to spend time in it every day, writes Kimmelman, “found it impractical to the point of seeming sadistic. They protested. The building became a totem of ’60s unrest. Walls were defaced by graffiti. A fire, whose cause remains uncertain, ruined parts of the interior.”

As it happens, I didn’t go to Yale. When it comes to having been exposed to brutalism, I did better. I went to Stony Brook, on the north shore of Long Island, where I spent four years an undergraduate and four more years as a graduate student. Poking around online the other day, I found a 2022 [article](#) by Kathryn Henderson entitled “The 50 Ugliest College Campuses Ever.” Stony Brook clocks in at #7. (Interestingly, four of the six campuses that beat it out are also in New York State.) As Henderson notes, Stony Brook, where the main buildings went up in the 1960s and 70s, at the

height of brutalism, “has been criticized for years, even being named ‘neo-penal’ for its ‘prison’ aesthetic.”

That wasn’t all. At one Reddit-like [website](#) I found a bunch of answers, all dating back to 2018, to the question: “What is the ugliest building you’ve seen at a college or university?” One reply: “Almost all of Stony Brook.” Another: “when we first toured Stony Brook on a bleak winter day, we drove past it and I thought that somehow I’d slipped into a dystopian nightmare world.” And a third: “Stony Brook wins. Butt ugly...Actually comically bad.” And at Reddit itself, I ran across several hostile reactions to Stony Brook’s brutalist architecture. “You feel like you’re either on the East side of the Berlin wall or in an airport,” read one [comment](#).

Yep. Admittedly, I loved the vast interior of Stony Brook’s library, where on some days I spent hours just wandering through the three floors of stacks and discovering innumerable treasures. But the exterior was an eyesore. So were the Student Union and the principal science and engineering buildings. Since I was an English major, I was lucky – the English department was housed in a bland, three-story brick structure that was utterly nondescript but at least not aggressively hideous. But during my undergraduate years I had to take classes in all of the most repellent structures on campus, perhaps the worst of which was the low-lying Lecture Center, which bore a rough similarity to an Egyptian pyramid and which had no windows (as far as I can remember: perhaps there were a couple of small ones). I see online that at some point it was named for Jacob K. Javits, the late senator, and that it underwent renovations to make it more wheelchair-accessible. “Fans of institutional architecture from the 1960s and ’70s,” [reported](#) Architect Magazine in an undated article, “will be glad to hear that the renovations preserved the character of the building, famous for having no 90-degree angles (other than doors).”

What a thing to brag about! All I know is that for all the

good experiences I had at Stony Brook, those buildings were oppressive. When I visited other colleges with beautiful campuses (among them Duke, Chapel Hill, Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, Pepperdine, Michigan State, and of course Mr. Jefferson's University of Virginia), I could only imagine what a difference it would've made to study in those sublime, serene, and civilized settings rather than in unsightly buildings that seemed to have been intended to house felons – and to crush their souls as punishment for their crimes.

I've never taken for granted my extraordinary good fortune in being born an American, and, beyond that, being born a New Yorker, in the mid 20th century, at a time when, from a very early age, I was intensely conscious that I was living in the financial and cultural capital of the world and was therefore enjoying, unearned, a raft of privileges that most of my contemporaries could barely dream about. By the same token, however, I couldn't help being increasingly aware, during my teenage years and afterwards, that beauty itself was being radically redefined by elite culture as uncool, and that the very notion that works of art should be aesthetically appealing was becoming increasingly unacceptable to the "in" crowd.

This applied to contemporary classical music, much of which sounded like trash cans being thrown on top of one another, as well as to popular music, notably hip-hop, some of which seemed designed to destroy the very idea of civilization itself. It applied to the postmodern rubbish that began to fill the art museums – ranging from blank canvases to rooms full of golf balls or pebbles or the remains of animals in tanks of formaldehyde.

And in architecture, the epitome of this new ugliness was brutalism. Yes, some examples of it are, as noted, being torn down because no one loves them. Which is appropriate, because they were never built to be loved: they were built to dominate, ,to tyrannize, to *épater les bourgeois* – to spit in

the face of the people whom Hillary Clinton would later famously dismiss as the “deplorables.” Three cheers for the destruction of these revolting monuments to elitist contempt for beauty. But their disappearance is – let’s not fool ourselves – a small victory. We won’t know that civilized values are on the mend until we see governments and corporations spending fortunes to build structures that seek to be as beautiful as Versailles or Saint Paul’s Cathedral – which, alas, I don’t see happening anytime soon.

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