

# A HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS OF BRUTALISM, EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN INNOVATIVE CONSTRUCTION

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Brutalist construction litter many city centers contributing to what is termed skyline. Several of these constructions have indeed elicited some form of identity crisis for the people on the margins given the cultural dimensions of these ‘brutal’ buildings. The buildings’ coldness and its totalitarian gait confront diverse peoples making the construction problematic, in its presence. The very intense use of concrete suggests wastefulness and arrogance, all of which alienate certain sensibilities. The problem of ‘the other’, that is the minorities within the mainstream culture, is manifest in the intellectual constructs of these buildings since the essential characteristics of the ‘other’ is diversity hence a concern for equality. How may brutalism in construction deal with concerns about diversity and equality, which it creates? Do constructions based on brutalism consider equality and diversity and the sensibilities arising therefrom? To what extent does brutalism affect equality and diversity in cities where ‘brutal’ buildings exist? A philosophical hermeneutical analysis is essential to understand the problems created by these building types. Essentially, hermeneutics brings to the fore those parts of brutalism that alienates and which militates against equality. It is concluded that brutalism in innovative construction should now tend toward deconstruction such that a minimalist façade is created in brutalist buildings which accommodates the diverse nature of today’s cities.

Keywords: brutalism, diversity, equality, hermeneutics, innovation

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of organized construction is to make appropriate space to create acceptable habitation for humans (Kibert *et al.*, 2002, Schoenauer, 2003). This use of space is filled with sensibilities arising from the various forms of life of both the architect and the society where the constructions are made. The brutalist architecture mirrors one of these sensibilities and how societies using brutalists’ constructions are constructed. This research effort contemplates the implications of brutal architecture and its effects on the individual in particular, the ‘other’ in modern societies. Usually one of the questions asked about modern architecture in relation to communal living is linked to ideas about up-to date architecture in harmony with its local culture and the concerns about the ethical. We therefore wish to extend this question to individuals’ lived experiences in particular how construction type, in this case brutalism alienates the ‘other’ person within

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a Westernized local culture or where Western culture is mainstream in a diverse community. In this context, our paper dwells on creating a hermeneutical approach to brutalist architecture and establishing a thesis that brutalism alienates the 'other' in Western societies where it is used in buildings. Pertinent questions are asked and answered. Who is the 'other' in society? How do buildings affect the 'other'? What can be done so that buildings are integrative in terms of accommodating all citizens and respect diversity? Attempts are made to answer these questions. Brutalism poses a particular research interest since it represents an example of how architectural ideas seeking to maximize constructed spaces create problems in the spaces leading to alienation and dissonance in social spaces. Therefore the aim of this paper is to show that brutalist architecture is problematic in terms of alienating 'the other' in Western societies. Consequently, it infringes on the idea of diversity/toleration on which many modern societies are based on. It is suggested that minimalism, with a bent toward critical regionalism should serve as opposites of brutalism, and they can indeed be incorporated into a brutalist façade to achieve a more inclusive and regional outlook that will better accommodate 'the other' in Western societies where brutalism holds sway.

### **Brutalism and Construction**

Many interesting ideas have been put forth trying to describe brutalism as a construction type and an architectural philosophy. Brutalism of the nineteen fifties refers in name to (among other things) the An Brui 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 i'oura (MacArthur 2005). A lot of scholars (for instance Zein 2012, MacArthur 2005, Hauvel 2015 and Stalder (2014) among others) describing brutalism suggest that brutalist buildings are usually known with striking repetitive angular geometries which stands out, and, where intense concrete is used, often revealing the texture of the wooden forms used for the in-situ casting giving vent to a nineteenth century architecture type.

Several buildings have the above characteristics and such characteristic litter city centers worldwide. However, there are several criticisms against brutalist architecture. It is believed by critics (for example Darlrymple (2009) that Brutalism makes the style unfriendly and uncommunicative, instead of being integrating and protective, as its proponents intended. Brutalism also is criticized as disregarding the social, historic, and architectural environment of its surroundings, making the introduction of such structures in existing developed areas appear starkly out of place and alien. Darlrymple (2009) submits that brutalism 'seems designed to overawe, humiliate, and confuse any human being unfortunate enough to try to find his way in it.....a style of soulless architecture'.

This criticism shows the general perception of this architectural type among its critics, which in making use of space, redefines it in an unexpected way. This use of space is unexpected since there are issues that arise in its use. It acquires new meanings for many people it intends to serve. For instance, according to Allison and Smithson (1957), 'Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work. Up to now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical in the sense that it tried to solve housing problems. Reidel (2013) says that brutalism is a pursuit of anti-beauty and this makes brutalism controversial.

So there is a barrage of descriptions about brutalism which goes to suggest that brutalism is a minority idea in architecture and construction but which has garnered prominence because of its style and successful presence in many city's skylines. Despite this near

rejection of brutalism by many, brutalism is bouncing back in what is called 'new brutalism'. After the surge of brutalism in the 1950s, the period after the Second World War, and its subsequent subtle disappearance, it is now back to take some prominence once again as architectural scholars discuss it again to see its merits. The merits of brutalism lie in its immense appropriation of space. It creates a lot of opportunity in creating an all-encompassing human dwelling, which helps in solving the problem of accommodation in cities.

If brutalism is seen by its critics as 'soulless' and 'ugly' or is out to 'humiliate', then it can be argued that brutalism create alienation problems. Although non-minority residents may be alienated by brutalism, our interest here is in the minority, 'the other'. The 'other', people of minority cultures whose living experiences and history does not accommodate brutalism since it is not like anything they are used to in their cultures. Brutalism creates 'Otherness' in its distancing from the client community. In other words, the diversity of the communities that normally house brutalist architecture is not taken into cognizance in brutalist designs since the designs are usually done not to appeal to the general sense of community sensibilities but simply to house more people and make use of space.

It also ignores any kind of regional perspective immanent in society and this creates some form of environmental totalitarianism. According to Darlymple (2009) brutalist structures represent an artefact of European philosophical totalitarianism, a spiritual, intellectual, and moral deformity, which is cold-hearted, inhuman, hideous, and monstrous. The rise of the modern movement in architecture, which brutalism is part, was inspired and motivated by the rise of industry and not having people's cultures in mind. Such an alliance between creativity and technology exists in the concurrent rise of the historic avant-garde whose shock techniques stemmed from a celebration-of and reaction-to science and production. Industry became aligned with a new 'concrete' utopia (Banham, 1960: 7), a utopia that alienates since its creations does not center of diversity or cultural sensitivities.

### **The Construction of 'The Other'**

It is imperative that when considering the idea of diversity within a given social space, it is important to note the presence of 'Otherness' in such a social space. This is because each social space has an original culture and then other cultures come in to interact with this 'original culture'. This coming together, if successful creates a lived success of social interaction. There are many ways of articulating the other. One of those that have articulated the idea of 'the other' was the Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (see Levinas 1981). He perceived 'the other' to be an ethical concept pointing towards humans relations. Levinas' writings on 'the other' show that his concern is in the ethical arena where human's dwell. Thus this is ethical concern is not the ethics philosophers ordinarily understood as system of morals and prescriptions. He points 'the path not to a theory of ethics but of orienting the subject towards acknowledging and responding to the 'ethical', before it is categorized by knowledge'. As Derrida noted, what Levinas proposes to understand is the 'essence of the ethical relation in general (Derrida 1978).

So in constructing the other we look for what the other is in relation to what we are. There is that difference, that differentiation of the self from other people. The other becomes problematic when the 'self' attempts to subsume the other into the 'same', then there is violence done against the other. There is an ethical responsibility not to violate the other by reducing it to one's own system of thought, one's own system of building houses. The violence arises in ignoring this ethical call. Ignoring the call is also to view

the other as an object of knowledge (Sarukkai, 1997). Doing so only eliminates the identity of the other and re-figures it in the eyes of the subject, thereby incorporating the other into the identity of the constituting subject (Powell 1995). The dominant ideas in the world today are Western in character and these are spread through various contacts of the West with other cultures leading to a degree of sameness of cultures in the world (Morgan, 2007, Tallman, 2013). Western culture, often equated with Western civilization refers to those social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, languages and technologies that have direct connection to Europe in terms of origins. This Western oriented culture or way of life has now become the principal force in world civilization influencing other cultures. Other non-western cultures, in particular Africans' or black people, with no dominating powers are aptly 'the other' in the global context. So there is the palpable 'other' the one that is not Western, the one whose ideas of a building is not accommodated by brutalism, which is a Western idea.

The concept of 'the other' is also linked to the idea of nation-state or nationalists' ideas. Nation states necessarily emphasize the binary opposition "we" and "them". These nations were created to cater for a particular people and these people will have to compete for resources to stay alive or disappear. According to (Triandafyllidou 2001), "the notion of the other is inherent in the nationalist doctrine itself. For nationalists (or simply for those individuals who recognize themselves as members of a national community) the existence of their own nation presupposes the existence of other nations too. Moreover, as history and Gellner (1983) teach us, the course of true nationalism never did run smooth.

Thus, most of the nations' existing today had to fight to secure their survival and to achieve their independence. For most national communities, there have been and there probably still are significant others, other nations and/or states, from which the community tried to liberate and/or differentiate itself". The globalization culture concerns the activities of nations in constant opposition to each other. It is the triumph of the Western States that has enthroned globalization as the currency of engagement for the whole world. This triumph also presupposes a general belief that what is Western is also good and so when brutalism is constructed, it is expected that 'the other' should accept it as a form of acceptable building style. The result, of this type of imposition 'has been the acquisition of an aura of superiority for Western cultures and an imposition of a sense of inferiority upon non-Western ones' (Malik, 2000).

### **Hermeneutics of Brutalism: Mediating Between Brutalism and 'The Other'**

Hermeneutics has become one of the alternative voices of contemporary philosophy used in assessing the human intellectual and social conditions in terms of making what is implicit, explicit. It has long become mainstream in philosophy and has garnered profound influences. Hermeneutics has arisen also as a response to the totalizing and perennial nature of epistemology, which seeks to assert that knowledge and understanding are indeed a-historical and apodictic entities. Given the rise of post modernism and also the consequences of (Gettier 1963) counter examples, hermeneutics has become a viable alternative voice in bypassing the protracted debate about traditional epistemology and Kantian ideas of epistemology which has characterized twentieth century philosophy. Maddox (1985) analyzed hermeneutics to designate a classical discipline that formulated rules for correctly interpreting texts as was found in early forms of biblical studies, philology and jurisprudence.

The philosophical discussion of hermeneutics according to Maddox, deftly began in the nineteenth century, likewise initially engaged in the development of rules for proper

interpretation. As the discussion about hermeneutics developed, its attention shifted to the more basic question of the conditions of the very possibility of understanding. The distinctive characteristic that emerged in this 'hermeneutic' discussion of understanding was a rejection of classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology. Indeed, hermeneutics has more or less taken the place of epistemology for these philosophers. To be sure, they usually refuse to identify hermeneutics with epistemology, but this is due to the empiricist and reductionist connotations, which they sense in the latter term. There are essentially two problems, which hermeneutic philosophers have with traditional epistemology. First, they disagree with the reduction of the entire cognitive process to a single model drawn basically from the natural sciences - i.e. empirical observation. Second, they reject the a-historical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known and imposes meaning upon it.

So, critical hermeneutics is used to assess tradition in order to correct it based on human interests, with hindsight on history and horizons (Habermas, 1987). In other words, each human idea, in this case, brutalism, must be examined as a historical process that has arisen to enhance human life. Similarly its contours and dimensions must be examined to show that there are no personal and sectional appeals inherent in it since if there are such flaws, it cannot then serve human interests, as a whole. Where critical hermeneutics is humanistic in essence and seeks to use philosophical arguments to remove merely pragmatic or existential components from ideas and enshrine in the idea progress for humanity if that is possible. The major hermeneutical theorist of this idea was Jurgen Habermas. Habermas (1987) articulated the fact that not all tradition is acceptable or desirable. So the project of hermeneutics is to correct tradition as such, in this case brutalism. Correcting it means inculcating emancipatory cognitive interest in it. In some cases due to historical developments, in some concepts or tradition, it is impossible to have an inter-subjective correction of a concept so the concept is discarded as being sectional or detrimental to sociality. There is an understanding that 'a hermeneutical approach realizes that both the work and its interpreter are products of history and are shaped by a horizon of questions, concepts, assumptions, affects, habits, stories, images, and convictions that only fully enters our conscious awareness through something like a Socratic dialogue with the past'.

To do a hermeneutics of brutalism will require dissecting its ethical and social dimensions to see the reasons behind this type of construction and whether it can serve the overall human interests without alienating citizens and also establish a thoroughgoing interpretive trustworthiness. The interpretation given should be trusted despite oppositions. 'What does it mean to understand or interpret?' is a central hermeneutic question (Palmer 1969, Porter and Robinson 2011, van Manen 2014). How can we interpret brutalism is a question central to this paper. Since various considerations and questions are raised in interpreting, why is it, for example, that different individuals, groups, and historical eras, cultural groups may understand the same book, painting, musical composition, or architectural work differently? Becomes our central question. From a hermeneutical standpoint, the understandings and interpretations of any text are said to be inexhaustible in the sense that how the text is examined and understood by any interpreter can be somewhat or greatly different from what the original creator intended. In addition, these meanings and interpretations can vary because of differences among interpreters or because of historical shifts in psychological, social, and cultural concerns or sensibilities (Gadamer 1989, Palmer 1969). This is true when interpreting building as well. Given the fact that those interpreting buildings can come from diverse backgrounds and horizons, many dimensions of interpretation can be given.

To interpret brutalism and its effects on the other in Western Societies we must consider the situation of the 'other' since this other is the interpreter who looks at brutalism and abhors it. As we have articulated, 'the other' here are Africans and other non-Westerners. Jones (2000) submits that the most helpful hermeneutic focus when dealing with a building type is what he calls the 'ritual-architectural event'. According to him, it is not buildings but the human experience or apprehension of buildings that we must focus on. This means that 'the locus of meaning resides neither in the building itself (a physical object) nor in the mind of the beholder (a human subject) but rather in the negotiation or the interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder - in the ritual - architectural event in which buildings and human participants alike are involved. Meaning is not a condition or quality of the building, of the thing itself; meaning arises from situations'. Hence it can be argued that what 'the other' sees in a building presupposes a special kind of horizon. One cannot simply claim that an interpretation of brutalism given by 'the other' is not true or disagreeable since the person disagreeing is not in the same 'situation' culturally with the other. Rather attention should focus on founding rules of interpretation within the others' horizon. This is why Madison (1988) asked: "how is one to decide which of two or more conflicting interpretations is the better, and to do so impartially, non- arbitrarily, if there are no general, recognized criteria one can appeal to?"

To answer this question, we note that to interpret from the stand point of difference there must be comprehensiveness, which must take into cognizance of history, lived experiences, and culture (Wachterhauser 1996). It is when looking at these from the point of view of 'the other' that we know if the interpretation given is tenable. 'The other' in this context being Africans and non-Westerner in looking at brutalism are indeed seeing an alien structure that has not appeared in the forms of life. The African's lived experiences must include slavery, colonialism, and poverty (Serequeberhan, 1994). With this in mind, we can indeed submit that when the other apprehends brutalism, it alienates the other when the other is situated in the above articulated horizons and the other views it as harmful and unacceptable. According to Baumbergera (2015) 'We criticize other works for the harm they cause to the environment, for their negative impact on the health or well-being of human beings, for the morally reprehensible attitudes they convey or the morally despicable functions they serve. Such assessments of architectural works are of an ethical nature, or at least possess an ethical dimension'.

Following Baumbergera (2015), a hermeneutics of brutalism, that is making what is implicit, explicit in brutalism reveals that brutalism, as a construction type, with its robust presence, alienates the persons whose cultures do not view buildings as such. Brutalist constructions do not even consider issues of diversity and alienation. The buildings, based on brutalist perspective, come into existence to appropriate space in a more encompassing manner and to create a presence different from what is already in place. Indeed, 'brutalism is criticized as disregarding the social, historic, and architectural environment of its surroundings, making the introduction of such structures in existing developed areas appear starkly out of place and alien' (Baumbergera 2015). This is because 'brutalist buildings are formed from concrete. Instead, a building may achieve its Brutalist quality through a rough, blocky appearance, and the expression of its structural materials, forms, and (in some cases) services on its exterior' (Baumbergera 2015). These characteristics do not have any moral dimensions to them. The buildings so constructed do not seek to make any obvious moral statement but are making some aesthetic and useful statements. They are also designed to intimidate and dominate. Indeed proponents of brutalism emphasize this dimension of brutalism. According to

(Banham 1955), 'Brutalist would probably reject most of these buildings, from the canon, and so we must, for all of these structures exhibit an excess of suaviter in modo, even if there is plenty of fortiter in re about them. In the last resort what characterizes the New Brutalism in architecture is precisely its brutality, its je-m' enfoutisme, its bloody-mindedness'.

When a building is constructed in a city, the builders make certain moral statements without necessarily knowing it. In other words, the builders make moral statements. For instance, the brutalist architects are seeking to build in a robust manner to the extent that a look at their building creates the impression of domination, a conquering of space. Usually Brutalist buildings are massive in their gait and their concrete façade sends out messages of being an accomplishment of size and usefulness. Nonetheless they fail to ask important questions about what the buildings can do to the person that does not have any connection to brutalist architecture. Brutalist architecture arises from the Western tradition and so can indeed be accepted within the Western cultural milieu. Yet, when someone, not psychologically and historically immersed in Western culture views a building constructed in brutalist style, a certain dissonance occurs. This dissonance can be in terms of lack of understanding about the nature, purpose and value of the building or a sensing of detachment from mainstream culture, which is Western. Most 'other' cultures have their own building styles that serve their own purposes within restricted cultural conditions. On coming in contact with Western styles, in particular, brutalism, a conflict ensues. So, brutalist buildings can make moral statements in as much as it causes some mental harm or disorientation in another person, of a non-mainstream culture.

To this extent, a hermeneutical analysis must take into cognizance the moral dimensions of buildings in a brutalist style since issues of accommodating diversity and equality are essentially moral. Baumbergera (2015) analyzed certain objections that can be raised in evaluating the moral dimensions of a building with a hermeneutical circle. According to Baumbergera (2015), while relating the objections to moral assessment of building said that the first objection to morally assessing buildings, 'we morally assess people (their actions, motives, intentions and characters), but it makes no sense to morally evaluate artefacts such as architectural works. Moral evaluations of such works, so the objection goes, are based on a category mistake since moral criticism assumes moral responsibility and thus moral agency, but architectural works have no mental states and can thus not be moral agents'. Baumbergera (2015) did not stop there. He also showcases the futility of thinking in this direction but insisted that 'we morally evaluate architectural works with respect to their impact on individuals and society. A building can, for instance, be ethically criticized because it negatively influences the health, well-being, or behaviour of individuals, and because of its negative social ramifications'.

If it can be said that brutalism as a construction type 'negatively influences the health, well-being or behavior of individuals', then we can infer that when there is a negative influence, the idea of diversity is infringed upon by extension there is really no equal existences in place. If there is an immoral dimension concerning a brutalist construction, it means that someone suffers for it in such a way that it can be said that the brutalist edifice has no respect for individuals and does not care about diversity or equality. Wellner (2000) conceptualized diversity 'as representing a multitude of individual differences and similarities that exist among people. Diversity can encompass many different human characteristics such as race, age, creed, national origin, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation'. But when there is a superimposition of an idea that does not respect this diversity, that idea is condemned. Brutalists buildings, in its dominating type presence send out the message that 'I am above all else'. It also shows an arrogant

posture that seems to minimize all other forms of life around it and this does not augur well with individuals with ‘other’ sensibilities.

Martin Heidegger stated that dwellings are a form of being-in-the-world. In other words, the buildings we dwell in constitute a form of living experience, which is at the core of our very existence. The building is linked to us fundamentally. In Heidegger (1971) essay “Building Dwelling Thinking”, he makes it rather clear that ‘dwelling’ is not merely conceived of as one’s having or possessing an abode or roof over one’s head: it rather designates “the main feature of human existence.” On the one hand, we are to think of human existence as arising from dwelling’. If we follow Heidegger, it means that when a building type is not acceptable to some people, that building deconstructs human thinking about dwellings and creates a huge problem, the problem of alienation.

### **Towards A Critical Deconstruction of Brutalism, Towards Minimalism**

This work is an ongoing discourse, which is geared towards looking at minimalism as a viable alternative to brutalism. Minimalism, according to (Davis, 2015) is a movement that seeks purity as an expression of aesthetic beauty along with practicality. It reduces form, material, connection, texture and colour to their most basic levels. "Less is more" encapsulates the primary focus of Minimalism, which denies decorum and tradition in search for the simplest way to achieve a structure. Simplicity, austerity, pure craftsmanship unhindered by the guise of extraneous moulding to hide flaws and/or joints, essential material usage and spatial composition devoid of artificial superficiality is the core of minimalism.

The bent of this contemplated minimalism is like Critical Regionalism, a concept in architectural design which is known as ‘a synthesis of universal, "modern" elements and individualistic elements derived from local cultures. Critical Regionalist alternatives are more than a postmodern mix of ethno styles but integrate conceptual qualities like local light, perspective, and tectonic quality into a modern architectural framework (Botz-Bornstein 2010). This kind of regionalism can be incorporated into designs derived from brutalism and minimalism to the extent that the location of a building can reflect, as much as possible the cultures where the building stands or intends to stand without ‘othering’ as such. In other words, a creation of a collage of ideas in building to better represent diversity and inclusivity. There is an understanding that ‘othering’ is a relational idea in society and cannot be eliminated completely as long as social construction of self is possible. However, there are principles that ought to be applied in designing buildings that cater for the needs of diverse people.

This involves involving people. Rittel (1972) had already suggested that users should be party to the process as it is the knowledge held by a wide range of people affected by a problem, which should be utilized in seeking solutions to that problem. He claimed ‘expertise does not reside solely in the professional, but in all those whose interests are affected by a design or planning problem’ (Rittel 1972). Rittel saw gaps in the knowledge and expertise of the professionals, i.e. a degree of ignorance on their part, which can only be filled by other people, and succinctly emphasized this point by introducing the concept of a symmetry of ignorance. It is ignorance therefore to go ahead and ignore diversity in designs.

### **CONCLUSION**

The submission of this paper is that brutalism architecture can be jettisoned per se, although not completely. Its strengths, in the skilful appropriation of space, can be harnessed and used to form a kind of minimalist brutalism augmented by regionalism,



such that the local content, as diverse as it is, enters into the façade of brutal architecture. Brutalism as it is today, squares with traditional epistemology to the extent that it suggests a Universalist, a-historical gait, in which everyone ought to accept despite our different horizons. It is appropriating a reductionist cognitive process and suggests that an A-historical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known and imposes meaning upon it is possible. This indeed needs to be questioned in an era of diversity of conceptual schemes and forms of life. This is why a hermeneutics analysis of brutalism done here is inevitable and the analysis done in this paper, suggest that a minimalist architecture, augmented with critical regionalism can be incorporated into brutalism to accommodate diverse horizons.

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