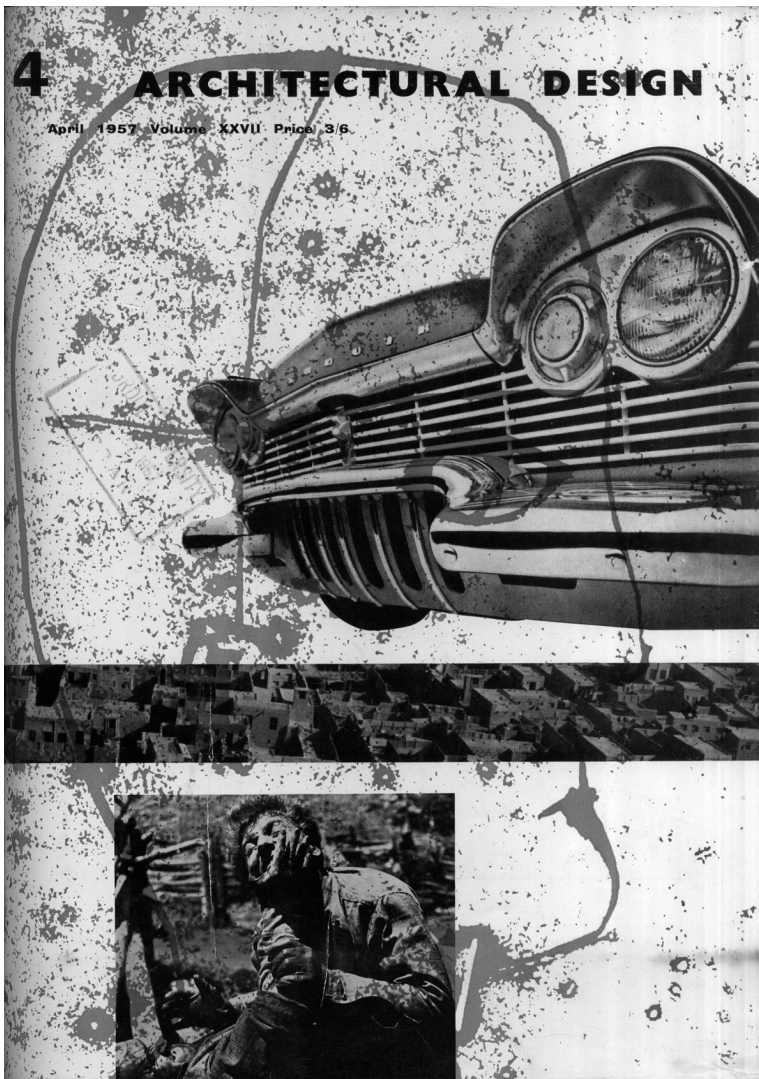




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Conversation on Brutalism

ALISON SMITHSON, PETER SMITHSON,
JANE B. DREW, E. MAXWELL FRY

In this “Conversation on Brutalism,” first published in the Italian architecture magazine Zodiac, Alison and Peter Smithson talk with the British architects Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. Of a slightly older generation than the Smithsons, Drew and Fry had designed a number of buildings for Le Corbusier’s project at Chandigarh, and would later complete other public works in colonial West Africa. In 1958, Drew organized the exhibition Le Corbusier: Architecture Painting Sculpture Tapestries with Theo Crosby at the Building Centre in London.

This interview points to clichés that had already attached themselves to New Brutalism—“as found” materials, cast concrete, and the like—and shows the Smithsons insisting again that their project is ethical, not stylistic. Brutalism here (the “New” has been dropped, perhaps as a way of reclaiming the conversation from Banham) appears as an attitude, a way of pushing against a dominant culture, a mandate to be straightforward and bold. “Communication” figures as an important keyword, as it does in Alloway’s text above. In contrast to Eero Saarinen’s approach with his General Motors Technical Center (1945–56), Peter Smithson maintains that communication should not “become an end in itself.” (This interview is characterized by a number of grammatical elisions, which are retained here.)—A.K.

Mr. Smithson: The intention of the first period of modern architecture was that buildings should be machine like, and whether machine made or not, they should look machine made. As a reaction to the period of, say, 1936 to 1946, when poetic machine work degenerated into superficial stylistic machine-work (in which the fundamentals were neglected), I think that one of the things which interests one now is that a genuine aesthetic of machine building technology should arise, and in some way this gets one involved in a rather brutal approach. If a thing is really made of pre-cast elements, or concrete blocks, the building has to reflect the way it was built with pre-cast elements or concrete block, and inevitably the building will not only have a different scale from an architecture that is conceived of as being a single object made by a machine, *but it will be built at the scale of the genuine machine with which it was built.* If you think back to the sort of key building of the

1920s like the Garches House or the Savoye House, one feels that Le Corbusier was trying to make the whole building look as if it was being made by machine, *as a single object*, turned out on a lathe, colored-up and so on, and there is a difference of attitude towards the machine involved here. In the first period I think essentially there was poetry in the machine that had manifested itself in industrial objects. That poetry was trying to be translated into architectural terms. Naturally one now wants to make a poetic artifact for if there is no poetic artifact we don't have any architecture, but not make, as it were, an object in the style of the machines, but made poetically through machines.

Mrs. Smithson: Therefore, if you considered yourself in the same tradition as the original masters, and in that way reacting upon what we found things were in the 1940s, buildings which were built as if they were not made of real material at all but some sort of processed material such as Kraft Cheese; we turned back to wood, and concrete, glass, and steel, all the materials which you can really get hold of. And with these started working on the field of town buildings because it was obvious that it was no longer possible to break the situation with a few buildings of the caliber of Garches, but one had to be thinking on a much bigger scale somehow than if you only got one house to do (and this would never be as big as Garches), but even if you only had a little house to do it somehow had to imply the whole system of town building by expressing it in itself (by its very smallness perhaps).

Mr. Fry: May I say that in the earliest days, an architect like Hans Scharoun represented the kind of weak idea of the slick machine finish—you remember some of his building, and how one revolted against the Einstein Tower in which again the slick idea preceded all ideas of function. People like Le Corbusier represented the idea in its purist form, but it was nevertheless, (and I think it is true of all the people operating in the '30s) that their ideas about the industrial world, and machine aesthetic and so on (with which they had still not by any means come to grips) are as yet untested. Though they had concrete, glass, and most of the materials available to play with, their ideas were still largely romantic in form, and what you are talking thinks about town planning it is of some these ideas. [This structure of the original sentence has been left intact—Ed.] One can talk about feeling much more easily than pure techniques because in the end we are all directed by feelings—through architecture we propound feelings which are picked up again. In the '30s that was the way of looking at it.

Mr. Smithson: I am sure that it is relevant. Always one felt in Scharoun, for example, in the pictures that I knew of his work in the '20s and '30s that there was a certain sort of expressionism about the machine. Well, I recently spent two days in his office and he has now driven through that expression, but there is still an element of play involved, based on a much more fundamental thing. He is building an extension to the Siemensstadt Siedlung, which in a funny sort of way is a history of the last forty years. We looked in his offices at a big

plan of the Siemensstadt and it has the houses by Gropius in lines, and the space is very anonymous and neutral. It was set up on the right angle—it was hygienic and it had the neat kick of machine architecture, but in terms of external living space (that is the space in which you actually operate outside the buildings) it is strictly anonymous. Well, what I think Scharoun is doing now is something in the sort of way that our minds work in our generation, in that he says that the dwellings are not only dwelling units in themselves, but there is a possibility of putting them together in such a way that they make another extension of dwelling—they have a front and back, a service side and play side, and that the bigger unit with more bedrooms express themselves as bigger units with more bedrooms. The play of the architecture, the play of the spaces linked, creates at the level outside the dwelling as well as inside, the spaces less anonymous and less geometric. This is really only a footnote on the progress of one man, but I think that the essential ethic of *brutalism* is in town building. What one about really is a revulsion of feeling from anonymous administrator laying down a master plan which may be on very good organizational principles, but when it actually comes to building on the ground, it is the way the *buildings themselves* fit together and interact with each other which creates the actual places in which you move, and have a feeling of identity or lack of identity. In consequence of this sort of way of thinking, in terms of direct responses of building to building, you tend to get buildings which are less (in the Renaissance sense) complete. One puts less value on the thing being symmetrical or cubic and more on the fact that its particular geometry, builds up into a relationship with other geometry not in a Camillo Sitte romantic way, but in a functional way; that you read the building for what it is, and not for some idea that is constructed on it. One thinks in these terms that in a certain situation it might be necessary to be brutally direct to change the tempo of the quarter—you know we were talking earlier of the Pirelli buildings.

Mr. Fry: I think that Gropius is a good man in a sense. I regard him as a George Stevenson, full of principles, but a bit like the Rocket, a bit ugly in some ways—I mean in the way the Rocket had the principles although it took fifty more locos before principles were clothed in beauty.

Mrs. Smithson: Yes, I think that with Gropius you feel that he talks about prefabrication and module and everything, and yet in the housing schemes that T.A.C. have done for University Professors and Teachers and the like, they're all polite little English/Swedish sort of things, instead of being these "things" that Gropius talks about. When all come to all, there is an absolute evasion of technique, and a retreat.

Well, that is the difference I think between our approach and some of the very first masters, and yet the greatest masters are acting in the same way that we want to act—that is Le Corbusier and Scharoun and the people that one can still learn from, in the business of responsibility, that the building is

not just obeying some intellectual law which is as wonderful as the Renaissance idea, but has to downplay these ideas, because it owes a greater responsibility than to the idea itself—the responsibility to the whole of “town building” and that it always has to imply that behind the immediate relationship is the relationship to the rest of the village, or to the rest of the district or the town or the rest of the quarter of the city, and I think the division between brutalism, which lines itself up with the great masters, and the rest of the work that is going on is this one of responsibility.

Miss Drew: Alison, I agree with you, but the division that one wants to see is not a division based on history—that could be misinterpreted. The Pirelli building seemed to me to be important because it was a sculptural work of concrete which, nevertheless, was founded on an engineering conception, which broke away from the rigid idea of a frame which has dominated towns everywhere, and which as much as Maillart did in his time with bridges, breaks the plastic conception from the solution everyone regards as automatically logical, but which is boring and sculpturally dead and which perhaps is not even the most intelligent answer, but a subject I wish to refer to (and I don’t know whether it is brutalism in conception or not) is that we all have a feeling that the right answer to a town is a general conception of different layers of communication and that communication as well as space around buildings has become the keyword.

Mr. Smithson: I think the major break away comes from the classical thinking (I am sorry to have to go back half a step to make the point) but if you read any sort of current town planning theories, particularly the English ones, town planning is based on a pictorial concept. Now we regard ourselves as functional, and therefore there is not only space in the town, but that space must signify what is going on, its function, and one of the things that we have to face in the twentieth century is that the space in towns has to indicate that it is a net of communication.

People know about things more—therefore there is more feeling of connectedness rather than the feeling of being in villages which is self-contained, and which as you know perfectly well, ideas are communicated by press, television, radio and so on, advertising, which knits practically the whole world into a net of relationships where people understand each other, and in this sort of situation it seems to me that to think of the image of the city as being a series of self-contained communities, or the new town being a self-contained self-generating entity, is that this net of communications we know exists must find expression in the architecture. The word “expression” is a key one, but one tends to shy of it. We are interested in expressing not ourselves, but what is going on and building which denies what is going on is just the opposite of brutalism—it is chi-chi, which is a sort of evasion, in that chi-chi is not just a matter of fashion (because fashion can be a direct communicant), it is the sort of person that cannot be bothered to think out what

the situation is, and how to work it out properly, and drops back into a formula of doing it which is a sort of lie—in a way it is a sort of ethical question, a thing being either plastic truth or this sort of evasion, or lie. In the early and late '40s we were in a situation in England in which many things got built which you felt were a lie, and a lot of ideas have been carried on in architecture well into the '50s, when building programs became strictly a formula without anybody really thinking about whether, for example, the office should be there at all, rather than what shape the office should be. Just to finish this note, it is an interesting experience to compare how we teach at the AA with the way they teach at IIT—undoubtedly the most direct school in America. They have a system. Mies says, "We don't build well in the twentieth century—we must learn how to build well," and so they say to their students "you must learn to build a house well" whereas we start off by saying "should there be a house there at all?" There seems to me to be a world of difference. (If the answer is "yes, there should be a house there," then it should bear a certain relationship to other things and we build well in the terms of present day technology). It is another evasion, just to learn to build, without questioning why one should build and whether it should be there.

Mrs. Smithson: Yes, part of our philosophy is that one must be ready to act in any situation that presents itself, and act rightly. I think this ties up with the Pirelli building and what Peter said earlier about acting brutally perhaps in some situations. At some spaces in the city all you can do is to make such a statement that [can] be seen perhaps from a long distance, or something so different from the accepted that even though you can only instinctively feel that it is right, and cannot actually prove it is right, that you hope by doing this that other people will change in relation to it.

[...]

Mr. Smithson: I think that one always had the idea that the motor car should be allowed everywhere, because it is an extension to oneself, but I noticed on this last trip to America after I had over the excitement of the movement and noise and so on, that in Chicago the noise level is quite unbelievable—on the elevated railway there is one point on a station where the noise level is just about 2 decibels below the pain threshold, and I found this time that one felt desperately in need of a sort of pool which noisy communicants didn't enter, just for the sake of mental stability.

The whole town has got to be re-gearred to the scale of the motor car movement, but there would obviously have to be places where either the car speed is reduced practically to zero, or the car is excluded completely. To take a scattered Garden City and to drive the motor roads through it seems to me to ignore the fact that the car is around at all. I mean you have the conventional housing estate now, a sort of Coventry, which turns its back on the bypass that goes through it, but makes no other gesture towards the motor car other than turning its back on it, you know, is separated by a little

green strip and all the backyards with their masses of concrete posts and little tatty huts and so on. I am not saying that one should not have a backyard, but that one is getting the worst worlds, neither a Garden City nor a truly sort of motorized environment at a new scale where one can travel and see at forty miles an hour sweetly, and at another scale sweetly experiencing walking.

[...]

Mrs. Smithson: It is just that one feels that there should be visible expression in the houses that the motor car has arrived.

Mr. Fry: Although obviously out of the picture in point of the scale, I also felt in Chicago on Lake Shore Drive with the avenues leading in, that this scene, magnificent in its way, and quite overpowering in its extent, nevertheless had an element of triviality in it.

Mr. Smithson: It was already Paleolithic, it was already antiquated—it should be bombarded.

Mr. Fry: Yes, but what I am not clear about is with what is this to be replaced?

Mrs. Smithson: I think it is falling on the architect to take up the traditional role of the architect urbanist and that planners, in a way, are living in a little dream world somewhere between William Morris and Camillo Sitte, and they talk in the conferences they keep having about Coventry and Harlow and they talk again and again about them, unwilling to come out in bright reality and the hard world of these fast motor cars and the styling changes, and how people are really living with their television, and their appliances.

Mr. Fry: The Americans deal with their great highways and turnpikes at the scale of the car. At Chicago and New York they seem in one sense to be heroic and then it seems to pass beyond human limits and becomes a kind of antway without sufficient relation to the scale of the human being.

Mrs. Smithson: Yes, well I think there are two different things happening here—that in America they are willing to take these big engineering chances—there is a different kind of man operating, whereas in Europe one is thrown back on the architect having to take up the traditional role of the architect-urbanist because one is mainly a sort of cerebral character, a sort of ancient-world man thinking it out.

Mr. Smithson: I think the interesting thing about the American civil engineer is that he is a sort of king, capable of majestic feats, mass earth moving and so on, because the program is well set it is simple. They make a road from A to B and it is not complicated by much high-level thought as to what is happening in the city or the region. But when they do the road they do it beautifully, and it has this heroic scale, but with a sort of irrelevance about it when it connects to other things. At Detroit, for instance, communication has become an end in itself. Now, the European-Mies-van-der-Rohe sort of beauty thing is an intellectual-conceptual system in which all the parts fit together. When you get a building built on such principles, it is a heroic

building in terms of human engineering, or whatever you like to call it, but constantly in America you find that when they build they fall back on a sort of antiquated humanism, you know, the Yamasaki sort of thing, which is a sort of ivory object built in concrete, which somehow turns its back on machine environment as if its impossible to come to terms with mechanized environment, we can't make it nice let's fall back on the Renaissance or the medieval thing, so that you get from many of the young American architects a total rejection of machine environment.

There are in America only two or three architects I know, such as Louis Kahn or Charles Eames, who seriously think in terms of the present, how to build at a machine scale, the aesthetics of pre-cast concrete for instance, or the programming of planning information.

Mr. Fry: . . . but, quite apart from Louis Kahn and Charles Eames, of course, you find in New York and Chicago in quantity, buildings which are in fact built with the machine technique to the end, and that they horrify by their excellence in the thing they set out to be, which is a shining machine product, and some of these places have no color even—the offices do pursue the machine technique to the end without artistry.

Miss Drew: Perhaps the most general blight one could talk about is the blight of the curtain wall, I mean the anonymous curtain wall which is gradually being hung over large areas of London. It is absolute formula without feeling which is perfect as a machine product but which no longer carries any kind of emotional quality.

Mr. Fry: What we are concerned with is what should significant building be under our circumstances?

Mr. Smithson: Well, one tends to merely contrast the possible thing with the thing that is bad. It is no good restyling a building with curtain walling—you have got to figure out if you have got a street that exists and say you have to redesign the block in it, is the street idea valid? Is the development of the offices in that block to continue in the same way, or should the offices be somewhere else? If they should be there what form of office should it be? You know, it is a different thing to what it was in the nineteenth century for certain. We are using now, tape recorders, information machines and so on, which tend to give a regrouping of the function within offices. Should they be built in a different way since the ways people work in offices is very different to what it was 50 years ago? One does not have an anonymous mass of workers but an egalitarian sort of society with an equal right to work, to walk out in their lunch hour and so on, and a different pattern should result, rather than taking the existing building and restyling it with patent glazing, while inside the patent glazing is a nineteenth century office building with all the disadvantages and a sort of spiritual obsolescence. I am thinking of the big tower of offices—if they are not done with very great skill as in the Seagram building, you have a strong feeling of cultural obsolescence—you are going to build a

museum for people to live in a way that has already been done away with.

Mr. Fry: I'd like to just start upon a new line, now, and to say that in arriving at a new morality which is really what has happened—a new morality and a new feeling—for reasons which you very clearly explained, you arrive also at a rejection of certain parts of the vocabulary which you don't like, i.e. all slickness and so on. But there may be values there still because there may be valid materials for use. As immediately translated by younger men it becomes a very fierce morality which will only deal with London stock brick and bush hammered concrete, giving up other means of expression which might be valuable.

Mr. Smithson: It is a very good point. It is something where the horse's mouth simile comes in useful. There has been an awful lot of writing by people, and construction by other people assuming what we mean. A modern architect does not think of a theory then build it; you assemble your buildings and your theories as you go along. The theory is evolved, a decision made five years ago will be a completely different decision from one made today. The business of materials "as found" does not imply a rejection of marble and plaster and stainless steel. Let's face it, you can get a direct effect out of the most simple material. You can say a lot with simple things, you give even a certain elegance. We didn't reject elegance per se but we were stuck, and are still stuck in many ways, with the problem of the brick. I am obsessively against the brick, you know, we think brick the antithesis of machine building and yet for practical reasons we never have built in anything else. It is a tragedy. When I was 19 I said I would never design or build anything in brick in all my life, and yet one is face to face in England in this northern climate and in the middle belt of Europe with the fact that brick does the job. You cannot argue with it, and therefore you know there is certain sort of common sense in it. If common sense tells you that you have got to make some poetic thing with brick, you make it with brick.

Mrs. Smithson: But a time is coming now for a further stand against being pushed towards building in bricks, even if it means refusing a job that needs bricks. We are getting mixed up with the problem of the peasant revival, just as we were up against the 1951 Festival world of everything being delicate, whatever the situation, whatever the building. Now everything is being done in brick, rough concrete, vast sections of this and that, and varnished planks. We have again to say that this is not solution for every possible thing.

—*Zodiac* 4 (1959), pp. 73–81.