

Arts & Literature

Brutal Honesty

Westport Arts Center looks at Brutalism's rough and raw legacy

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Wednesday, October 28, 2009

By Jimmy Stamp

Aggregate: Art and Architecture – A Brutalist Remix Ends Nov. 22.
Westport Arts Center, 51 Riverside Ave., Westport; 203-222-7070, westportartscenter.org.

Curiously, *Aggregate: Art and Architecture – A Brutalist Remix* begins and ends with a car. While it's a stretch to connect a city's automotive landscape with its Brutalist architecture, curator Terri C. Smith notes that Paul Rudolph, architect and designer of the Yale School of Architecture, said the car "has given us a new scale, for now we must perceive our environment from a quickly moving vehicle as well as on foot."

While the connection between cars, buildings and architecture is circuitous at best, all topics are confronted here, and by bookending the exhibition with the car's influence, Smith reinforces her intention to "touch on, expand and even complicate attitudes and histories linked to the movement."

So what is Brutalism? Pretty much exactly what it sounds like. The term was coined by British architects Peter and Alison Smithson after *béton brut* (raw concrete), a type of unfinished concrete popular with postwar architects.

Brutalist architecture is defined by massive, blocky volumes and a "brutal" honesty of material and structural expression. Although not a stylistic requirement, these buildings are often made from the raw concrete that gives the movement its name. Basically, if you walk too close to a building and it cuts you, chances are it's Brutalist.

Passing by David Brooks' tire-track sculpture *Tracks, II*, visitors are greeted by Heather Rowe's *Through the Glass*. It frames the gallery space with architectural fragments and thin mirrors. Reflections of shattered remains of space make for an appropriate intro to an exhibit that focuses heavily on the destruction of the built environment.

Photographs by Chris Mottalini show a decaying (now demolished) Westport house designed by Paul Rudolph whose shattered windows and neglected spaces helped establish the recurring thematic friction between man and space, between Brutalism and domesticity. A similar fate befell "Harvard Five" architect John Johansen's beautiful home, the Labyrinth House. Two slide projectors showing images of the house are accompanied by text informing us that talk show host Phil Donahue bought it in 1988 only to destroy it. "It was like a death in the family," Johansen writes.

In keeping with a rough and honest aesthetic, even the video pieces are displayed in a manner befitting the subject. Cords and cables hang loose or are roughly taped to their pediments. The not-so-quiet hum of the numerous slide projectors create a white-noise backdrop to the playful score of Martha Rosler's *How Do We Know What Home Looks Like?* – her vérité-style documentary walks us through rooms of peeling paint and ugly wallpaper in a canonical Modernist residential structure designed by one of the masters of that style and early proponent of *béton brut*, Le Corbusier.

Aggregate: Art and Architecture – A Brutalist Remix concludes with a 1972 documentary featuring noted British scholar of Brutalism, Reyner

Banham, and a talking car. Through their dueling commentaries, we see how the car is changing man's relationship to his built environment.

While Banham fondly describes Los Angeles as a place that "makes nonsense of history and breaks all the rules," his "Baede-Kar" welcomes its driver to the "supercity of the future."

As the documentary comes to a close Baede-Kar's commentary echoes the destructive beauty and that complicated relationship:

"God gave us the sun and the ocean, but the colors come mostly from the fumes and pollution that we ourselves pump into the atmosphere everyday. Enjoy it."

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