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THE BRUTAL TRUTH

BRUTALIST ARCHITECTURE is a great divider. Its many haters aside, it also has loyal enthusiasts, including Bond villains and dastardly dictators. If you haven't caught the bug for this raw – and sometimes foreboding – style, here's an opportunity to learn about its UTILITARIAN MAGNIFICENCE.

WORDS JO BUITENDACH



THE ORIGIN STORY Brutalism's beginnings are contested, but it's thought the pioneer of Modernism - Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier - had a hand in its origin. A lover of raw concrete, in 1952 Le Corbusier set about designing the Cité Radieuse in Marseilles, France. It's a structure characterised by a powerful concrete framework and minimal decoration.

The term itself was coined by two British architects, Alison and Peter Smithson, and is derived from the French term *béton brut*, which means raw concrete. Proponents of the design movement strived for honesty, and believed a building should not hide what it is or how it is put together. Brutalism is characterised by unusual shapes, rough surfaces, small windows and

THIS PAGE Designed by Le Corbusier, the Cité Radieuse in Marseilles, France has a minimalist concrete frame. **OPPOSITE** The cone-shaped Grand Central Water Tower in Midrand is a star of Joburg Brutalism.

PHOTOS PABLO SIEVERT (CITÉ RADIEUSE), SUPPLIED (WATER TOWER)



massive, powerful forms. The architectural style was a popular choice for government buildings, universities, car parks, low-cost social housing and high-rise blocks of flats.

The Barbican is one of the world's most popular examples of Brutalist architecture. The pitted-concrete London estate is made up of three tower blocks, 13 terrace blocks, two mews, two blocks of townhouses, and an arts centre. Architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon conceived it as a radical way to change the way Brits live. A city within a city, this imposing development was raised above street level, and aimed to integrate high-density living with educational institutions, retail offerings and cultural spaces. When Queen Elizabeth II opened it in 1982, she praised it as "one of the modern wonders of the world".

✘ **SOCIALIST MODERNISM** Brutalism is often associated with socialist ideology, and was especially popular in Eastern Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s. Because of its ties to this former regime, many monuments and buildings have been forgotten, left to fall into ruin or actively dismantled.

The **Buzludzha Monument** in Bulgaria is a good example of this. Opened in 1981, it is also known as the Buzludzha

Joburg's **Ponte City** was built in 1975. Like the Barbican, this 54-storey cylindrical building - built on an uneven rock floor in Berea, and featuring a hollow core - was designed to be a "city within a city".

Another star of Joburg Brutalism is the **Grand Central Water Tower** in Midrand. The eye-catching cone-shaped concrete structure, designed by GAPP Architects and built in 1997, is a relatively late nod to Brutalism.

The **Johannesburg Civic Centre** was designed by Monte Bryer & Associates and built in the early 1960s. The large authoritative structure, with a razor-thin western elevation, still towers over Braamfontein.

Cape Town's **Werdmuller Centre**, completed in 1977, was designed by architect Roelof Uytendogaardt. It was inspired by the work of Le Corbusier, and conceptualised as a shopping centre and mixed-use space with emphasis on pedestrians. Werdmuller has been a contentious topic of discussion for decades, and many Capetonians think its harsh Modernist design is ugly and worthy of demolition. Others - including VISI! - argue for its architectural importance and heritage value.

✘ **BRUTALISM 2.0** Agata Toromanoff's *Brutalism Reinvented* (Prestel) is a deep dive into how architects

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Memorial House, and sits on the site where the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party was formed in 1891. The building, comprising a saucer-shaped body and a star mounted on a conjoined tower, was designed by Georgi Stoilov, who was heavily influenced by Brutalism and the work of architects Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. After years of neglect and harsh weather conditions, the building is in a terrible state of neglect.

The Bureau for Art and Urban Research (BACU) focuses on the acknowledgment and protection of socialist landmarks in the former socialist bloc countries. It aims to research, document and add them to a database. Efforts such as this are crucial in, for example, Ukraine, where structures have been destroyed by recent Russian military action.

✘ **CLOSER TO HOME** South Africans are no strangers to Brutalism - just think of our university campuses and city centres. It was the often-preferred style of the apartheid state. Powerful and oppressive, these buildings watched over their citizens like big brother - fully symbolic of the Nationalist government's political ideology.

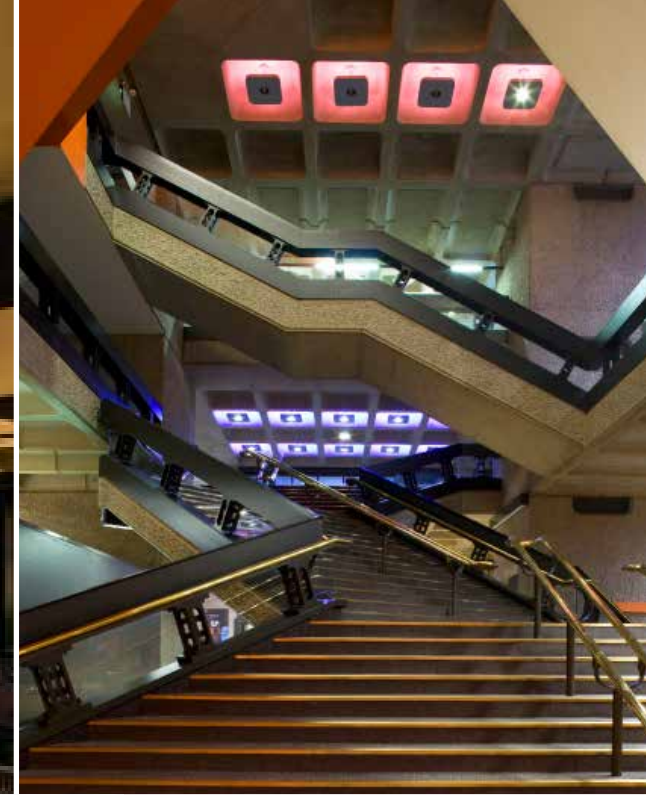
around the world are still embracing the principles of Brutalism - simplicity, functionality and rawness - today, and refining them with new technology. The book features hundreds of images of beautiful public buildings, homes and religious spaces. prestel.com

✘ **BUT IS IT BRUTAL?** The **Sol Plaatje University Resource Centre** in Kimberley is an impressive structure by celebrated architectural practice Designworkshop, who also conceived the award-winning Constitutional Court building in Johannesburg. With a 22cm-thick concrete shell that rises up 36 metres, it is viewed by some commentators as Brutalist, or at the very least as influenced by the movement.

That said, Designworkshop's Andrew Makin isn't entirely comfortable with stylistic categories, arguing that this wasn't their intent. The team was influenced by an urban framework that included buildings being designed right up against pedestrian routes, and the inclusion of courtyards. They also aimed to create a space for knowledge sharing and interchange.

PHOTOS: MAX COLSON (THE BARBICAN/LAKESIDE TERRACE), DANIEL HEWITT (THE BARBICAN/FOYERS), JO BUITENDIJK (PONTE CITY), NJRZA SOUTH AFRICA, AND JO BUITENDIJK (JHB CIVIC CENTRE), MARK AHSMANN AND ANDRIJK SIMOVIC (BUZLUDZHA MONUMENT)

OPPOSITE TOP Lakeside Terrace at the Barbican in London; an interior shot of the Barbican Centre's foyer and impressive stairs. **OPPOSITE CENTRE, FROM LEFT** The cylindrical, hollow-core Ponte City towers over Berea; the Joburg Civic Centre, designed and built in the early 1960s, features a razor-thin western elevation. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** After years of neglect, the Buzludzha Monument in Bulgaria is in a terrible state; the monument is made up of a saucer-shaped structure and a conjoined tower.





Rather than Brutalism, Andrew says the *brakdak* flat roof structures of the Karoo were a major influence. But commenting on Designworkshop's use of concrete as a material, he says, "I wonder whether the 'Brutalist' association would have arisen if the concrete had been pigmented to be more earth-coloured rather than grey".

✘ POWER SEATS Furniture can also have Brutalist leanings - and MŪVEK furniture design studio's MŪ61 chair is an example of this. The Cape Town company was founded by Chris van Niekerk and János Cserhádi, who have long been interested in the work of Hungarian

architect Marcel Breuer. It's no surprise that they're admirers of his Brutalist works, including The Met Breuer in New York and Hotel Marcel in New Haven, Connecticut.

muvekstudio.com

OKHA's new collection, Ambiguous Forms, comprises a small selection of limited-edition pieces - but Ambiguous Forms 4, a side table made of wood and metal, is stand-out gorgeous. The tabletop is cut from massive hunks of raw timber and stripped to its core identity. This simple piece is a celebration of honesty in material and construction.

okha.com



TOP, FROM LEFT OKHA's Ambiguous Forms 4 side table is a celebration of honesty in materials and construction; Agata Toromanoff's book, *Brutalism Reinvented* (Prestel), examines Brutalism in our modern world. **ABOVE** MŪVEK furniture design studio, the creators of the MŪ61 lounge chair, were influenced by Brutalist design. **OPPOSITE** The interior and exterior of the Sol Plaatje University Resource Centre in Kimberley. Designed by Designworkshop in 2018, the building features a substantial, 36m-high concrete shell.

PHOTOS: ROGER JARDINE (SOL PLAATJE UNIVERSITY STUDENT RESOURCE CENTRE), SUPPLIED (OKHA, MŪVEK)

