

BRUTALIST
JAPAN



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PRESTEL

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Brutalist architecture in Japan might not ruffle feathers locally but it's considered an aggro merchant elsewhere.

Its divisiveness stoked my interest whilst looking into built heritage. Should personal architectural taste shape preservation decisions? Clearly not. To what extent is such subjectivity shaped by fear and misunderstanding? Totally. Little did I know that this early exploration would lead to my current photographic niche.

Having failed to do the most basic research prior to moving to Okinawa, I was pleasantly surprised by the preponderance of Brutalism here and absence of negative association. No mental links with totalitarianism. Certainly none with piss-drenched stairwells to dens of iniquity.

Okinawa is famed as a "blue zone" of long life expectancy and for its importance in the closing chapters of the Second World War. This semi-tropical island prefecture of Japan should be equally well known among concrete connoisseurs for its plethora of Brutalist architecture. Housing anything from schools, museums and theatres to barber shops and aged-care centres, construction often fits the Brutalist moniker. It is common on mainland Japan too.

Fully functional, fully utilized iterations of a style so controversial outside of Japan promised lessons in successful urban planning – my field of study. More specifically, could an understanding of Brutalist Japan lead to broader appreciation of Brutalism and stem its demolition both here and overseas? Seismic and maintenance concerns, not subjective hatred, threaten the flattening of concrete gems in a country that has hailed and embraced Brutalism.

The general line is that the Brutalism here is borne of necessity, for Okinawa is seasonally battered by typhoons. *Béton nécessaire* rather than *béton brut*.

Homes must be robust and 90 per cent of new dwellings are made of concrete. Swift adoption of the material was prompted by post-war reconstruction needs, as it was on the mainland. Building processes used to establish US military bases have been an ongoing influence.

We also need to factor in concrete's resistance to termites – pests greedy for the traditional material of wood. Then there are earthquakes and a damp climate.

A rather Eurocentric take is that the likes of Le Corbusier and Antonin Raymond simply showed the likes of Kenzo Tange what's what.

Those with a static, Disneyfied perception of Japan balk at Brutalist buildings existing in a land of pagodas and temples. Something like a tracksuit at a black tie event.

The fact is that Brutalism's progenitors, Alison and Peter Smithson, stated that the main influence upon their work was traditional Japanese architecture. Whilst the influence may have resulted from some naivety on their part, the overlap can be seen in material expression, reverence for materials used, emphasis on spatial relations, bold geometry and integration with nature.

Their aim was to encourage the Japanese conception of architecture as a "way of life" and reflection upon how a building is actually constructed – the importance of form and rationalism but also openness, inside-outside dialectics and versatility. For the Smithsons, traditional Japanese architecture provided lessons for British architecture at a time of post-war austerity. How to make do.

In 'How Other Peoples Dwell and Build', architectural historian E. A. Gutkind believed the traditional Japanese identification of form and function and standardization of all structural elements of a home did not lead to monotony but rather "good proportions, simplicity and plain form ... clarity of construction and purposefulness of expression." Whatever the assumptions and misunderstandings surrounding Brutalism, these are attributes generally associated with it.

The Beef

Brutalism outside of Japan is like Marmite. Love it or hate it.

Some find it refreshingly raw – an honest counterpoint to contemporary glass-based disingenuous attempts at state transparency. Others are reminded of communism or when the UK nearly slid down the pan in the 1970s.

Brutalist buildings can be as welcoming as a slap in the face with a wet fish. The raw concrete and minimalist design of *béton brut* screams "Va te faire foutre!" to those craving *bucolia* within the urban fabric. Just the word "Brutalism" seems like a kick in the nuts.

Weathering and deterioration of concrete can lead to stains, cracks and crumble that upset some. Intended radical philosophical statements become eyesores.

With hindsight, I became a concrete-sniffing tragic at a young age. During a school trip to London, I envisaged a battalion of Stormtroopers pouring from Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Hayward Gallery and Lasdun's National Theatre. Since growing up, I've recognized that a sure gauge of whether something is Brutalist or not is this: Would it look good in a sci-fi movie?

To the haters, Brutalism reflects the increased intrusion of government and state power. It is no accident that Brutalist architectural forms often harboured state departments. Brutalist buildings afford sobering historic reflection – much like the preservation of communist statues in former Soviet states.

Fellow concrete sniffers bray at the misassumption the heathen hold about Brutalism. No, it wasn't cheap. Nor was it easy. Rather, Brutalism more often than not reflects the work of architects at the peak of their craft and a belief that technological progress should deliver social benefit.

Recognition of the misassumption surrounding Brutalism would better inform contemporary planning and architecture – particularly in relation to issues about heritage and preservation. Yet opinions on Brutalism remain based upon taste and fashion. It deserves better.

Urban Planning, Brutalism and the Public Realm

As I delved into Brutalism during urban planning studies, I could not foresee that living and working among the Japanese style would reveal that the urban academics and designers I admired seemed to have drawn lessons from it without ever admitting to being here.

What they decried for being missing in urban planning and design, Japan had in droves. Public participation in planning? Tick. Design that affords legibility, accessibility and permeability? Tick.

Built environment expert Anna Minton laments the overstatement of fear that has resulted in misanthropic design measures (Secured by Design) that prioritize security rather than the civic engagement that is required for successful twenty-first-century urbanism. Design driven by security has heightened perception of insecurity and increased suspicion amongst urbanites. Design measures that raise feelings of urban insecurity have been combined with the privatization and erosion of the public realm.

Security specialist Sophie Body-Gendrot advocated for design measures focused on civic engagement within the public realm. Minton promotes public space in pursuit of liveable, socially sustainable, dense cities. Such public space should facilitate “doing nothing” as opposed to unhindered consumerism. Her frustration is compounded by the fact that public space and civil liberty erosion through insensitive, exclusively private “regeneration” has happened without due consultation.

The neoliberal tactic of reducing the public realm must be combated if “the commons” are to be reclaimed.

Physically, the public realm must present robust variety, or rather a range of uses available to all; legibility, that is, an understanding of opportunities offered; visual appropriateness that makes people aware of the choices available; a rich choice of sensory experiences; and personalization, that is, the extent to which people can put their own stamp on a place.

Sociologist Lyn Lofland said it should be a rich learning environment that provides needed respite and refreshment, operates as a centre of communication, allows for the “practice” of politics, is the stage for the enactment of social arrangements and social conflicts, and assists in the creation of cosmopolitans.

She argued that such creation is assisted through promotion of cooperative motility, civil inattention when appropriate, audience role prominence, restrained helpfulness and civility towards diversity.

Political scientist Robert Axelrod argued more durable and more frequent interactions must be created: “Continuing interaction is what makes it possible for co-operation based on reciprocity to be stable.” He called for a change of payoffs that tip scales towards cooperation, teaches people to care about each other through reciprocity, and improves people’s ability to identify and analyse other players and their actions.

Adoption

Arriving in Japan, I quickly realized that the dons of my academic field echoed the task laid before the architects of post-war Japan. Astoundingly though, the desirable public realm and civic building features I had read so much of had been achieved through Brutalism.

Falling foul of the over-association with communism myself, I had expected to see plenty of Brutalism whilst living in China. However, a falling out with the Soviet Union in the 1950s cut off influence from Eastern Europe. Anything from the West on the other hand was “Capitalist Structuralism”. A Chinese architect designing in the Brutalist style would have been as wise as wearing jeans in Pyongyang. Conversely, Japanese Brutalist architects became national heroes.

Like many countries after the Second World War, Japan was a picture of destruction and needed to rebuild

physically. The difference was that replacement hardware needed to inculcate new software. Civic architecture needed to foster a civil society accepting of democracy, pacificity, decentralization and an openness to not just new technology but new ideas as well.

Brutalism became the method of choice for anything from civic halls, gymnasia, government offices, schools, libraries, theatres, museums and cultural centres.

In part, this is explained by the availability of aggregate and the general influence of the post-war need for rapid construction of buildings with fire, climatic and seismic resistance met by the characteristics of concrete.

Yes, there was the influence of Le Corbusier upon Kunio Maekawa and Maekawa's upon Kenzo Tange. What seems overlooked is the importance of "shuttering" in concrete construction. Also known as "formwork", this is moulding used to support and shape concrete before it hardens and becomes self-supporting. Whilst it can be steel or plastic, the use of wood brings in the importance of Japanese carpentry. This is a respected profession in Japan and carpenters here put your average chippy to shame. It might explain why Japanese Brutalism has a level of unparalleled refinement.

An architectural form commonly disliked for a perceived inaccessible and imposing coldness offers quaint warm humble hints as to the construction process. Concrete surfaces embossed with timber grain signify the use of wooden moulds in the construction of the most behemoth buildings.

The combination of concrete and steel with exquisite nail-less carpentry allowed for continuation of tradition whilst adopting new building technology. The likes of Maekawa could simultaneously and deftly present modernity and tradition in a way that placated the more patriotic. Hence a critical regionalism – the rooting of architecture in local tradition, culture, history, geography and environment – that predates uptake elsewhere by around thirty years.

This can be seen in the inflated eaves of Maekawa's Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall, the mimicry of timber by concrete beams in Tange's pagoda-like Kagawa Prefectural Government Building, and Hiroyuki Iwamoto's rendering of the National Theatre in eighth-century wooden storehouse style. Traditional post-and-beam replication can be seen in the supposedly "Internationalist" Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

Brutalist architecture, with its use of concrete and steel, allowed for more expansive expressions of temporal and spatial transitions inherent in traditional Japanese architecture. Sculptor Antony Gormley talks of the counter-intuitive deployment of the density of mass to activate space – an attempt to put human biological time in relation to planetary time: "Movement, your space-time experience, is amplified." He speaks of the modern equivalent of standing stones, but ones that people live and breathe in.

I think of Raymond's Gunma Music Center (1961), Tange's Nichinan Cultural Center (1963) and the much later Okinawa Prefectural Museum (2007) by Niki and Ishimoto Architects. Vertically folded or horizontally cascading mass permitted by concrete is employed in the replication of ancient Japanese castles. Time travel.

Enabling the presentation of modern notions of form as function with nuanced nods to local tradition, the Brutalist style clearly lent itself to the lighting, auditory and seismic considerations of monumental public buildings such as civic halls, theatres and museums.

Acceptance and Appreciation

So much for the adoption of Brutalism here. What about the enduring appeal? Many old-school examples of Brutalist architecture still stand fully functional, well used and appreciated. Construction in the style continues to this very day – from grand public monumentality to the smaller-scale vernacular. You cannot speak of a Brutalist "revival" here. The fact is that it never went away.

Recent part-demolition of the only Tadao Ando building in the United Kingdom got me thinking. Whilst the stated reason only concerned a fragmentary six-metre-long wall blocking sight lines, it reminded me of the offence concrete can cause outside Japan. Why the lack of upset here? Why the acceptance?

It has been argued that concrete is the "natural choice" of construction material in Japan as it resonates with the half-a-millennium-old practice of *sukiyai* – the considered composition of raw and rough natural materials. The material expression of concrete's rawness is deemed to chime with an almost genetic appreciation for an elemental, unrefined aesthetic. Apparently, the Japanese have a unique long experience with wood, pottery and stone, but for what people are these not traditional materials? I can only think of the Inuit.

To understand the continuing acceptance of concrete in Japan, we might need to get a bit *wabi-sabi*. This is the Japanese aesthetic that embraces the beauty of imperfection. Whilst the appearance of aged concrete bolsters its detractors, it's the very patina that comes with its aging that is appealing to others. Inspired by the cycles of nature, it is no surprise that Japanese architects saw in it an aesthetic, not just practical, strength.

Mono no aware is a Japanese term that describes the bittersweet awareness of the fleeting nature of beauty and the poignant transience of things. Despite its own subjection to ultimate decay, concrete provides a juxtaposed backdrop of seeming permanence to, say, the brief appearance of cherry blossom.

Ma refers to the concept of negative space, pause, or the interval between objects or events, often highlighting the importance of emptiness in design, art and life. Japanese architects saw in concrete and steel an opportunity to provide thought-provoking transitions between, and the blurring of, large areas of internal and external space. This overlaps with the centrality to Japanese architecture and urban planning of harmony – both that between built form and its environment and that generated among its users.

Acceptance of concrete architecture may well result from the importance of these concepts in the Japanese psyche and the thoughtful application of them by talented architects and consummate execution by skilful craftsmen.

On Photography

I was told twenty years ago by a war photographer at *The Guardian*, “You’ve got to find yourself a niche, son.” Call me a slow learner but, armed with a genuine architectural and urban interest, I now have one.

Urbanist Charles R. Wolfe highlights the importance of the discerning photographic observation of the urban scholar. He encourages the use of photographic urban diaries to capture urban spaces that generate feelings of safety and identity, examples of successful urban space – particularly those that align with lessons gleaned from successful, pedestrianized, dense cities that respect human scale and prioritize the public realm.

It should be noted that photography has been previously deployed to promote architectural and urban planning policies and concepts. Urban advocate Jane Jacobs spoke of the photographic approach of city historian Lewis Mumford

and urban planning educator Catherine Bauer. Bauer’s photographic pursuit was aimed at proselytizing a decentrist approach to planning through the negative framing of the dense city. It was perhaps the success of her photography in denigrating the city that inspired the criticism of city processes by Jacobs.

Photographic urban explorations can catalyse and inform a discursive participatory approach to tackling architectural and urban issues and vice versa.

The photography of Ingrid Pollard transposes Black people into English rural locales – mocking their exclusion from traditionally accepted sites of “Englishness”. It jeers at the idea that non-whites belong in degraded inner urban areas. As I mentioned earlier, some dislike the idea that Brutalism exists in a land of shrines and pagodas.

The Message

In the early throes of this brutal photographic journey, I wondered if I was just enjoying annoying the detractors. For them, I was documenting a mistransposition. This without the weight of Pollard’s message. Was I presenting the punchy, supposedly out-of-place aesthetics of Japanese Brutalism just to wind people up? Definitely. The initial appeal of Brutalism to me was certainly the discord it sows. I needed some purpose beyond having a laugh. Especially when people started to like it.

The epiphany came with the awarding of the 2021 Pritzker Prize to Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal and my reading their succinct philosophy: “Never demolish, always transform.” Ding!

Brutalist architecture even here in Japan faces the prospect of demolition. This includes Tange’s remarkable Kagawa Prefectural Gymnasium in Takamatsu, Iwamoto’s impeccable National Theatre in Tokyo, and the historically significant Naha Civic Hall in Okinawa by Nobuyoshi Kinjo. In contrast to the inclusiveness of post-war Japanese urban planning, demolition has been slated without the once-vaunted public participation. The failing of seismic audits is often invoked to justify destruction. There are rumours that my local muse, Nago City Hall, will be condemned, and wilful neglect does not bode well for other examples in Okinawa.

Civic and public halls by architectural legends such as Takeo Sato, Junzo Sakakura and Kiyonori Kikutake are gone. So too Kisho Kurokawa’s internationally

famous Metabolist Nakagin Capsule Tower. Land value trumps any humane architectural message. Japan is not immune.

By presenting the Japanese experience, I hope to challenge the stereotypical negative attacks levelled at Brutalism more broadly. The aim is to provoke thought about examples of Brutalism closer to you. With understanding comes appreciation. Appreciation may lead to more considered decisions regarding built heritage.

Despite feigned pseudo-environmental worries that cloak what is simply personal distaste, environmental concerns are the very reason concrete architecture should

not be demolished; such demolition releases huge amounts of carbon dioxide. The environmental argument for preservation is stronger than the one for demolition. Environmentally sensitive repurposing of Brutalism that honours the original architectural message is increasingly and rightly seen as key. Environmental arguments against both demolition and new concrete construction are undermined by the concept of embedded energy and that concrete proves to be a beneficial carbon sequestration sink. Any self-proclaimed environmentalist calling for the demolition of a concrete building needs to wind their neck in.

So *kanpai* and let's get amongst it ...



KIHOKU ASTRONOMICAL MUSEUM

12

KANOYA, KAGOSHIMA PREFECTURE · Architect: MASAHARU Takasaki · Completed 1995

Clearly in the throes of his 'Smack My Bitch Up' phase, architect Takasaki Masaharu took appropriate inspiration from the moon crab on The Prodigy's *The Fat of the Land* album cover. From certain angles, this Cancerian creature seems to be either embracing the stars in rave-like rapture or wondering where it left its whistle and helium balloon.

Actually, the design slightly predates The Prodigy's third album. More cerebral appraisals cover Masaharu attempting a cosmic connection between Earth and the universe.

The observatory affords views of the active Sakurajima volcano, Kinko and Shibushi Bays, Miyakonojo Basin, the Kirishima Mountains and stunning night skies, but locating it 550 metres above sea level without public transport access seems inconsiderate.

The site selection resulted from it winning night sky visibility awards over four consecutive years. Fair enough. A participatory approach by Masaharu allowed for the ageing local community to showcase the potency of the region's mushrooms. Architectural bloggers tend to focus on

more interesting aspects such as floor area and staff and visitor numbers.

Intended to attract visitors to a depopulated area with an average age astronomical itself, this brutal oddity is increasingly less visited. Local authorities might do well to tout its spiritual aspects. Indeed, the build is designed to constantly interact with land energy and provide a sanctuary for contemplation of nothingness – the universe's origin.

What is basically a four-storey reinforced concrete building comes equipped with a Cassegrain telescope and houses a cocoon incubating a blood-thirsty alien. Struggling for creativity and imagination, Studio Ghibli ripped off its design for a film about a flying castle.













ROW HOUSE IN SUMIYOSHI

18

OSAKA · Architect: ANDO Tadao · Completed 1976

This is an awkward early inclusion for a book about Brutalist architecture in Japan. Ando, the master of modern concrete architecture, has annoyingly claimed his work is not Brutalist. Come on!

Although his work unrelentingly features assertive geometry through exposed concrete, he constantly prioritizes and strives for an ethereal experience of light and space. Material expression of concrete, a sure sign of Brutalism, is demoted in favour of this. That said, polishing concrete doesn't help this ex-pugilist box himself out of a corner. No apologies, sensei, for including your work in this book.

Holes left over from concrete ties, which are used to hold formwork together, smack of the honesty of Brutalism. So too the simple palette of standardized ingredients seen in Ando's resume.

Covering a land area of just sixty-six square metres and concerned with the concept of a microcosmic living space within broader urbanity, this was a humble start to Ando's career which still inspires Japanese architects less inclined to deny the Brutalist label.



KOBE PORT MUSEUM

KOBE, HYOGO PREFECTURE · Architect: Taisei Corporation · Completed 2001

Rising like a geological protrusion, the KPM complex is where architecture meets sea, reflecting the theme of “Rising Earth and Eroding Water” according to the promoters. Inclusion of aggregates from Mount Rokko and the Seto Inland Sea mirror the deep terrestrial layers of the area. Thanks to its robust, quake-ready framework and a cleverly engineered pile foundation, the museum is built to stand firm against seismic shock. Bear in mind Kobe was hit by an earthquake that killed 6,434 people in 1995.

Flow and functionality are enhanced by an oval blueprint. Internally, a spherical aquarium boasts pre-stressed beams

that eliminate columns, offering unobstructed views of the imprisoned sea life that no one here really cares about.

Watching that deep dark shadow progress across the textured façade is enhanced by a couple of stouts from the ground-floor bar and restaurant.

