THE BRUTALIST TURN
AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONCRETE ARCHITECTURE
14—16.4.2019
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Prof. Architect Eran Neuman, Azrieli School of Architecture and Azrieli Architectural Archive

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Dirk van den Heuvel is an Associate Professor of Architecture at TU Delft. He leads the Jaap Bakema Study Centre at Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. His expertise is in postwar modern architecture and planning, and its related fields of architecture theory and history. His most recent book publication is Jaap Bakema and the Open Society (Archis, 2018).

In 2017, van den Heuvel was awarded a Richard Rogers Fellowship from Harvard University Graduate School of Design for his research project “Socio-Plastics,” which examined New Brutalism with regard to British welfare state politics. He was the curator of the Dutch pavilion for the 14th architecture exhibition of the 2014 Venice Biennale. Van den Heuvel also curated the exhibition “Structuralism” at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam (2014), together with Herman Hertzberger. In 2008, he curated the show “Changing Ideals: Re-thinking the House” for Bureau Europa, Maastricht. Together with Max Risselada, he organized two international exhibitions and publications: “Team 10 – In Search of a Utopia of the Present” (NAi, 2005) and “Alison and Peter Smithson – from the House of the Future to a House of Today” (010, 2004). Other book publications include Architecture and the Welfare State (Routledge, 2015, with Mark Swenarton and Tom Avermaete) and Lessons: Tupker / Risselada. A Double Portrait of Dutch Architectural Education (SUN, 2003, with Madeleine Steigenga and Jaap van Triest).

He is an editor of the series Delft Architectural Studies on Housing, DASH (nai010 publishers) and the open-access online journal for architecture theory Footprint, as well as an editorial board member of the Spanish open-access, online research journal VLC Arquitectura. He was also an editor of the journal OASE (1993-1999). His writings have been published in various international magazines and online media.

BRUTALISM AND THE WELFARE STATE:
HISTORIES OF DISPLACEMENT, 1952-2017

My presentation will look into the intersection of New Brutalism and welfare state politics, using the case of Alison and Peter Smithson to unpack some of the dominant myths of the period. I will use some of my recent research findings to hypothesize that when looking at the British state welfare system, we are seeing not so much a universalist project of citizens’ emancipation but rather a continuation of disruptive development at the expense of lower-class communities in particular.

It was Kenneth Frampton who suggested a direct link between the New Brutalism and the welfare state in his famed Modern Architecture: A Critical
History (1980, 1985). Yet, the link is not quite substantiated in his seven-page discussion of the architecture of the Smithsons, and Stirling and Gowan.

I will first contextualize the case of Robin Hood Gardens and demonstrate its rather exceptional qualities, not only in terms of its architecture, but especially in terms of the local council policies and the larger history of the construction of the London Docklands and its immediate housing districts.

Secondly, I will highlight some of the propositions as conceptualized by the Smithsons for the welfare state-architecture nexus, and how they – at first optimistically, but also naively – developed their ideas over the years, from the cheerfulness of the House of the Future in 1956 to the pessimism of “The Violent Consumer” in 1974 and from embracing the ideas of the Labour politician and Minister for Health and Housing Aneurin Bevan as described in his book In Place of Fear (1952), to Team 10’s dismissive discussions of the “Labour Union Society” in the mid-1970s.

My presentation will conclude with a few observations concerning the afterlife of Robin Hood Gardens and the demise of the British system of planning and housing. I will also address the ruthless metabolism of a “superstar city” like London (Richard Florida, 2017), which devours its own architecture and history in its relentless striving for capitalist hegemony as driven by the speculative logic of global real estate surplus value.