

Book

Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism

By Barnabas Calder
William Heinemann, £25
Review by Ruth Lang

What's in a name? If Reyner Banham's moniker for the ism had made a play on different words, different nicknames, could brutalism be more readily accepted by the unconverted?

Despite what you may have heard, brutalism isn't brutal. It isn't even really about concrete. The name speaks of what it is — brutal referring to its raw, unhidden qualities — in much the same way that its architecture expresses the components of its construction. And yet in adopting a title with so many misconceptions, much of interest is often obscured.

In comparison to much of the contemporary built environment, whereby buildings on the waterside seem to endlessly seek to emulate ripples, upturned boats and skeletal fish, for example, brutalism comes from a movement whereby architecture sought to ape nothing but the pure joy of its own tectonics and materiality. The movement's buildings seek to render legible the process of their construction, the specific material choices made, and the implicit references drawn to its

historical and functional context. In a smart synecdoche of the subject, this is exactly the manner in which the author of this book operates too. In the case studies of people, places and processes outlined in *Raw Concrete*, Barnabas Calder scratches the surface of the movement in a manner that's nearly impossible to do with the material itself, providing a primer in not only what, but also why, and how.

The series of studies that form the primary structure of the book are chosen not as a representative survey, but because the author has something novel to reveal about them. There's a great breadth of projects, albeit solely British ones, from the well-established like Goldfinger's Trellick Tower (see Infographic page 31), through the little-known, such as Glasgow's Newbery Tower to the genuinely little — David Scott's Hermit's Castle in the Scottish Highlands.

Each chapter takes the reader on a historical, and in some cases literal, ramble; the stories are of discovery, both emotional and geographical. This is a journey which then continues beyond the page, thanks to the accompanying website each chapter's QR code links to, which seeks no definitive definition and renders the

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discussion on brutalism ironically fluid.

The histories of each project also acknowledge and accommodate the voice of dissent in a manner that is not merely preaching to the converted, the projects being viewed from the romance of historical aspiration as well as the reality of contemporary inhabitation. Stylishly presented and intellectually aware, the tone adopted is neither one of looking down from a position of the evidently well-educated, nor one dumbed down to the uninitiated, balancing instead between heartfelt poetics and historical fact. There is lament for the lost, the demolished, the bastardised, and a not farfetched rallying cry for their preservation — and that of our planet — which requires little more than a pen and a supply of jumpers (for which I urge you to read to find out more).

Calder's book is the very antithesis of the recent glut of coffee-table-style, #brutalism, which focuses primarily on appearance. By adopting a personal perspective, he humanises what is often demonised as an alienating material.

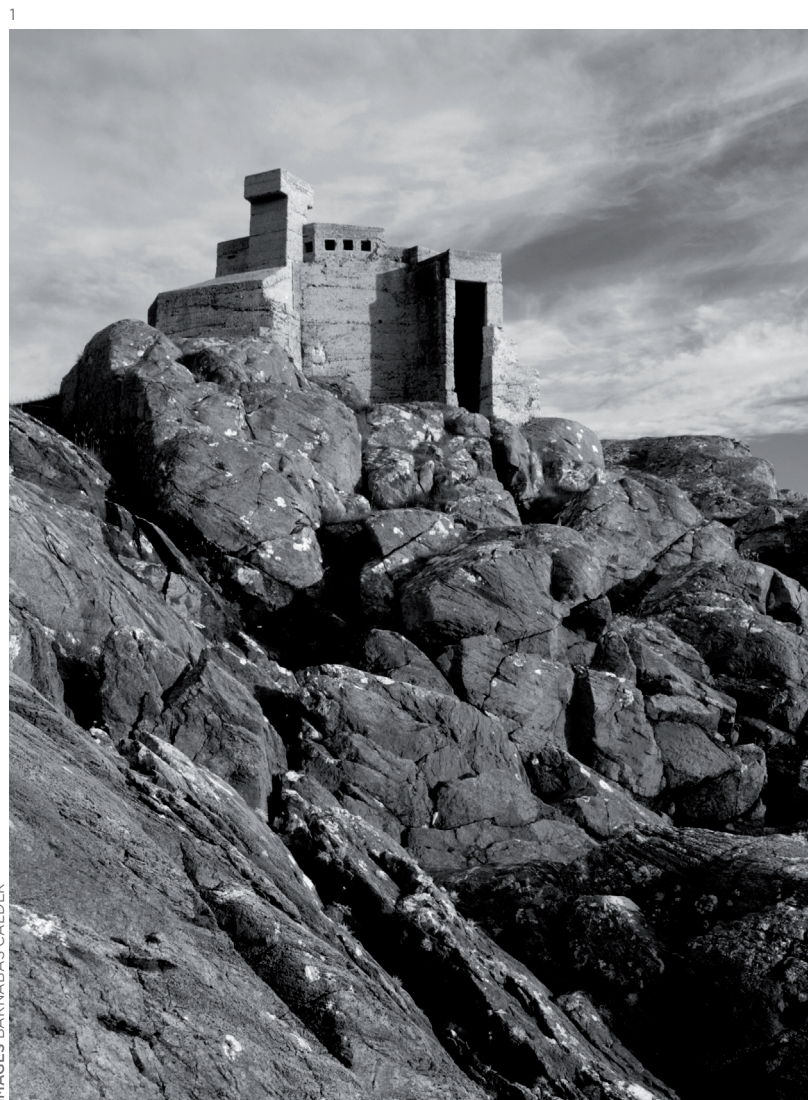
The book's lack of imagery also reasserts human experience as the primary mode of investigation, his words conjuring up a truly experiential process. Unusually, those who use buildings are placed on a footing of equal importance to those who make them. Chipping away at layers of preconceptions, brutalism

is revealed to be an architecture imbued with life, replete with flaws, as evidenced in the tectonics of the buildings outlined. Yet these flaws are not their visibly evident aesthetics to which many ills are so often ascribed, but the invisible financial and political mechanisms of their creation. The book itself as much as the movement outlines how architectural history is not an art of preservation, but a tool for defining connections across economic, societal and political spheres. With the evolution of these points into which architecture is inherently linked, we must now question how our buildings must evolve; not stylistically, but tectonically as a mirror to the world which we inhabit.

This is a book which is truly about architecture. Not 'Architecture' as a hyposet of the built environment, but architecture as the processes of which building is the product. Calder draws together the otherwise disparate confluence of forces that make brutalism a societal rather than stylistic movement. The story told is not just one of materials put together, but also of people, politics and social aspiration, for which great reward can be gained from looking beyond the surface itself.

See also *This Brutal World Is My Oyster* on page 132.

1 - Hermit's Castle folly in the Scottish Highlands, by David Scott, 1950
2 - Glasgow School of Art's Newbery Tower, by Keppie Henderson & Partners, 1970



IMAGES BARNABAS CALDER

