

## Architecture

## Beauty and the Brutalists: why the most maligned style in history should be preserved

Brutalist buildings around the world are endangered or lie derelict — even Donald Trump dislikes them

Edwin Heathcote JANUARY 15 2021

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Donald Trump might now forever be associated with classical architecture, just not necessarily in the way he would have wanted. The image of rioters [storming the Capitol building](#) in Washington, DC, this month, snapping selfies and stealing souvenirs, will be the indelible final memory of his tempestuous presidency.

But one of his last acts in office was to issue an executive order that new federal buildings must be built in a classical style. What they should not be, it specified, is Brutalist. This is how it was defined:

“Brutalist means the style of architecture that grew out of the early 20th-century Modernist movement that is characterised by a massive and block-like appearance with a rigid geometric style and large-scale use of exposed poured concrete.”

For a big builder, Trump seems to have misunderstood the moment. Brutalism has been over as a way of building for about 40 years. No new US government buildings are in danger of being Brutalist. Perhaps he was thinking of the J Edgar Hoover Building, the FBI HQ a block away from the Trump International Hotel. The chunky concrete building has always been unpopular.



The Brutalist FBI headquarters in Washington, DC, has always been unpopular © Alamy Stock Photo

Not only is Brutalism no longer an applicable style, but hundreds of its best buildings are in danger of being lost forever through neglect, ignorance and laziness. Many have been demolished or are currently threatened. Trump's executive order ingrains (at least temporarily) a prejudice against modern architecture's most maligned moment, a utopian approach which aimed to reconcile the monumental with modernity.

The housing estates and libraries, town halls and theatres, parking garages and apartment blocks that were the fruits of this concrete explosion are being lost at an alarming rate, in the US and beyond.

However, in the midst of this visceral destruction and loss, Brutalism has been enjoying a revival of interest in other media. There has been a cascade of books, tea towels, bookends, mugs, maps and models made as gifts for Brutalist groupies and a stream of images on social media featuring tower blocks, bleak former Soviet hotels and striking Yugoslav war memorials, the previously unloved and often now decrepit concrete monuments of late Modernism.



The demolition of Birmingham's Central Library with its 'striking inverted ziggurat', 2016 © Alamy Stock Photo

The word Brutalism has recently become a catch-all for almost any Modernist architecture, at least anything in concrete, but the first houses described as Brutalist are not at all what the description has come to signify.

The Villa Göth in Uppsala, Sweden, designed by Bengt Edman and Lennart Holm in 1949, is a friendly-looking brick house with a nice, white-painted timber porch and balcony.

The Sugden House in Watford, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson five years later, is similarly unthreatening, a brick box with a pitched roof — it even has timber beams on the ceilings. I suspect most people would be hard pressed to distinguish it from the bland 1960s brick houses that litter the edges of every UK city.

It was the critic, academic and ludicrous self-promoter Reyner Banham (1922-1988) who promoted the use of the word so that Brutalism became more widely associated with the concrete blockbusters we're familiar with.

Influenced by Swiss architect Le Corbusier's designs and mixed with the remains of ruined German wartime bunkers, Brutalism (derived, after all from the French *béton brut*, or "raw concrete") became an architecture of the public realm, buildings for the people.



Robin Hood Gardens, social housing in east London, still in the process of demolition © Inigo Bujedo Aguirre/VIEW

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Its most enduring landmarks, such as London's Southbank Centre — designed in the late 1960s by the architects of the Greater London Council, then the biggest practice in the world — the Barbican and New York's Whitney Museum (designed by Marcel Breuer), were almost fortified in appearance, citadels of culture and housing resisting the city but also revelling in renewing it.

There were Brutalist theatres, churches, schools, cultural centres, town halls and, most of all, housing. All were designed to give dignity, solidity and urban presence to a newly educated, suddenly more affluent working class.

It didn't last. As Brutalism was reaching its apogee in the late 1960s and 1970s it was already being derided as monstrously inhuman, out of scale, ugly and dangerous — though most of these issues had far more to do with maintenance and policy than any failure of design.

By the mid-1980s Brutalism was over and, although some architects have referred to it in admiring sideways glances, it has never truly returned. Yet here was Trump, in the dying embers of his presidency, trying to stop Brutalist buildings being built.

So expressive is that name, it seems, that it has become a cipher for everything a populist's audience might not like. Brutalism is, as it has been for decades, a soft target — albeit one wrapped in reinforced concrete.



The 'mesmerising ruins' of Giuseppe Perugini's Casa Sperimentale, near Rome © FRENCH+TYE

The US president knows there aren't many Brutalist fans among his base. In his executive order, it says that before selecting an architectural firm or design style for a new building, the General Services Administration (GSA) should seek input from the building's future users and from the "general public", which it defines as "members of the public who are not: artists, architects, engineers, art or architecture critics, instructors or professors of art or architecture".

There is a lot of truth in the long-running joke that Brutalism's loudest champions — and many of the residents of London's most famous Brutalist estates, including the Barbican and Keeling House — are all architects themselves.

In recent years, many of Brutalism's best examples have already been demolished, from Portsmouth's Tricorn Centre, a spiralling mass of sculptural concrete, to the striking inverted ziggurat of Birmingham's Central Library.

There was Bertrand Goldberg's beautiful Prentice Women's Hospital in Chicago, a cluster of concrete cylinders on an unlikely slender base; Paul Rudolph's Shoreline Apartments in Buffalo, and John Johansen's tough-as-an-armadillo Mechanic Theatre in Baltimore. Hundreds of others across the world are endangered or derelict.



Textile designer Bernat Klein's studio, designed by architect Peter Womersley, is a 'tragically neglected Scottish masterpiece' © Iain Masterton/Alamy Live News

Much has been written, from a social as well as an architectural view, about the loss of landmark social housing complexes such as Alison and Peter Smithson's [Robin Hood Gardens](#) in east London or Thamesmead (used as a location for [Stanley Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange](#) when it was newly built). But less has been said about private Brutalist works.

A couple of years ago, on my way back to the airport in Rome, I asked the cab driver to take a short diversion so I could look at the astonishing Casa Sperimentale in Fregene. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, architect Giuseppe Perugini and his family experimented with ideas about the house as a kind of adventure playground. Its mesmerising ruins, the red-painted steel and the concrete spheres, all now graffitied, sit awkwardly between past and future.

Similarly atmospheric and hauntingly overgrown is St Peter's Seminary in Cardross, Scotland. There were plans to turn this brilliant building by Glasgow Brutalists Gillespie, Kidd and Coia into an arts centre but they fell through, leaving one of Britain's most charismatic ruins.

Another tragically neglected Scottish masterpiece is textile designer Bernat Klein's studio in Galashiels. Designed by the brilliant though underrated Peter Womersley, it recently featured in [The See-Through House](#), Shelley Klein's moving memoir of growing up in the neighbouring house (also designed by Womersley).



The home of architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha in São Paulo exemplified his idea that a home was a public space, a microcosm of a city © Leonardo Finotti

Although Brutalism certainly started in northern and western Europe, it really took off in the east. Many of the most inventive and ambitious Brutalist complexes were conceived in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states and, after the collapse of the bloc, their close association with the old regime led to hundreds of startling structures being neglected or deserted.

The crumbling Yugoslav Brutalist “Spomenik”, or war memorial, has become a widely shared image on social media but there is much more. Take the trade union resort at Bankya in Bulgaria. Planned in the mid-1970s, Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov took a liking to it and requisitioned it as a residence. After the regime changed, it became a hotel and, allegedly, a brothel. Designed by Pavel Nikolov, it is an astonishing ensemble with pierced facades, sculptural op-art reliefs and wavy balconies.

Gevorg Kochar’s 1969 Writers’ House (an extension to an earlier hotel of his — he was exiled to Siberia in between jobs), cantilevered precariously over Lake Sevan in Armenia, is another neglected wonder, crumbling away.



Villa Van Wassenhove, by the Belgian architect Juliaan Lampens © Jessy van der Werff

What started in Europe arguably reached its zenith in Brazil. Brutalism never quite went away in São Paulo and still influences its contemporary architecture. The architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha told me once this was because, as “a postcolonial” country, “we are condemned to be modern”.

In 1966, he completed a pair of houses in São Paulo for himself and his sister and they perfectly illustrate his idea that a home was a public space, a microcosm of a city. Open and flowing spaces are framed by powerful concrete membranes with even the work surfaces and desks cast in the material.

His contemporary, friend and fellow communist Vilanova Artigas created some of the best buildings of the modern age, including the FAU-USP Architecture School (1969), one of the vanishingly few buildings that genuinely moved me, a gut-punch of architectural brilliance in an open, expansive and uplifting space. Past students have since told me the school was cold and impractical, albeit still beloved — a good metaphor for Brutalism itself.

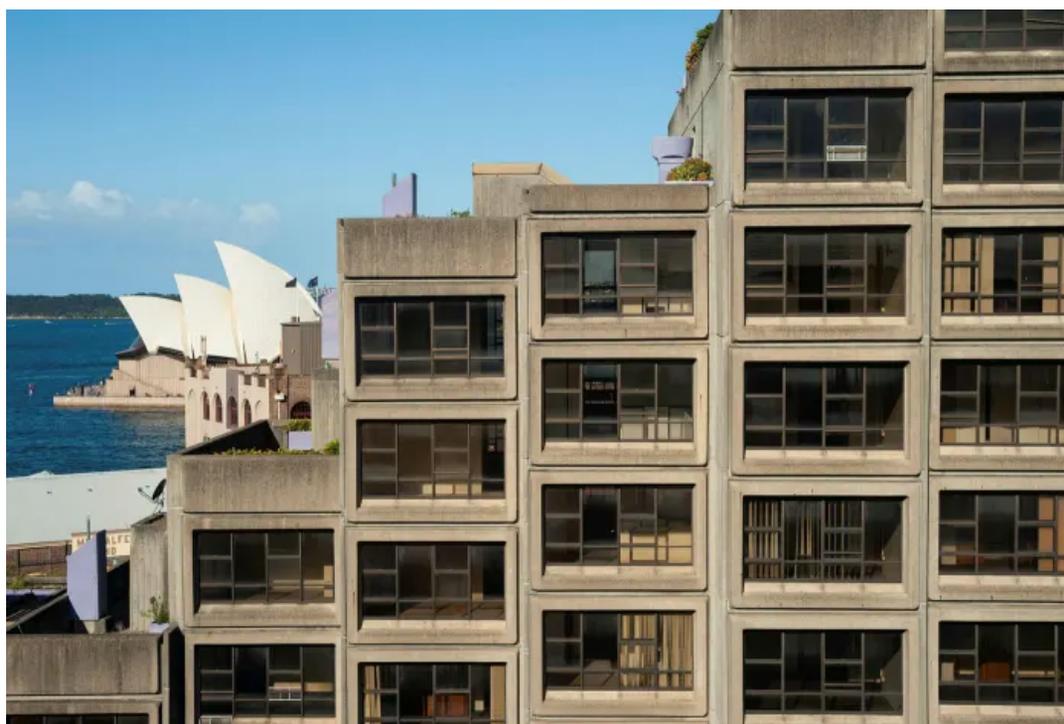


Dunelm House in Durham, 'an elegant cascade of concrete' © Alamy Stock Photo

Photographer Simon Phipps' new book *Brutal North* covers the plight of Brutalist buildings in northern England using stark black-and-white images, and the remarkable success of publisher Blue Crow's Brutalist maps might seem to point to a future in which this once-most-maligned of architectures has been newly appreciated.

An exhibition that opened in October, featuring the eye-wateringly brilliant houses of Belgian Brutalist Juliaan Lampens at the Vlaams Architecture Institute, may pique a little more interest in one of the style's less familiar protagonists.

Yet we continue being careless with brilliant buildings which might have had a great future almost every week. Currently under threat of demolition are Derby's Assembly Rooms, a serious, urbane building of brick and concrete, Dunelm House in Durham, an elegant cascade of concrete with a slender bridge on the river Wear, and Kenzo Tange's brilliantly eccentric Kuwait embassy in Tokyo. Tao Gofers' inventively piled-up Sirius building in Sydney has been saved from demolition but is being extensively altered.



The Sirius building in Sydney has been saved from demolition but is being extensively altered © Alamy Stock Photo

Brutalism has shown a capacity to represent radically different things in different places — and often radically different things to different people in the same places. We have seemingly regained our respect (if not always affection) for the weight and commitment of Brutalist architecture to the creation of a better and more public shared future through building.

In the UK, it might stand for a lost dream of generous housing for all and commitment to culture, while in São Paulo or Abidjan or it might represent a postcolonial confidence. In eastern Europe, it might equally evoke nostalgia or provoke unease.

Trump's condemnation may well provoke some to reassess it — if he hates it then it can't be all bad. But Brutalism always has the capacity to carry meaning through form, sometimes, ironically, when it is at its most neglected and forlorn, the rain-stained ruins of a dream of a Modernist world that never arrived.

It is an architecture that creates charismatic space and leaves beautiful remains, sometimes almost unbearably ugly, sometimes shocking, sometimes sublime — but always interesting.

## Brutalist homes for sale in London

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**Golden Lane Estate, City of London, £425,000**

A studio apartment in Crescent House, available through [The Modern House](#).

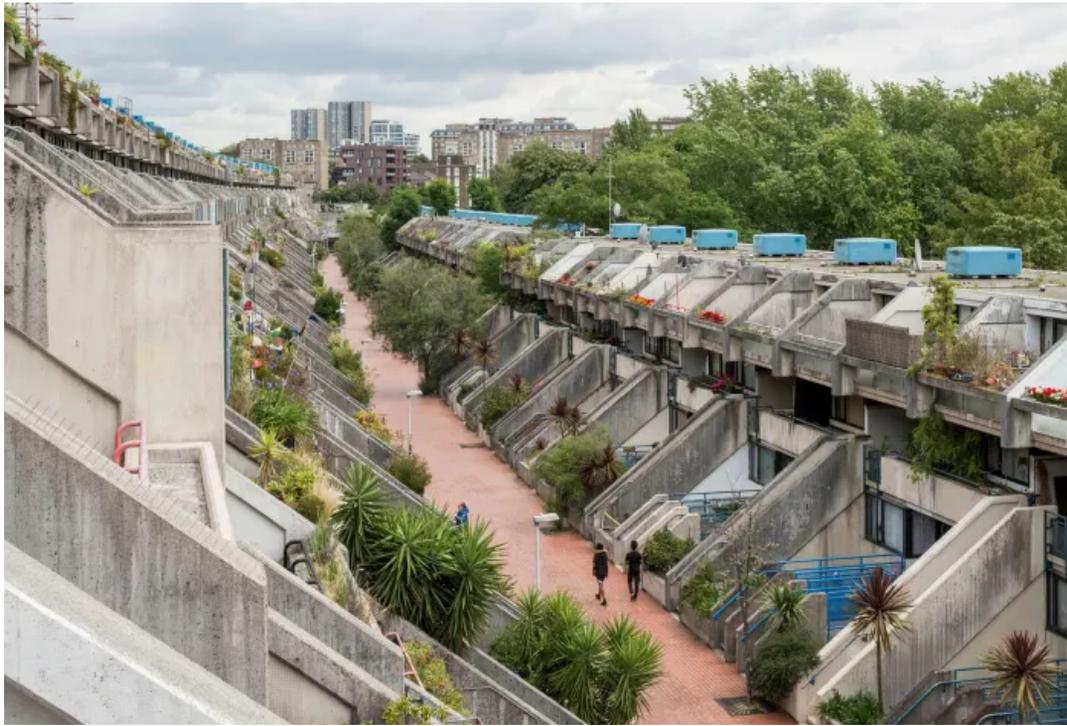
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**The Barbican, City of London, £1.6m**

A three-bedroom flat on the 17th floor of Cromwell Tower. Through [Hamilton Brooks](#).

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### **Alexandra & Ainsworth Estate, St John's Wood, £350,000**

A one-bedroom apartment in Rowley Way, available through [The Modern House](#).

*Edwin Heathcote is the FT's architecture critic*

*This article has been [amended](#) since publication to make clear Tao Gofers' Sirius building in Sydney is being altered, not demolished*

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