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The Brutalist Image & Robin Hood Gardens

The Brutalist Image

Brutalist architecture is defined by its relationship to the image.[1] From its inception as a style that emerged alongside the expansion of photography and mass communication in the latter half of the 20th century[2], to its increasing popularity in the 21st[3]; images have been crucial to how Brutalist architecture has been represented and mediated.[4] Understanding the relationship between the image and Brutalism has also been a key point of discussion by the style's proponents, especially architectural critic Reyner Banham who positioned one of Brutalism's defining characteristics around the notion of 'memorability as image'; or the ways in which the memory of an 'image' affects the 'emotions' and our engagement with architectural space. [5]

It is following Brutalism's connection to the image and Banham's mobilisation of the concept (particularly the photographic image) and its 'memorability' that I wish to explore in this paper, building on recent (re)turns to examine representation within cultural geography and the capacity of images to intervene in how we experience, interpret, sustain and (re)make forms of life.[6] At the same time, this paper contributes to a second academic discourse that has emerged within architectural geography which explores brutalist architecture and the efforts to reclaim it as an important critical, aesthetic, and political lens of enquiry.[7]

In framing this paper around these contributions, it provides a compositional and discursive interpretation of images of the soon to be demolished Robin Hood Gardens (RHG) estate in East London and how they contribute to visual strategies which influence how people have engaged with the site and wider Brutalist architecture. I focus on RHG for its significance as both an important example of Brutalist design by British architects Alison and Peter Smithson but also because it sits at the heart of a number of political discussions surrounding the aesthetic politics of architecture and inner-city gentrification which has played out through the many images and visual representations which have tried to construct different (often competing) narratives of RHG.[8]

To develop my argument, I draw upon architectural images of the estate as examples through which to discuss visual strategies which influence how the site has been composed and represented. In particular, I draw out the similarities between 20th century Brutalist images and compare them to contemporary forms of art and photography; from the work of Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi and John Maltby, to images uploaded to social media platforms such Instagram and Facebook, the artwork of Jessie Brennan[9] and the photography of Kois Miah.[10] My discussion is framed around three different visual strategies which appear across these different 'Brutalist images' of the estate,

focusing on the use of 'grids', 'the interruption' and the 'ruin'. Through these three themes this paper positions images of the estate (in all their diverse forms) as only ever part of a host of other processes and events that constitute aspects of RHG's 'Brutalist Image'– particularly as the estate shifts from a Brutalist social housing estate to urban ruin. As such the paper emphasises how buildings (as built forms of representation) interact with other systems and practices of representation. At RHG this is reflected in how the original ethical and aesthetic principles of Brutalism, developed by Banham and the Independent Group (IG) through the artwork and images they created and interpreted, have been re-invented by different artists and audiences in the present. As a result, the paper extends discussions within cultural geography which concern how we engage with different kinds of representation and how built spaces like RHG, are continually (re)interpreted and mediated through different kinds of image. [11]

Brutalism, Photography & the Image

In order to understand the context surrounding the relationship between RHG, Brutalism and the image I return to the style's origins in the early 1950s. Brutalism is widely acknowledged to have developed from the theoretical and practical engagements of Alison and Peter Smithson, Reyner Banham and other members of the IG throughout the 50s and 60s.[12] 'New Brutalism' as a term was first coined by the Smithsons in their essay for the design of the 'Soho House' (1953), using it to emphasise its simplistic and industrial aesthetic.[13] The term was then codified by Banham in his essay '*The New Brutalism'* (1955) which established three criteria for a Brutalist building; *Memorability as an image*; *Clear exhibition of Structure*; and *Valuation of Materials 'As Found'.*[14] These presented Brutalism as a movement with a distinct set of ethical and aesthetic principles which sought to challenge the prescriptive aspects of modernist art and architecture, instead emphasising the 'as found' material qualities of everyday life, and the interrelationship between people and different scales of the city. [15]

However, this paper is concerned with the first of Banham's criteria - 'Memorability as Image' and how it alludes to the relationship between Brutalism and visual forms of representation. In this sense the Brutalist image represented something that theoretically 'lodged' in the brain because it had something 'thing-like' about it. Banham once referred to them as 'concrete images'; images that can carry the mass of tradition and association, or the energy of novelty and technology, and deliver them to the beholding subject.[16] In theory you could capture the 'thingness' of everyday life and elevate it to that which was memorable, while still retaining all its associated pasts and contexts. Banham's use of the term 'image' throughout *The New Brutalism* is also quite particular, in that it is not used as representation, but to describe a material configuration that is immediately striking for

its ‘raw’ visual qualities that are not reducible to a formal logic.[17] He proposes that for a building to be Brutalist the shape of the building must be whole at a topological level.[18] Therefore, the building’s fabric is topologically the same as its programme, ‘just as a gramophone record is the same as a teacup if defined as a continuous surface with one hole’.[19] This ‘shape relation’ underlies the buildings image-ability, just as in the past geometry was the foundation for beauty, the idea of the ‘image’ comes to supplant beauty as the aesthetic approbation of modernity.[20] This approach enabled Banham and the IG to define their relationship to the visual world in terms of something other than geometry. These ideas reinforced the Brutalist image as radically anti-art, or anti-beauty in the classical aesthetic sense of the term.[21]

This also influenced Brutalism’s ethical underpinnings as its subversion of classical beauty was something Banham was keen to foreground, as he stressed the importance of ‘ethic’ before ‘aesthetic’.[22] This meant that while having a distinct aesthetic (built around Banham’s criteria), Brutalism’s proponents wanted it to be represented foremost for its ethical relationship to society, and how people inhabited space rather than simply the qualities of its appearance. This created an interesting interrelationship between the aesthetic principles of Brutalism, its ethics and how it was represented and constructed around particular images and image making practices. In this regard, what Banham, the Smithsons and the IG valued when it came to images of Brutalism were their intrinsic openness and integrity[23], in that they chose to construct Brutalism around images which they felt reflected these ‘ethics’ and acknowledged human presence and reflected life ‘as it was found’, as opposed to those that mindlessly sought the ‘beautiful’.[24] This creates a connection between the ethics of Brutalism and its image which makes them hard to separate, as its ethical principles presupposes a particular reading of the Brutalist image based around honesty and authenticity as dictated by the set of aesthetic criteria devised by Banham and the Smithsons.

This is illustrated by other members of the Independent Group, particularly Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi.[25] The Smithsons drew a great deal of inspiration from Henderson’s humanistic photography in Bethnal Green (**Figure 1**). His images conveyed a material world which embodied the working lives of those in the East End, creating a historical narrative that was shaped by the lives of people. Henderson placed a great deal of emphasis on capturing the ‘life’ of the street, focusing on the everyday lives of those at work or play, (**Figure 1**). The subtleties that his work conveys are regarded as capturing a Brutalist sensibility that looked at the overlooked, that discarded the values of an established high culture.[26] It is in these early images where we get a sense of how the Smithsons’ practice came to incorporate the humanistic approach and style of Henderson’s photography, informing many of the aesthetic elements which went on to be known as Brutalism.

The IG's fascination with the photographic medium also reflects the effect that photography and image culture were having on professional practice throughout the 1950s and 60s.[27] Images during this period rapidly increased in importance for communication across an array of fields, including, art, advertising, design, and architecture.[28] Colomina has written extensively about how architecture at the time was transformed by the rise of photography and mass media.[29] This reshaped the site at which architecture was produced – no longer was it simply located at the construction site but through print, publications, films and journals. Architects and artists, including those within the IG were integral to the production and proliferation of architectural images which shaped how buildings were understood, interpreted and engaged with. The anti-beauty emphasis of Brutalism reflects the influence of this transformation, as architecture was repositioned from a high artistic practice established in opposition to mass culture to one which was defined by it. Its focus on the 'as found' and use of the 'everyday' serving to position Brutalism as a movement that was counter cultural, anti-aesthetic but distinctly predicated on the 'image'.

[Figure 1.]

Brutalism & Robin Hood Gardens

In recent years Brutalism has seen a revival in popularity, as Lindner puts it 'Brutalism is back'.[30] On the internet, one finds blogs, Facebook groups, opinion articles and extensive coverage by lifestyle and architectural magazines such as Dezeen, Wallpaper and Monocle and Buzzfeed, each of which reproduce and reinterpret images of Brutalist architecture.[31] Brutalism's revived popularity brings about a new form of engagement with the style that has influenced how we interpret sites like RHG , it's contested history and demolition providing opportunities for amateur and professional photographers to capture a Brutalist building 'in its last days'.

RHG was designed as a commission by the Greater London Council, who faced with growing demands for more council housing decided to clear the 19th century tenement blocks (Grosvenor Buildings) between Robin Hood Lane and Cotton Street.[32] Completed in 1972, it was the only one of Alison and Peter Smithsons' major housing schemes to be built. Coming at the end of Brutalism's popularity, its most prominent features include its use of raised street decks (streets in the sky) and its emphasis on the pedestrian in structuring community space.[33] Similarly, its use of a ten-foot-high acoustic wall, as well as raised vertical fins on the estate's exterior to 'baffle' the sound of the surrounding Blackwall Tunnel[34] has given the estate a distinct appearance which has divided opinion, some referring to its appearance as 'prison like' [35] while others praise the noise cancelling effects for creating a 'calm pool' within a busy city. [36]

Since 2017 the estate has undergone demolition as part of the Blackwall Reach redevelopment scheme and is soon to be replaced with luxury flats. However, the redevelopment has been hit with controversy, with a heated campaign to try and list the estate which was backed by local residents and architects including Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid.[37] In the same year the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) salvaged a two-storey section of the site, leading to accusations of art/heritage washing, as the politics and experiences of previous residents were overlooked in favour of the site's significance as a heritage object.[38] This has meant the estate has become a site of pilgrimage for architectural enthusiasts who wish to document the estate before it is lost.

Underpinning the controversy surrounding the site's demolition are the ways in which images have been used to construct different narratives of the site. In recent years this has resulted in a gradual shift from images which celebrate the site as a space of home and optimism to ones which increasingly aestheticize the site as an urban ruin (making urban blight aesthetically desirable). My discussion examines this shift through three different visual strategies which have come to underpin how the site has been represented, from the use of framing and grids, the interruption and the ruin – each informing how the 'Brutalist image' continues to be mediated and constructed at RHG.

The Grid

Grids are a means to organize ideas visually through juxtaposition. Images utilising the grid are typically those in which the primary visual impression comes either from the overall framing of the image or from the operations of frames within it.[39] As a visual motif the grid has come to define modernist and Brutalist styles, as the art historian Rosalind Krauss notes in her seminal essay 'Grids', it 'functions to declare the modernity of modern art'.[40] Grids were a key part of the Smithsons' approach, particularly in their use of the CIAM grille (**Figure 2**). The grille or grid was a thinking tool for representing town planning projects at the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) which attracted architects from across the world with the objective of developing shared architectural principles.

The Smithsons' 'Urban Reidentification Grid' features the Smithsons' failed entry for the Golden Lane estate and was intended to display how the community should be built from a hierarchy of associational elements and how these could be expressed at levels such as the street, the district, and the city – drawing upon photographs by Nigel Henderson. [41] Henderson's images provided snapshots of an engaged city life within the technical language of urban reform.[42] The divisions of the grid provide a contrast to the fluid depictions of urban life. In the context of the conventions of the grid, these non-orchestrated photographs functioned in the manner of orthography, as measurable documents of reality.[43] The Smithsons believed that documentary photography

conveyed what they referred to as the 'as found', that needed to be reintroduced to architecture to equate a method of building with a way of life.[44] This use of the grid also reflects what Borden refers to as dialectical imagery, where juxtaposition through visual montage (via the application of the grid) allows conventional periodisations and causal explanations of chronology to be destabilised.[45] Meaning is then produced not by logical interpretation of facts and documents over regular intervals, but from a collision of politics, events, and ideas, shocked out from objects through their displacement in time and space within the grid. Similar conventions can be seen in work by Paolozzi and Henderson, for instance, 'A Study for a Parallel of life & Art' in **Figure 3** shows the conscious use of grids as a framing device to create juxtaposition between the ordered and the chaotic 'as found' elements of reality. We also see how collage is used to create the effect of a couple looking at a series of images displayed in a grid. The grid becoming a device for juxtaposition but also as repetition, as images are placed one after the other in a chaotic yet ordered manner. This forces the viewer to make their own connections between the images in order to derive their own meaning. Important, is the sense that these images have been made by a conscious intervention with a frame or a framing device. This is not the image 'as found', but rather the beginnings of a staged or constructed image or set of images.

However, in reality the grid only provides a window structure that serves to show fragments of visual reality.[46] Like the space of a newspaper or an illustrated magazine, the grid is a space where information is arranged and rearranged, that the reader navigates in his or her own way, at a glance, or by fully entering a particular panel. As a result, the viewer constructs the space, actively participating in the design, reflecting the logic of the mass media as multiple forms of content are presented for the viewer to consume simultaneously.[47] This highlights the very conscious choices that were made by the Smithsons and the IG in how they constructed the Brutalist aesthetic, slightly at odds with Brutalism's supposed appreciation of materials and conditions in situ. Instead, it reflects Colomina's assertion that modernist architecture is intertwined with mass media and highlights how reality is mediated through grids to cultivate a perceived aesthetic of honesty and realism[48].

[Figure 2.]

[Figure 3]

Looking online, the grid also mediates how we view RHG, particularly in how social media platforms choose to group similar content together. In contrast to the IG's use of the grid as a frame for

juxtaposition and scale, sites such as Instagram and Facebook use the grid as a format for homogenisation, as all images are uploaded into square formats for its users to consume. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive summary of Instagram and Facebook content, I wish to briefly explore how some users have engaged with RHG through the social media grid. Taking what Boys & Uitermark refer to as a microscopic perspective, I use a sample of images taken from January 2023, which represent screen shots of the first few pages of Instagram and Facebook while searching under the term 'Robin Hood Gardens'. [49]

What emerges is a rectangular grid of resized images (**Figure 4**), displayed primarily because of their searchable metadata. Each platform uses an algorithm to feed the user more of the same content. In a similar way to the Smithsons' CIAM grille, we are fed a narrow field of view that only portrays key elements of the site. This reduces architectural experience to what we can perceive through the grid square, the algorithm and the interface.[50] Illustrated by **Figures 4 & 5**, we only get snapshots that show the façade of RHG and its architectural features such as its raised aerial walkways. As such, Instagram and Facebook users selectively and creatively reassemble the city as they mobilise RHG as a stage or prop in their posts.[51] This is shaped by how viewers use Instagram and Facebook, as experiences of social media are marked by a prevailing aestheticization of everyday life as users capture individual urban experiences, supposedly set apart for their beauty or significance but collectively induce a degree of conformity (structured by the grid). [52] While users are aware of this selectivity and homogeneity they still produce images that their followers will appreciate.[53] This is reflected in **Figure 4** as we see a combination of images which similarly attempt to capture the estate's significant architectural features or its destruction.

By exploring how the Brutalist image is mediated through the use of grids, we can see that the compositional choices made by the IG and the format of social media platforms ends up being similar, but ultimately do different things. The IG use the grid to highlight and frame their own claims to reality, while the grid as a mode of display within social media represents a means through which images and depictions of reality are collectively formatted and presented. However, there is a similarity in the way architecture can be viewed through singular and collective forms of imagery, as both examples expose the viewer to individual viewpoints and representations of built space, either through Henderson's photography or individual uploads by Instagram users, which when viewed alongside each other through the format of the grid constructs a collective interpretation of architectural space. This extends our understanding of the building event[54] and how it has shaped by images, as the grid and social media bring together multiple experiences and temporalities via images of the estate which span periods when it was both lived in and no longer inhabited.

While historically Brutalism and the grid were related to how the IG sought to frame their ethical and aesthetic choices, we now see how RHG is mediated through different forms of the grid that transform its context to one that is constructed around instantaneous and collective practices of photography, where images are grouped together through the format of the app, and reproduced through shared formats. It identifies how social media has provided users with the capacity to instantly share their impressions and images with distant audiences.[55] Like the role of mass communication in shaping modernist and Brutalist architecture, the proliferation of social media has led to a further reinterpretation of RHG and the built landscape. This reflects the changing ontology of the photographic image as it shifts from indexing the real to equalizing it, creating a different condition of being, in which the very idea of 'reality' beyond the surface of the image and its cognitive reception is subverted.[56]

[Figure 4.]

[Figure 5.]

The Interruption

Another visual strategy which structures how RHG has been represented is through the interruption. These images involve the disruption of the intended frame of the composition by the active presence of animals, human figures, or objects, so that the viewer perceives space, object, and/or event simultaneously. For instance, the photographer Kois Miah emphasises the contemporary lived elements of RHG in order to reiterate the fact that it is first and foremost a space of home. His photographs of the estate originally published in the Guardian under the title 'Lived Brutalism' and more recently in the book 'Brutalism as Found', attempt to reinsert the faces of residents into discussions of RHG's demolition (**Figure 6**).[57] The images he presents of the estate are therefore 'interrupted' by the presence of people, humanising the estates architecture. His work provides a counter narrative to other depictions of RHG which show it as uninhabited or run down.

Yet these images are equally constructed, representing a staged moment in the life of RHG. As the estate nears complete demolition, all the residents photographed by Miah no longer live in the blocks. Similarly, the dilapidated elements of RHG are ignored in favour of a romanticised representation of family life. There is an emphasis in the way the original article is constructed that this is the 'real' depiction of RHG, more real than other representations. Yet, the realities of living on the estate were far more complicated, with a building very much in decline and a local council unable to provide much needed maintenance as the site awaited demolition.[58] What these images do is shift the aesthetic of RHG away from its architectural and structural elements to consider the people and communities that lived there. However, through its composition there is a greater sense

of what Henderson's work in Bethnal Green tried to capture, as both reflect a form of documentary photography which seeks to capture and preserve a form of East-London working-class life. However, where Henderson's images represent the traditions of post-war humanist street photography, as images appear non-staged and attempt to capture the relations between humans and their everyday environment,[59] Miah's are consciously staged and interrupt 'street life' through portraits of people within their homes. As a result, Miah's work is more overt in identifying the injustice of RHG's regeneration and the complexity of the families that lived there rather than simply a celebration of collective street life. It could be argued that the choice to represent the estate in this way reflects the wider critique of humanist photography since the late 70s, which is often seen to overlook conflict and injustice and typically preserved a western male gaze.[60] Miah's use of the interruption therefore gets straight to the point, it presents people on the estate and in doing so challenges the dehumanising forces of neo-liberal capitalism by reinserting the lives of those impacted by the site's demolition back into wider representations and discussions of the estate.

Returning to **Figures 4 & 5** there is a different use of the interruption and the narrative it portrays, particularly the couple in the image on the right-hand side, as they take a 'selfie' next to the estate. The selfie reflects a form of 'mediated portrait', where part of the photographer is presented within the image, creating a visual co-presence where the photographer's subjectivity is foregrounded, and the uniqueness of the personal experience is portrayed.[61] At the same time, the mediated portrait or 'selfie' functions to create an alignment with the ambient social media viewer positioned as 'sharing' in the experience.[62] The mediated portrait also foregrounds the activity being performed by the photographer at the time they take the image. At RHG what we see is people sharing in the aesthetic experience of being 'present' at sites of Brutalist architecture. It presents how part of the experience of Brutalist architecture is something that is performed and encountered through touristic practices of 'visiting' and documentary, legitimised through the act of taking a selfie.[63] The experience of RHG and its reality is therefore based on the performance of the photographer, as the practice of being seen in front of the camera is foregrounded as opposed to relying on the indexicality of the building.[64]

These ideas are not limited to the selfie, the Smithsons have employed similar strategies in the way they chose to photograph the Hunstanton School. For instance, images by John Maltby show it according to the conventions of the published architectural photograph – 'Detached from site and use, a town school with no town, a school gymnasium with no children, washbasins pristine' (**Figure 7**).[65] This creates images which focus purely on the aesthetics of the Smithsons' design, intended for an audience composed of the architectural elite. In contrast, images of the school by Nigel Henderson demonstrate different interests; a building in process, revealing its construction with the

presence of painters at a window and the architects lounging in the building's entrance (**Figure 8**). This again reflects Henderson's humanist and documentary style, presenting a building that is the product of a process, an event, which is expressed through images of a specific incident.[66]

What emerges from these examples is how the interruption is used to generate different readings of architectural space. The Smithsons use the interruption to convey a sense of reality and authenticity, presenting their work as something that was 'raw' and 'as found'; for Kois Miah it works to represent the lived elements of RHG, constructing a sense of home which stands in opposition to the site's demolition; while the couple taking a selfie construct similar claims of authenticity but focus more heavily on presence and performance that signals their own claims to the site's aesthetic. These narratives grant a humanised tone to RHG and similarly reflect the ethical principles that the Smithsons attempted to communicate in their own work through documenting the relationship between people and the different scales of habitation.

[Figure 6.]

[Figure 7.]

[Figure 8.]

The Ruin

The revival of Brutalism is part of a similar phenomenon that has led to the explosion of interest in post-industrial ruins.[67] What characterises this trend is its spectacularisation of decay for voyeuristic pleasure and exploitation.[68] This 'ruin lust' is not tied to the lived, social experience of decay or deprivation, instead it revolves around the visual apprehension of ruin as aesthetic encounter.[69] The contemporary ruin has also become synonymous with the council estate wherein run down and 'grimy' aesthetic stereotypes metaphorically convey the endpoint of utopian twentieth-century social housing projects.[70] However, the image of the 'ruin' when applied to social housing has damaging consequences, as Slater presents how the visual characteristics associated with urban poverty is used to stigmatise those that live in post-war estates.[71] This produces reductive terms such as the 'sink estate', where the visual and aesthetic characteristics of the estate are used to condemn the population as they are implicated in the perceived decline of the location.[72] This has been true for RHG, featuring in reports and articles which document its material decline, including the Daily Mail where its image has been used to brand those living on the estate as being 'benefits scroungers'.[73] Thus, RHG embodies the contemporary ruin, where its ongoing demolition

distinguishes it as an object of cultural fascination and a source of both aesthetic pleasure and revulsion.

Returning to social media there are many images that focus purely on RHGs demolition as a chance for voyeuristic pleasure. For instance, in **Figure 4 & 5**, several images depict a half demolished west block, while several others show it vacant and empty prior to its demolition. Images of the demolition have become an object of fascination, yet they gloss over the lived aspects of the estate, and display little interest in the forces that produce, sustain, or revive urban ruins.[74] The V&A's exhibition at the 2018 Venice Biennale also reflects this ruin aesthetic, the depiction, removal, and subsequent display of fragments of the estate as pictured on the V&A's website in **Figure 9**, arguably reflect a voyeuristic fascination with the contemporary ruin. The Biennale also removed the estate from its original context, reinforcing RHG as an object of display, reducing its value to an image of 'curated decay'.[75] This is problematic when we consider that in their celebration of decay as desirable, images of the 'ruined' estate actively contribute to the visual imagery of gentrification, normalising urban inequality and deprivation.[76]

[Figure 9.]

However, the destructive and voyeuristic forces of the ruin are not always oppressive. To dismiss all depictions of RHG's demolition as actively involved in gentrification would prevent any opportunity to engage with the emancipatory potential of the ruin.[77] Thus, ruination is not necessarily reductive and could be operationalised to offer complex, oppositional depictions of working-class communities that counter dispossessive political ideologies.[78] For instance, the work of Jessie Brennan and her artwork 'A Fall of Ordinariness and Light' depicts RHG as it slowly goes through a process of 'ruination' (**Figure 10**), symbolising the fall of social ideals and progress. Her work provides a discussion of estate's demolition, presenting it as a space that has been neglected but still a site of home. She goes on to challenge the processes behind RHG's regeneration, highlighting 'the extraordinary greed of the London property market, especially as the estate sits in Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest and most unequal boroughs in the UK'.[79] Therefore, her work evokes the idea of the ruin and the processes behind it but without disregarding the social and political context within which it is embedded, moving beyond a 'ruin lust' which seeks only aesthetic appreciation.

Alison and Peter Smithson also had an interesting understanding of the ruin, inspired by American artist Robert Smithson, which presents a different perspective of 'ruin lust'. In 1976, the Smithsons exhibited a billboard-scale photograph of RHG, alongside a viewing bench modelled at the Venice Biennale. Within the exhibit was the caption 'A building under assembly is a ruin in reverse' - a phrase which had been borrowed from Robert Smithson, hinted at how Alison and Peter envisaged

and understood the relationship between construction and demolition and its connection to the landscape. [80] In exploring the ruin further, Robert Smithson developed the notion of the 'dialectical landscape'. For him, such a landscape uses the 'ruined resources of the past to imagine or re-imagine the future'.[81] Robert Smithson therefore conceptualized landscapes as a set of 'ruins in reverse', where even the unbuilt structures of an imagined city suggest the 'memory traces of an abandoned set of futures'.[82] Smithson proposes that topographical landscapes facilitate a dialectical conversation between the past and the future.[83] The dialectical landscape is 'a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region'.[84] 'Dialectics of this type', he argues, 'are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects'.[85] Thus, the contrasting images of Robin Hood Gardens' demolition and construction offer an insight to the various relations that surround the estate. We get a greater sense of how the Smithsons envisaged their own work and how they constructed a visual narrative that reflected a landscape that was constantly changing. Aesthetically there are similarities between construction and ruin, the presence of builders and the hollow outline of the building's shell in **Figure 8** create similar motifs. From the Smithsons' point of view, these images are part of the dialectical landscape through which you can encounter the past and present. It creates an opportunity to discuss the numerous relations between construction and demolition, that notions of 'ruin lust' would be quick to dismiss as purely aesthetic. In this sense the ruin and its construction offer an imaginary potential to conceive of new urban futures as well as considering the wider forces involved in urban regeneration.

[Figure 10.]

Concluding Remarks

By examining the 'Brutalist image' as it manifests at RHG, this paper has been able to extend recent attention within cultural and architectural geography which concern representation[86] and the aesthetics of architecture and its redevelopment[87]. In this sense, this paper has developed discussions of how a particular architectural style (Brutalism) is (re)produced at the scale of a single housing estate through different kinds of image over time – encompassing aspects of RHG's conception and its demolition. In doing so, it emphasises the power of images to re-animate the ethical and political tensions captured within them and the opportunities for reflection that depends on the historical context in which they emerge.[88] This has been achieved through an examination of different representational practices, design choices, artwork and interpretations, and how they are enacted around a specific building event to reproduce and reinterpret architectural space.[89]At the same time, this paper evidences the liveliness of different forms of representation by capturing the changing relationship between different images of RHG and Brutalism and how the two are

interwoven and have been reinvented by different audiences over the last seventy years. What emerges is a critical engagement with the multiple narratives, temporalities, experiences and practices that unravel the voices and politics surrounding what aspects of RHG are made visible and which are absent, highlighting a split between those that choose to humanise the lived aspects of the estate in contrast to those who focus on its design and ruination.

Specifically, this paper has highlighted the differences between the Brutalist image and ethics that the Smithsons and the IG were trying to cultivate and contemporary images of RHG. Although, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary representations of the estate reflect the changing ontology of the photographic image in relation to architecture and both the increased number of images that now circulate around built spaces since Brutalism's inception and the role of social media and the digital image in being able to create new and imaginative realities which re-interpret 20th century photographic and architectural conventions.[90] What this suggests is that many of the images and visual strategies that have emerged through social media reflect a re-invention or re-appropriation rather than an engagement with the ethical and aesthetic components of Brutalism as set out by Banham and the Smithsons.[91] This is particularly evident in the images from Instagram, Facebook which utilise the grid to format collective displays of the estate, in contrast to the IG's use of the grid to draw out connection between different scales of habitation.

Images of the estate also feed into wider aesthetic politics – particularly those concerned with the aesthetics of gentrification and the concern around how images, aesthetic choices and architecture are mobilised to facilitate acts of dispossession. [92] Images of RHG therefore become key sites at which the struggles over place and identity of the estate emerge, particularly those used by the V&A which uncritically represent urban decay as artistically pleasing in the form of the ruin and normalise urban inequality, which makes it easier for developers to justify demolition. [93] By choosing to highlight these discussions, alongside the role of images in both RHG's and Brutalism's construction, this paper provides a more nuanced discussion of how different kinds of aesthetic narrative have been constructed by different artists, social media users and photographers. For instance, Miah's and Brennan's images of RHG provide an opportunity to discuss the estate as a space of home which helps rehumanise the estate and provide an opportunity to counter the dehumanising aspects of inner-city gentrification[94]. In this regard, this paper challenges some of the more insidious aspects of how gentrification is mobilised through the image, by highlighting practices that make communities at RHG less visible and giving presence to those that rehumanise the estate.

These discussions also relate to the recent revival of academic discourse surrounding Brutalism as a style and whether it encompasses a particular ethic or aesthetic[95] and is connected to wider

dialogue into the 'aspirational qualities of architecture'.[96] As Brutalism is closely aligned with the post-war welfare state, the demolition of RHG and the loss of social housing is seen as an attack on these socialist ideals. The (re)surfacing of these debates arguably reflects the British absorption of modern architecture as an important political and heritage battleground and the increasing politicisation of particular architectural styles.[97] Images of the estate therefore continue to construct and shape these debates, with different narratives altering how it is viewed both online, within architectural media and by the public. It is therefore imperative that we continue to interrogate what images of architecture do in relation to the sites like RHG as they undergo gentrification and demolition and what they make possible.[98] It highlights the value of continuing to draw threads between the increasingly prolific and disparate sets of images surrounding architectural space in order to understand how they shape, mediate and resist/contribute to the politics of the built environment.

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