

Abstract

Introduction: Brutal?

The word "brutal" has associations with cruelty, inhumanity, and aggression. Within the field of architecture, however, the term "Brutalism" refers to a post-World War II Modernist style, deriving from the French phrase *betón brut*, which means raw concrete (Clement 18). Core traits of Brutalism include functionalist design, daring geometry, overbearing scale, and the blatant exposure of structural materials, chiefly concrete and steel (Meades 1).

The emergence of Brutalism coincided with chronic housing shortages in European countries ravaged by World War II (Power 5) and government-sponsored slum clearance in the UK (Power 190; Baker). Brutalism's promise to accommodate an astonishing number of civilians within a minimal area through high-rise configurations and elevated walkways was alluring to architects and city planners (*High Rise Dreams*). Concrete was the material of choice due to its affordability, durability, and versatility; it also allowed buildings to be erected quickly (Allen and Iano 622).

The Brutalist style was used for cultural centres, such as the [Perth Concert Hall](#) in Western Australia, educational institutions such as the [Yale School of Architecture](#), and government buildings such as the [Secretariat Building](#) in Chandigarh, India. However, as pioneering Brutalist architect Alison Smithson explained, the style achieved full expression by "thinking on a much bigger scale somehow than if you only got [sic] one house to do" (Smithson and Smithson, *Conversation* 40). Brutalism, therefore, lent itself to the design of large residential complexes. It was consequently used worldwide for public housing developments, that is, residences built by a government authority with the aim of providing affordable housing. Notable examples include the [Western City Gate](#) in Belgrade, Serbia, and [Habitat 67](#) in Montreal, Canada.

Brutalist architecture polarised opinion and continues to do so to this day. On the one hand, protected cultural heritage status has been awarded to some Brutalist buildings (Carter; Glancey) and the style remains extremely influential, for example in the recent award-winning work of architect Zaha Hadid (Niesewand). On the other hand, the public housing projects associated with Brutalism are widely perceived as failures (*The Great British Housing Disaster*). Many Brutalist objects currently at risk of demolition are social housing estates, such as the Smithsons' [Robin Hood Gardens](#) in London, UK. Whether the blame for the demise of such housing developments lies with architects, inhabitants, or local government has been widely debated. In the UK and USA, local authorities had relocated families of predominantly lower socio-economic status into the newly completed developments, but were unable or unwilling to finance subsequent maintenance and security costs (Hanley 115; R. Carroll; *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*). Consequently, the residents became fearful of criminal activity in staircases and corridors that lacked "defensible space" (Newman 9), which undermined a vision of "streets in the sky" (Moran 615).

In spite of its later problems, Brutalism's architects had intended to develop a style that expressed 1950s contemporary living in an authentic manner. To them, this meant exposing building materials in their "raw" state and creating an aesthetic for an age of science, machine mass production, and consumerism (Stadler 264; 267; Smithson and Smithson, *But Today* 44). Corporeal sensations did not feature in this "machine" aesthetic (Dalrymple). Exceptionally, acclaimed Brutalist architect Ernő Goldfinger discussed how "visual sensation," "sound and touch with smell," and "the physical touch of the walls of a narrow passage" contributed to "sensations of space" within architecture (Goldfinger 48). However, the effects of residing within Brutalist objects may not have quite conformed to predictions, since Goldfinger moved out of his Brutalist construction, [Balfron Tower](#), after two months, to live in a terraced house (Hanley 112).

An abstract perspective that favours theorisation over subjective experiences characterises discourse on Brutalist social housing developments to this day (Singh). There are limited data on the everyday lived experience of residents of Brutalist social housing estates, both then and now (for exceptions, see Hanley; *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*; Cooper *et al.*).

Yet, our bodily interaction with the objects around us shapes our lived experience. On a broader physical scale, this includes the structures within which we live and work. The importance of the interaction between architecture and embodied being is increasingly recognised. Today, architecture is described in corporeal terms—for example, as a "skin" that surrounds and protects its human inhabitants (Manan and Smith 37; Armstrong 77). Biological processes are also inspiring new architectural approaches, such as synthetic building materials with life-like biochemical properties (Armstrong 79), and structures that exhibit emergent behaviour in response to human presence, like a living system (Biloria 76).

In this article, we employ an autoethnographic perspective to explore the corporeal effects of Brutalist buildings, thereby revealing a new dimension to the anthropological significance of these controversial structures. We trace how they shape the physicality of the bodies interacting within them. Our approach is one step towards considering the historically under-appreciated subjective, corporeal experience elicited in interaction with Brutalist objects.

Method: An Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative research that connects the researcher's personal experience to wider cultural understandings (Ellis 31; Johnson). It can be analytical (Anderson 374) or emotionally evocative (Denzin 426).

We investigated two Brutalist residential estates in London, UK:

(i) *The Barbican Estate*: This was devised to redevelop London's severely bombed post-WWII Cripplegate area, combining private residences for middle class professionals with an assortment of amenities including a concert hall, library, conservatory, and school. It was designed by architects Chamberlin, Powell, and Bon. Opened in 1982, the Estate polarised opinion on its aesthetic qualities but has enjoyed success with residents and visitors. The development now comprises extremely expensive housing (Brophy). It was Grade II-listed in 2001 (Glancey), indicating a status of architectural preservation that restricts alterations to significant buildings.

(ii) *Trellick Tower*: This was built to replace dilapidated 19th-century housing in the North Kensington area. It was designed by Hungarian-born architect Ernő Goldfinger to be a social housing development and was completed in 1972. During the 1980s and 1990s, it became known as the "Tower of Terror" due to its high level of crime (Hanley 113). Nevertheless, *Trellick Tower* was granted Grade II listed status in 1998 (Carter), and subsequent improvements have increased its desirability as a residence (R. Carroll).

We explored the grounds, communal spaces, and one dwelling within each structure, independently recording our corporeal impressions and sensations in detailed notes, which formed the basis of longhand journals written afterwards. Our analysis was developed through co-constructed autoethnographic reflection (emerald and Carpenter 748).

For reasons of space, one full journal entry is presented for each Brutalist structure, with an excerpt from each remaining journal presented in the subsequent analysis. To identify quotations from our journals, we use the codes R- and N- to refer to RB's and NC's journals, respectively; we use -B and -T to refer to the *Barbican Estate* and *Trellick Tower*, respectively.

The Barbican Estate: Autoethnographic Journal

An intricate concrete world emerges almost without warning from the throng of glass office blocks and commercial buildings that make up the City of London's Square Mile. The *Barbican Estate* comprises a multitude of low-rise buildings, a glass conservatory, and three enormous high-rise towers. Each modular building component is finished in the same coarse concrete with burnished brick underfoot, whilst the entire structure is elevated above ground level by enormous concrete stilts. Plants hang from residential balconies over glimmering pools in a manner evocative of concrete Hanging Gardens of Babylon.



Figure 1. *Barbican Estate*



Figure 2. Cromwell Tower from below, *Barbican Estate*.

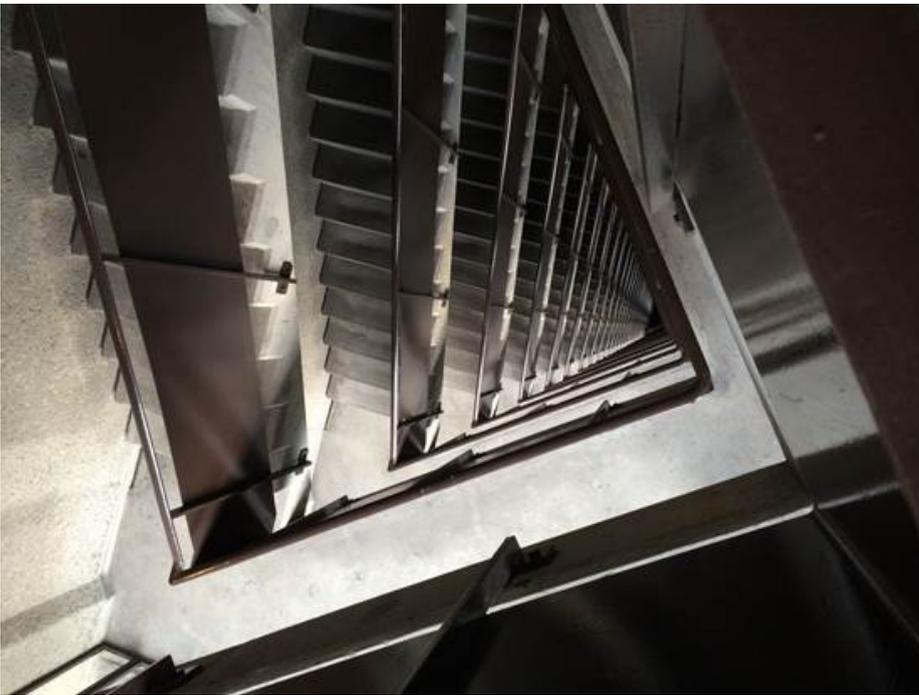


Figure 3: The stairwell, Cromwell Tower, *Barbican Estate*.



Figure 4. Lift button pods, Cromwell Tower, *Barbican Estate*.

R's journal

My first footsteps upon the *Barbican Estate* are elevated two storeys above the street below, and already an eerie calm settles on me. The noise of traffic and the bustle of pedestrians have seemingly been left far behind, and a path of polished brown brick has replaced the paving slabs of the city's pavement. I am made more aware of the sound of my shoes upon the ground as I take each step through the serenity.

Running my hands along the walkway's concrete sides as we proceed further into the estate I feel its coarseness, and look up to imagine the same sensation touching the uppermost balcony of the towers. As we travel, the cold nature and relentless employ of concrete takes over and quickly becomes the norm.

Our route takes us through the *Barbican's* central Arts building and into the Conservatory, a space full of plant-life and water features. The noise of rushing water comes as a shock, and I'm reminded just how hauntingly peaceful the atmosphere of the outside estate has been. As we leave the conservatory, the hush returns and we follow another walkway, this time allowing a balcony-like view over the edge of the estate. I'm quickly absorbed by a sensation I can liken only to peering down at the ground from a concrete cloud as we observe the pedestrians and traffic below.

Turning back, we follow the walkways and begin our approach to Cromwell Tower, a jagged structure scraping the sky ahead of us and growing menacingly larger with every step. The estate has up till

now seemed devoid of wind, but even so a cold begins to prickle my neck and I increase my speed toward the door.

A high-ceilinged foyer greets us as we enter and continue to the lifts. As we push the button and wait, I am suddenly aware that carpet has replaced bricks beneath my feet. A homely sensation spreads, my breathing slows, and for a brief moment I begin to relax.

We travel at heart-racing speed upwards to the 32nd floor to observe the view from the Tower's fire escape stairwell. A brief glance over the stair's railing as we enter reveals over 30 storeys of stair casing in a hard-edged, triangular configuration. My mind reels, I take a second glance and fail once again to achieve focus on the speck of ground at the bottom far below. After appreciating the eastward view from the adjacent window that encompasses almost the entirety of Central London, we make our way to a 23rd floor apartment.

Entering the dwelling, we explore from room to room before reaching the balcony of the apartment's main living space. Looking sheepishly from the ledge, nothing short of a genuine concrete fortress stretches out beneath us in all directions. The spirit and commotion of London as I know it seems yet more distant as we gaze at the now miniaturized buildings. An impression of self-satisfied confidence dawns on me. The fortress where we stand offers security, elevation, sanctuary and I'm furnished with the power to view London's chaos at such a distance that it's almost silent.

As we leave the apartment, I am shadowed by the same inherent air of tranquillity, pressing yet another futuristic lift access button, plummeting silently back towards the ground, and padding across the foyer's soft carpet to pursue our exit route through the estate's sky-suspended walkways, back to the bustle of regular London civilization.

Trellick Tower: Autoethnographic Journal

The concrete majesty of *Trellick Tower* is visible from Westbourne Park, the nearest Tube station. The Tower dominates the skyline, soaring above its neighbouring estate, cafes, and shops. As one nears the Tower, the south face becomes visible, revealing the suspended corridors that join the service tower to the main body of flats. Light of all shades and colours pours from its tightly stacked dwellings, which stretch up into the sky.



Figure 5. Trellick Tower, South face.



Figure 6. Balcony in a 27th-floor flat, Trellick Tower.

N's journal

Outside the tower, I sense danger and experience a heightened sense of awareness. A thorny frame of metal poles holds up the tower's facade, each pole poised as if to slip down and impale me as I enter the building.

At first, the tower is too big for comprehension; the scale is unnatural, gigantic. I feel small and quite squashable in comparison. Swathes of unmarked concrete surround the tower, walls that are just too high to see over. Who or what are they hiding? I feel uncertain about what is around me.

It takes some time to reach the 27th floor, even though the lift only stops on every 3rd floor. I feel the forces of acceleration exert their pressure on me as we rise. The lift is very quiet.

Looking through the windows on the 27th-floor walkway that connects the lift tower to the main building, I realise how high up I am. I can see fog. The city moves and modulates beneath me. It is so far away, and I can't reach it. I'm suspended, isolated, cut off in the air, as if floating in space.

The buildings underneath appear tiny in comparison to me, but I know I'm tiny compared to this building. It's a dichotomy, an internal tension, and feels quite unreal.

The sound of the wind in the corridors is a constant whine.

In the flat, the large kitchen window above the sink opens directly onto the narrow, low-ceilinged corridor, on the other side of which, through a second window, I again see London far beneath. People pass by here to reach their front doors, moving so close to the kitchen window that you could touch them while you're washing up, if it weren't for the glass. Eye contact is possible with a neighbour, or a stranger. I am close to that which I'm normally separated from, but at the same time I'm far from what I could normally access.

On the balcony, I have a strong sensation of vertigo. We are so high up that we cannot be seen by the city and we cannot see others. I feel physically cut off from the world and realise that I'm dependent on the lift or endlessly spiralling stairs to reach it again.

Materials: sharp edges, rough concrete, is abrasive to my skin, not warm or welcoming. Sharp little stones are embedded in some places. I mind not to brush close against them.

Behind the tower is a mysterious dark maze of sharp turns that I can't see around, and dark, narrow walkways that confine me to straight movements on sloping ramps.

"Relentless Employ of Concrete:" Body versus Stone and Height

The "relentless employ of concrete" (R-B) in the *Barbican Estate* and *Trellick Tower* determined our physical interactions with these Brutalist objects. Our attention was first directed towards texture: rough, abrasive, sharp, frictive. Raw concrete's potential to damage skin, should one fall or brush too hard against it, made our bodies vulnerable. Simultaneously, the ubiquitous grey colour and the constant cold anaesthetised our senses.

As we continued to explore, the constant presence of concrete, metal gratings, wire, and reinforced glass affected our real and imagined corporeal potentialities. Bodies are powerless against these materials, such that, in these buildings, you can only go where you are allowed to go by design, and there are no other options.

Conversely, the strength of concrete also has a corporeal manifestation through a sense of increased physical security. To R, standing within the "concrete fortress" of the *Barbican Estate*, the object offered "security, elevation, sanctuary," and even "power" (R-B).

The heights of the *Barbican's* towers (123 metres) and *Trellick Tower* (93 metres) were physically overwhelming when first encountered. We both felt that these menacing, jagged towers dominated our bodies.

Excerpt from R's journal (*Trellick Tower*)

Gaining access to the apartment, we begin to explore from room to room. As we proceed through to the main living area we spot the balcony and I am suddenly aware that, in a short space of time, I had abandoned the knowledge that some 26 floors lay below me. My balance is again shaken and I dig my heels into the laminate flooring, as if to achieve some imaginary extra purchase.

What are the consequences of extreme height on the body? Certainly, there is the possibility of a lethal fall and those with vertigo or who fear heights would feel uncomfortable. We discovered that height also affects physical instantiation in many other ways, both empowering and destabilising.

Distance from ground-level bustle contributed to a profound silence and sense of calm. Areas of intermediate height, such as elevated communal walkways, enhanced our sensory abilities by granting the advantage of observation from above.

Extreme heights, however, limited our ability to sense the outside world, placing objects beyond our range of visual focus, and setting up a "bizarre segregation" (R-T) between our physical presence and that of the rest of the world. Height also limited potentialities of movement: no longer self-sufficient, we depended on a working lift to regain access to the ground and the rest of the city. In the lift itself, our bodies passively endured a cycle of opposing forces as we plummeted up or down numerous storeys in mere seconds.

At both locations, N noticed how extreme height altered her relative body size: for example, "London looks really small. I have become huge compared to the tiny city" (N-B). As such, the building's lift could be likened to a cake or potion from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. This illustrates how the heuristics that we use to discern visual perspective and object size, which are determined by the environment in which we live (Segall *et al.*), can be undermined by the unusual scales and distances found in Brutalist structures.

Excerpt from N's journal (*Barbican Estate*)

Warning: These buildings give you AFTER-EFFECTS. On the way home, the size of other buildings seems tiny, perspectives feel strange; all the scales seem to have been re-scaled. I had to become re-used to the sensation of travelling on public trains, after travelling in the tower lifts.

We both experienced perceptual after-effects from the disproportional perspectives of Brutalist spaces. Brutalist structures thus have the power to affect physical sensations even when the body is no longer in direct interaction with them!

"Challenge to Privacy:" Intersubjective Ideals in Brutalist Design

As embodied beings, our corporeal manifestations are the primary transducers of our interactions with other people, who in turn contribute to our own body schema construction (Joas). Architects of Brutalist habitats aimed to create residential utopias, but we found that the impact of their designs on intersubjective corporeality were often incoherent and contradictory. Brutalist structures positioned us at two extremes in relation to the bodies of others, forcing either an uncomfortable intersection of personal space or, conversely, excessive separation.

The confined spaces of the lifts, and ubiquitous narrow, low-ceilinged corridors produced uncomfortable overlaps in the personal space of the individuals present. We were fascinated by the design of the flat in *Trellick Tower*, where the large kitchen window opened out directly onto the narrow 27th-floor corridor, as described in N's journal. This enforced a physical "challenge to privacy" (R-T), although the original aim may have been to promote a sense of community in the "streets in the sky" (Moran 615). The inter-slotting of hundreds of flats in *Trellick Tower* led to "a multitude of different cooking aromas from neighbouring flats" (R-T) and hence a direct sensing of the closeness of other people's corporeal activities, such as eating.

By contrast, enormous heights and scales constantly placed other people out of sight, out of hearing, and out of reach. Sharp-angled walkways and blind alleys rendered other bodies invisible even when they were near. In the *Barbican Estate*, huge concrete columns, behind which one could hide, instilled a sense of unease.

We also considered the intersubjective interaction between the Brutalist architect-designer and the inhabitant. The elements of futuristic design—such as the "spaceship"-like pods for lift buttons in Cromwell Tower (N-B)—reconstruct the inhabitant's physicality as alien relative to the Brutalist building, and by extension, to the city that commissioned it.

Reflections

The strength of the autoethnographic approach is also its limitation (Chang 54); it is an individual's subjective perspective, and as such we cannot experience or represent the full range of corporeal effects of Brutalist designs. Corporeal experience is informed by myriad factors, including age, body size, and ability or disability. Since we only visited these structures, rather than lived in them, we could have experienced heightened sensations that would become normalised through familiarity over time. Class dynamics, including previous residences and, importantly, the amount of choice that one has over where one lives, would also affect this experience. For a full perspective, further data on the everyday lived experiences of residents from a range of different backgrounds are necessary.

R's reflection

Despite researching Brutalist architecture for years, I was unprepared for the true corporeal experience of exploring these buildings. Reading back through my journals, I'm struck by an evident conflict between stylistic admiration and physical uneasiness. I feel I have gained a sympathetic perspective on the notion of residing in the structures day-to-day.

Nevertheless, analysing Brutalist objects through a corporeal perspective helped to further our understanding of the experience of living within them in a way that abstract thought could never have done. Our reflections also emphasise the tension between the physical and the psychological, whereby corporeal struggle intertwines with an abstract, aesthetic admiration of the Brutalist objects.

N's reflection

It was a wonderful experience to explore these extraordinary buildings with an inward focus on my own physical sensations and an outward focus on my body's interaction with others. On re-reading my journals, I was surprised by the negativity that pervaded my descriptions. How does physical discomfort and alienation translate into cognitive pleasure, or delight?

Conclusion

Brutalist objects shape corporeality in fundamental and sometimes contradictory ways. The range of visual and somatosensory experiences is narrowed by the ubiquitous use of raw concrete and metal. Materials that damage skin combine with lethal heights to emphasise corporeal vulnerability. The body's movements and sensations of the external world are alternately limited or extended by extreme heights and scales, which also dominate the human frame and undermine normal heuristics of perception. Simultaneously, the structures endow a sense of physical stability, security, and even power. By positioning multiple corporealities in extremes of overlap or segregation, Brutalist objects constitute a unique challenge to both physical privacy and intersubjective potentiality.

Recognising these effects on embodied being enhances our current understanding of the impact of Brutalist residences on corporeal sensation. This can inform the future design of residential estates. Our autoethnographic findings are also in line with the suggestion that Brutalist structures can be "appreciated as challenging, enlivening environments" exactly because they demand "physical and perceptual exertion" (Sroat). Instead of being demolished, Brutalist objects that are no longer considered appropriate as residences could be repurposed for creative, cultural, or academic use, where their challenging corporeal effects could contribute to a stimulating or even thrilling environment.

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