

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Harwood, Elain, Brutalist Britain, Buildings of the 1960s and
1970s**

Watson, V.A.

This is an author's accepted manuscript of a book review published in the Journal of Historic Buildings and Places, 03, pp. 194-195 2024.

The final definitive version is available from the publisher:

<https://hbap.org.uk/resources/transactions/>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Harwood, Elain, *Brutalist Britain: Buildings of the 1960s and 1970s*, Batsford (2022), 304pp, 148ills, £25. ISBN 9781849947275

This book is one of a number of publications by Elain Harwood advocating the heritage value of modern architecture in Britain, a project she has been working on since the 1990s. As I understand it, Harwood's ambition has been to better appreciate and comprehend the historical fact of the alliance of modern architecture and welfare state in postwar Britain, it is best represented in her magnum opus *Space, Hope and Brutalism* that was published in 2015. For those of us who are fascinated by the phenomenon of Brutalism in architecture, *SH&B* is a tiny bit disappointing, because it has so little to say about the history and theory of Brutalism as a concept in architecture. Neither does it address the feelings of excitement and horror that are as much a part of Brutalism as are the designs and buildings that embody it. *Brutalist Britain* goes some way to compensate for that disappointment. It is a catalogue of buildings, each one entered as a double-page-spread, consisting of a photograph of the subject building, taking up a full page, and a title and a short written account that includes historical and descriptive information. The entries are organised according to the type of institution the subject building was designed to serve, such as 'public housing,' 'culture and sport,' 'transport.' There are 10 categories in total and these, more or less, correspond to the chapter headings of *SH&B*, thereby reinforcing the connection to that publication. There is an introductory essay exploring many of the acquired meanings of Brutalism since it first made its appearance in the discourses of architecture back in the 1950s.

The most striking thing about *BB* is the way it uses photography, with just one, full page, photograph per entry - most of them taken by Harwood herself, although a few are licensed from Alamy stock. The dominance of clear blue sky in the imagery acts as a unifying ground, something common that appears in all the photographs, bringing the subject buildings together in the same, film-blue space. Of course, much architectural photography is like this and its use here is justified because it is a good way to show otherwise neglected buildings and bring them into the heritage archive. And yet there is this nagging feeling that *BB*'s photography is undermining the Brutalist idea. One reason might be because the way *BB* uses photography is antithetical to the way the medium was used by the artists, authors and architects who were responsible for initiating and developing the Brutalist project back in the 1950s. These people wanted to identify and reveal the sources of stimulation that were exciting practitioners like themselves within the networks of cultural production. They asked about the possibility of harnessing those sources as the basis for creative work. The exhibition *Parallel of Art and Life*, generally agreed to be the primary event of Brutalism's 'going public,' consisted in an environment made almost entirely out of photographs. The photographs were not intended to be read like pictures but to act as stimulants upon the nervous

systems of the visitors to the exhibition. To this end, they tended to suppress the pictorial aspect of photography, stressing instead the way it can be used to reveal things that evade everyday habits of vision. They emphasised the way that photography can transcend time and space through the simultaneous presentation of objects and events that in reality are separated by unsurmountable differences of history, of scale, of location and they played-up the way real materials appear in the photographic image as grainy patterns and bodies and objects appear as ghostly figures. The alienating effect of the photographs was enhanced by the way they were distributed in the gallery space, they were not only hung from the walls but also suspended from the ceiling and made to rise-up from the floor. It was the overall effect of the total environment that must have impressed the visitor, more than the individual photographs, or their referents. Effectively, the photographs were translated into space-defining elements, where the strictly optical patterns and textures of the photographs could play upon and subvert the conventional grasp of interior space as customarily perceived through the limiting surfaces of walls, floors and ceilings.

The word that came to be associated with the environment staged at PoA&L was 'image' and it gave rise to the provocative question as to how, or even if, it was possible to translate the Brutalist image from the controlled space of the art gallery into the real spaces of cities, towns and buildings. One response came from Reyner Banham, he advocated the suppression of abstract, geometrical schema as the controlling parameter in architectural design in favour of a more intuitive feeling for topology, by which he meant the flows of space that permeate in, around and through buildings and places. Banham's speculations were based on his analysis of a number of projects by the Smithsons, but other, less well known architects also rose to the challenge of Brutalism and many of their responses are catalogued in BB. Of course, looking at a picture and reading a written account is never the same as actually going to visit a building or a place - not even one that is regulated by a geometrical schema. With most of the buildings catalogued in BB, because they were self-consciously designed to resist pictorial viewing, it requires a fully embodied person, immersed in the immediate environment to encounter them as images, in the Brutalist sense. For those who are really curious about Brutalism as a concept in architecture it is therefore necessary to go beyond the book and to visit the subject buildings for themselves. BB can help to do that because to find out where some particular building or place is, all one need do is type the address (the title of the book entry) into a search engine and your computer, tablet or smart phone will locate it in Google maps and offer several options on how to get there from your current location.