

Reappraisal of the Concept of Open Aesthetic in France

a. The ‘aesthetic of change’: issues of evolution of the architectural form

In the nineteen-fifties, some architects began to question the building model defined by composition principles stable over time and instead searched for formal principles involving possibilities of evolution, growth and flexibility.

This gave rise to some considerations about indeterminacy. This architectural concept has found several expressions: spatial or programmatic indetermination, formal indetermination (growth and change) and aesthetic indetermination. In this presentation, we will focus on the third issue.

In 1957, Peter and Alison Smithson published an essay in the Architects Year Book 8: ‘The Aesthetics of Change’¹. In this article, drawing on the case of the university, the Smithsons tell us that the university and the city are growing and changing. Consequently, the new buildings of a university should no longer be conceived according to traditional aesthetic theory in which the part and the whole are in a finite relationship with each other, the aesthetic of each being ‘close’. Their aesthetic must be an ‘aesthetic of change’. Retrospectively presenting their Sheffield project, designed 4 years earlier, the Smithsons described the system of footbridges connecting the old building with the new as a ‘linkage’ between independent elements, an elevated street. The facade, in addition, is made up entirely of screens, allowing all the class changes inside but without changing the external aspect.

In their article, the Smithsons also presented the Santa Monica house, designed and built by Charles Eames. For the Smithsons, this project was the expression of a ‘transient aesthetic’², composed of elements that could be easily replaced over time and therefore expressing an ‘aesthetic of change’.

b. The ‘New Brutalism’: premises of a shared aesthetic

Already at the time of its conception, brutalism was generally reduced to being an apologia for the use of raw material. However, as Reyner Banham had already pointed at the time³, the definition given by the Smithsons more broadly covered the issue of social ethics, some of which echoing with the subject of the present article. Banham’s book ‘The New Brutalism’ offers a valuable insight into the initial doctrine of this movement.

In the January 1955 edition of Architectural Design, the Smithsons set out their first explanation of the brutalist aesthetic with the following conclusion, ‘What is new about the New Brutalism among movements is that it finds its closest affinities not in past architectural styles, but in peasant dwelling forms. It has nothing to do with craft, we see architecture as the direct result of a way of life’⁴. We can analyse this reference to the peasant dwelling in terms of two aspects which respond to each other: on one hand, the wish to involve architecture in pragmatic ethics, based on the economy of means in the act of construction, and on the other hand the wish, by abandoning disciplinary elegance, to reveal the expression of anthropological components whose authenticity would bring more meaning to architecture.

Further on in this issue, the Smithsons concluded their commentary on a low-cost social housing project constructed in Morocco by the architect Vladimir Bodiancky, with this statement: ‘It is impossible for each man to construct its own home. It is for

the architect to make it possible for the man to make the flat his house, the maisonnette his habitat... We aim to provide a framework in which man can again be master of its house. In Morocco they have made it a principle of "habitat" that each man shall be at liberty to adapt for himself"⁵.

The brutalist approach such as defined by the Smithsons therefore involves placing the architect in a position of withdrawal, keeping himself from any sophistication in the design of the overall structure, and abandoning responsibility for the aesthetic result, in one hand to the materials in their natural state and on the other hand to the users in the part left to them to appropriate the built space and finalise the building.

In a second later article, again using the reference of the peasant housing, Peter Smithson tells us: "When we say that "lightness of touch" can allow a building to be interpretable we mean capable of being read in different ways by the occupiers so it becomes theirs without itself being changed; and when we say it should permit a building to be "dressable" we mean capable of responding to occupiers or community seasonal or festival decorations, or to temporary changes, without the underlying structures or meanings being destroyed - in fact these structures and meanings being enhanced by such "dressing" (this is in fact the oldest and commonest of ideas, common to the temples of Greece, the shrines of Japan, and the Christian churches; and also common to old peasant and burgher houses almost everywhere)"⁶.

Defined in this manner, we can extrapolate one of the main characteristic of what a brutalist building can express: its potentiality to be 'dressable'.

c. The "open aesthetic"

The "open aesthetic" is heir to the brutalist considerations of the Smithsons,

It consists in imagining the purpose of architecture not as the incarnation of a drawing totally mastered by the architect and resulting in a physical object offered to contemplation, but as the result of an evolving process partially escaping the determination by the architect.

In a 1959 text published in the journal *Le Carré Bleu*, the architect John Voelcker cited the work of Solton & Hanson presented at the Otterlo congress as an 'open aesthetic', and defined it in these terms:

'to consider form as a master key likely to serve as an instrument to satisfy the many solicitations of life[...] it is the diversity of individuals and their actions which form the primary element of this open aesthetic and its architecture aims to play the role of a *mobile* art whose object is formed by the events themselves'⁷.

The open aesthetic therefore anticipates the future uses from the project design and proposes to suggest, encourage and even provoke them. It involves that the architect abandons part of his control on the final result, and conceives architecture rather as a support capable of receiving multiple aesthetic scenarios, mostly conceived by the user, or the succession of users.

In this perspective, the aesthetic outcome of architecture will incorporate not only its material and construction component, but also, be variable over time.

In contrast to an approach seeking to master all the visual effects generated by the arrangement of materials, this posture promotes the use of materials and construction techniques devoid of sophistication, seeking to approach and make visible the act of construction in its basic truth. This posture echoes the brutalism of the Smithsons. When they evoke their interest in ‘peasant dwelling forms’ in place of ‘past architectural styles’⁸, they are highlighting their interest in an architecture emerging from the expression of the direct contingencies of its realisation: economy of means, techniques of simple construction, attached to a specific time and place, and which do not seek to conceal their nature. Hunstanton’s school project illustrates this approach.

To caricaturise, the architect no longer acts here as creator but as the conscious revealer of realities that are beyond his control. We will see immediately afterwards that this approach finds a particularly relevant echo in the posture of the architects Lacaton & Vassal.

d. Contemporary syntheses : Lacaton & Vassal: extra space and the aesthetic of “as-found”

1. Extra space and “open structure”

On their return from Africa, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal worked on the project of the Latapie house. For these architects, it was important to think of housing in an alternative way. This project was an occasion for them to think about the type of housing an ordinary family could afford. This reflection leads to an estimated surface area of 80m² for the housing, if it were built under conventional conditions. The objective followed by the architects was to produce a bigger house, ‘not an extra 10m², but perhaps twice as big if possible, because we are intimately convinced that you’d live better in a big house and that also offers an opportunity to have different sorts of spaces and atmospheres’⁹. The architects responded to this equation by designing the accommodation inside an agricultural greenhouse, an industrial device making it possible to provide an inner space with a controlled climate and with very low construction costs.

For the authors of the project, ‘You don’t have to conceive everything; you just have to give [the inhabitant] the potential space to be used and appropriated. If you give enough qualities and a range of capacity, then you provide maximum opportunities for everybody and the project will assume to be changed, transformed and re-appropriated’¹⁰.

For Lacaton and Vassal, this possible degree of appropriation and freedom is a definition of ‘luxury’: ‘luxury is linked to freedom of use and a high level of possibility and minor constraints, in order not to set limits to your imagination and desires and is not linked to the cost¹¹ of a construction.

In a text published in 2014¹², the architects spoke about the possibilities offered by the use of agricultural greenhouses as a basic structure for creating housing or other programmes, as ‘an open structure for inventing climate and ambiance’

2. The aesthetic of “as found” and “open aesthetic”

We have seen above how Lacaton & Vassal suggested to significantly increase the housing by offering an extra space. This extra space, created within the budgetary limitations of a standard project, is rendered possible by using poor materials and industrial devices (agricultural greenhouses) diverted from their primary use. The architects therefore assume, for this extra space, to work with very low finishing standards, in order to offer this extra space which is considered, as we have seen above, as the source of a certain idea of luxury. In view of the post-2008 economic context, this *as found* design could constitute a benchmark for building qualitative housings for the greatest number of people, and thus provide a framework for the role that the architect can play in defining architecture. This is in line with Smithson's concerns about the architects' provision of a "dressable" building for its occupants and could answer a contemporary economic issue in building affordable dwellings.

These considerations are also in line with the principles of the 'open aesthetic' as defined above. The final aesthetic result shown by this approach is the opposite of the expression of a fixed design. As the polycarbonate generally used to realise this extra space is a generic industrial material, the final image which results from its appropriation is strongly influenced by the elements of customisation introduced by the user.

Beyond the image, the use of the extra space itself is the object of a strong definition by the resident, without a specific predisposition caused by architecture. This result would undoubtedly not have been disowned by the brutalists, who spoke of supplying 'a framework in which man can again be master of his house'¹³.

For the French architects, the site is therefore never considered as a negative situation to be resolved or repaired, but as a pre-existing tissue to be preserved, on which the goal is to 'superimpose [their] new intentions, but without imposing them onto pre-existing systems'¹⁴. The logic of the *as found* is therefore equally valid in the way the site is considered. This way of acting as revealers of an existing reality without transforming it, is also in line with the definition given above of the 'open aesthetic'.

This preoccupation with the "existing" is also in line with the considerations of the Smithson's concept of *as found* and are expressed as such: "Thus the "as found" was a new seeing of the ordinary[...]. We were concerned with the seeing of materials for what they were; the woodness of wood; the sandiness of sand. With this came a distaste of the simulated, such as the new plastics of the period -printed, coloured to imitate a previous product in "natural" materials "¹⁵

In 2004, through his conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Peter Smithson said, with regard to brutalism and as-found: "Brutalism simply means- I am repeating some of what I said earlier about Soane's vaults: the quality of a plaster ceiling is entirely different from a concrete ceiling, in every way. And Brutalism is not concerned with the material as such, but rather the quality of the material: what can it do? And by analogy: there is a way of handling gold in Brutalist manner and it does not mean rough and cheap, it means: what is its raw quality ?"¹⁶

3. Lacaton & Vassal: The *Cité Manifeste* social housing project in Mulhouse

The *Cité Manifeste* housing project in Mulhouse, finished in 2005, presents a continuity of the investigations into the extra-space initiated with the Latapie and Coutras houses. The considerations on the necessity to offer extra space for the appropriation of the users, offering them a certain vision of luxury, was extrapolated here in order to be applied to collective buildings.

The architects wanted to abandon the classic gesture which consists in managing 'the minimum where one makes every effort to gain half a square meter here and there'¹⁷. To escape from this, they opted for a 'loft'-type system, 'namely an envelope that's as big as possible'¹⁸. The goal was to allow the residents to make the most of the qualities of this open structure.

On the ground floor, the architects drew a regular concrete structure, a grid of 7.5m by 6.5m, which acquired a value in allowing for appropriation of the ground, while at the same time aiming not to distort the original situation of the place. This concrete frame was designed to withstand urban constraints, offering the possibility of detaching the greenhouse from an anchorage on the ground floor which was considered too vulnerable. The greenhouse was taken as it is, without modifying any of the constituent elements of it, in order to maintain the performance/cost ratio of this structure.

Once the grid was fixed to the ground and the greenhouses placed on top of it, the architects partitioned it into 11 irregular parts.

The appearance of the building could be that of a 'transient aesthetic' in the sense that the Smithsons understood it when speaking of the Eames house in Santa Monica. The polycarbonate elements of the greenhouses, with the garage doors filling the spaces between the concrete columns, seem to be able at any time to be modified, reversed or changed. Upstairs, the greenhouses are partially insulated and heated. The non-insulated part represents the 'extra space', a winter garden that can be appropriated. The heated part was also provided with a solar protection system to regulate the interior atmosphere of the dwellings.

The aesthetic result is, as the architects explicitly claim, part of the brutalists' legacy of thought. The great attention paid to the adaptability of housing, the appropriation capacities delivered by extra space, and the aesthetics exposing constructive principles, undoubtedly constitute components of the brutalist doctrine as expressed by the Smithsons.

However, the result seems to suffer, like the achievements of its predecessors in the 1960s, from a difficulty in displaying itself as a model that can be applied on a large scale. Indeed, far from revealing a neutral aesthetic, which would allow the inhabitant to "customize" his home by giving it its own style, the architecture of Lacaton & Vassal is very stylistically assertive, affirming its raw materials and its bare joints.

e. Reusable materials, self-construction and 'open aesthetic'

As the Smithsons pointed out in 1957¹⁹, the essence of brutalism is ethical and not stylistic or aesthetic. This aphorism was echoed by Banham in his 1966 book where he concluded : "I make no pretence that I was not seduced by the aesthetic of

Brutalism, but the lingering tradition of its ethical stand, the persistence of an idea that the relationships of the parts and materials of a building are a working morality – this, for me, is the continuing validity of the New Brutalism”²⁰. This ethical approach is now once again explored in the current question raised by the reuse of building materials. The investigations that are carried out on this question take various forms: assembly of different recovered materials, interest in the question of wear on the material resulting from deconstruction, including the participation of future users,...

This interest in patina and how materials weathered, was put into perspective in the Belgian pavilion of the 2010 Venice Biennale by the architects of the ROTOR group. They tell us that: "As a trace, wear reminds us that, most of the time, other users have preceded and others will follow. In some cases, wear and tear is even a valuable indicator of the nature of these uses. In this sense, traces of wear and tear fully contribute to the readability of the environment and, by extension, to its appreciation. But that's not all. As a reaction of a material in the presence of a use, wear reveals the materiality of our environment”²¹. This impromptu effect, resulting from alteration processes such as abrasion, scratching, erosion, dislocation, chemical reactions,...echoes the Smithsons' concerns. Reuse therefore opens the door to an extension of the 'as found' questions and goes beyond them by broadening the range of materials, leaving beside the constructive model using new materials from industry, but using raw materials from deconstruction.

To illustrate our point, we will use the case of the housing of "La passerelle" designed by Nicolas Dünnebacke in Saint-Denis, France.

The interest of the project lies in its process and not in a defined aesthetic. In order to provide housing for families from camps, an old building was wrapped with recycled materials to improve insulation issues. The author adds: "Given the disparity of the materials collected, the detail drawings quickly became inoperative”²².

In its purpose, the project puts into perspective the possibility of a building to be "dressable" or evokes a 'transient aesthetic' and reusable materials in this case seems to be a possible response to economic issues in the design process.

f. Conclusion

Through this presentation, we tried to trace a history of what an "open aesthetic" approach could represent, by voluntarily relying on the Smithsons and John Voelcker, not Reyner Banham. For the latter, the essence of brutalism can be defined as follows: 1_Memorability as an Image ;2_Clear Exhibition of Structure ; and 3_Valuation of Materials "as found”²³ . This heavily relies on a visual, technology-driven development of architecture. On the contrary, the other authors above-mentioned are focused on notions of use and appropriation of architecture by the user.

Lacaton & Vassal define all structural, spatial and climatic parameters. They intend to provide the occupant with an available space which, by its size, invites appropriation and increased life, "luxury", without elitist connotation. As Tom Vandeputte mentioned, the

issue "testify to the awareness that the appropriation is not only limited by the walls that enclose it but also by the fixed patterns of inhabiting it"²⁴.

In this case, the introduction of indeterminacy factors meant that the architect had to relinquish some control over the final result. In both cases, it attempts to offer a response to the precarious, unstable and uncertain nature of contemporary reality, by offering residents a measure of freedom to define and develop their own living environment, as the theoretical architects of the 1950s and 1960s had imagined.

We have also highlighted the potential of reusable materials as an expression of 'as found' considerations. This emphasizes the potential of the two key concepts of 'open structure' and 'open aesthetics' we wanted to enlighten. These concepts allow for other formal translations, which could meet other objectives but definitely express a living legacy in the design of an "indeterminate aesthetic". This, from our point of view can constitute a potential development of democracy in architecture by relaying the architect's position as the producer of an open structure, free of appropriation.

¹ Alison and Peter Smithson, «The Aesthetics of Change», *Architects' Year Book*, n° 8, (London: Elek Books, 1957), 14-22.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic ?*, (London: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966), 47.

⁴ *Architectural Design*, January 1955, cited in Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 46.

⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

⁶ Peter Smithson, 'Lightness of Touch', in *Architectural Design*, n° 6, 1974, 378

⁷ John Voelcker, "D'Aix-en-Provence à Otterlo ou l'agonie et la mort du C.I.A.M.", *Le Carré Bleu*, IV/1959.

⁸ Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 46.

⁹ Anne Lacaton, "We don't much believe in form", in *ORIS*, Magazine for Architecture and Culture, vol.24-03, 114-115

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, "Structural freedom, a precondition for the miracle", in *Lacaton & Vassal. Recent work*, 2G no.60 (2012), 162-175.

¹³ Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alison et Peter Smithson, "The "As Found" and the "Found"", in: David Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, MIT press, Cambridge MA, London, 1990, 201-202.

¹⁶ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Smithson Time*, Cologne, Walther König, 2004, 17-18

¹⁷ Ilka & Andreas Ruby, 2G Libros Books (Spain: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2007), 144.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁹ Alison and Peter Smithson, "The New Brutalism". Alison and Peter Smithson answer the criticisms on the opposite page," *Architectural Design*, n°4, April 1957, 113. The answer refers to "Thoughts in Progress. The New Brutalism", *ibidem* 111-112

²⁰ Banham, *op.cit.*, 135

²¹ Ariane d'Hoop, Benedikte Zitouni, *Avant-propos*, catalogue of the exhibition of the Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2010, 15

²² See project description in *Encore Heureux*, Julien Choppin et Nicolas Delon, *Matière grise. Matériaux/réemploi/architecture*, éditions du Pavillon de l'Arsenal, Paris, 2014, 137

²³ Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism*, dans *Architectural Review*, Décembre 1955, 354-361, reedited in Max Risselada (éd.), *Alison and Peter Smithson. A Critical Anthology*, *ibid*, 122

²⁴ Tom Vandeputte, "Economy and Excess/Three Recent Projects by Lacaton and Vassal", *ibid*, 110