

Brutalist Trauma, Picturesque Repair

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CITYMAKERS 3

PRAGMATICS OF THE PICTURESQUE STRATEGIES FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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ABOUT CITYMAKERS

Each year, the Citymakers series brings together developers, planners, academics, journalists and collaborators to look beyond the boundaries between practitioners and the public; between a site and the city; between spaces and society.

Organised by Allies and Morrison's Masterplanning Group, led by Antje Saunders and Emad Sleiby, Citymakers this year explored, over three sessions, different aspects of picturesque theories and principles. We invited a wide range of experts, collaborators and fellow architects to discuss the role of the picturesque in theory, in practice and across different historical periods.

perspectives

BRUTALIST TRAUMA, PICTURESQUE REPAIR

DIRK VAN DEN HEUVEL

I call this story; brutalist trauma, picturesque repair. But when rethinking the relationships between empire and picturesque, it might be better thought of the other way around – picturesque trauma and perhaps brutalism, has a use for repair and healing. Either way, it's a story of a husband and wife's architectural practice, a practice that was also their home. I seek to illustrate, that the work of the Smithsons was immersed in the picturesque, and how it offered a useful design strategy, long before such strategies and approaches to city repair were even part of the conversation.

In the post-war period, many architects and historians referred to classical imagery in the picturesque tradition, and the Smithsons were no different. A frequently referenced image is Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*, 1648 (pictured on page 61), which the Smithsons used to accompany an essay, *Cluster City*, in a 1957 issue of *The Architectural Review*. Here, amongst images of the vernacular, of landscape and of new patterns of habitation and urbanisation, sits this classical Poussin painting, as the Smithsons outline ideas for a new shape for the community. The image for them represented a crucial question of the time; in observing the consistent hierarchical building forms represented in Poussin's vision of the classical city, they ask, "can modern architects create an equally convincing image of the city without being caught in some similar closed hierarchy?"

Debate raged about the New Brutalism in the pages of architectural journals of the time. The Smithsons believed that Brutalism was a much-needed response to a mass-production society, and that it attempted to "drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces" at work. To this point, Brutalism had been discussed stylistically whereas they maintained, its very essence is ethical. To drag a rough poetry out of those powerful, confused forces, one could argue is not so much a call for the avant-garde, rather a call for radical contextualism.

The project that brought the Smithsons world fame was Hunstanton Secondary School (1949-54, now Smithdon High School), which you'll see is already imbued with the picturesque spirit. It's the first project of New Brutalism, but also remains very much Neo-Palladian, at least in its affinities. Considering *The Economist* building, London (1959-64), one of the Smithsons most well-known examples, the pair fully realised this contextualism and elements of the picturesque tradition. It remains a true example of relational architecture. Walking from the plaza, the block opens up, the view of the street and the Victorian façade beyond is resultantly brought into the whole composition. Looking down St James's Street where the building resides, *The Economist* is emersed in the streetscape, it's almost an artifice. To draw the environment in through strategic framing; there is a gestalt idea, but this is clearly a picturesque design strategy, and the Smithsons

were accused of betraying Brutalism, in favour of the picturesque.

When talking about contextual design, Peter Smithson would emphasise the importance of the new reenergising the old. As a project for city repair, it's about a reciprocity between the old and the new; the urban fabric and the modern architecture. So what sort of convincing design can architects bring to the modern city using picturesque strategies? Pathways and routes can structure and reorganise both cities and landscapes. This of course speaks to the way movement is at the core of the picturesque sensibility; moving, a corporeal experience, a common thread which features consistently throughout their work. Alison Smithson would talk extensively about the pair's weekend home, Upper Lawn Pavilion, near the ruins of Font Hill Abbey, and the picturesque connections it had. She integrated her experience of these connections into her understanding of the landscape – even when that landscape is being navigated by car. The language Alison uses in *AS in DS* (1983), written when she was teaching in Delft in the early '80s, is about sensibility, the perception of landscape, how movement and modernisation change that perception and these intrinsic values.

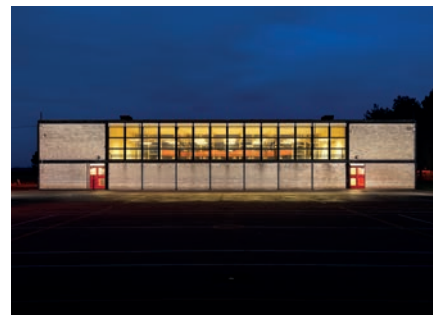
Continuing the theme of movement in navigating the landscape, I came across a vast collection of drawings from a 1959, lesser-known project. One which aimed to understand the landscape of London, to approach the design of green spaces, to create

differences and new densities in response to post-war modernisation, clearly employing picturesque strategies. Other work, very much in this tradition are those of the pedestrian walkways in Cambridge, aimed to counter the already prevalent threat of tourism, shown additionally through their series of walking guides for the cities of Bath and Oxford. Peter Smithson had an ongoing reflection on city space in relation to the built urban fabric of historic cities and how we understand cities as human animals. With a keen focus on material and movement, *Italian Thoughts* explores small interferences and entries to the city, emphasising how they should be minimal. He highlights markers of the land; gates, bridges, routes, of where to enter the city and how to navigate the landscape.

The 70s sees the Smithsons embark on a different journey, but still hold onto the picturesque. We see their focus change and become much more autonomous in their thinking, moving away from influence one felt from the modernist voices of the pre-war period - Mies van de Rohe, Le Corbusier. A piece by Alison, *The City Centre full of Holes*, talks about the importance of repairing our cities which are falling apart due to the impacts of industry and impact still felt from the war. The now demolished Robin Good Gardens, Poplar, London, should also be understood in this way. The design focuses on the buildings but they are very carefully situated in relation to the landscape of the Docklands. The landscape features prominently in

the drawings and is designed as a piece of land aimed at restoring calm and creating a particular energy. The topography of the central garden area between buildings has been shaped by the rubble of the buildings which formerly stood on the site. This embracing of landscape out of the ruin and its relationship to the new is influenced by the picturesque. Alison wrote extensively about the lyrical appropriateness of this tradition, she believed ruins were always a good reason to start again and a sign of hope.

Lastly we consider Ansty Plum, the weekend home of Roger Rigby, Partnership Director for Ove Arup, and built by David Levitt in a Brutalist style. Peter Smithson built a small porch extension and more interestingly, the pathway going up to the house, which Peter compared to the pathway up to the Acropolis. The pathway really activates the very steep approach to the house, activating the land through creating connections and new and deliberate views of the surrounding landscape. His work at Ansty Plum exemplifies this proposition and incorporates the ruin of the old cottage that once stood on the site, re-energising the space by creation of a secret garden, enclosed from the wider landscaping on the side of the hill. True picturesque repair in the context of Brutalism.



THE SMITHSON'S HUNSTANTON SECONDARY SCHOOL, 1949-54



'THE MAN ON THE ECONOMIST PLAZA', LONDON, 1959



IMAGE FROM *ITALIAN THOUGHTS*, ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON, 1979



ANSTY PLUM, WILTSHIRE, ENGLAND, PRESENT DAY

Allies and Morrison

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