UNMASK - Digital Thinking with Brutalism

Jacob Cram

York University
Toronto, Canada
jacob@jacobcram.xyz

Abstract

Brutalism originally rose to popularity in architecture as a response to excessive ornament, and lack of clarity in the function of buildings. Inspired by the modernists it took on many of the aspects, but stripped away any obfuscation of the functionality of the building. In recent years this design theory has been brought back for use in the field of web design, for the same purpose of removing obfuscation of function. The application also created pages that are more accessible to both those with disabilities, and those in developing countries, where connectivity is limited. This expansion of these theories suggests their potential to be adopted in further areas, such as the creation of interactive art pieces, and installations.

Through examination of brutalist design theories in architecture, their adaptation into web design, and borrowing from the process of speculative design, a brutalist methodology was created. This methodology was simultaneously created alongside and applied to an interactive installation. The two established brutalism as a useful method of constant justification of any content or additions to a project or artwork. It encourages the creator to think about what is important, and needed for the project over what is expected.

Keywords

Interactive installation, brutalism, framework, methodology, reactive installation, generative art.

Introduction

Limitations are something that are growing to be less and less common in the digital world. Much of the work on digital platforms is removing any barriers or limitations that are imposed on it. However these limits can aid in the process of creation. Having barriers to work within means fewer paths to work down, meaning more effort can be put into a singular vision.

In the early 20th century, architecture was going through a similar loss of limitations. It was easy and faster to create buildings, which resulted in ones that were more and more ornate, without a reason for being that way. This sparked a rise in the modernist movement, which quickly spawned the brutalist movement. The goals of which were to pare down buildings to their most bare and honest form. [1]

These ideas can be valuable to adapt into the digital world, allowing the process to adopt new technologies without compromise, but keeping true to the intent and goals of the piece. I used these theories in practice to create a brutalist framework to work within.

The intent is to create a new approach to tackle design challenges, and change the way technology is handled and thought about. Adopting an honesty based framework to work within can provide a new, and interesting perspective.

History

Brutalism was meant to be a response to the optimism and appearance of ease that was common in the architecture of the 1930s and 40s, often featuring intricate and ornate detailing all over the building. [2] Brutalist architects saw this use of ornament as a way to hide the building. A dishonest representation of what the building truly was. They created buildings that were stripped bare of any
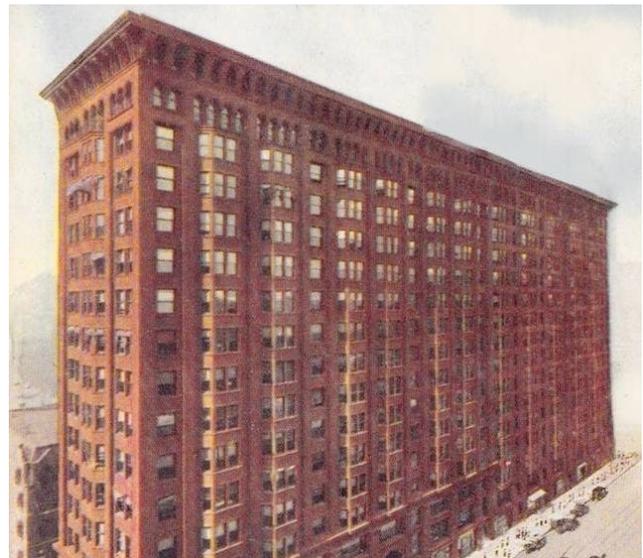

Figure 1. The Monadnock Building, Chicago. An early, heavily ornamented, skyscraper.

ornament, and brought the buildings down to their bare materials. Accentuating features of a buildings function that would often be hidden away in other forms of architecture become centrepieces for brutalism. There was no attempt to make the structures look easy, or comfortable, often aiming to go in the exact opposite direction of that. [1] It was meant an unobscured vision of the world, showing this quite literally with its defining look of bare concrete. The results were often seen by critics as being lazy, and ugly. But its detractors can't deny the impact it had on the direction of modern architecture. [3]

Brutalism had a very practical side to its adoption as well, coming into the wider view following World War II, where many of the cities in Europe had been largely destroyed, leaving housing as a fairly large issue. Brutalist buildings were fast, cheap, and easy to make, and thus found themselves appearing all over Europe. This expansion continued in North America, with university campuses looking to expand in a similar fast, and cheap way. [4]

Brutalism is also a very misunderstood design language. The first misunderstanding coming from the idea that Brutalism just rejects what is accepted as aesthetically pleasing, which it does not. This is the core of Anti-design, which has a very different look and feel. [5] The paring back to the essentials can also be confused with minimalism. Though the two are from the same base (modernism), minimalism has the goal of making the output appear more clean and simple, where brutalism aims to just remove any excess. If you picture a brick wall, the minimalist way of approaching it would be a coat of white paint, where brutalism would leave it bare and uncovered. [6]

Honesty is the core of brutalist theory. Almost everything about the movement can be brought down to it, and as such, honesty became the core of the methodology used in the creation of UNMASK.

Into the Web

The movement was largely dead by the 1980's, with many people understandably wanting to move onward from the concrete monstrosities, once again replaced due to new technologies. At this point the buildings were also beginning to show their age, with raw concrete not able to stand up the the elements as well as the treated and covered buildings.

Decades later though the ideas of the movement found a new home in web design. The Web Brutalist movement shared many of the same ideas as the architectural movement, providing a new alternative to how a website could be constructed, by tearing away the layers of excess, and leaving only what is crucial in its place. [7]

Web brutalism is where the idea for further adapting the theories began. The designers in the movement had already fabricated a framework to work within in web design, bridging much of the gap between physical and digital

materials. [8] An interesting point of it is that unlike with architectural brutalism, the bare materials are not considered to be the actual 'material' the website is made from. As there is not actual material, the natural place to arrive is that the HTML, CSS, and Javascript would be the bare materials. This is not the case. The content of the site is considered to be the bare materials, as that purpose of the site is to host that content. [9]

Bare Concrete & Honesty

The first stage in the application of brutalism was to find the concept to base the piece on. Using, and creating, a methodology based on honesty requires a solid concept, and core to turn back on, and use as a place to reflect to find that honesty.

In order to find this basis, I chose to expand the methodology slightly beyond being just about the piece itself. I chose to use this idea of honesty as the conceptual core of the piece by applying it to myself, and my own life and experiences. I chose to confront my issues with mental health, specifically issues of anxiety and depression, and use them as the core of the piece. These topics are not easy ones to think about, or discuss, but Brutalism isn't about choosing the easy methods. [2]
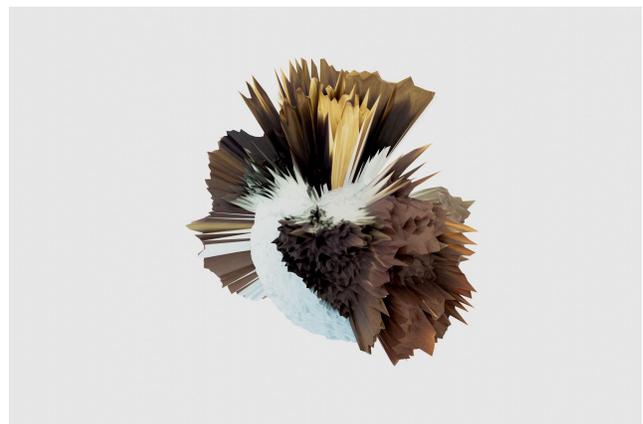

Figure 2. Emotion:Spheres I, 2018.

In 2018, I created a series of pieces based on the distortion of photos (as seen above).. I had originally created the series as an output of emotions that I could not properly explain. As I looked back upon the pieces through this new mindset, I began to see them more as artifacts and representations of my experience with memory distortions. Each of the photos that had been used were in some way related to a memory of mine that had been bent, or entirely lost because of trauma brought out by anxiety and depression.

This concept of memory also lent itself to the choice of using old monitors in the installation. CRT monitors have a distortion that comes from placing them close together,

they start to warp the image. Combining this with the 'glow' they produce can create an ethereal effect which well suits the concept of the piece.

This concept was key to moving the project and the research forward. While being important for any project to stay with in order to have a focused vision, it was even more important to have solidified to pursue a brutalist representation for the project. Without a vision and a concept for the project, it would be impossible to present the project in its most honest way.

Nodes as Material

With the concept decided on, the construction of the project could begin. The pieces that I had based on the concept for the installation upon were created in Blender, but would need to be moved into a different application in order to create the orbs both in real time, and to allow a form of interactivity between the viewer and the installation.

TouchDesigner was chosen as the basis for the project because of this, it allowed a similar workflow for the creation of the effect, as well as a fast method of prototyping that allowed it to stay adaptable, something that would be needed with the Brutalist method of identifying what are crucial features.

At this point the second piece of the framework came into play. Part of what kept the honesty in brutalist architecture was a reliance and celebration of the 'bare materials' of a building. In architecture this was easy to identify, being the literal bare concrete that the buildings were made of. This gets harder when using digital formats.

Web brutalism provides an interesting way of looking at this. Rather than viewing the bare materials as the literal building blocks of code, it views it as what is important in the construction. In web design this is the actual content of the page. Touchdesigner is a node based program, with each node adding something to the output, and providing a visual flow of information.

These nodes are the bare material of this installation. Using a different display for each of them would provide this flow of information in the final construction of the piece, showing the user every step of what was going on to create the orb. No part of the function would be obscured. This was combined with a reference to the brutalist Habitat 67 in Montreal to create the final shape of the installation, with each monitor getting its own 'pod' to sit in. [10]

Figure 3. Habitat 67, Montreal..

All in a Name

The final stage in the process of creating the piece was forging a name. It would not serve the purpose of using Brutalism to give it a name with little or no meaning. That would not be fitting towards the honesty of the piece.

UNMASK was chosen as it fit the purpose of the piece. By using these ideas of Brutalist architecture, I was lifting the mask away from the art, and away from myself. I was laying it all out in its most bare, essential, and honest form. The framework for the methodology will change slightly for every project that is being worked on, but the overall steps are the same.

1 - Find the core to reflect everything back onto. This will serve as the basis for your honesty.

2 - Find the bare materials of what you are working with. Make sure these are in line with your concept. Never obscure them.

3 - Always question every addition of a feature, or aspect to the final output. Question if it is crucial, or just ornamental.

Figure 3. The most recent install of UNMASK.

Reflecting back on this process is an important step in the creation of both the framework, and the piece itself. However this reflection is aided in this case by the constant reflecting that the process forced. This is where the brutalist ideas can really aid the creative process, especially in a field as wide open as digital media. It forces a path on the creator, giving them far fewer paths to go down. This process may not be excellent for all purposes, as the restrictions it provides may hinder an aesthetic, or creative vision, but it provides a new way of looking at starting and creating a project. It is a process that should be looked at in the same way that speculative design is. A pathway to take in order to open new areas, and refresh your mind with new ideas.

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Author Biography

Jacob Cram is a digital media artist and designer from Toronto. He creates works using new technology, with themes of relationships and memory, manifesting themselves as reactive installations, and experimental data visualizations.