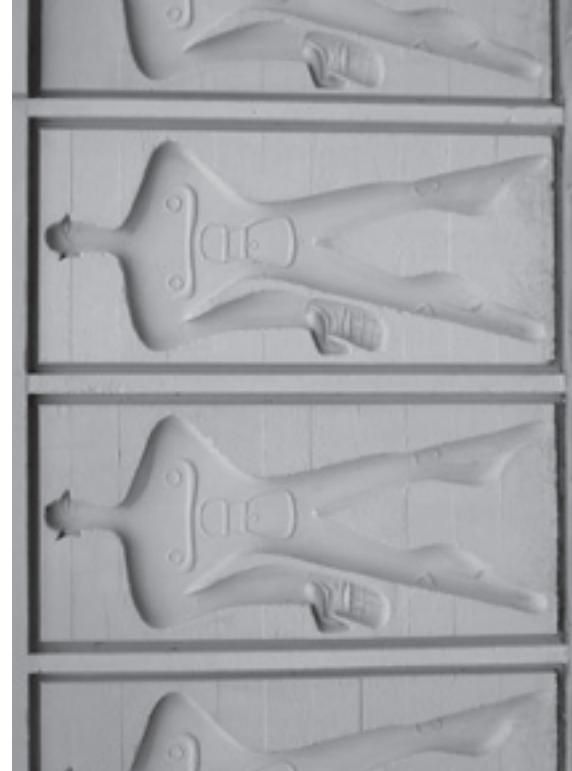
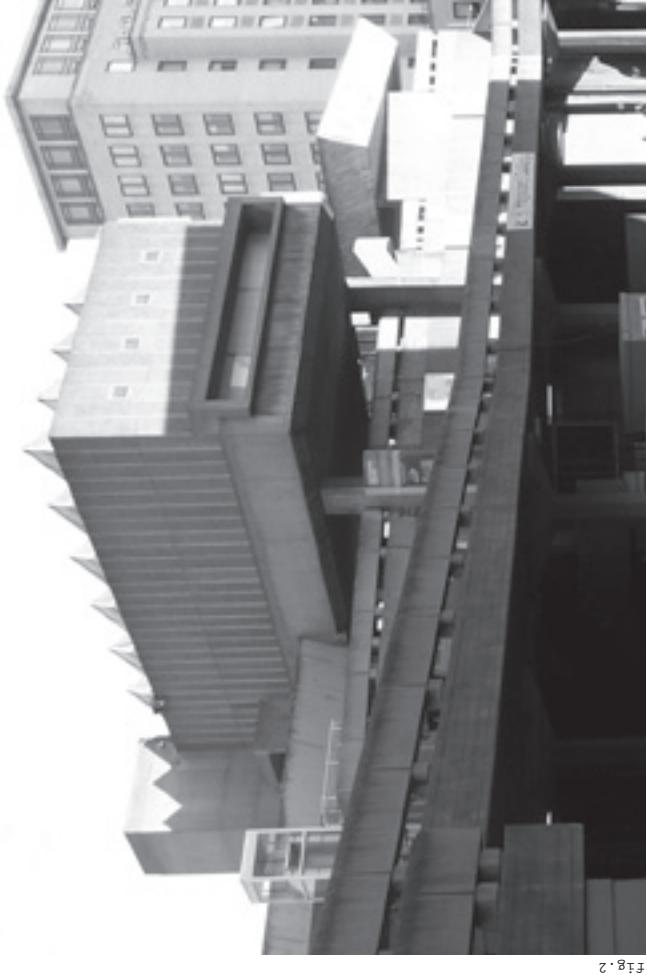


improbable combination. In the London buildings mentioned above, the concrete was similarly bare, although not always so flamboyant. At Ham Common it was the concrete frame left on display, with London stock brick inset; it didn't make such a display of its peasant roughness, as Stirling was unnerfed by the primal gestures of Le Corbusier's use of it in private flats. The Alton West blocks were more a matter of subtle texturing, the stones of the aggregate glinting in a variety of semi-accidental patterns. Here they seem to invite touch, have a particularly coarse physicality; when at school I was asked to make crayon or pencil rubbings of surfaces like these, to see the unexpected beauty of them when slightly abstracted. The Old Vic Extension is nearer to Le Corbusier, with the shuttering on clear display, with the imprint of the wood so clear that it looks considerably more "organic" than the bits of slatted wood stapled onto contemporary apartment blocks.

It has since been painted. These three very different approaches to the material were superseded by something much more extreme, visible at the Southbank Centre by the Greater London Council Architects Department (fig. 2), where in seemingly deliberate reference to the utilitarianism of the Atlantic Wall the concrete is bunker-like, devoid of charming gestures; it is, however, a tactile sensation, full of various kinds of different treatments to the surfaces, all of them different in pattern, in glint, and to the touch. It appears from a distance to be obnoxious—windowless, monochromatic. It's quite specifically not architecture designed to look good as a two-dimensional representation or even from a distance; it, and the many Brutalist buildings like it across the UK, from the Birmingham Library to the Preston Bus Station to the Ulster Museum, have to be experienced, demand involvement and physicality, and require more than a distracted glance. It is this physicality that explains their current unpopularity.

Brutalism meant concrete and concrete meant Brutalism. It somehow fused with a British architectural-moral tradition which went back to Arts and Crafts and the Gothic revival, based on a series of political/aesthetic identifications: honest constructions for an honest society, the marks of work being left for a society that favoured the worker, and the showing of a building's workings as a means to demystification. The style, too, was Gothic—huge spans, rough materials, a persistent hint of melody and drama and even the sinister, buttressing and vaulting—an angry, aggressive approach that scraped towards the clouds, and contrasted between shafts of bright, coloured light and crepuscular gloom. It was Pugin in ferroconcrete. Accordingly, it is a very different beast to the seemingly similar American Brutalism of the likes of Paul Rudolph, which had none of this moralist baggage.

The discovery Le Corbusier made at Marseilles was apparently accidental—he'd intended to design in steel, but concrete was cheaper. Corbusier had designed in concrete since the 1920s, and initially that material masqueraded; it did so for most of the first few decades of modern architecture, although the rhetoric of truth to materials was just as prevalent then. Concrete buildings looked, in their natural state, rough, as though their material was an uneven, sloppy aggregate. It was smoothed and rendered into surfaces which intended to look machine-made but actually required meticulous craftsmanship in order to convey their elaborate fib. Le Corbusier, perhaps consciously taking up efforts made by Latin American architects before the war, decided to make a fetish of what concrete really was—a slop, fixed rigid by shuttering and setting; the marks of the wooden shutters were invariably left on the surface as a testament to the labour that had gone into them. Sculptural motifs were set into the concrete afterwards. At Le Corbusier's various Unités, the effect is both cave-like and brightly optimistic, a rather



Not Concrete by Owen Hatherley

The most noticeable thing in British modern architecture as it has been practised since the mid-1990s is cladding. In cities where public housing was semi-privatised, that meant the attaching of tupperware to concrete towers of various kinds, but it was by far the most prevalent in new construction, especially in apartment buildings. The current orthodoxy—alternatively called CABEism,¹ neomodernism, pseudomodernism—disdains postmodernism's aesthetic of pastiche and irony, its apparent dishonesty, and its lack of truth to materials, but that hasn't impeded the craze for the clad one bit. There are certain materials that get applied to the in-situ concrete frames that form the skeleton of such buildings: red tiles, introduced in the late 90s by Richard Rogers at Potsdamer Platz and Battersea, where they alternate with wide expanses of glass; tresa, an industrially produced material produced to look vaguely like stone or wood; thin veneers of brick, red or yellow, often streaked or splashed with florescence; wood of various kinds, often applied as slats to balconies, which are themselves usually metal clip-ons onto the frame; and stucco, or render, which when made cheaply, has a tendency to flake. Alternately, glass panels, usually in a 'barcode' facade appear slightly closer to modernism of the mid-century Miesian mode.

That's a lot of different materials, and in many apartment blocks they will all be applied at once, as a rather naïve effort to hide the overwhelming and ungainly mass of very small speculative flats; "dovecots," as the blogger Penny Anderson calls them. It's also quite specifically English; elsewhere in Europe, a similar typology is built usually only with stucco on the façades or even with just painted concrete. An argument could maybe be made for all this on the basis of the excitement of multiple materials, but that would entail them having some particular tactile quality; but they never do, instead there is an almost imperceptible skin, with the flatness of a computer screen. The materials always want to be something else, but can't—the wood never looks as "warm" and "organic" as it wants to, the brick never looks even remotely load-bearing, the tresa panels are often instantly recognizable as such, irrespective of what might be printed on them. They're there simply to look good in the advert, but they also have a singular negative virtue—they are not concrete.

The United Kingdom has a weird relationship with concrete, where it has become a kind of swearword. It is applied as such to post-war buildings that are clad in mosaic tiles, or made from the same Portland stone as St Paul's Cathedral—either way, it's just a grey mass. It is strange, then, that this material was so prevalent in the UK in the 1960s and early 1970s, and especially strange that it was usually used in such a rough, forthright, and aggressive manner, so overpoweringly physical in its approach. It's as if British architecture became for a time just too present, too there—it had to be dematerialized, it had to somehow cease to be a three-dimensional object, lest it somehow offend.

The architectural term that encompassed this, originally self-proclaiming and then pejorative, was Brutalism. In fact, the earliest "New Brutalist building" was not concrete at all, but a steel-framed building with glass and stock-brick infill, the Hunstanton School in Norfolk, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in the early 1950s. "Brutalism" here meant that Cromwellian fixation with "truth to materials"—

things are visibly made of what they're made of—and a bloody-mindedness with respect to form. It is not, unlike the Lilliputian contemporary schools being designed from prefabricated kits in Hertfordshire outside of London, on a child's scale or even, to critics, on a human scale. Rather, it is largely two boxes, one of them immensely long, running linear across the Norfolk flatlands. Its material qualities are mostly more ethereal than pliginistic, especially in the amount of glazing—this is a seaside town, and the blasting it got from the winds led to several complete reglazings. Brutalism's nomenclatural similarity to Beton Brut, the raw concrete used by Le Corbusier in his Marseilles Unité d'Habitation, meant that this soon became the dominant Brutalist material, and later examples of the form from the late 50s and early 60s—Stirling and Gowan's brick infill, the Hunstanton School in Norfolk, designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in

the early 1950s. "Brutalism" here meant that

Owen Hatherley is the author of three books, *Militant Modernism. A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain and Uncommon-An Essay on Pulp*. He is currently completing a PhD thesis, "The Political Aesthetics of Americanism—Constructivism, 'America' and the dreaming collective across the Moscow-Berlin axis, 1919-1934," at Birkbeck College, London.

Notes

1. The term CABE is coined by Rory O'Carroll in the article, "A New English Architecture," *The Architects' Journal* 230, no. 11 (2009): 22-33. CABE stands for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in the UK. O'Carroll states in a letter to the editor at the *Guardian*, Tuesday, October 19, 2010 that, "England has a new mode of architectural expression. It's called CABEism (by me, at least) and has taken ten years to perfect. It draws upon many sources: Gordon Cullen's *Townscape Philosophies*, Ian Sinclair's *Psycho-geographic musings*, public-private (usually develop-led) ideas about brownfield regeneration and transparent decision-making inspired by New Labour. Throw in a bit of old-fashioned modernism, concern around climate change and some mixed-messages about 'iconic' design. Finally, sprinkle liberally with branding concepts culled from 80s-style advertising culture, and what you have is CABE-ism."