

Brady Corbet, dir. *The Brutalist*. New York: A24 Films LLC and Saint Laurent, 2025, 201 min.

SHASWAT HARSH

School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

In *The Brutalist*, Adrien Brody plays Hungarian architect László Tóth, who departs from post-war Europe in a quest for a new life in America after surviving the Holocaust. He attracts the interest of Harrison Van Buren (Guy Pearce), a wealthy philanthropist, who hires László to construct a community centre for his neighbourhood that includes a sports complex, a gym, and a prayer hall.

Brutalism was a prominent architectural style from the 1950s to the 1980s, and it was known for its massive, minimalist concrete buildings.¹ It first developed in England and quickly gained global popularity. This style emerged from both the urgent post-World War II need for cost-effective housing and as a rejection of earlier architectural trends. The name “Brutalism” was initially introduced as “nybrutalism” by Swedish architect Hans Asplund, and gained wider currency after British critic Reyner Banham adopted it in 1955. Despite its harsh-sounding name, the term is a nod to the French phrase *Béton Brut*, meaning raw concrete. Concrete is frequently used by brutalists to celebrate its honest shape and rough textures so that the structural elements should be presented truthfully. Not a single decoration or adornment. Many people hated brutalist buildings because they appeared as the bare skeleton of a building. Brutalism was one of the most divisive design movements in history because it was so distinct from earlier styles. These buildings were mocked for decades and were viewed as dystopian, aloof, and indifferent.²

¹ Royal Institute of British Architects “Brutalism,” accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.architecture.com/explore-architecture/brutalism>.

² Kristin Hohenadel, 2024. “What Is Brutalist Architecture? Definition, Characteristics, and Examples,” *The Spruce*. September 20, 2024, <https://www.thespruce.com/what-is-brutalism-4796578>.

The film opens with a striking image that foreshadows the difficulties of the protagonist László Tóth, as he flees fascism in search of freedom in America, represented by the upside-down Statue of Liberty. Through László's experiences as an immigrant, the story contrasts his dreams with the hard reality of American society. This is especially evident in his encounters with his cousin Atilla (Alessandro Nivolla), who, driven by jealousy, believes that László isn't American enough for him.³

Under the patronage of Harrison Van Buren (Guy Pearce), László sacrifices his well-being for his art, illuminating the exploitative nature of capitalism. A crucial incident that represents the depths of exploitation and the loss of self-worth marks the conclusion of this relationship. Erzsébet Tóth (Felicity Jones), László's wife, is a spectral apparition that symbolises the emotional bond that keeps him going through his hardships. An important turning point in László's journey occurs when he decides to leave America after realising how important it is to safeguard one's inner self. The second half of the movie parallels the creative culture of brutalism by concentrating on the raw realities of the world. The finished structure represents László's goals and traumas, expressing his inner conflicts, and desire for family. The story shows that László has to face the truth of his circumstances and his violent relationship with Harrison in order to maintain his spirit and self-love. This insight enables Erzsébet Tóth to unveil Harrison's character, leading to a dramatic dinner scene that exposes the fragility behind his powerful exterior.

The director, Brady Corbet, draws parallels between the film's structure and brutalist architecture, emphasizing its raw and uncompromising nature. In the same way that brutalism had to change to meet the demands of a post-war world, the protagonist, too, represents tenacity, adaptation, and survival. Adrien Brody's character, László Tóth, is not real but is inspired by a real architect, Marcel Breuer, who was a Hungarian architect and was trained at the German Bauhaus school, the birthplace of modern design. Like Tóth, Breuer was of Hungarian-Jewish descent who worked in the brutalist style. Unlike Brody's character, he relocated to New York in 1937, prior to the outbreak of World War II. While the term "Brutalist" in the film might suggest a focus on architectural style, the title actually reflects the protagonist's

³ Brady Corbet, and Mona Fastvold. *The Brutalist*. screenplay, March 12, 2023, 4-30, <https://a24awards.com/assets/The-Brutalist-screenplay.pdf>.

personal journey, a life marked by cruelty, hardship, and emotional brutality. What truly stood out in the film wasn't the focus on architecture, or even the way the rich patrons take advantage of the artists. Instead, the movie shines when it targets two forms of pride: the belief in American superiority and the ego of the ultra-wealthy. The movie also explores how America treats immigrants, relying on their skills and hard work while often looking down on them.⁴ The story slightly changes historical facts for emotional impact. Instead of landing a job at a university or architecture firm, as many Bauhaus-trained architects did after escaping Nazi Germany, Tóth ends up working in his cousin's furniture shop in Philadelphia. However, this creative choice adds power to the story.

Much like the Brutalist movement, refugees like László often face judgment and criticism before their experiences and identities are truly understood. *The Brutalist* isn't a film about architecture –it is a story about resilience and the misunderstood beauty of starting anew. It perfectly demonstrates how our opinions and tastes evolve. Once condemned, brutalist buildings are now celebrated and viewed as iconic remnants of their time. What is dismissed today is likely to face rejection again in the future until, with time, it is eventually rediscovered and truly appreciated. The wonderful thing about design is that it allows us to look back on things we used to dislike and try to find beauty in them. These designs show who people were and are today, and they may even provide us with hints about who we might become in the future.

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⁴ Christopher Hawthorne, "Why 'The Brutalist' Isn't About Architecture," *The Yale Review*. April 13, 2025, <https://yalereview.org/article/christopher-hawthorne-america-the-brutal>.

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