Published at **En Blanco** n.9/2012 pages 130-2
Avaliable at: http://www.tccuadernos.com/enblanco_numero.php?id=86

Brutalism?
Some Remarks About a Polemical Name, its Definition, and its Use to Designate a Brazilian Architectural Trend

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Abstract

The term Brutalism is both used and ignored in the architectural literature of the second half of the twentieth century. A thorough analysis of the term shows that it does not have a single, agreed-upon meaning. Although its definition and frequent use have not provided an unequivocal characterization of a Brutalist "essence," to use Reyner Banham's words, there seems to be no shortage of architecture identified as Brutalist, even if they are only superficially related. Paradoxically, instead of disregarding the term as inappropriate or vague, we might consider it adequate if we agree that what is common to all the architecture referred to as Brutalist is nothing more than their appearance. By accepting a non-essentialist definition of this movement, one may correctly apply the term to a number of different works, from different places, designed between 1950 and 1970. For the most part, what really connects these buildings is not their essence but their surface, not their inner characteristics but their extrinsic ones. Such a straightforward definition, encompassing the broad variety of Brutalist works, has the merit of providing a working definition of a broadly influential if understudied movement in modern architecture.

Fifty years after Brasilia's inauguration in 1960, Brazilian architecture remains stuck in the same frozen images of a glorious moment in history. Some recent surveys take note of contemporary Brazilian architects, but maintain the distorted image of the uniformity and millenarianism of modern Brazilian architecture, ignoring the very significant changes that were occurring even before Brasilia's construction.[1] That lacuna would be just another insignificant episode, worthy of a minor historical correction, if it were not for the sheer quality—and quantity—of São Paulo Brutalist buildings, the majority of which are still in use.

Even an abridged account of the main Paulista Brutalist works would be too long to present here, and in any case, it is available elsewhere.[2] A proper study of the conceptual framework in which these buildings were conceived and built is still necessary to avoid misunderstandings that frequently arise with the all-too-often-used label of 'regionalism'. Paulista Brutalist architecture is not an isolated manifestation rooted in a strictly local context. On the contrary, it shares the rhetoric and results with several other international forums of the 1950s–1970s. Wherever Brutalism appeared around the world[3], most designers adopted it as a kind of alternative architectural language, often spicing the discourse about their practice with a vaguely moral tone, stressing the necessity of preserving authentic modern ideals (with different interpretations of what that actually meant) and exhortations not to betray those ideals and to pursue an ethical discourse as the proper basis for the practice of architecture. This discourse was then predicated on an optimistic assessment of advances in construction technique and enthusiasm for their adoption by the construction and manufacturing industries. More often than not, Brutalism found expression in an architecture characterized by a monumental aesthetic and exposed construction details and materials—of the latter, especially exposed concrete, frequently used in daring structural propositions.

By the 1960s, Brutalism was a label shared—but not necessarily accepted—by many architects in many countries. There are good reasons for continuing to employ that label; most obvious among them is the marked similarity of the visual aspect of many so-called Brutalist works, and their roughly common dates of construction, regardless of their location.[4] There are a few significant examples of Brutalist buildings in the 1950s, followed by a crescendo in the beginning of the 1960s, and then a period of consolidation in the beginning of the 1970s. From then on, one observes a trend toward formulaic repetition. This, along with the emergence of certain technical problems (mostly, the poor weathering of exposed concrete), quickly exhausted the initial creative impulse, giving way to a Mannerist stylization that for many good reasons was much disliked by authors of surveys written in the 1980s. The best examples of Brutalist architecture were thus overlooked on account of the worst.

Brutalism flourished at roughly the same time throughout the world, but the different economic, political, and historical realities of the various countries where it was practiced resulted in different national or local contributions. Some of these were simply matters of detail, while others involved differing ideological and political positions. This variety of manifestations impedes a direct and uncontroversial connection between so-called Brutalist ethical / political beliefs and Brutalist architectural form. Even if we were to accept the name Brutalism as a handy label to

group together many works from different places, these works still cannot easily be interpreted as constituting a movement sharing distinct ethical standards.

However, they can easily be perceived as constituting a fairly homogenous style—perhaps the only bond between all Brutalist works is their aesthetic. The variety of Brutalist architectures share common visual characteristics, which derive from similar constructive, plastic, and technological features, such as the tendency toward monumentality, the use of unfinished materials, the emphatic display of structural solutions, and the tendency to exaggerate certain architectural and constructive details.

The term Brutalism should not be narrowly defined as having had a single national origin—except, perhaps, in the postwar works of Le Corbusier. And since most Brutalist buildings, regardless if they were also part of local or national trends, were designed and constructed during the same twenty-plus-year period, the term by no means belongs to any one of its most familiar manifestations—for example, the so-called British New Brutalism, for which historians often inaccurately claim precedence. Brutalism had no central geographic focus. Perhaps it is best conceived of as a generational achievement, helped by that period's easy exchange of images through widely circulated professional magazines and journals, which published works from different countries that looked similar. Editors and critics used the term Brutalism in an effort to characterize an international phenomenon, perhaps with no clear understanding of its precise limits and significance.

About the label: Brutalism in its many guises

Though the term Brutalism was coined relatively recently, it is not easy to analyze, given its inconsistent use and varied definitions. Such a task would not be complete, or even possible, without revisiting Reyner Banham's *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, among other sources. Above all others, this was the publication responsible for the origin and crystallization of the myth that Brutalism (or, in Banham's terms, New Brutalism) was a movement created and nourished by British architects.[5] Banham's book is more-often mentioned and quoted than critically read or studied. An attentive analysis reveals just how vigorously Banham endeavored to promote a myth that establishes the predominance and precedence of British architects in the constitution of Brutalism. He accomplishes this through a precise but abbreviated and partial historical account, cleverly seasoned with some interesting anecdotes whose aim is not to arrive at a general definition of Brutalism but to promote British architecture from 1944–1964, with the main focus on the creative contribution of the architects Alison and Peter Smithson.[6]

Banham was extremely successful in his mythmaking, and it is not uncommon, even today, to find Brutalism portrayed as purely British in origin. Moreover, there remains the pervasive belief that the term can be correctly applied only in Banham's circumscribed sense (more precisely, as he uses it in the first half of his book), and that its use would be unjustified in other circumstances —even though Banham himself did not hold this position.[7] Let us, instead, more precisely apply the term 'New Brutalism' to identify a young generation of British architects from the postwar period who were dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the ongoing tension between continuity and

transformation of the modernist tradition. This is the sense in which the Smithsons used the term in their texts published from 1953 onward, which was first picked by Banham in a 1955 article and then in his later book.[8] And let us use the term 'Brutalism' as it was consecrated by common use: it begins to be used to indicate Le Corbusier's *béton bru,* as a constructive material, a building technique, and an artistic attitude; and its use is extended after the end of the 1950's to define other more ordinary works, designed by countless architects all over the world with or without the same high quality of Le Corbusier's examples.

From about 1960 onward, Brutalism emerged as a more or less recognizable style supported and validated by its initial exemplary works of the 1950s. In 1959, the first explicit statements of a Brutalist affiliation appear in connection with certain works, though these rarely originate with the architects themselves. More frequently they come from commentators and critics, who always base this assessment on a detailed description of the works, not on an *a priori* body of doctrine, although in some cases one can detect a few timid attempts in that vein.[9]

When commenting on these works in his 1966 book, Banham suggests the existence of a "Brutalist connection."[10] The phrase attempts to account for the simultaneous flourishing in several countries and regions of the world of works in tune with the Brutalism canon though not necessarily affiliated to one another, or sharing a central focus (except perhaps the original connection with Le Corbusier's contributions). To illustrate the "Brutalist connections" Banham includes works in Italy, Switzerland, and Japan and gives only one example Latin America, from Chile.[11] Although he does not mention Brazil or more precisely, São Paulo Brutalist works, there would not be any logical impediment to his including them, since the results, circumstances, and dates are compatible with his other examples.

A more-careful analysis of the broad panorama of the period's architecture reveals that Brutalism, as an architectural trend, appears internationally in works designed or constructed from 1953–55 onward. Facts – meaning, the works, and their correct dates of design – clearly show that the Brutalist aesthetic did not emerge in Britain first and foremost, as an insolated phenomenon; instead, that brutalist works (or more precisely, works that can be connected with that architectural trend) appeared around the same time in several different parts of the world – and also in São Paulo, Brazil[12].

Half a century after its initial works, the nature of Brutalism trend continues to be ill-defined, impeding its recognition as an important phenomenon in the architectural history of the mid-twentieth century. This movement, like others that succeeded it, flamed like a Roman candle: by the end of the 1970s, it began to be ridiculed and reviled, both by the laypeople and in critical surveys of modern architecture. Because it was largely employed for the design of public and official buildings, Brutalism was labeled—first by influential writers advocating stylistic and historic eclecticism, and later by neoliberal critics—as a mistaken and miscarried movement, aesthetically and politically. For these and many other reasons, Brutalist architecture has never received the attention it deserves, let alone a systematic assessment of its contributions.

The non-essential character of Brutalism

The absence of more systematic definitions of the term Brutalism, despite its frequent if imprecise application to certain modern architectural expressions of the mid-twentieth century, is paradoxical. Is this term so vague that, in the end, it is not even worth an attempt to employ it in a coherent and consistent manner?

According to William Curtis, neither postmodernism nor Brutalism is easily characterized as a style, although each term is capable of designating a group of aspirations and rejections, however vague they may be.[13] Yet in fact it is not difficult to adduce the formal, constructive, and symbolic characteristics of Brutalism, which easily can be extracted from the ample range of works to which the term has been applied. What seems to slip through one's fingers is a way to grasp, among so many and such diverse productions, something more than their likeness, more than a certain tactile sensibility. As Curtis states, the only thing which really links Brutalist architectures is captured in a "cliché," namely that "this architecture was the exposed concrete surface, obtained with the help of rough timber formwork."[14] Yet, this too is insufficient to grasp Brutalism as a tendency, let alone a style. In any case, the term Brutalist seems inappropriate because it lacks any essential quality or substance capable of linking beyond any doubt the majority of its manifestations. Such an essential quality might perhaps be ethics, or at least a moral standard applied to architectural design. However, this would not be a definition, but a subterfuge, escaping from the vagueness of one domain—architecture—to the even greater vagueness of another—the ethical-moral dominion—leaving architecture to ally itself with philosophy, without solving our problem of definition.

Instead of discarding Brutalism as an inappropriate, conceptually vague term, we might find, paradoxically, that it is suitable, once we adopt a pragmatic or phenomenological approach. All one has to do is renounce the search for an internal, essential harmony between Brutalist works and accept, instead, that what really unites them is their appearance. If we accept this putatively superficial definition and cease to look for an essential one, then we can, without logical inconsistency, bestow the title Brutalist on a group of correctly dated works sharing similar formal and surface characteristics, even though each one of them and / or their creators might hold different conceptual, ethical, and moral attitudes. In other words, some buildings can be called Brutalist simply because they appear to be so, since what determines their inclusion in the group is not their inner essence but their surface—not their intrinsic characteristics but their extrinsic manifestations. With this understanding of Brutalism, it is possible to label the Brazilian Paulista architecture of the 1950s and 1960s as Brutalist, and to introduce it as a contribution among other, also forgotten Brutalist manifestations around the world.

São Paulo Brutalism: works and comments

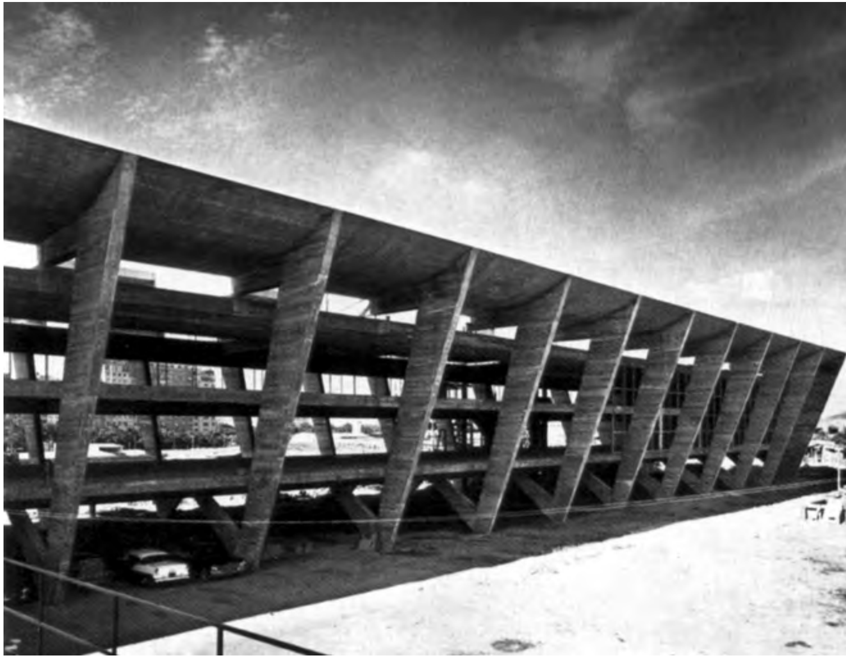

Figure 1. Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro, 1953

In Brazil, Brutalism's earliest manifestations appeared in the early 1950s in Rio de Janeiro, when modernist Affonso Eduardo Reidy shifted from his lighter Carioca-Corbusian style to the strong exposed-concrete porticoes of the Museum of Modern Art.

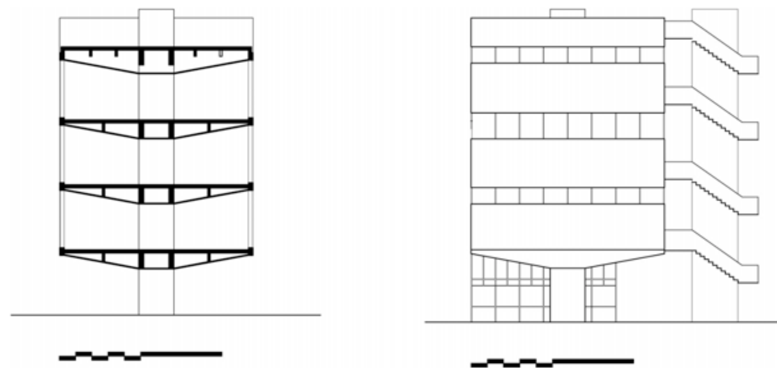

Figure 2. Helio Duarte and Ernst Mange, Engineering School, São Carlos, São Paulo, 1953

Also in 1953, architects and engineers Helio Duarte and Ernst Mange proposed a three-story linear block over pilotis for the Engineering School of the University of São Paulo, a reworking of Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion in an all-concrete construction. The central double column was continued through all levels, supporting a cantilevered slab and defining built-in infrastructural ducts. All details, including the free facades, were designed on a modular grid; the beauty of the composition emerges from its discipline, which, owing to its regularity, is suitable for prefabrication.

Figure 3. Roberto Tibau, Astrophysics Municipal School, São Paulo, 1956

The Astrophysics Municipal School sits amid greenery of the Ibirapuera Park. An elongated rectangle, it is composed of huge extended beams with enclosing walls. Many internal and external voids define terraces, verandas, and habitable spaces in a markedly horizontal solution. The building was recently restored and painted white.

Figure 4. Vilanova Artigas and Carlos Cascaldi, Elementary School, Itanhaém, 1959

In the 1950s, many other significant São Paulo Brutalist buildings explored daring new ideas in prestressed concrete. These were designed either by architects with engineering expertise, as in the case of Duarte and Mange, Tibau, and Vilanova Artigas, or by a new generation of gifted young architects who had been trained in architecture programs only recently separated from the polytechnic schools, but still under their pragmatic, structural, and Constructivist-oriented influence. By contrast, architectural programs in Rio de Janeiro remained under the influence of the Beaux-Arts tradition.

Figure 5a. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and João de Gennaro, Paulistano Club Gymnasium, São Paulo, 1958

Figure 5b. Joaquim Guedes, Cunha Lima House, São Paulo, 1958

Most notable among the younger Paulista architects of the 1950s generation was Paulo Mendes da Rocha (winner of the 2008 Pritzker Prize) and João de Gennaro's winning entry for the Paulistano Gymnasium competition (1958). Mendes da Rocha and de Gennaro proposed huge structural concrete columns supporting a concrete donut slab and rising up to anchor the cables supporting a metallic scrim that covered the sunken sports arena. This remarkable spanning solution emerged from a habitable concrete structure, which defined a plaza just above street level. Another example of remarkable designs from this generation was the Cunha Lima House, designed by Joaquim Guedes, where a light tree-like structure emerged from four columns anchoring the house to the steep site.

6. Bittencourt House, architects Artigas & Cascaldi, SP, 1959

7. Elementary School, architects Artigas & Cascaldi, Guarulhos, 1960

Figure 8. Artigas and Cascaldi, Santapaula Club Boathouse, São Paulo, 1961

The Santapaula Boathouse was a singular work merging Brutalism and Wrightian undertones. A high degree of structural and formal experimentation characterizes this relatively small building, with a very simple program and scarce site limitations. A tripartite rectangular slab is supported by two longitudinal prestressed concrete beams with a subtle arched and slightly folded design, dispersing the weight over eight joints made by bulky steel blocks, each pair different from the other. As in other Paulista Brutalist works, architects took advantage of the plasticity of poured-in-place concrete.

Figure 9. Artigas and Cascaldi, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP), São Paulo, 1961

Artigas was always aware of the architectural developments of his time. His mature work addresses a wide range of formal, structural, and compositional paradigms, and often offers outstanding and original solutions. Although the FAU-USP building is a closed rectangular block covered with a homogenous grid of square skylights, inside, eight half-levels are connected by ramps, defining usable spaces and voids and all collected around a central covered courtyard. The openness of the interior is reversed on the exterior: the apparently heavy concrete facades, dark in shadow, are supported on a few widely spaced columns.

10. São Paulo Football Club Dressing-Rooms, architects Artigas & Cascaldi, SP, 1961

Figure 11a. Mendes da Rocha and de Gennaro, Guaimbé Residential Tower, São Paulo, 1962

Figure 11b. Telesforo Cristofani, Giselle Residential Tower, São Paulo, 1968

In the 1960s, the use of concrete in every detail and surface, combined with structural experimentation, characterized Paulista Brutalism. This architectural language first appeared in houses, schools, and clubs, and then quickly spread to other program types (even more conservative ones, such as speculative high-rise towers). Early examples of the latter are the Guaimbé Residential Tower by Mendes da Rocha and de Gennaro and the Giselle Residential Tower by Telesforo Cristofani.

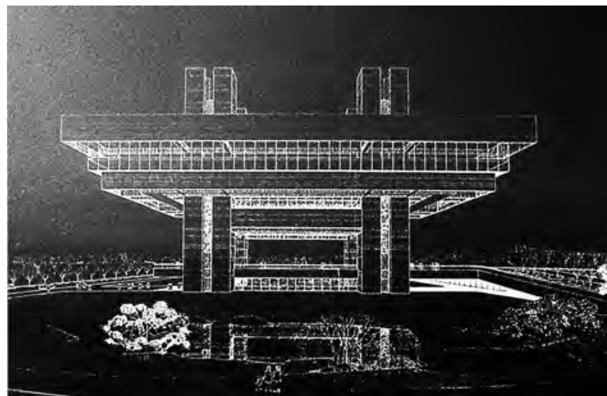

Figure 12a. Mange and Kato, South America Bank, São Paulo, 1966

Figure 12b. Tribunal de Contas, architects Croce & Aflalo & Gasperini, 1971

The theme of a single central column—a kind of Brutalist trope that, with slight variations, appeared in many different countries—was explored by Mange and Kato in their South America Bank. Such central column schemes seemed to appear almost simultaneously, suggesting not some hierarchical influence but a kind of creative dialogue crisscrossing the world in Brutalist connections.

Figure 13. Lina Bo Bardi, São Paulo Art Museum (MASP), São Paulo, 1961

This is perhaps the most famous Brutalist building in São Paulo. The Italian-born Brazilian architect Bo Bardi's contribution to local architecture was both actual and polemical in the 1960s and 1970s through her influence not only as an architect but also as a critic and cultural agent / provocateur. The MASP is indisputably a landmark, but currently suffers from several unfortunate renovations that have compromised its character.

Figure 14. Hans Broos, St. Boniface Parish Centre, São Paulo, 1965

This masterpiece of Paulista Brutalism is an enclosed concrete box elevated over four peripheral columns and crowned by a bell tower. Below the pilotis is an open plaza, a few steps above street level atop the roof of the below-grade communal facilities (following the MASP example of a double building, one elevated and the other half-buried). Inside the church, the matte tones of the concrete walls creates an austere atmosphere, occasionally softened by the play of natural light and the sparkling of stainless steel details in the altarpiece and steel cables bracing the ramp. The only decoration is a concrete bas-relief of the Via Crucis.

Notes

[1] For example, see Lauro Cavalcanti, *Moderno e Brasileiro: a história de uma nova linguagem na arquitectura*

[2] For more visual information on São Paulo Brutalist architecture, one may refer to the author's research website, www.arquiteturabrutalista.com.br which also provides more information about the works studied, research criteria, and its conceptual frame.

[3] The appearance of brutalism trend all over the world seems to be simultaneous and deriving from the same sources, mostly, the contribution of Le Corbusier after 1945 for start and that of some other international masters like Marcel Breuer after the 1960's. A broader research on international Brutalism is being held by the author; hundreds of examples from several countries are being studied and the results regularly published at the website www.brutalistconnections.com

[4] The author is building on her previous research on the subject in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay through new research on the Brutalist trends of the 1950–70s in other American countries, namely Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

[5] Brutalism or New Brutalism? Even Banham is not completely consistent and clear in the use of the expressions, but alternates between both, probably to better superimpose them. New Brutalism is the term that the Smithsons used in their first essays, clearly indicating their reference to Le Corbusier's Brutalist works that they attempt to correct, not as a style but as an attitude. Instead, Banham did not want to acknowledge Le Corbusier's precedence, and without denying it, postponed the master's appearance in his book until chapter four, striving to distinguish the differences and to state a "discrimination between Brutalism as a creative style and the mere imitation of Le Corbusier." See Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold Pub. Corp., 1966), 88. But such discrimination is also operative, not only in British Brutalism, but in any other of the knots of the "Brutalist connection" spread all over the world: the best of Brazilian, Israeli, Mexican, Japanese, Canadian, South African (and so on) Brutalism are neither copies of Le Corbusier nor of its British counterparts. Rather, they were exactly contemporary, and the best of them were truly creative accomplishments.

[6] Banham begins his book with a bedtime story about the origins of the term Brutalism that suggests a connection with the classical Brutus profile of Peter Smithson and credits it to private talking among the mythical gods of the Far North at Uppasala—carefully forgetting to quote Le Corbusier and even titling the book's first chapter with a biblical resonance: "In the beginning was a *phrase*…" (shifting from John's gospel *Verb*). The narrative technique tends to the rapture and is aimed to seduce beyond logic—but of course, it would not resist a more-crude rational analysis that would easily demonstrate the insubstantiality of such statements.

[7] Just as an example among others: in their thorough study of Toronto's "concrete architecture" of the 1950s and 1960s, McClelland and Stewart prefer not to use "the confused term Brutalism […] the word comes principally from the work of English architects Peter and Alison Smithson, who, with their friend Reyner Banham, used the phrase the New Brutalism […]." McClelland and Stewart do, however, offer some remarks about the possible influence of the Smithsons and Le Corbusier on Canadian architects; see Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart, *Concrete Toronto: A Guidebook to Concrete Architecture from the Fifties to the Seventies* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007), 12. Classical surveys written in the 1970s and 1980s—including Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co,

Modern Architecture (New York: Electa / Rizzoli, 1986) and Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985)—do not use the term or use it only in connection with the British New Brutalism. Other comprehensive history of architecture books written after the 1980s and 1990s ignore the subject entirely—for example, Josep Maria Montaner, *Despues del movimiento moderno: arquitectura de la segunda mitad del siglo XX* (Barcelona: G. Gili, 1993)—or give a brief notice extracted from Banham's book.

[8] In a text written by Alison Smithson following the unbuilt house at Soho, published in *Architectural Design*, November 1953; Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism." *Architectural Review* 118 (December 1955): 354-361.

[9] For example, Italian critic Renato Pedio originally published in *L'Architettura*, February 1959 and also quoted by Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 127; also Italian, Bruno Alfieri Zodiac's magazine editor considers the works of São Paulo architect João Baptista Vilanova Artigas as a "*ricerca brutalista*." See *Zodiac* 6 (1960): 97.

[10] Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 131.

[11] The Portales neighborhood unity at Quinta Normal at Santiago, Chile, designed by Bresciani, Valdes, Castillo, Huidobro. He gives the design date of 1961–63, when in fact it was designed a decade before (1953), as can be seen in the original drawings housed today at the Centro de Documentación y Informacion Sergio Larrain Garcia-Moreno of the Catholic University of Chile at Santiago. Banham believes that "it seems extremely unlikely that there is any direct connection" between the Chilean architects and the LCC (London City Council) architects. In fact, if there is any connection, perhaps the inspiration is opposite what Banham would have believed, since LCC's works are posterior to those of the Chilean architects.

[12] Although, not only or exclusively in São Paulo. In fact, the first "brutalist" project designed in Brazil seems to be the MAM-RJ museum, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy in 1953, immediately after the design of his first "brutalist" attempt in Paraguay-Brazil High School in Asunción (1952); and brutalism also flourished in Northeast Region of Brazil probably as an independent trend with scarce connections with the São Paulo counterpart.

[13] William Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 550-602.

[14] Ibid, 602.