Brutalism

Brutalism does not sound like an architectural style; instead, it sounds pejorative and violent and is often misunderstood by the general public who perceive Brutalist buildings designed with poured reinforced concrete as bunkers. The Pittsburgh region has several fine examples of Brutalism.

Flat-roofed, rectilinear buildings have been designed since Walter Gropius and Adolph Meyer created the glass-sheathed Fagus factory in Alfeld, Germany, in 1911. Gropius and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), who called himself Le Corbusier, and their followers continued designing buildings intended to look more like man-made machines than buildings that would blend with the natural setting through the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Their buildings in the 1920s and '30s were iconoclastic, radical, and often embodied socialist or collectivist ideas. Yet, by the 1950s, Modernism—especially in America—had come to symbolize something different. After World War II, Modernist buildings were seen as a new streamlined force reflecting powerful post-war American corporations and the government. This was an ironic shift in perception, but one that frequently occurs when an older style is reinterpreted by a new generation or moves to another continent. And so, the architecture of the 1950s is populated with rectilinear buildings, often transparent due to glass curtain-walls, hung on steel frames.

Le Corbusier’s buildings of the 1920s were made of reinforced concrete sheathed in white stucco with deep-set, narrow windows. After World War II, he found the stucco had not weathered well, and he began to forego it, exposing the rough structure below. Concrete, called béton brut in French, was inexpensive, honest, and malleable. Le Corbusier’s first major use of the material was in the apartment complex Unité d’Habitation at Marseilles (1946-1952). One of the most important elements of the project was its proportionality, an element some followers overlooked resulting in buildings that overwhelmed rather than ennobled. Le Corbusier worked with a strict set of human proportions he called the Modulor; to show its importance he had a figure illustrating the system and its measurements cast in the concrete at the Marseilles building’s entrance.

Pittsburgh, often considered a town wed to traditional architectural styles, has a surprising number of fine Brutalism examples. Paul Schweikher (1903-1997), chairman of the Architecture Department at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) from 1958 to
1970, designed several examples for Pittsburgh: the Knoxville Carnegie Library at 400 Brownsville Road (1965-1966), the Duquesne University Student Union (1967) [above], and WQED studios on Fifth Avenue in Oakland (1970). The library meets the street abruptly with two massive metal hoods that admit light on the interior, but unfortunately add to the bunker-like reputation of the style. The Student Union and television studios are more successful; their concrete interiors are warmed with natural colored woods and large window openings in the offices and gathering spaces. They are both massive concrete buildings designed with human proportions in mind and with windows like voids rather than smooth parts of an exterior skin. Upon closer inspection their concrete skins have a texture created from the forms that held the wet concrete.

The firm Deeter Ritchey Sippel designed a Brutalist classroom building, Wean Hall (1968-1971) [left], to complete Henry Hornbostel’s grand quadrangle at CMU. Built for the Computer Science Department, it attempts to match the older buildings in scale and massing and continues the rhythm of Hornbostel’s projecting lecture halls as seen at Doherty Hall. Wean Hall is a complete departure from the finesse of the Fine Arts Building, yet straightforward in its use of materials and structure.

The Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral (1967-1971), 450 Maxwell Drive in the South Hills, is a departure from the rectilinear examples of Brutalist architecture. Designed by Aliquippa architect John V. Tomich (1929-2001), its curved apse, dome, and bell tower give the building a sinuosity revealing that Brutalist buildings need not be heavy, but can be light-filled and warm [page 12]. The interior’s soaring sanctuary, where the architect was married in 1972, is open and inviting. Tomich trained at Carnegie Tech and taught design there for a brief time in the late 1970s after a stint with Skidmore Owings and Merrill in Philadelphia.
Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, 1967-71.
Tasso Katselas (1927-) designed some of the earliest Brutalist buildings in Pittsburgh and often used brick in combination with exposed reinforced concrete, as seen at 552 Neville Street (1958). Here he uses the *pilotis* or columns supporting the bulk of the building as Le Corbusier often did, for example at Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, to keep an open space at street level. His medium of brick and concrete surrounding rows of windows dramatically shows the interplay of solids and voids. This effect is exaggerated at the Community College of Allegheny County's North Side Campus (1973) [below] by its hillside site, segmented plan, and warm-toned brown brick.

The beauty of Modernism and Brutalism depends on craftsmanship, exacting proportionality, and clean lines without excess ornament. The open spaces and honest use of materials appealed to a war-weary generation in the mid-20th century, and architects trained to take up the mantel produced thoughtful, measured buildings in the Brutalist tradition for Pittsburgh.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.