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BRUUT
ATLAS VAN HET BRUTALISME
IN NEDERLAND

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A book of significant weight and size is often jokingly referred to as a 'doorstop'. Monographs of architects or buildings have a tendency to turn out heavy and bulky; they don't sit comfortably in the hand and are a pain to take on one's travels, should the contents inspire one to do so. They do, however, look rather impressive on bookshop counters and on clients' desks. And it has to be said: on paper architecture is at its best in a large format and with razor-sharp pictures. The choice of the 'doorstop' format is highly appropriate for *BRUUT. Atlas van het brutalisme in Nederland*. Concrete is after all the main subject of this hefty tome, compiled by five devotees of this much-maligned material. 'A book that feels like a robust handshake,' according to architecture journalist Kirsten Hannema in her introductory essay, referencing the overpowering initial impression that brutalist buildings can have on people. They are unignorably present, indomitable and implacable, but on further acquaintance they often reveal their charm, beauty and tactility. 'A building you must dare to love,' Tracy Metz once wrote of the American embassy in The Hague, a design by Marcel Breuer and one of the hundred buildings in the book.

The editors hope that the selection of buildings featured in *BRUUT* will contribute to the revaluation of brutalism. They are tapping into the recent uptick in interest in brutalist architecture on social media, which they themselves have helped foster and where they discovered one another. But there are also a growing number of physical publications on brutalist architecture in neighbouring countries, the absolute front

runner being the United Kingdom. Every self-respecting bookshop or museum shop in London boasts a shelf filled with more or less serious works on that country's brutalist heritage. One of the most penetrating and entertaining of these is *Raw Concrete. The Beauty of Brutalism* (2016) by Barnabas Calder. It is hardly surprising that England is in the vanguard of such studies, given that brutalism is bracketed with the creation of the welfare state in the post-war decades and with the emergence of a completely new generation of architects. Alison and Peter Smithson are regarded as the founders of New Brutalism and their 1953 Hunstanton School is seen as marking the beginning of a new era. The authors of *BRUUT* rightly note that while brutalism in the Netherlands was never on the same scale as in the UK, it is certainly possible to find buildings deserving of the name.

That of course brings us to the big question of what precisely the definition of brutalism is. According to the authors there is no unanimous definition, rather a diffuse idea of what it could be. The popular Facebook group, The Brutalism Appreciation Society, thinks it is unfinished materials, unconventional forms, heavy materials and an air of inscrutability in the architecture. In the *Atlas of Brutalist Architecture* (2018), a comprehensive reference work featuring examples from 108 countries, the use of exposed concrete is not mandatory but notions like provocative, sculptural, brazenly evident and self-satisfied are associated with brutalism; characteristics that describe what the buildings' aura or the impression they make. The idea

that brutalism is not about the materials as such, but about the expressiveness was established back in 1955 by the architecture critic Reyner Banham. The editors of *BRUUT* reference his famous *Architectural Review* essay in which he was the first to refer to brutalism as a new movement in architecture. Banham characterized brutalist buildings as memorable objects that display their structure and in which materials are true to themselves, but he also cited other characteristics, such as brutal, uncompromising and unyielding.

According to the authors, the definition of brutalism is 'not set in concrete' but open to interpretation. This afforded them the freedom to posit their own concept of brutalism, which they encapsulated in five attributes. These attributes, or rather criteria, constitute the yardstick by which they judged a longlist of over five hundred buildings, eventually ending up with the selected one hundred most brutal buildings in the Netherlands. The criteria were in turn transposed into the acronym BRUUT. On the face of it a bright idea, but one that can sometimes come across as a bit forced. The B stands for *beton* ('concrete' in Dutch) and although all manifestations are embraced, the motto is 'the rawer, the better'. This is further emphasized by the R for *ruw* ('raw' or 'rough'), referring to unfinished surfaces and honest materials. What materials these might be apart from concrete, is not mentioned. The first U stands for the *uitgesproken* ('explicit') way in which the structure is revealed and sometimes accentuated. The latter recurs in the second U for *ultra*, which stands for big, heavy, massive and imposing with grotesque, sculptural forms. The T completes the acronym and refers to *textuur* ('texture'): how surfaces feel and reveal visual patterns. The one hundred selected buildings tick at least two boxes while the highlighted top twenty most brutal structures score on all five criteria. The editors have not fixated on the number of ticks, however. They felt it was also important that a building be redolent with the 'spirit of Le Corbusier', one of the founders of brutalism. It is a pity that they do not explain exactly what this entails, but it no doubt has to do with the provocative, bloody-minded and uncompromising demeanour of his architecture. It is precisely that expressive punch that makes brutalist buildings so imposing.

As befits an atlas, the selected projects are arranged according to region, revealing that the provinces of North and South Holland have the most to offer on the brutalist front. Nevertheless, the editors have managed to include a few often unknown, but equally interesting projects in the furthest reaches of the country or outside the urban area, like the Hogelanden office building in Farmsum, Groningen, the Oda apartment building in rural Sint-Oedenrode, and the look-out post in the infrastructural landscape of the

Volkerak Locks. And there are surreptitiously many more than a hundred buildings because the thematic chapters about housing, office buildings, school buildings and so on are also illustrated with projects that did not make the cut or have since been demolished. The book also contains a glossary and five pen portraits of brutalist figureheads and prolific brutalist designers, with the relatively unknown Sier van Rhijn emerging as an unexpected star. The portraits provide insight into their oeuvres and point out that the 'brutalist' label was often applied retrospectively to their work. It is not a clear-cut building style, but overlaps with several trends in architecture, such as large-scale post-war modernism as well as small-scale structuralism.

In the introduction the editors describe *BRUUT* as an initial attempt to produce an inventory of brutalist architecture in the Netherlands. That is selling their work short, however. It is a huge achievement to have organized and synthesized so much information about one hundred buildings into lively texts. The real pleasure of the book lies in those hundred descriptions. Although they vary in length, structure and depth, they are packed with nuggets of information that not only elucidate the brutalist aspects of the buildings, but also consider the spatial context, their backstories, the furore they caused and the witty nicknames they attracted (radiator, concrete court – the Dutch *betongerecht* is a play on *kantongerecht* or cantonal court). Together with the superb photographs they tell part of the story of one of the most consequential periods in the spatial and architectural development of the Netherlands. That story deserves to be kept alive because in spite of the growing interest in brutalism as a relevant and substantial part of the Post 65 period, its survival is still often uncertain. The old Royal Conservatoire building in The Hague has already fallen prey to the wrecking ball and more will surely follow. It is with good reason that the books' authors are keen to contribute to the revaluation of brutalism. With *BRUUT* they have laid a strong foundation for that endeavour.

WIJNAND GALEMA

