

Beyond Bauhaus - The allure of Israeli Brutalism

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By BARRY DAVIS JANUARY 12, 2019 07:27



MERKAZ HANEGEV.
(photo credit: ELI SINGALOVSKI)



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It is not difficult to see why **Brutalism** has had its fair share of bad press. For starters, there’s the moniker, which, naturally, conveys an elemental, if not visceral, outlook.

Then again, any negative thoughts about the architectural style that was all the rage here and elsewhere around the globe in the 1950s to 1970s, could be easily allayed, were you to get yourself over to Beersheba. The Negev Museum of Art in the “capital of the Negev” is currently running the “Dreaming in Concrete” exhibition. The show is subheaded “The style that built Beersheba,” which adds a nice local, although not parochial, touch to the offering.

The exhibition features photographs of striking and even alluring specimens of brutalism dotted around the city, with works by photographers Gabriel Benaim and Eli Singalovski, as well as contributions from Yael Itzkin, Shlomi Ara and Sharon Yokev, who combine snapping buildings with designing them.

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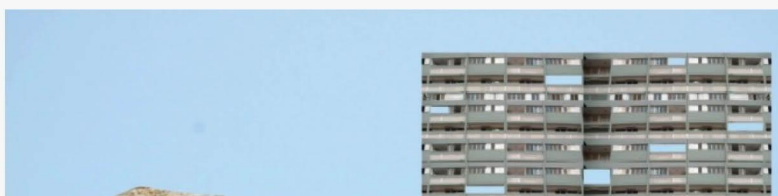
I put it to Eran Tamir-Tawil, who, along with Hadas Shadar and Omri Oz Amar, curated that the museum layout, that the architectural discipline did not do itself any favors with its choice of moniker. Tamir-Tawil appreciates the nominal deterrent and, in fact, says the situation is even less favorable that I'd thought.

"People tend to be put off by the name and by the actual style, so there is no incompatibility between the name and the style," he notes. Well, there is something to say for honesty.

As admirable as playing it straight may be, if you are putting on an exhibition, you want people to come in off the street and spend an hour or so perusing the fruits of your curatorial labors.

"The Brutalist style was very popular among architects in the 1950s and 1960s, and even in the 1970s."

Still, it must have taken a little getting used to for the uninformed consumer on the street. Brutalism is a far cry from, for instance, the elegance of the Bauhaus architectural style, which flourished here in the 1920s and 1930s. Then again, maybe there is some common ground between the two subgenres. It seems some of the leading proponents in the field were equally enamored with the very different takes on physical aesthetics.



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“The fact that [leading Swiss-French architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret] Corbusier, for instance, explored and worked in both styles connected the two.”

You don’t need to be an expert in the finer nuances of architectural design to appreciate the glaring gulf between Brutalism and Bauhaus, otherwise known as the international style. Corbusier and his fellow professionals must have undergone some sort of epiphany in their own lives to make the conceptual leap from the delicate clean lines of the earlier discipline to the seemingly less sophisticated look of rough-and-ready concrete.

Then again, there are some prints in the Negev Museum exhibition that draw the eye and even tug gently on the heartstrings. Take a look, for example, at Singalovski’s shot of the arcade at the Faculty of Humanities, of Ben-Gurion University. Untouched building material notwithstanding, there is a palpable sense of Gothic majesty about the location. Then there’s the nocturnal picture of the beehive-like structure of the university’s Aranne Library, with the interior illumination shining out of the roof level windows. The setting lends the complex structure an air of magic, regardless of the down-and-dirty concrete walls.

I remember my own reaction to encountering the seemingly basic look of, for example, the Sacker Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tel Aviv, when I was a student there in the late 1970s and early 1980s, not to mention the dorms where I resided for much of that period. At the time, I thought that being a not fully Westernized country with a first-world national budget, Israel had to scrimp a bit when it came to constructional veneer. I never imagined I was looking at a bona fide architectural idiom with a reasoned philosophy behind it.



BRUTALISM’S FORMAL language was more than a design caprice on the part of the post-WWII generation of architects who rebelled against their predecessors or underwent a change of tack themselves. There is something refreshingly unfettered about the Brutalist approach, which, when you think about it, is a direct result of the post-war era’s emphasis on functionalism and the rejection of traditional architectural styles.

about, was a natural fit for the pioneering spirit of the young state of Israel – and particularly of those who settled in the Negev in the country’s early years.

It is said that architects who went the Brutalist way sought truth and authenticity devoid of frills. As noted in the exhibition blurb: “Brutalism aimed to show the structure’s truth, not to cover it with plaster; to disclose the process and effort entailed in building it; and to presence simple construction materials – chiefly concrete.”

According to Tamir-Tawil, the stripped-back approach actually has some classical aspects to it that its predecessor lacked.

“I think the International style was far less monumental, in terms of its character, than Brutalism. Brutalism, from the outset, lent itself to monumentalism.”

That, the curator explains, was also a product of the gradual post-war revival.

“The country wanted to demonstrate its power, so they built in a more stark monumental style.”

Beersheba was tailor-made for such an avenue of public expression. As a basically new city rising out of the arid desert landscapes, it was an ideal backdrop for showing off the pioneering spirit in architectural terms, too, and the fact that it was largely a state-built town helped to create a largely uniform line of building aesthetics.

“Buildings in the Brutalist style were characteristic of public construction throughout Israel, and was considered a ‘sabra/native-born’ style – rough but straightforward, power-driven yet daring,” the exhibition background material notes. “Beersheba is a unique and riveting example of Israeli and international Brutalism. Because the state was a pivotal factor in the city’s construction, Brutalism’s presence in the city is more notable and central than in other cities and fabrics in Israel that were principally designed by the private sector, which tended not to design in that style.”



Meteorological facts on the ground also contributed to the prevalence of Brutalist design down south.

“The desert landscape, the hot climate, and historical precedents of desert construction engendered distinctive architectural motifs, in turn creating a valuable local dialect of Israeli and worldwide Brutalism. Among them are the sealed perforated facades of Beersheba’s Municipality building and the tent motif of the Bavli Synagogue.”

As *Dreaming in Concrete* clearly shows, sometimes the architectural language offered delightful expressions of seductive eloquence, with powerful oxymoronic cocktails of bare concrete with voluptuous linear departures. The pristine angularity of Ben-Gurion's Faculty of Natural Sciences, for example, hath charms, while the elongated Quarter Kilometer apartment building and the now-derelict Orot Cinema structure leave more than a little to be desired in the aesthetics department.

Clearly, not all the Brutalist projects dreamed up by the municipal authorities and the architects worked, but *Dreaming in Concrete* offers an enticing overview of Beersheba's constructional development, and, to my mind, makes a walking tour of the city's Brutalist structures an attractive proposal.

Dreaming in Concrete closes on February 2. For more information: (08) 699-3535 and www.negev-museum.org.il

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