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The Nomenclature of Style: Brutalism, Minimalism, Art History and Visual Style in Architecture Journals

JOHN MACARTHUR

Naming styles or movements is a basic mechanism of architectural journals. The announcement of phenomena such as 'critical regionalism' or 'deconstructivism' involves referring architectural developments to a context in socio-political or philosophical, and thus provides at least an initial resistance to their understanding as formal styles, which they quickly become. A different strategy is the naming of an architectural moment in the traditional form of an art historical style. Peter Reyner Banham and the Architecture Review's promotion of 'Brutalism' as an anti-aesthetic, took its conceptual form from explicit movements, with members and agenda, such as Futurism. Architectural Design's promotion of 'Minimalism' in the 1990s exemplifies a different kind of style. In both cases, apparently divergent uses of 'style' are complicated by the process of naming, and by the tendency of the journal's graphic design to become the style—to become self-identifying.

The role of written and spoken discourse in architecture is a curious one. We might say that it is to conceptualise the practice of architecture, but it does this largely in retrospect. Like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, the architectural writer inevitably faces backwards, seeing the eruptions of the past, both recent and distant, that propel the discipline into the future. Within the wider discipline, it is the aspect of trajectory in all this—the possibility of depicting future success on the basis of recent past—that creates the heat, that makes discursive work in architecture desired, and to some extent, feared. Journals ride the cusp of history in this sense, observing a past from which they have barely extracted themselves, and claiming utility in a tomorrow that has already arrived. Journals would be histories except for their news-like character; their task of constructing a present in which the reader will see and think about a building that they did not know about the day before, a building which, tomorrow, the journal suggests, will be significant, unavoidable. To pick winners in this way, to make judgement after judgement, is difficult: it is hard to consistently predict the taste of profession and public, and to risk failing a wide readership. We see, thus, the rhetorical necessity, the intellectual interest, for a different strategy, a different more inclusive game with its own risks: the naming of styles.

The naming of styles is a basic mechanism of architectural journals. The announcement of new groups or philosophies is sufficiently abstract from any specific project for each reader to imagine their own
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practice fitting, or not fitting, the newly introduced unity. If the naming is taken up in general discourse,  
this demonstrates the prescience of the editor and enhances the journal’s repute. It may even give  
the journal a kind of property in the term. All the text of a journal is, at a certain level, a caption, or  
a title elaborated and played out. Such names, however, are more than simple descriptors. Names  
claim propriety and authority. But authority over what? Form is the currency of architecture journals.  
To choose a large format journal heavy with four colour printing on gloss stock over a text-based  
academic journal is to be interested in appearances and forms that can be appropriated into one’s own  
vocabulary, and over which one can exercise taste. The relation of form and authority is a complex  
issue in architectural culture, which, experiencing as it does the strong constraints of society and  
economy, has never been quite convinced of architecture’s autonomy as art. In science, technology,  
the human form and national culture, architects have always sought authoritative causes for their  
buildings’ appearances, and through this, attempted to condition their critical reception.

As rhetorical strategy, the naming of phenomena falls into two groups, distinguished by the use of  
e external referents. The announcement of, for example, ‘critical regionalism’ or ‘the architecture  
of complexity,’ refers architectural developments to socio-political or scientific contexts. The  
announcement of ‘minimalism,’ or to reach further back, ‘brutalism,’ refers to visual arts movements.  
It is the latter relation that is of interest here because it makes visible one of the icebergs of twentieth  
century discourse: that what is being named is a ‘style.’

Names such as ‘critical regionalism’ or ‘deconstruction’ refer outward, to an idea elsewhere, of  
which architectural phenomena claim to be a part. For readers, the effect is a drawing away of our  
attention from the phenomenon, and then a returning to it in some more fulsome appreciation.  
The name and all the masses of critical text promoting it are, at one level, attempts to complicate,  
delay and make precious a formal appropriation of the projects presented. But also, the project itself  
becomes referential: this building, says a title like ‘deconstruction,’ refers to and acts on a world of  
ideas. Such names, then, reveal anxiety about the utility of forms, fear of fashion, puzzlement at why  
differences between buildings exist at all. Explicit stylistic terms, by contrast, such as ‘minimalism,’ are  
representational. They say in a word what pictures say; technically, they are elphrastic—an attempt  
to celebrate visual arts through verbal imitation. As such, stylist terms play a dangerous game: they  
must fail (minimalist buildings being so much more than what can be said about them), but do so  
 honorably. Though exhausted in admiration, they must still be the proper name. Names that refer to  
or draw on art history, thus, reveal a different kind of anxiety about authority and propriety.

Let us examine two of these. Brutalism of the nineteen fifties refers in name to (among other things)  
the Art Brut propounded by French critic Michel Tapie. Brutalism also claims relations with American  
Abstract Expressionism and Italian artists, such as Alberto Burri, whose work led to the later Arte  
Povera. Minimalism of the late eighties to the present refers in name to American art of the late fifties  
and sixties. The two points that I want to make about these publishing phenomena are each linked  
to, and (I hope) substantiated by, my observation that such ‘art-history’ names are representational.  
The first point is that the style-name markedly affects the journal’s page design, typography and use of
images. We can literally understand the journal as attempting to be the style. The second point is that the visual arts connection is not always made; sometimes it seems explicitly hidden or contradicted. In my view this is, again, a tension between desire for exterior authorization and the need for the journal to be the thing being discussed. The nomenclature of art seems to require that the journal not merely re-present, or open some window on a phenomenon that is elsewhere, but to be an iconic sign in which the style is palpably present.

Peter Rayner Banham’s launching of the name ‘New Brutalism’ in 1955 was one of the great rhetorical moments of architectural history. Along with Jencks’ ‘Post-Modernism,’ it is one of the very few original namings in post-war architecture to have any uptake and longevity, and as a name, it is the more interesting.6 In our present context, one aspect of interest is Banham’s claim that New Brutalism is an effect of the rise of architectural history, its terms and nomenclature, of which he says there are:

two main types: One, like cubism, is a label, a recognition tag, applied by critics and historians to a body of work which appears to have certain principles running through it, whatever the relationship of the artists; the other, like Futurism, is a banner, a slogan, a policy consciously adopted by a group of artists, whatever the apparent similarity or dissimilarity of their products. And it is entirely characteristic of the New Brutalism—our first native art-movement since the New Art History arrived here—that it should confound these categories and belong to both at once.9

In retrospect, it is clear that Banham was a proponent of Brutalism as the latter kind of style—that of a ‘moment’—like the Futurists who he was studying at the time. Why then does he claim that Brutalism also shares formal characteristics, as the former style suggests? The clue is ‘the New Art History,’ which, in some ways, is based on a concept of style as historical relation. Heinrich Wölfflin pretty much founded modern art history on the idea that art could be described formally and independently of ideas and social and technological circumstances. This was not a simple formalism—a recipe of features; according to Wölfflin all style is based on feeling, a kind of feeling that transmits across history.10 Wölfflin, following Burchardt, argued that the latter part of the Renaissance in Italy was actually the ‘Baroque,’ despite people of the time not noticing this break or naming the new ‘style.’ Wölfflin’s argument assumes that style has a double root. Firstly, that the formal characteristics he observed—in this case the mass-iness and movement of Baroque architecture—are an authentic expression of the demeanor, the whole cultural orientation, of artists and people of seventeenth century Rome. These people might not have been able, however, to disentangle ‘the style’ from their beliefs and customs. Modern people, not sharing the seventeenth century world of ideas, can, nevertheless, feel mass-iness and movement because these aspects are fundamentally linked to human perception. This is the second root of style: because of art, Wölfflin can feel as Carlo Maderno felt, even though he cannot think as the Italian architect thought. Styles, thus, make the history of art available to modern people immediately and differently to the history of land-tenure or royal families. This theory is, of course, highly contestable and Ernst Gombrich was doing just that in the 1950s. His “Meditations on a Hobby-horse,” composed on the occasion of an ICA exhibition in 1951, argued for an iconographic
The second point is that Macarthur is often overlooked and the need for the quire that the journal re, but to be an iconic account of art and against a distinct ontology of art objects. Banham's architectural ideas are closer to Gombrich than to Wölfflin, and hence there is a degree of satire in the whole announcement of a new style. At the same time, there is ambivalence in the definitions of style that he gives, and we can see his ambitions in saying that Brutalism is a style as well as a movement or policy. This potency continues in claims to having identified styles, tendencies or movements today.

Banham's retrospective account of Brutalism's etymology is amusing and somewhat contradictory. Various origins according to Banham include: Art Brut, beton brut (being a French term for concrete); a quote from Le Corbusier about the transformation of brute materials; a term of abuse and subsequently an honorific among factions in the London County Council architecture studio (which may have had an origin in Sweden); a phrase of Alison Smithson's; and the curious revelation that Peter Smithson's nickname was Brutus. This etymology, however, acts to disguise the significance and utility of the term in the two main arenas in which Banham was engaged. The first target was the Institute of Contemporary Art, the most progressive part of the British visual arts establishment, within which Banham, along with a number of younger dissident members, formed the Independent Group. The IG opposed the institutionalization of modernism as humanist utilitarianism, a process that the Group saw in Sir Hebert Read's programme for the ICA. The second target was Nikolaus Pevsner, Banham's doctoral supervisor and one of the editors of the Architectural Review where The New Brutalism essay was published. In this context, Brutalism raises issues over the meaning of composition in architecture and in particular, that tendency towards informality, vernacular forms and contingent composition that we call 'picturesque.'

In the early 50s, Banham was researching Futurism and giving informal lectures on avant-garde history. From this research the notion arose that Brutalism was a 'movement' with adherents, programme and direction at odds with mainstream culture. This avant-gardist comportment opposed Read's directorship of the ICA, which attempted to place modern art in the 'van-garde' of British culture, as natural successor to earlier art forms. The mechanism of this succession, according to Read, was modern art's psychological truth experienced in the relation of modern art to 'primitive' art. Brutalism, by contrast, did not compare itself with other styles or modes, or argue for its merits as art; it claimed to replace art. Brutalism was a façade of a movement, a vehicle for Banham's rhetoric; it had no agreed membership or programme. Its pretension to avant-gardism was clearer in what it was not: it was not 'academic art'; it did not suppose some stable idea of what art was for, or what it contained.

In 1952, Pevsner arranged for Banham to be 'Assistant Literary Editor' of the AR, and he continued as a dissident voice within the journal in various roles until 1961. The prefix in the Brutalism article refers to the New Empiricism and the New Humanism, earlier rhetorical vehicles of the AR and Banham's target. Banham and the Brutalists thought that the AR was betraying modernism by attempting to reach a rapprochement with popular taste for traditional architecture. What particularly affronted them was Pevsner's claim that the picturesque was the English heritage of modernism. I argue elsewhere that the picturesque, rather than modernism, is at stake in this argument; that the Brutalists were repeating an older opposition between a hard picturesque, which is aesthetically challenging, and a soft and facile
picturesque, which panders to familiar sentiments. 16 We can see this opposition in the visual form of the publication if we compare Gordon Cullen’s graphic townscape studies prepared for the AR with the Smithsons’ illustration of their Golden Lane housing design, published in the Architects Journal, in 1952. 17 Both have an apparent negligence about them: in the use of collage and the unevenness of representational verisimilitude that results; in the hand lettering, and in Cullen’s case, the use of a typewriter for captions; and in the general lack of a sense of the page as a frame. It is as if speed of execution were more important than final form. Both imply a lack of self-consciousness, absorption in topic and a sense of the designer as observer and collator of found materials. If, at another level, we understand this lack of rhetoric as a rhetoric, then we could say that it works by valuing the visual materials—the character of a line or the dot-screen of a newsprint photo—over the composition. It is a kind of painterliness, where indefinite outlines and a sense of movement or succession attempt to capture visual attention directly rather than through the presentation of a ‘finished’ and composed graphical object.

The differences between Cullen and the Smithsons are equally apparent. Cullen cannot help but show off his representational facility; it is clear that skill with the pencil is required to make such a page. The Smithsons, on the other hand, rigorously avoid any show of skill; their lines are generic, characterless and in the background behind the found material. The result is that the Smithsons’ drawings seem truly open and un-composed, pure moments of their thought, while Cullen’s seem condescending, folk-ish attempts at persuasion. Cullen’s presentation style grows out of a certain retro chic graphic style in AR as a whole, exemplified in the use of a simplified ‘courier’ font designed for typewriters that have difficulty making finer parts of fonts used in proper printing. Again, this bears comparison with a Brutalist approach. When Academy brought out The New Brutalism in 1966, they set it in a sans serif font, simplified like courier, but not primitive, and clearly the result of modern typesetting. Yet the page is designed in columns often ending short, with no attempt to adjust the white space. On the one hand we see recherché and particularized graphic material that is comprehensively designed; on the other, generic graphic materials treated with a startling lack of design.

My point here is simple but perhaps obtuse: The New Brutalism, precisely because it wished to present itself as an art movement (or anti-art movement) needed also to represent itself, in itself, to be Brutal on the page. Just as, if considered as an art movement, New Brutalist architecture could not have any definite style or body of characteristics, neither could it have this in graphical representation. To do so would be to construct an outside reference point. To be an avant-gardist movement rather than an observed set of characteristics, it had to appear autonomous and understood only through difference.

If we turn now to another journal, Architectural Design, and its propagation of minimalism in the nineties, we can see a different relation of art history nomenclature to visual style. Architectural Design moved, in the 1990s, from being a journal of record to a largely thematic organization. In doing so, it promoted groupings, such as New Classicism or Minimalism, which could recur; hence the 1994 issue “Aspects of Minimal Architecture” and its follow up of the same title in 1999. 18 These publications
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it wished to present , in itself, to be Brutal structure could not have bical representation. list movement rather istood only through

of minimalism in the Architectural Design ization. In doing so, cur, hence the 1994 10 These publications

are notable for their self-consciously expensive printing, with large all colour images printed to the edges of pages. Remarkable in many of these images is their colour range and register. Images almost entirely shades of cream or blue are an unusual use of the four colour printing process, because the image is largely made up of total information that would have been equally apparent in black and white. The rhetorical significance of this occurs at two levels: that the high verisimilitude of the colour image will truly show the monochrome nature of the space depicted; and that the very small register of colour range that remains, helping us distinguish a wall from a floor, also shows the quality of the printing. This fine sub-rhetoric of image colours can represent the architectural issue where similarly fine discriminations about material are being made. We see, here, another way in which the journal needs to become the style in question.

What is of greater interest in minimalism is the name. Publications on minimalism fall into two camps: those that refer to the art history movement and those that attempt to hide or delay this connection. Architectural Design’s approach is the latter, and this is curious. The journal copied the idea of a thematic issue on minimalism from Rasagna and Daidalos, which had done versions in the late eighties.39 Each of the European journals begins with a well-informed and detailed discussion of the American art movement from the fifties into the present and relates this to the architectural phenomenon they are observing or promoting. The AD editorial by Maggie Toy mentions none of this, presenting minimalism as a newly emerging architectural phenomenon, defined in largely phenomenological terms. This is despite the AD introducing the art history aspects of minimalism later in the same issue and in subsequent issues, and despite it having reviewed minimalist visual art exhibitions in previous issues, and having used the term in a visual arts sense almost immediately after Richard Wohlenheim’s coinage of the term in 1965.40

What was happening here? First of all, a dumbing down, albeit a complicated one. The journal probably wanted to hook the readers into a simple version of minimalism before heading into the more complex and indeed controversial aspects of its historical explanation. The British exponents of the new style in architecture, may not have even been aware of, or interested in, the visual arts precedents. But also, ‘dumbing down’ was a rhetorical position usefully distinguishable from AD’s previous vehicle, ‘Deconstructivism.’41 Not only was Minimalism meant to ‘feel’ different to the high theory of DeCon, we could speculate that Minimalism was the beginning of current, well-considered, even theoretically astute, arguments against theory-led architecture.

I think that AD’s editors were probably correct. Although Rasagna or Daidalos are more rewarding to read and give a greater breadth of references, they end up reproducing a basic contradiction in the idea of architectural minimalism. Is minimalism descriptive of a kind of architecture, or more precisely, a kind of architectural experience? Or is it a movement with an historical origin, adherents, leaders and some kind of aim or trajectory? This is the point that Banham was at in 1955: defining Brutalism as a movement, like Futurism, in the expectation that it could then become an observable style, like Art Brut. AD chose the obverse strategy: they observe minimalism at large in the profession, and only then introduce the conceptual equipment imported from the visual arts. This is safer, in the sense
that it is further removed from the thorny question threatening to derail minimalism as a publishing vehicle. Minimalism is, in fact, quite like what great name givers such as Jenkins had been calling 'neo-modernism' for a decade or so, and which provided the name for a special issue of AD in 1990. For the phenomenon to be news in 1994, however, when there were already several neo-modernisms, it was more operative to take up the name vented by the Europeans. To astute commentators, the theory of minimalism in the visual arts explained an observable difference between, say, Richard Meier and John Pawson. This theory was the retrospective account of American minimalism by commentators who followed Rosalind Krauss’s reintroduction of phenomenological theory—a strand of art theory that reached institutionalization by 1990, coinciding with the rise of minimalism in architecture. Like earlier importation theory such as semiotics or deconstruction, this art theory discourse assisted in the observation and analysis of buildings. However, having come from the visual arts, which are historically tied to architecture, it caused another complication. Does a use of minimalist theory in architecture imply that minimalist architecture broke with modernism in the same way that minimalist artists, such as Judd and Morris, broke with Clement Greenberg’s formalism modernism? We can read Krauss trying to tread her way around this abyss in an essay of 1994, where she avoids the question of whether Mies van der Rohe was a 'minimalist.' This is a fascinating question, still gaping open at the moment, and beyond the remit of a journal like AD to resolve.

Art history, understood as a nomenclature, raises issues of authority in journals around these two moments. In Brutalism, authority was sought in a model from art history, in the idea of a movement as action on history. In Minimalism, authority was sought in the formal analytic methods of art history, exactly the aspect of art history that Banham was rejecting in Pevsner. In each case, authority sought from the visual arts is treated quite differently to political discourse or science, exterior causes explained and then exemplified in projects. The authority of art history itself requires representation so that it can be implicit in the journal, not exterior to it. Banham was ambivalent as to whether his movement, Brutalism, also needed to be a style. Maggie Toy wanted to avoid the unwanted implication that if minimalism was a style it might encompass both architecture and art, where it meant different things. In their aim to have us experience, on the page, the tendencies they identified, the journals assume the historical ambitions of style. Underneath the scorn with which we use 'style' to mean some simple-minded formal recipe is the idea that, in style, we recognize an organization of sensuous feeling that is capable of greater longevity than our ideas.

Endnotes

1 This article is a development of a paper read at the International Symposium on Journal Publishing in Architecture, Museum of Sydney, 1-3 February 2002. My thanks to the other delegates for their discussion and to the convenors, Dr Stanislav Fung, Dr Charles Rice, and the Faculty of Built Environment at the University of New South Wales. Thanks also to Justin Clark and to Angela Hirst.


3 Critical regionalism, coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre and popularised by Kenneth Frampton:
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ture, the reen, say, Richard Mec
tion by commentators - a strand of art theory
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impress as poetry in which works of visual arts are described and praised. Ekphrasis has come
to be a central term in the scholarship of
in the United States of America by National Book Network, Inc.). 1997. Some of my argument here is
further explored in John Macarthur, "Brutalism, Ugliness and the Picturesque Object," a paper presented at
the Formalisation Fabrication papers from the seventeenth annual conference of the Society of Architectural

3 Banham, "The New Brutalism". More accurately, Banham was translating argot into formal discourse by
adding the prefix 'new.' The references to this essay are to the more available reprint in: Reyner Banham and

4 Postmodernism is greatly propagated by Charles Jencks in his book Charles Jencks, The Language of
Post-Modern Architecture, London: Academy Editions, 1977. But he has had a long career of style naming
before and after this. His famous diagram in Charles Jencks, Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods,
London: Studio Vista, 1971, attempted to name every event and subcurrent in 20th century architecture.
Jencks has recently had the book reprinted and boasts of his success in prediction. See Charles Jencks,

5 Banham and Banham, A Critic Writes, p. 8.

6 Freidrich J. Schwartz, "Cathedrals and Shoes: Concepts of Style in Wölflinian and Adorno," New German Critique,
Art, M. D. Hottinger (trans), New York: Dover, 1950 (original edition, 1932); Heinrich Wölflin, Renaissance
and Baroque, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966; Heinrich Wölflin, "Prolegomena to a Psychology of
Architecture," in H. F. Mallgrave and E. E. S. Ikonomou (eds), Empathy, Form and Space: problems in
German aesthetics 1873-1893, Santa Monica: Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1994.


16 Macarthur, “Brutalism, Ugliness and the Picturesque Object”.


