Building A2: The Underappreciated Spectacle of Crosley Tower

By Scotty T. Simpson

Crosley Tower | Building A2, South Façade. Photograph by Ico Abreu. 2018. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

The Queen City is home to many different styles of architecture, various revivals, and several subcategories of modern and post-modern, but it was never overflowing with Brutalism. Cincinnati became known for its beloved mid-westernized Art Deco buildings, of which it has never tired. The city also produced much fine Midcentury Modern architecture. But Cincinnati's reception of concrete Brutalism of the 1950s and 60s is another story. Truth be told, the Queen City remained too conservative to be inviting buildings of such an austere, experimental nature, stripped of all pretension and, I dare say, with ties to egalitarian Socialist values. The only Brutalist exceptions in Cincinnati are a few structures built for universities, hospitals, libraries, or governmental purposes.

Even so, Cincinnati received one of the finest examples (or worst, depending on who you ask) of Brutalism: that being Crosley Tower at the University of Cincinnati. I have gained a greater appreciation for this building now that I'm back to school, attaining a Historic Preservation Graduate Certificate from UC's College of Design, Art, Architecture (DAAP) than as a young undergraduate English student almost 20 years ago. Before UC transitioned to remote learning in 2020, I was looking at the building almost every day. While many people hate it, Crosley Tower has a cult following on the internet; just check Reddit and Youtube. Some folks love the tower, some hate it, and some just plain love to hate on it. I've heard it said that only architects and masochists enjoy Brutalism, and presumably there is quite a bit of overlap between the two groups.

The tower is named in honor of Powel Crosley Jr., UC Alumnus with degrees in both engineering and law; inventor of the Crosley radio; manufacturer of Crosley aircraft and automobiles; operator of WLW radio station; and owner of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team. The building stands, looking like a giant chess piece, highly recognizable from a distance, dwarfing its surrounding buildings. Crosley Tower is bound to stir some kind of response from anyone who sees it. On gray, dreary days it looks like a dystopian movie set; on clear, blue-sky days, a medieval castle tower presiding over a fairy tale kingdom. It is sixteen stories of fluted concrete pylon with flared arms reaching towards the clouds. It was built in a continuous concrete pour using the slip-form method, in 18 straight days, as part of a 6-part, high-rise plan for the University in the 1960's. It hosted labs for the University of Cincinnati's growing science and chemistry program; the flaring projections atop the tower were meant literally and symbolically to exhaust the fumes created in the labs.

This one-of-a-kind building is, like multitudes of other Brutalist buildings, becoming rarer every day. In Cincinnati, all that remains of classic Brutalism are specimens such as the Wesley United Methodist Chapel (on E. McMicken and Lang in OTR); 1970s additions to the Fechheimer Mansion (at 22 Garfield Place); the 1974 Cincinnati Bell Equipment Annex; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Building in Clifton; and Crosley Tower. The last three buildings were designed by A.M. Kinney Architects and Engineers, which has a history of its own to talk about.

After graduating Purdue University, then working for several engineering firms, A.M. Kinney Sr. and a colleague formed Kinney & Ehlers, Inc., in 1929. They focused primarily on mechanical engineering for boiler plant and factory designs. The stock market crashed eight months later. A.M. Kinney bought Ehler's share, changed the company name, and became the CEO for the next 37 years, until 1966, when his son, A.M. Kinney Jr., took over.

During the World War II years, A.M. Kinney Associates expanded into the sister field of architecture and added architect Max Boehm to the team, where he stayed until his death nearly a decade later. Architect, Charles Burchard was then hired to take Boehm's place at A. M. Kinney Associates in 1953. Burchard studied at Harvard under famous Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, had worked for Marcel Breuer's firm, and taught architecture at the Harvard Graduate School.

Burchard's career in Cincinnati was bumpy. He was unable to obtain an Ohio architect's license until 1955, after several lengthy court hearings. In 1961, the Ohio Board of Examiners sought to have Burchard's license revoked, saying that, "by fraud and deceit," he had permitted an engineering corporation to practice architecture illegally, with a "fictitious, non-existent," complementary architecture partnership in order to build a $15 million state office building. During one of the hearings A.M. Kinney Sr. testified on Burchard's behalf, saying "this results from a serious ambiguity in the statutes governing. . . these sister professions." He added, "it is deplorable that the architects have seen fit to endeavor to settle this conflict by a deliberate and vicious attack upon a man of Charles Burchard's character and reputation" (Architectural Forum, 1961). Burchard never lost his license in the state of Ohio, but his stay did not last much longer and he soon returned to academia where he ultimately became founding Dean of the College of Architecture at Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

Crosley Tower, initially called "Building A2 of the Science and Engineering Complex," (a complex including Rieveschel Hall and a parking garage) had a first, completed architectural plan dated Sept 1,1965, though Burchard had already left Cincinnati in 1964 for Virginia Tech. Another set of approved architectural drawings of Building A2, dated July 8, 1966, contains Charles Burchard's stamp, along with stamps and signatures by architect Frank L. Codella, and senior structural engineer at A.M.K., John R. Morris, who'd engineered many dams in the Ohio River. The building was constructed in July of 1967, which we know from dated photographs. However, most sources wrongly list Crosley Tower as having been built in 1969.

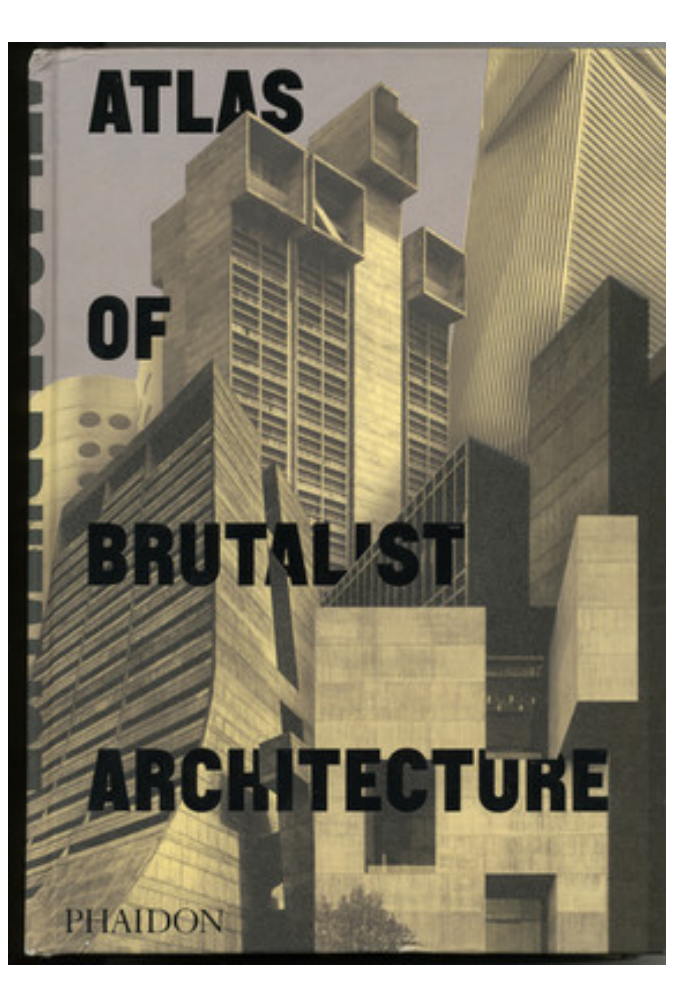
I can get no confirmation of this, but a highly reputable source who'd like to remain anonymous told me during an interview that they'd seen preliminary drawings of Tower A2 from the hand of an earlier A.M.K. employee. This source believes A. Eugene Kohn, a prominent, still practicing NYC architect, businessman, founder and chairman of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates to be the original designer of Crosley Tower, though he is credited nowhere as having been part of the project, nor even having worked for A.M.K. I reached out to his office for comment on this, but to date have received no reply. I must therefore assume that CT was Charles Burchard's design, but it's worth mentioning in case if more info about the building someday comes to light.

As Dean at Virginia Tech, Burchard expanded the architecture program from a department within the College of Engineering, to a full College of Architecture. He created an intensive program, employing many of the educational principles of the Bauhaus. Burchard would dedicate the rest of his career to architectural education. In 1966, he was designated a University Distinguished Professor; in 1970 he was elected a Fellow in the American Institute of Architecture (FAIA); and in 1976 he received the title of Dean Emeritus upon retirement. In 1983, Burchard received the Award of Excellence in Architectural Education, a joint award by the AIA and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), and in 1985, a University Distinguished Award. In 1990, at age 77, Charles A. Burchard died and was buried at Sherwood Burial Park in Salem, VA.

Imbued with Bauhaus principles from his time with Gropius at Harvard, Charles Burchard likely did not make a wide distinction between engineering and the architecture of new concrete Brutalism, as he eloquently demonstrated in Crosley Tower. The building has no ornamentation; being a tall, solid vessel of concrete, guiding its vents and mechanical shafts to the sky through its flared corner piers. As with any serious practitioner of Modernism, Burchard probably viewed architecture less as an artform than as a pure fusion of functions, materials, and construction methods. He did however, like Le Corbusier, the famous Modernist architect who pioneered concrete Brutalism, use abstracted classical forms which indeed followed function.
Crosley Tower has a classical, cruciform plan, echoing Palladio's Villa Rotunda. The interior has functional asymmetries relating to the building's use and mechanical systems; however, the design itself has a clean and symmetrical appearance from the exterior. Looking at the building from afar, one can see a Brutalist interpretation of a Corinthian column, with a base, shaft, and capitol extending up and outward. The form also seems fitting for a university in the 1960's when steel and concrete towers were fashionable.

Unfortunately for Brutalism in America, it was sometimes associated with Communism. The architectural style had little to do stateside with the Brutalism of the Soviet Bloc countries, which were appropriated only later by Stalin, after the British began using it during their period of austere reconstruction following WWII. Soon after, Brutalism appeared in other countries in need of rebuilding, recommended by its practicality, its economy, and its swiftness of construction. The Soviet Union had originally denounced Bauhaus Modernism as being too bourgeois, but accepted concrete Brutalism wholeheartedly into its canon. Many practitioners of Brutalism and Modernism in America and Europe shared some Socialist ideals, rooted in creating more egalitarian, honest, long lasting, and economical structures. However, for some, Brutalism evoked totalitarian control and shows of strength through massive replication of characterless, identical high-rise buildings, as in Soviet Russia of the Cold War period.

In the 1970's, the International Style had grown in popularity, becoming progressively more flashy and obtrusive on city skylines. Leading to its association with wealth and privilege tucked away in secure, shiny, steel and glass corporate towers overlooking the masses. While Brutalist architecture on the other hand, came to represent a dystopian lower social stratum of the poor, the unemployed, and those in need of public housing. Both forms of Modernism fell out of favor, although this happened later for the International Style, the movement continues to be branded as a symbol for the shortcomings of Capitalism and "starchitecture." Yet, one can argue that Brutalism is currently on its way back into popularity, as many recent books and articles suggest (see Citations, below). A 2016 article in The Guardian wrote: "You can't put a Brutalist building in a gold lame' party dress," referring to Trump International Hotel's 1980s gold recladding of a 1950s International style building. (Salmon)



Phaidon Editors. Atlas of Brutalist Architecture. Phaidon, 2018.

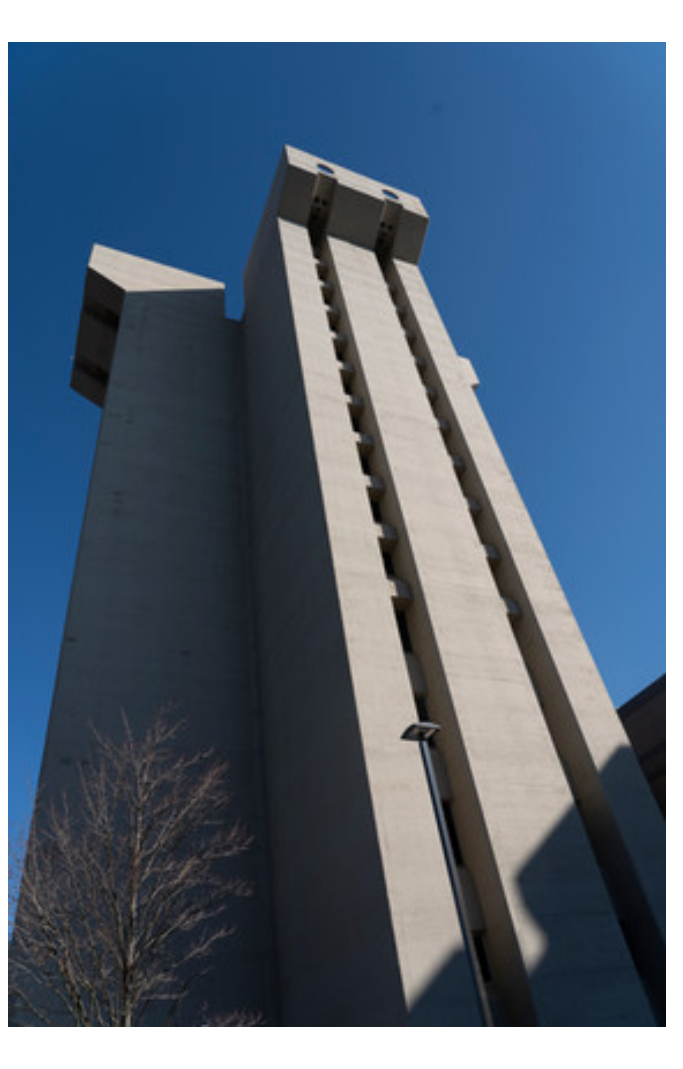
What could possibly bring Brutalism back into the American zeitgeist nowadays? Perhaps its unpretentiousness, its honesty, and its seeming permanence in an age where people hunger for truth, respect, and practicality over veneer and pomp needlessly displayed. In addition, concrete is about as local and affordable as construction material gets. Consisting of rock and sand bound with water and cement, it exhibits a different finish depending upon the locale where the materials originate. As Felix Salmon writes, "The reddish concrete of Boston, for instance, looks and feels very different from the fine-grained concrete of Japan." He goes on: "when they're treated with care and respect, Brutalist buildings can be treasured by a city in a way that glass and steel towers very rarely are." Concrete is an especially old medium, and yet it can be renewed with endless possibilities, ideas, and the application of new techniques. What Brutalism lacks in flexibility, it makes up for in creativity, monumentality, and inspiration. It projects functionality, protection, timelessness, simplicity, innovation, and is ecologically benign. There are many advantages of choosing to work with concrete. Are there many reasons to preserve it?

Presently, Crosley Tower is scheduled to be demolished sometime in 2025, on the grounds that 1) it is a public danger and 2) offers no flexibility. "Parts of the exterior are crumbling and falling on people or objects below" has been reported by UC's *Newsrecord* since 2009, though if you visit the building, take a walk around. Do visit the conversation pit in the lobby, but also take a stroll around the exterior base, and make note of the ground around it not being full of debris, or concrete chunks, or even hardly any gravel, though the building is made of cement and gravel. Where is the danger? The roof of CT leaks, they say, having in the past "caused disaster within the rooms, labs and offices below," *Newsrecord* says. In addition, "the elevators, which frequently malfunction, are a danger," because the compromised roof holding them could one day collapse according to Dale Beeler, UC's Director of Projects Management. It sounds pretty serious, though if this building hadn't been deemed one of the "8 most ugly," in a large architectural publication, I'm betting it might have had a newly tarred roof and an updated elevator system.
Dale Beeler said Crosley is "nearing the end of its useful lifespan," and the building "does not qualify for renovation." He claimed that CT does not have enough flexibility due to it being "four pods which can't be connected." I don't know what exactly this means, as the four pods are already connected at the center of its cruciform plan, where the elevators and stairwell exist. Beeler said the building had been treated with a "chemical impregnation process," which can only be applied once as a "band-aid," that would only guarantee "10 more years of life" (Parton).

Crosley Tower | Building A2, Conversation Pit

I'd be satisfied knowing if anyone had asked for a second opinion on this. Crosley Tower is a unique building that is now being nationally and internationally recognized. Surely this behooves UC to have a more open dialogue with the public about what to do with this building. I'd be very curious to know if any preservation specialists were consulted on the matter. CT was built in 1967, making it 53 years old, and eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Why has this not been mentioned, whenever a local Cincinnati news source laments the future loss of this landmark?

I myself love to work with concrete and would like to see more unique structures come to life from it. I also will greatly miss Crosley Tower if it exists no more, so I'm glad to be writing this article now, in the hopes that it helps others appreciate Crosley Tower as more than a colossal chunk of cement, pebbles and sand. If it does finally come crashing down, I want to be present to say goodbye, to watch, and to remember an event that will surely be almost as epic as its construction.



Crosley Tower | Building A2, East Façade. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer. 2020.

Crosley Tower | Building A2, Detail of East Façade. Photograph by Elizabeth Meyer

Crosley Tower | Building A2, South Façade looking up. Photograph by Ico Abreu. 2018. From the University of Cincinnati Digital Collections & Repositories @UC Libraries

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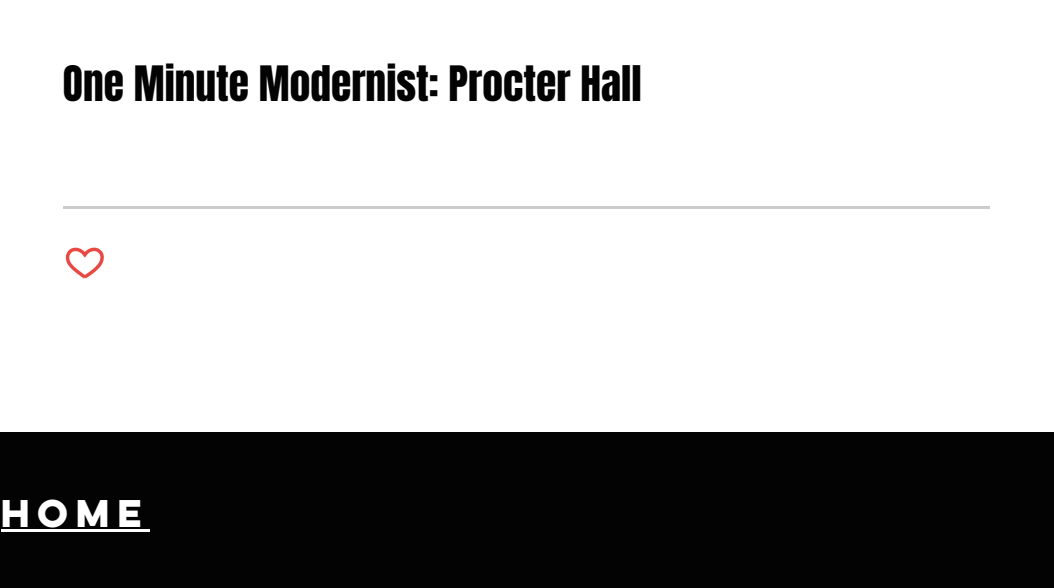

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