

Utopian Bunker Builders and the Esoteric Roots of Brutalist Architecture

In its gestation period, Modernist architecture was bathed in utopian visions of dematerialized walls, transcendent light, and a more humane existence for downtrodden urbanites. The historical reality of the Modern era, and the effect that war and destruction had on urban planning and architecture, is often overlooked. Punctuated by two world wars, both of which decimated entire nations and flattened cities like Minsk, Dresden, and Nagasaki, the history of Modernist architecture can be seen as a continual struggle to adapt wartime technologies to generative ends. An exchange of form and technique took place between the architecture of war and the architecture of habitation, blurring the line between terrestrial and subterranean, public square and bulwark.

The aerial bombardment by the Germans in the Second World War caused an unprecedented degree of destruction to the cities and towns of Britain. This destruction was mirrored by their simultaneous surge in building. Between 1940 and 1944, massive concrete fortifications were built up along the Atlantic coastline of the German occupied territories from Norway to the border of Spain. In those four years, the Germans poured over 375 million cubic feet of concrete into simple wooden moulds up and down the Atlantic coast. Creating the so dubbed “Atlantic Wall” was, in the words of Field Marshal Rommel, meant to “stop [the enemy] in the water, not only delaying him but destroying all his equipment while it is still afloat.”¹

The use of bunker-like structures is as old as war itself, but the widespread use of reinforced concrete fortifications dates from around the First World War. While most troops in that war found shelter in crude trenches, artillery-proof bunkers, barracks, and gun placements began to be utilized as well. During the run up to the Second World War, the French built concrete fortifications known as the Maginot Line near the border with Germany. The Germans continued construction of the opposing Siegfried Line fortifications along the French border, which they had begun during World War I. Primarily made up of concrete bunkers, these lines of defense ended up serving more as tools for propaganda and intimidation than as actual defensive structures. With the mobility of the Wehrmacht (unified German military) and the rapid capitulation of French forces in the beginning of the war made the Maginot Line ineffective. Near the end of the war, the shattered Wehrmacht were unable to use their defenses against a mobilized Allied force. These bunkers were relics of an old war strategy of extended face offs and proved largely ineffective in securing and defending territory like the castles and garrison of centuries past.

In his seminal book *Bunker Archaeology*, Paul Virilio references a statement that Mao Tse-Tung made in 1942, where he claimed that once the German war machine had shifted from offensive blitzkrieg to defensive bunker building, the war was effectively over.² Virilio and Mao’s

¹ Partridge, Colin, *Hitler’s Atlantic Wall*, D.I. Publications Guersey, Channel Islands 1976

² Virilio, Paul, *Bunker Archaeology*, Pg. 28, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, New York 1994

reasoning is that the German military was trained and equipped for continual attack, not protracted defense. A bulwark against potential Allied invasion was not compatible with the idea of a *Großdeutschland* or the notion of *Lebensraum*—the freedom of the Germanic people to settle and expand their cultural influence. As the German army focused on the East and agendas like the scorched earth campaign in the Soviet Union, the production of the Atlantic Wall bunkers, which peaked in 1942, signaled the end of their euphoric expansionism.

It was in the 1920's that architects of the International Style initiated widespread use of bare concrete structures with large expanses of windows. Architects such as Bruno Taut, Erich Mendelsohn, and Walter Gropius utilized the strength of concrete combined with structural iron and steel to enable their utopic visions, which included the fetishization of light and a desire for structures both flexible and utilitarian. The International Style inverted the technology of bunker building, opening up its inherent interiority to transparency and egalitarian living. Prefacing this move, in his 1914 book on the use of glass in architecture, Paul Scheerbart wrote, "Colored glass destroys hatred."³

Modernist architects quickly adopted much of the technology developed during the war as means for the production of new, residential ferroconcrete structures in the post-war period. Due to heavy bombing by the Germans, much of Britain's housing and other domestic architecture was either destroyed or in shambles. Like most of Europe, and in particular the eastern half of the Soviet Union, Germany, and Poland, there was an immediate need to prevent an impending housing crisis. In the Soviet Union, massive apartment blocks were erected to house the over 3 million people made homeless by the German invasion. Entire cities, including Warsaw and Minsk, had to be rebuilt from the crumbled stone that remained. Britain had a similar need. Unable to follow the American plan of decentralized suburban development (itself partly based on an analysis of bombing patterns during the war, coming to the conclusion that a dispersed populace and manufacturing base increased national survivability in war time), Britain followed the path of much of Europe, investing heavily in reinforced concrete apartment blocks modeled after the International style of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, among others. In a style that came to be known as Brutalism (from Le Corbusier's term *béton brut*, or "raw concrete"), housing complexes and state buildings were erected in war-torn areas of Britain, particularly London, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Deeply unpopular for many decades, this approach to civic design was favored by governments for pragmatic reasons: it was cheap and fast. Although they share the basic form and function of pre-war Internationalist building projects, the post-war Brutalist buildings were stripped, architecturally and ideologically, of much of the utopic and "radiant" qualities that characterized the International Style. Brutalism placed more of an emphasis on the bulwark profile as opposed to the openness and flexibility of many pre-war buildings and urban plans. Le Corbusier's love of the bare concrete, a result of his quest for a "truth to materials" became an expedient and cheap building practice under Brutalism, lending not only to an aesthetic connection between the Brutalist apartment block and the concrete bunkers, but a cost-benefit based bureaucratic one as well.

³ Watkin, David, *A History of Western Architecture*, Lawrence King Publishing 2005

One of the key Brutalist housing projects in Britain is London's aptly named Robin Hood Gardens. Along with several other structures built between the late 1950's and late 1960's, such as Park Hill in Sheffield and Balfron Towers in London, Robin Hood Gardens is defined by its rough exterior and elevated walkways. The bare concrete dominating their construction never acclimated well to the wet and dank British weather. More often than not, it discolored from rain and grew a thick coat of moss. While the architects of these and other Brutalist buildings had considered progression an asset, bringing the concrete closer to natural stone, the public felt it engendered more of a post-apocalyptic ambiance to the housing projects. As with much of the post-war public housing in the United States, the Brutalist projects often became home to the socially and economically disadvantaged. Currently, the majority of residents at Robin Hood Gardens are African and South Asian immigrants.⁴

The English first used the term "esoteric" in reference to the cults of Pythagoras, literally meaning "referring to that which is inward." The relationship between 20th century bunkers and post-war Brutalist architecture can be seen as a play between the esoteric and the exoteric, the inner and the outer. Brutalist structures are materially and formally bunkers, but turned inside out and made terrestrial. One of the hallmarks of Brutalist structures, the revealing of the inner workings of the building on the outside of the structure, can be seen as a gutting of the bunker. With its hardened body eviscerated and exposed on all sides, this bunker-cum-apartment block is put in the service of housing those that bunker activities helped make homeless. Instead of deflecting that which is coming from the outside (the bunker), the Brutalist housing developments prevent that which is inside from getting out. With the density of barracks, Brutalist housing reinforces the siege mentality of the war and perpetuates social stigmas of the working class. Nearly impossible to modify once built, both the bunker and the Brutalist building share the fate of either eroding away or being forcibly demolished. This immovability and inevitable destruction has greater implications for how we conceive of urban environments and social mobility, as well as the desire to fix points on the land that form an immovable locus of power or control.

With the Atlantic wall currently sinking into the sands and eroding in the ocean air, Brutalist structures in Britain, too, are sharing the slide towards obliteration. Reviled for decades, many of the buildings are being torn down or repurposed. The attempts at social utopias via large-scale urban plans have faded along with their counterpart, nation-states at war. There is now an emphasis on mobility and morphability in both architecture and in warfare- from the modular structures of Dutch architects MVRDV and the FEMA trailers to the asymmetrical warfare in Iraq and the low intensity conflicts in Pakistan, Israel, Chechnya, and elsewhere. During the course of Modernism, Europe tried to immolate itself twice, with much success. The bunkers and the Brutalists form a Möbius strip of an architectural and social history, a unified side that shifts and flips according to the essential need for survival and the desire to project power and maintain control.

⁴ Nicolai, Ouroussoff, *Rethinking Postwar Design in London*, New York Times, March 18 2009