ODE TO **CONCRETE**

In 2021, **BOB PANG** set out on a mission to discover the forgotten story of brutalism in Hong Kong. Now with the publication of the bilingual *Brutalist Hong Kong Map*, he's hoping to engage a global community of architecture enthusiasts.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK

New Territories-raised Bob Pang studied architecture in Hong Kong, but it was thanks to an Instagram algorithm some 15 years later that he discovered the presence of brutalism in his home city.

"I spend a lot of time on social media – and around 2019 I started to see a lot of posts from people from other countries looking at brutalism, especially in Germany, where a group called SOS Brutalism organised an exhibition in Frankfurt [the first global survey of brutalist architecture, which later travelled to Taipei]. And I realised it's a hot topic right now outside of Hong Kong, and it made me curious to know if there's any brutalist architecture here," he says.

As Pang would soon discover, 40 brutalist structures built between 1965 and 1981 remain in the city. Characterised by bulky and stripped-back geometric forms, the architectural style was founded in Europe – and especially Britain – during the 1950s, spawning the rapid construction of colossal structures until it fell out of favour 30 years later. The name is derived from the French word for raw concete, *béton brut*.

In Hong Kong, a city synonymous with skyscrapers and ultra- concentrated residential towers, the brutalist architecture tradition had largely gone under the radar. "No one was talking about it," says Pang, who thinks the hitherto lack of research and documentation amounts to a "gap in local architectural history".

For Pang, an award-winning architect himself, the discovery came at the right time. Although his career had taken him to London, Vienna and Shanghai, along with a stint at the studio of Pritzker Prize-winning Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, he was looking for a fresh challenge.

He met Marisa Yiu, co-founder and executive director of the Hong Kong Design Trust, to see if they could attract funding for the project. In fact, Yiu awarded Pang the Design Trust Grant, which, she says, "recognises individuals seeking to kick-start a meaningful and intellectual project with social, educational, economical or environmental impact for communities." Along with support from the firm Leigh & Orange Architects, Pang founded the Brutalism Hong Kong Research Group in 2021 and has since assembled a team of more than 20 volunteer architects to uncover the untold stories of our concrete giants.

The fruits of their research, which included interviews with living brutalist architects, led to two exhibitions at the Design Trust and later the publication of the Chinese-language book *Unknown Brutalism Architecture in Hong Kong*. The reaction was immediate. "I didn't have much expectation because architecture is kind of a niche topic in Hong Kong. And brutalist buildings aren't famous landmarks, like the Henderson building or anything, but it's actually been very popular." In fact, the exhibitions drew thousands of visitors.

Until now it's been a local affair, but Pang hopes his latest project, the *Brutalist Hong Kong Map*, will engage a global community of enthusiasts. The bilingual double-sided map joins publisher Blue Crow Media's series of similar charts for cities that include Paris, Buenos Aires, Chicago and Tokyo, whose adoption of the brutalist style even predates that of the west (Tokyo's now-demolished brutalist Nakagin Capsule Tower, built in 1972, is currently featured in a show at M+). "My intention was to promote Hong Kong's brutalist architecture beyond Hong Kong, so people who are really interested in the style or want to discover the city in an alternative way can catch up with the map," he says.

But enthusiasts of brutalism might wonder how it arrived here in the first place, given the movement's emergence in post-war Europe to rebuild cities and provide housing for displaced populations. The tenets of brutalism, which prioritises function over form and used cheap and readily available concrete, were seen as the solution to a society in recovery from heavy bombing and lacking in public infrastructure.

Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier is often

St Stephen's College Belltower (1981)

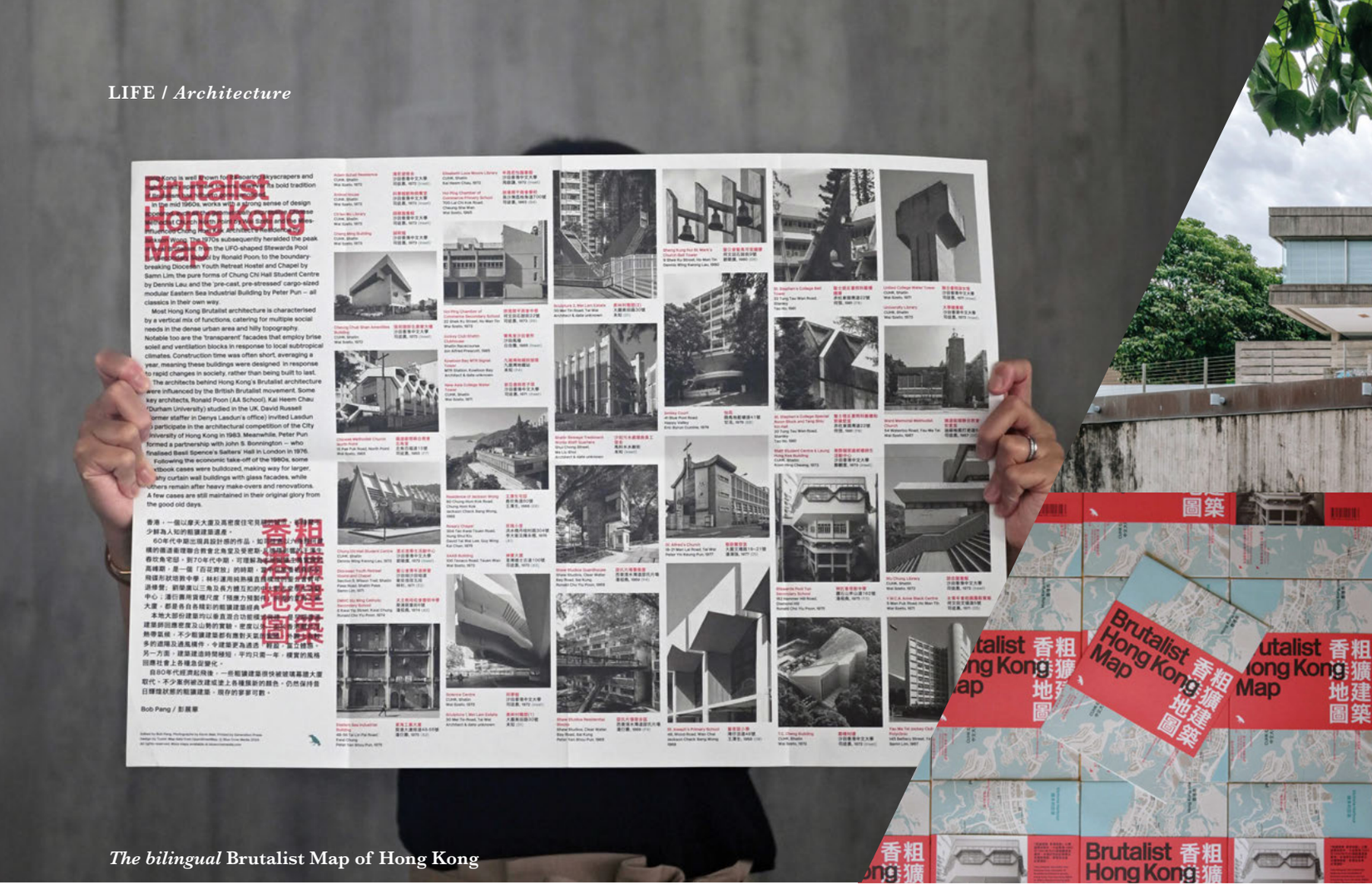
KEVIN MAK

The Si Yuan Amenities Centre (1972) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin

cited as the father of brutalism – his 1951 Marseille housing project Unité d'Habitation is among the style's most recognisable buildings – but British architects Alison and Peter Smithson played a significant role in its development. Later, the movement spread to the US and especially the former Yugoslavia where its utilitarian appeal chimed with the country's socialist agenda.

Given Hong Kong's former links to the UK, perhaps its arrival was inevitable – local brutalist architects Ronald Poon and Kai Heem Chau studied in England – but here it met a slightly different need. "Brutalism in Hong Kong started slightly later, from around the 1960s," explains Pang. "The city was already rebuilt, but its infrastructure needed to catch up with the speed of economic growth. At that time, Hong Kong was developing things like the cargo terminal, highways, new districts and another university. So we relied on this form of fast-building architecture." Indeed, one great benefit of building in monolithic style was speed, with the average construction time being one year. And as concrete was considered a new material, "a lot of architects wanted to experiment with it," he says. Hence, the beginnings of Hong Kongrete-ism.

Even though many were subsequently demolished, most of the 40 surviving brutalist buildings are still in use. "Forty is quite a lot," Pang



***The bilingual* Brutalist Map of Hong Kong**

says. "Hong Kong architecture blends Western design with traditional Chinese elements. But if we're talking about one single ideology or style of architecture, it's quite a high number."

The *Brutalist Hong Kong Map* takes people on a tour of the surviving architectural gems. Several form part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Sha Tin campus: the triangular Chung Chi Hall Student Centre (1972), the hulking Wai Szeto-designed Wu Chung Library (1972) and the UFO-shaped New Asia College Water Tower (1971). Another Kowloon highlight – and Pang's personal favourite – is Ronald Poon's Stewards Pooi Tun Secondary School (1975) in Diamond Hill. "It's octagonal yet built next to a steep slope, so it's a really constrained site," he says.

On Hong Kong Island, standouts include North Point's Chinese Methodist Church (1965) with its concrete geometric façade, the ultra-modernist Chung Hom Kok residence of Jackson Wong (1966) and Eric Byron's Smiley Court (1978) in Happy Valley, a rectangular residential block that sits atop a spiral car ramp.

Although brutalist architecture flourished in the 1970s, by the economic boom of the '80s, local developers increasingly favoured curtain-wall architecture and luxury apartments. The last brutalist structure built was the six-floor Sha Tin Jockey Club House (1985). Despite its menacing appearance, the now ultra-exclusive digs hardly resemble the utilitarian ideals of the style's original proponents.

Similarly in the West, the movement quickly lost appeal by the 1980s, with many buildings facing demolition. Not only did the concrete structures grow to look run down, they were heavily criticised for their cold and oppressive appearance. Even King Charles III, then the Prince of Wales, once referred to Britain's National Theatre (1976) as "a clever way of building a nuclear power station in the middle of London without anyone objecting".

But anyone who's recently tried to squeeze themselves into a pair of pedal pushers will know too well: all trends are cyclical. Social media has stoked renewed fascination for brutalism. Its dystopian charm sits well on the gram, where images of futuristic buildings, such as the Geisel Library in California, the Barbican in London and Boston City Hall, go viral. Dedicated accounts, such as @brutgroup, @brutal_architecture and @brutbuilds, have follower numbers reaching the million mark, while grassroots organisations such as #SOSBrutalism unite like-minded concrete enthusiasts to campaign for buildings under threat of demolition. No doubt Brady Corbett's forthcoming Hollywood epic *The Brutalist*, starring Adam Brody, will capitalise on the genre's re-discovered allure.

Once regarded with disdain, brutalist buildings have also become desirable addresses. Take West London's 73-storey Trellick Tower. What started out as a social-housing project now houses flats that sell for millions to aesthetes seeking hip, design-led addresses. Even high fashion isn't immune to the style's harsh charms; last May, Chanel staged its Cruise show atop Corbusier's original Marseille masterpiece in a collection where grid-like patterns made their way on to tweed twinsets. Is Brutalism architecture the equivalent of Prada's "ugly beauty" fashion?

Pang thinks the renewed interest reflects society's yearning for simplicity and honesty. "It's going back to basics, because the world is too complicated. Nowadays we build a lot of complex contemporary architecture in mixed styles, using new materials and

KEVIN MAK

The Residence of Jackson Wong (1966) in Chung Hom Kok

Bob Pang

planting strange vegetation along the facade, so much so that you can't really understand the building in an easy way. But brutalism is simple and direct. They're delivering a true and honest message. And people who love brutalism appreciate this kind of essence."

Pang urges Hong Kongers to start discovering this previously forgotten part of its architectural history. "These buildings are now more than half-a-century old, so it's the right moment to start thinking about creative ways to repurpose them, consider their value, and appreciate them as part of our modern heritage." He cites the example of Hong Kong's City Hall, built in the 1960s and recently the youngest structure to be declared a monument. While Yiu adds: "heritage of our city and culture, our unique characteristics need to be fully explored. From public spaces for communities to come together to old heritage buildings to be restored, revitalized, and not be in complete demolition. There is an urgency to archive, conserve and protect architectural historic buildings from different eras."

Another bilingual book is also in the works for July. It builds on Pang's extensive research on brutalism in Hong Kong but in a coffee-table format, emphasising photography – and the perverse beauty – of the existing buildings.

While Pang doesn't expect Hong Kongers to become brutalist conservation campaigners overnight, he hopes to inspire people to learn more about their surroundings. "It's about encouragement. Encouraging people to know about a place or some kind of architecture that you walk past every day, but that you never appreciated for its aesthetics or its function or its history before." Now there's a truth both brutal and beautiful. P

The Wai Szeto designed New Asia College Water Tower (1971)