

# The visual language of brutalist web design

## El lenguaje visual del diseño web brutalista



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### Abstract:

Many authors agree on the current relevance of brutalist web design, a trend inspired by the popular architectural style which, in turn, is distinguished by the rawness of its materials, the geometric shapes or the absence of decoration. This study uses Content Analysis to discover whether it is possible to interpret web-brutalism as a movement with distinctive features and, if this is found to be the case, to make a description of the term based on visual communication techniques as the main variable. After evaluating 50 websites from the catalogue of Brutalist Websites, the study concludes that the most recent meaning refers to a highly heterogeneous movement whose works, based mainly on visual tension, only share the attributes of provocation and creative freedom, which brings it closer to other contemporary trends in postmodern graphic design, such as New Ugly.

### Keywords:

Brutalism, graphic design, web design, New Ugly, aesthetics, postmodernism.

### Resumen:

Un gran número de autores coincide en señalar el protagonismo actual del diseño web brutalista, una corriente inspirada en el popular estilo arquitectónico que, a su vez, se distingue por la desnudez de sus materiales, las formas geométricas o la ausencia de ornamento. Este estudio recurre al Análisis de Contenido para averiguar si es posible interpretar el brutalismo web como un movimiento con rasgos diferenciados y, en tal caso, realizar una descripción del término a partir de las técnicas de comunicación visual como variable fundamental. Mediante la evaluación de 50 sitios procedentes del catálogo de la plataforma Brutalist Websites, el estudio concluye que su significado más reciente apunta a un movimiento sumamente heterogéneo cuyas obras, principalmente basadas en la tensión visual, solo comparten la provocación y la libertad creativa, atributos que lo aproximan a otras tendencias contemporáneas del diseño gráfico posmoderno, como el New Ugly.

### Palabras clave:

Brutalismo, diseño gráfico, diseño web, New Ugly, estética, posmodernismo.

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## 1. Introduction

Many authors agree on the prominence in current web design of a trend which has come to be known as brutalism, originating from the architectural movement that reached the height of its popularity between 1950 and 1970. As Rubio Hancock indicates (2014), the term derives from the French *béton brut* (raw concrete) and its most outstanding representatives were architects such as Le Corbusier, Miles Warren (founder of the Christchurch School, New Zealand), or the British couple Alison and Peter Smithson. Driven by the responsibility to aesthetically renovate a damaged post-World War II environment, they were attracted by an architecture which, according to Merelo, “could be designed and executed both rapidly and efficiently, with a minimum of unnecessary decoration (...), minimizing costs and maximising capacity” (2017, para.6). Lorente uses the term New Brutalism to refer to a “purist trend which advocated taking the raw decoration and experimentalism of the pioneers of the modern movement to the most radical extreme” (2017, p. 145). The brutalist trend is inscribed within this philosophy even though, as Bayley notes (2012), many of the strictest supporters of modernism renounced its aesthetic value as questionable. Grindrod also includes it within this context, while recognising a certain affinity with other styles (such as humanism, prefabricated structures or the International Style), and prefers a certain flexibility and caution on positioning it:

Appreciating post-war modernism in all its nuances helps to contextualise brutalism, where the dramatic structural bluntness often contrasts with the softness, functionality and modernity of other styles (2018, p41).

Going back to Merelo (2017), the architectural structures linked to this movement are defined by the following features:

- They use geometric forms and repetitive patterns, used either in modules or grid-based.
- The buildings leave the construction materials on view rather than concealing or beautifying them.
- Uniformity and layout of residential structures are the result of an eminently egalitarian and communitarian social vision.
- Function is prioritised over arbitrary decoration.

These same key concepts which characterise brutalist architecture have been transferred to become a paradigm for graphic design –especially focused on web design, according to Gràffica (2016)– which Özdemir (2017) places as beginning in the middle of the 2010s in the period of transition from an “age of information” to what he defines as the “age of innovation”. Since then, numerous supporters have taken up a style, which, as Miller points out, defends “simple designs and basic fonts. It is a return to the early web design and a rejection of highly polished and usable design so popular today” (2017, para.1). For Hill, brutalist philosophy represents “an antidote to the softer web” (2017, para.9) and recalls the first days of the World Wide Web when there was no standardisation and far fewer possibilities for producing friendly designs.

Taking up this definition and the criteria which describe brutalist architecture, some of the attributes specifically associated with this trend in web design are as follows:

- HTML codes are stripped bare by limiting –excluding even sometimes– the cascading style sheets (CSS). The aim of maintaining “the basic materials (in this case the code) in their purest state, with the intention of not ‘decorating’ or ‘beautifying’ the final result” (Casado, 2016, para.12) is one of the most apparent similarities with its architectural

equivalent; it therefore shares this preference for “unpolished” solutions, characteristic of an “honest, unpretentious and anti-bourgeois architecture” (Grilo, n.d. para.25).

- A rejection of templates and pre-designed formulas. As Sanchez says, “While some designers continued to cling daily to the confines of WordPress, others began to demonstrate against the templates armed with few lines of code and a Basic HTML” (2016, para.2).

All these sites –some from years back, others built more recently– and hundreds more like them, avoid easy to use interfaces based on templates which have been standard practice in the industry for a long time. Instead, they are built on an imperfect HTML coded manually and whose design signals from the graphics of the 90s (Arcement, 2016, para 2).

Yates (2016), in short, turns to adjectives like hard, harsh, rough, uncomfortable, raw, aggressive or even cynical to define not only the aesthetic result of this type of page but also its programming, which usually uses a simple artless frame, with linear styles, a clear lack of optimisation and, at the same time, a complete lack of complexity in order to eschew information overload. Among the most representative examples of this school, he cites, among many others, the popular Craigslist (http://craigslist.com), a website of classified ads, or the random showcase of images Ffffound (http://ffffound.com), who ceased activities in 2017.

Even though the aforementioned features are the closest and most specifically linked to the spirit of architectural brutalism as compared with other similar trends, it seems that in web design the term has evolved towards new parameters, responding to the multiple sources and references that deal with the subject. Thus those manifestations which incorporate “stark colors, bold and unforgiving shapes and layouts, and typography that is often clumsy and oversized” (Bates, 2017, para. 1) have begun to be associated with the paradigm, as proposals which seek to distance themselves from the aesthetics dictated by Google’s *Material Design* or Apple’s *Human Interface Guidelines*, repetitive and homogenous outlines which permeate a large part of the graphic philosophy of the contemporary web.

It all indicates, therefore, that web-brutalism has been developing its own codes and standards over time in spite of, ironically, arising as a reaction to standardization (Özdegard, 2017). In this way, from the key features offered by numerous authors on this phenomenon –for the most part designers unrelated to the scientific circuit–, some of the new master guidelines by which the trend in brutalist web design can be identified are as follows:

- Absolute freedom in creation, defined by rejecting any kind of regulation (grid, hierarchy, order or simplicity). Arcement (2016) uses the posture adopted by several specialists on the complexity of establishing a universal definition for brutalism: for Pascal Deville –one of the founders of the term but not of the movement which, according to Özdegard (2017), was driven by graphic designers from all over the world– the aversion to rules which this style defends makes it difficult to create a stable definition. According to the author, it is absolutely vital to constantly update its definition from the key features that are gradually observed in this web design trend. In the same article, Jake Tobin (one of its main enthusiasts) explains that brutalism does not necessarily have a defined group of aesthetic signifiers but that it is the medium itself which dictates the visual characteristics of the message. In line with Deville & Tobin’s assertions, Gràffica (2016) maintains that this creative freedom and the experimental nature, rather than a specific aesthetic, are what really define web-brutalism. Deville insists on these arguments:

They could not care less about the end user's experience, ease of use and the state of the question on the rules of design. So it is not a term defined by design, rather it is defined by a certain attitude towards a given technology or material (in Sanchez, 2016, para. 5).

If brutalism presumes a radical violation of the rules it is precisely in order to demolish the excessive homogeneity of a *look & feel* which comes from applying various conventions of usability:

Let's face it; the User Experience (UX) is not a design style. It is not a design language. It does not propose a shape or color. UX is an objective discipline enabling the optimization of design decisions by interpreting the qualitative (and if any quantitative) data (Özdemir, 2017, para. 26).

- Derived from this rupture, the works are governed by a formal approach sprinkled with naïve or kitsch references, a perception which derives from the first architectural manifestations and whose fundamental intentions of “honesty” and “transparency” were soon condemned for their “irremediable loyalty” (Bayley, 2012, p235). In web design, this style frequently leads to aesthetically controversial resolutions, based on sharp contrasts and deformations, the rejection of any trace of balance and order and a preference for chance and visual excess. In this sense, in the words of López Palacios (2016, para.3) the brutalist aesthetic “may serve to express opposing ideas: Hope and despair. Beauty and ugliness”. Miller cites the web UX Brutalism –a platform on brutalist web design methodology created by Fabricio Teixeira and Caio Braga, designers of *uxdesign.cc*– to refer to the only premise which governs this graphic style: “place elements on screen without worrying too much about how they work together” (2017, para. 4).

The new formulas and, specifically, the ugliness which inspires several of the solutions, may respond to an attempt to undermine the prevalent structures and propose alternatives focussed on maximising the receptor's response; according to Heller, “like warpaint, the dissonant styles which many contemporary designers have applied to their visual communications are meant to shock the enemy –complacency– as well as to encourage new reading and viewing patterns” (1993, para. 8). In line with this, for Buttin, paradoxically, text-heavy designs drive higher user engagement” (in Toor, 2017, para.5).

- The controversial aesthetic preferences of this trend are linked to a sensation of imperfection in the graphic resolutions, with proposals that are frequently illegible or whose navigation are complex, arising as a rejection of professionalism, digestibility, ease of consumption, standardization, mono-tonality or the clarity of “good design”. As stated in the presentation of Brutalist Websites, “in its robustness and complacency towards appearing easy or comfortable, brutalism can be seen as a reaction by a younger generation to the glibness, optimism and frivolity of today's web design (Deville, n.d. para. 1).

This movement is characterized by complacency towards web usability and by eschewing aesthetically pleasant design. We can come across the use of garish colours or a radical use of black and white. As for the use of fonts they will always be simple and functional and in many cases the line spacing, margins and balancing will be noted by their absence. Neither should we be surprised by the blue hyperlinks used without the minimum of complex. The gifs and emoticons are also found frequently in this aesthetic trend of web design (Bayona, 2018, para.3).

- Resorting to irony and humour, popular culture and eclecticism are other frequent arguments. For that very reason, the visual heterogeneity of pieces associated with brutalism are what motivate doubts for Pierre Buttin – author of the project Brutalist Designs, in which he adapts various apps in line with the stylistic criteria of the movement – about the

real defining attributes and the vagueness of the definition: “is it more about Swiss minimalism or just raw coding?”, he asks (in Toor, 2017, para.3).

- A certain preference for incorporating pastiche as the axis of the graphic content or paying homage to earlier movements can be seen. One of the most significant features of brutalism is the evident nostalgia for the visual style of the first websites of the 90s. In this sense, as Moran describes, graphic expression is found in the “pure bones, an almost raw HTML with blue links and single space and monochromatic text” (2017, s.p.). Gràffica (2016) also mentions the graphics of the 80s as a possible source of inspiration.

To return to the aforementioned evolution of terminology, it seems appropriate to establish a connection between the term brutalism and other mainstream schools, such as the New Ugly –or Pretty Ugly, as the name preferred by authors like TwoPointsNet (2012)– a trend which began in the 21<sup>st</sup> C and which essentially is based on an attempt to simulate an amateur approach to the designer’s task. New Ugly is an eclectic trend linked to postmodernism which seeks to demolish traditional principles of “good design” concepts (order, proportion, simplicity or legibility, among others) via the incorporation of multiple resources (references to the past, combining digital and analogic references, using irony or the inclusion of popular motifs, etc.) and deliberately introduces a false appearance of imperfection. From a creative perspective, the movement reutilizes many of the basic characteristics of previous stages which, combined in a different context, acquire new meanings always tending towards provocation or surprise (Suárez-Carballo & Martín Sanromán, 2014).

Although there is a considerable coincidence, Moran (2017) insists on differentiating the brutalist trend from the so-called “anti-design” trend which predominates at the heart of New Ugly. According to this interpretation, the former would maintain certain conventions of visual hierarchy, navigation and visual design, while the latter represents a total departure from these criteria. In spite of this, the author considers that the popular identification between the two terms is now a fact:

Web-brutalism is beginning to take on a new meaning, quite different from the spirit of the architectural movement. Instead of just focusing on simplified user- interfaces with a raw or inexistent style, some designers interpret brutalism as a rebellion against design which is excessively simplified, intentionally creating ugly, disorienting or complex interfaces (Moran, 2017, para. 14).

The confusion grows when the features that are currently attributed to brutalism are examined, of clear postmodern influence (like New Ugly), in contrast with its original connection to modernism (Ledesma, 2017), defined via attributes such as “the geometry, the structural emphasis, the abstraction and the use of flat colours” (Dopico Castro, 2016, p 80). Along this line, while Barilli maintains that the essence of the modernist formula is based on the maxim pronounced by the Viennese architect Adolf Loos that “ornament is crime” (2013, p. 49), many adepts of brutalist philosophy have decided to outspokenly embrace the decorative formula. The clear rejection of the remotest brutalism by the postmodern school (Bayley, 2012) underlines this contradiction.

In spite of the vast collection of articles in online journals (previously cited) which have discussed this phenomenon, and the proliferation of blogs or references to it on social media –specially Instagram, as pointed out by López Palacios (2017)– its presence in scientific literature on graphic design is somewhat anecdotal. The only publication on brutalist web design in journals of this type corresponds to an argumentative study by Ganci & Ribeiro (2016) in which the authors disagree as to the influences, implications and real extent of the trend: while Ganci maintains that this movement could have a

generally positive effect on the evolution of web design –as much as it represents creative rebellion against the reigning homogeneity– Ribeiro states that it is no more than a temporary distraction for designers who avoid facing more important problems like usability or accessibility. Nevertheless, instead of dispelling these doubts, the text acknowledges that it raises more questions than answers.

As a result of these reflections, one wonders whether it is feasible to formulate a precise and universal description of web-brutalism as a discernible trend based on the formal features that define it, or whether the term has been perverted to refer to the heterogeneous manifestations of other contemporary trends such as the aforementioned New Ugly.

## 2. Aims

As mentioned, the main aim of this article is to reveal whether it is possible to interpret brutalism as a movement with its own independent and personal features and, if this is found to be the case, provide an accurate definition for a visual blueprint by analysing a selection of pieces associated with the style. The general aim is divided into three main objectives:

- Discover whether there exists a visual uniformity in the pieces linked to brutalist web design, that is to say whether it is possible to identify a personal and homogeneous style in the visual resolutions associated with this model.
- Carry out a description of the brutalist movement in web design by numbering the stylistic attributes by which it is identified.
- Determine from previous arguments whether brutalism can be identified as a discernible trend in the specific field of web design or whether it is simply a new term for other pre-existing movements.

## 3. Hypothesis

From these objectives, and after an initial superficial exploration of some of the pieces linked to the brutalist movement, the research proposes the following hypotheses:

- Brutalist web design is understood today as an eclectic movement defined by a broad heterogeneous repertoire of attributes and techniques of visual communication which only share a violent opposition to the conventional mores of design (ease of use, hierarchy, proportion or legibility, among others).
- In relation to this first prediction, the term brutalism cannot currently be identified as a clearly discernible movement of web design but it adopts the features of other trends which pursue provocation as their central force and calls them its own.
- There exist two opposing directions in brutalist design: one static (which encompasses the foundational attributes of the movement, based on techniques such as simplicity, passivity or balance), and the other dynamic (represented by the opposite values of complexity, activity and instability).

## 4. Research Method

This research uses Content Analysis, a technique which has proven to be an extremely useful instrument for research into graphic design: the studies developed by Bermejo Blas and Montes Vozmediano (2015), Salvador Rivero & Montes Vozmediano (2016), or Suárez Carballo, Martín-Sanromán & Galido-Rubio (2018) are just some examples. Colle defines this tool as “a set of methods and techniques for facilitating the systematic description of formal and semantic components of all types of message, and the formulation of valid inferences on the data collected” (Colle, 2014, p. 7). For Prendes Espinosa it is a valid, reliable, objective and systematic procedure for analysing the content of visual messages on a specific support and, ultimately, “a means to process information and categorize it into analysable data” (1996, p. 16).

The formula used in this text in particular is centred on the expressive surface of the message and presents a quantitative focus –which is based on the objective of “summarising in a group of statistical numbers the result of a systematic and meticulous examination of a sample of messages” (Igartua, 2006, p. 183)– and, at the same time, qualitative, based on the need to study both the underlying and the displayed contents of the pieces in depth (Andréu Abela, 2000). The reason for contemplating these latter procedures, used in studies like that carried out by Vizcaíno-Laorga and Jiménez-Ruesta (2018), can be observed, for example, in the interpretation of categories such as activity and spontaneity (and their respective opposites), as detailed in the next section.

### 4.1. Variables

The research draws on three variables in order to verify the hypotheses: the visual communication techniques (mainly), the typographic characteristics and the chromatic strategy of the websites.

In the first place, in relation to the rhetorical construction of the message, the techniques of visual communication are a collection of possible instructions, graphic formulae or design alternatives for generating a specific artistic meaning, according to the communicative needs of the project.

The techniques are grouped into opposing pairs, based on two extreme compositional proposals (Dondis, 2000): balance (or levelling) and tension (sharpening). Oejo (1998) suggests a proposal for classification (Table 1) which stems from these options (that he calls static and dynamic, respectively) and he adds a third group (combinatory) where he includes very different techniques whose features do not strictly fit into either of the other two groups (based principally on levelling and tension) but which are very interesting for completing the meaning of the piece. In his words, “the binary code, in this case, is too simplistic and even excludes the complementary capacity which some of the techniques mentioned have in order to enrich others with features that limit action” (Ojeo, 1998, p. 174).

Dynamic	Static	Combinatory
Asymmetry Fragmentation Instability Complexity Irregularity Spontaneity Activity Distortion Sequentiality Depth Continuity	Symmetry Unity Balance Simplicity Regularity Predictability Passivity Realism Juxtaposition Neutrality Episodicity	Audacity Economy Profusion Exaggeration Reticence Subtlety Diffusiveness Accent Coherence Sharpness Singularity

Table 1. Three groups of visual communication techniques. Source: Oejo (1998)

The communication techniques are therefore set up as the pillars of analysis for this study, to try to describe visually the brutalist movement in web design and try to contrast its homogeneity in relation to the hypotheses formulated. Likewise, and given that in one graphic piece several techniques usually coexist simultaneously (together they give meaning to the work), a maximum of ten main formulae in each website have been retrieved: that is to say only those which really condition the graphic solution to each project. Among them, however, the following pairs, which are considered to be especially relevant in relation to the predictions, are always assessed:

- **Balance-instability:** In a graphic product, the elements develop a series of weights, forces, tensions and directions. The balance is achieved by compensating these factors; however, when they do not cancel each other out the composition is more dynamic, chaotic, disturbing or provocative (instability), a perception which can be strengthened through resources such as diagonals or an abundance of elements.
- **Symmetry-asymmetry:** These are really two formulas to represent balance. While symmetrical balance is the static formula par excellence, asymmetry is obtained when the elements move away from the axis and give way to new relationships of more dynamic forces. Symmetry and asymmetry (as alternatives therefore to static and dynamic equilibrium respectively) and instability (the absence of balance) constitute therefore three options for representing the distribution of forces from levelling or sharpening.
- **Simplicity-complexity:** Simplicity seeks an immediate, clear and direct solution, free of superfluous elements and useless additions. Complexity, on the other hand, is created through the use of numerous units and elements (usually) and from an implausible structure which gives rise to intricate visual schemata.
- **Activity-passivity:** In a two-dimensional and static space dynamism or the sensation of movement can be achieved (through diagonals, distortions, saturated colours or typographical contrast): in short, activity. At the other extreme, passivity seeks to transmit a sensation of absolute repose. It is usually linked to techniques with similar objectives, like neutrality, reticence or economy, among others.
- **Spontaneity-predictability:** Spontaneity is based on bold solutions that avoid conservative approaches and seek to create the maximum impact in the message. Its opposite, predictability, alludes to conventional formulas and recurrent strategies; in web design this predictability coincides with the use or imitation of templates and themes



of content managers like WordPress (Arcement, 2016; Sánchez, 2016), the recycling of frameworks (header, content, article, footer, sidebar) and recourse to common pieces (slideshows, breadcrumbs), for example.

As the list of visual communication techniques is long, the meanings of the thirteen remaining techniques can be found in Appendix 1. It is important to mention that in the field of graphic design the present study finds no significant difference between the techniques of audacity and spontaneity (and their opposite pairings), and therefore interprets them as synonyms and links them under combinatory techniques. In consequence, the number of pairs analysed are reduced to a total of 18.

Together with these principle variables, the analysis is completed with two other criteria which, according to Yates (2016), are at the heart of visually understanding the trend: the use of system fonts and browser web safe colours, whose possible application is observed by accessing the font code of the pages analysed.

As well as this group of variables belonging to the field of visual language, the relevant data of the type of web page (magazine, portfolio, blog, shop etc.) has been collected for each piece analysed along with its object, area or discipline, in order to try to determine whether this style is more prevalent in any one sector or professional area.

Table 2 summarises the relation of variables and categories analysed in this study and sets out the observable criteria of each one:

Variable	Category	Observable criteria
Communication techniques	The 18 pairs of techniques (Dondis, 2000; Oejo, 1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Significant presence of the techniques in each piece (maximum ten techniques)</li> <li>- The following pairs are always analysed: Balance-instability, symmetry asymmetry, simplicity-complexity, activity-passivity and spontaneity-predictability.</li> </ul>
Typography	System fonts	Inclusion of system fonts: yes/no
Colour	Browser web safe colours	Inclusion of safe colours: yes/no

Table 2. Variables, categories and observable criteria used in the study.

#### 4.2. Sample and process of analysis

To make up the sample, the 50 most recent sites were selected from the catalogue of the Brutalist Websites archive (<http://brutalistwebsites.com>), for a large part developed by the authors mentioned in the theoretical corpus of this study (Arcement, 2016; Miller, 2017; Özdemir, 2017; Sánchez, 2016; Toor, 2018; among others) as a showcase for brutalist web design, and which constitutes the only platform devoted entirely to the collection of examples of this web design paradigm. As noted by Özdemir (2017), the platform's popularity is proven by the more than 100 daily requests from different cultural disciplines (such as experimental sites for punk music or abstract art) or more serious niche traders who wish to find a really new way of reaching their target audience. The number of websites analysed is considered to be sufficient to extract reliable conclusions about the movement's visual features.

The process of analysis took place throughout the first week of October 2018 and consisted of evaluating the main page of the selected websites (whose visual features were considered to be broadly representative of the graphic philosophy of the whole digital product), which forms the unit of observation. The full sample can be found in Appendix 2.

### 5. Results

In general, the results obtained show notable visual-arts heterogeneity among the pages which make up the sample. With regard to the techniques principally judged in the analysis (Figure 1), a preference was observed for activity (34 cases) and complexity (33) as compared to their respective opposites passivity (16) and simplicity (17). On the compositional features what most stand out are the asymmetrical strategies (27 cases) against instability (17) and symmetry (6). However, the most resounding figures come from the application of spontaneity, a formula which, in short, refers to the capacity to surprise or the creative freedom of the web's graphic concept. Although this technique is present, with greater or lesser intensity, in all of the pages analysed, it was found indisputably in 41 of the 50 listed (82%).

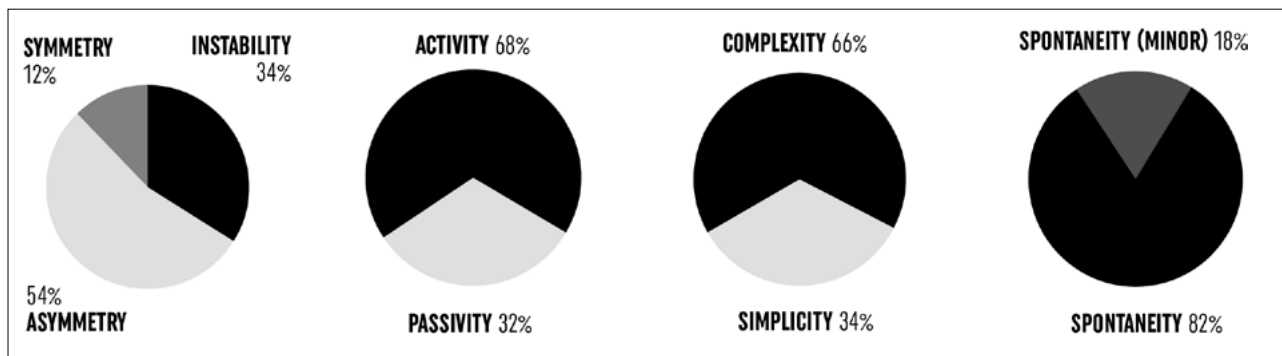


Figure 1. The presence of the 4 principle visual communication techniques (in percentages). Source: author's own production.

The figures which derive from the analysis of the remainder of techniques (Figure 2) show an absolute dispersion in the formulas that underlie the visual inspection of the selected projects, and likewise in the three groups formulated by Oejo (1988), a division which, as will be seen, was finally rejected. In this study only those techniques which are essential for visually describing each project are recorded; those whose presence is surplus are dismissed. Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight the frequent recourse to irregularity (found on 20 websites), coherence (15), fragmentation (15) or opacity (14).

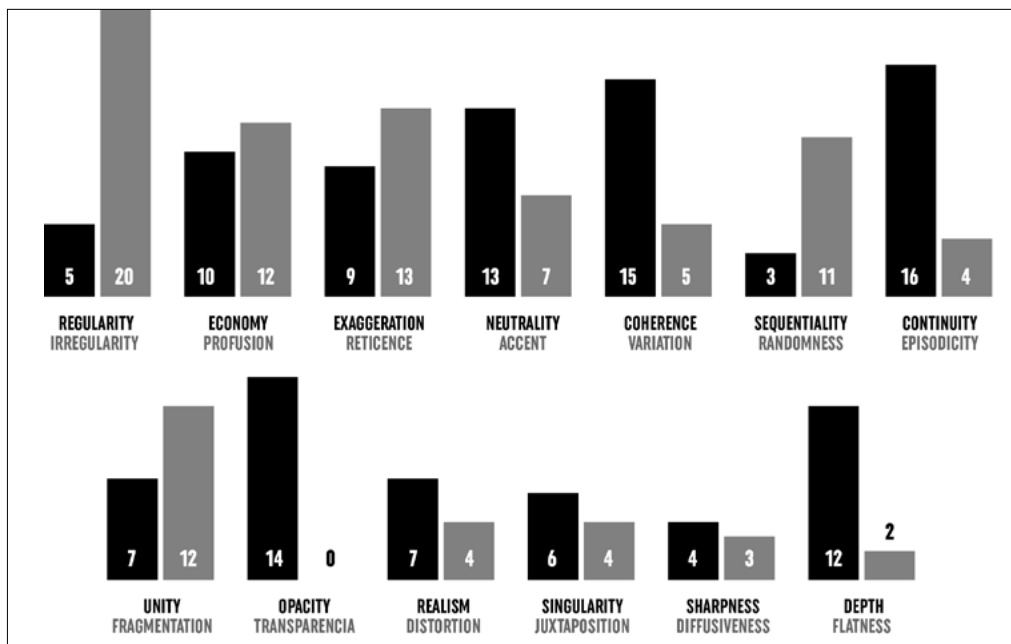


Figure 2. Presence of the remaining communication techniques (in number of cases). Source: author's own production.

On the remainder of the variables analysed, there was no special attention found towards the system fonts or safe colours (Figure 3), which were only used by 14 and 11 sites respectively. On the other hand a considerable frequency of achromatic harmony (scale of greys) was found in the different selectors of the cascading style sheets (CSS) –a resource used regularly in portfolios, for example– although this combination is not so apparent due to the inclusion of images in colour. It is important to point out that the analysis is carried out on the design of the website and not on the graphic resources included within it (such as images of projects or news), except when they are essential for the chromatic strategy and/or typography of the site.

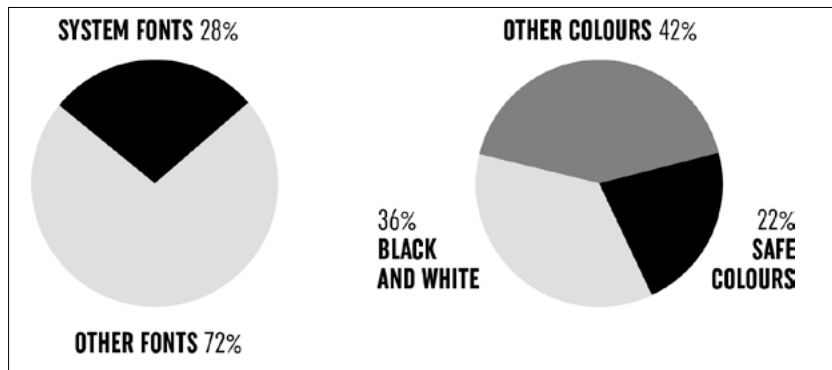


Figure 3. Presence of the system fonts and safe colours (in percentages). Source: Author's own production.

Finally, on the type of pages and the predominant field (Figure 4), especially notable is the number of portfolios (in half of the cases analysed) –a “display or showcase, physical and virtual” of the creative work, according to Taylor (2013, p. 8)– on art and design (29 cases) or other artistic and cultural fields (fashion, music or architecture), as well as platforms whose aim is merely experimental (in its function and/or subject).

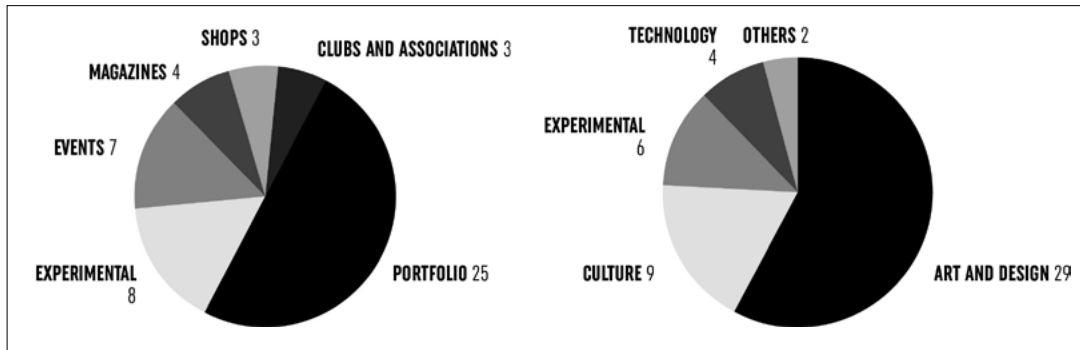


Figure 4. Types of websites and the most common sectors (in number of cases). Source: Author's own production.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis of the results corroborates the research hypothesis: from the selected sample, the term brutalist today covers a multitude of many different manifestations whose only common thread is the clear rejection of some of the classic dogmas of graphic design; precisely those linked to the *traditional* school (hierarchy, order, proportion or simplicity, to cite but a few) and which have defined the shape of products such as the generalist printed press (Vizcaíno-Laorga &

Jiménez-Ruesta, 2018). The significant presence of spontaneity –or audacity– as synonym for rupture, innovation and creative daring, together with the absolute dispersion of the remainder of the formulas, prove the visual heterogeneity of an extremely eclectic movement whose unity only seems to be upheld by the provocative attitude of its respective authors.

With regard to this point, there is no great individuality evident in relation to other mainstream movements such as the aforementioned New Ugly, according to Suárez-Carballo & Martín-Sanroman's definition (2014). Looking at the features revealed by the sample, there is no apparent difference in the posture of either paradigm; they share rebellion, provocation, creative freedom and, regularly, a certain trace of imperfection in the visual shaping of the message.

Coinciding with this aspect, even though certain peculiarities can be seen in the original manifest which inspired the brutalist web design –based, in turn, on the architectural keystones of this movement (rawness of the visual resolutions, total absence of decoration or the popular nature of the visual formulas)– the numerous contributions in the literature consulted suggest that this essence has been lost and that the trend has evolved towards a new, more hybrid and chameleonic model which picks up elements from other graphic trends of popular culture and whose universal definition, from the visual plane and in reference to our sample analysed, is extremely complex. The new brutalist concept, therefore, appears only to respect the disdain towards excessive conservatism and predictability in current web design.

Therefore, features such as rawness or the extreme absence of decoration (interpreted as the lack of CSS attributes) which, according to Moran (2017) or Bayona (2018) constitute the pillars of the original brutalism, appear to have been displaced towards a diverse group of attributes which reflect their opposites: an irreverent spirit of postmodern design which shares only one aesthetic with its origins that many identify as a marked ugliness. Perhaps, on this point, it would be appropriate to assess a possible distortion of the original meaning (“raw concrete”) and its change to erroneous synonyms such as savage, crude, monumental or, simply, *raw*.

As the third hypothesis suggested, this identification with New Ugly reveals two basic opposing directions in brutalism: those solutions based on simplicity and passivity on the one hand, and a second option, clearly prevalent, which resorts to the opposite extreme, dynamism (related, in turn, to activity, complexity and instability or asymmetrical balance). As regards this aspect, the sample gathers together visual proposals that are truly contradictory, as can be seen in Figure 5, from the sites of Jacopo Tripodi and Pli Revue.

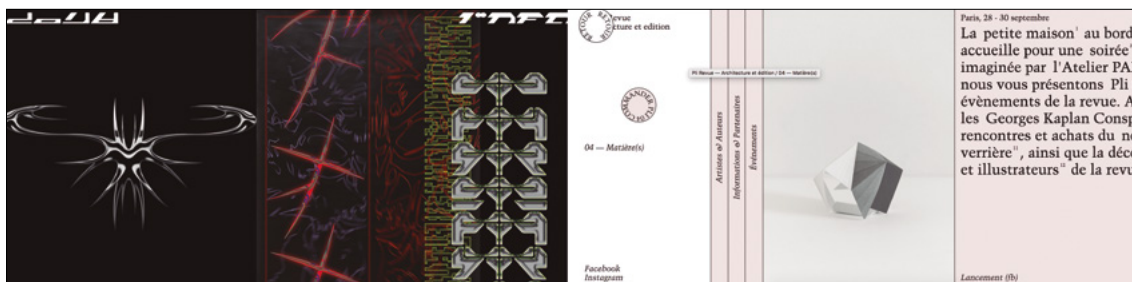


Figure 5. Comparison of Jacopo Tripodi (<http://www.jacopotripodi.com/>) and Pli Revue (<http://plirevue.com/matieres>) websites. Source: Brutalist websites and author's own production.

Going beyond the previous conclusions, what follows are some of the doubts, weaknesses and challenges that this study has given rise to and that will be approached in future projects in this line of research.

- The literature referred to in the introduction to this paper is aimed specifically at an important development of the meaning of brutalist web design since its beginnings; however, the methodological tool does not allow for this extreme to be contrasted, given that the original idea of the movement has not been rigorously described by communication techniques. Following the criteria of authors such as Casado (2016), Grilo (n.d.), Arcement (2016) or Yates (2016), of the few examples of the sample which seem to respect the original proposal of the term brutalist, those which stand out are the sites from the multidisciplinary artistic space Public Possession and the distributor of printed matter Ore.e Ref (Figure 6). Nevertheless, having stated thus, it can only be partially accepted, by paying attention to the two remaining variables (safe colours or, above all, system fonts): a more detailed description of the archetypal features of the beginnings of web-brutalism from the communication techniques is required in order to confirm this reinterpretation of the term's meaning. In the current study, this hypothesis can only be corroborated through the arguments that have spilled into the references quoted, from the analysis of the last two variables (typography and colour) or underlining the visual eclecticism of the sample, factors which the research does contemplate.

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Figure 6. Website Public Possession (<https://www.publicpossession.com>) and Ore.e Ref. (<http://oree.storijapan.net>).  
Source: Brutalist websites and author's own production.

- Secondly, the division of techniques created by Oejo (1998), from the catalogue by Dondis (2000), is actually quite conflictive and certainly inefficient. Questions arise over the distribution of some of the techniques in their three groups (realism, juxtaposition or episodicity proposed as static features, in fact), so that the results relative to the third hypothesis (the levelling or tension of the movement) cannot be verified absolutely, at least based on this distribution.

For this reason, this study suggests a classification proposal (Table 3) which seems to offer more precision in relation to the three categories. It is advisable to note that symmetry and asymmetry are positioned in two different groups in spite of representing two formulas of balance (technique placed in the first group).

It is worth mentioning as a limitation in the methodological design of this paper the absence of a prior exploratory study that would have permitted applying this new version to the process of definitive analysis. It is thought to be more solid and will, in any event, be introduced in future research along these lines.

Static	Dynamic	Combinatory
Balance	Instability	Unity
Symmetry	Asymmetry	Fragmentation
Simplicity	Complexity	Transparency
Regularity	Irregularity	Opacity
Economy	Profusion	Realism
Reticence	Exaggeration	Distortion
Passivity	Activity	Singularity
Neutrality	Accent	Juxtaposition
Coherence	Variation	Sharpness
Sequentiality	Randomness	Diffusiveness
Continuity	Episodicity	Spontaneity (Audacity)
Flatness	Depth	Predictability (Subtlety)

Table 3. New proposal for the distribution of communication techniques. Source: Dondis (2000), Oejo (1998) and author's own production.

- Although, in general, the techniques show themselves to be a very efficient element for describing any movement of visual communication, it is also true that the weight of the different pairs in this task is unequal: while some are considered to be essential (balance, simplicity, activity or spontaneity itself, together with their opposite pairings), the role of others would appear to be little more than as an accompaniment which seems relevant only to study individual works (singularity, unity or opacity, for example). In any case, the dispersion of the technique in this study serves precisely to confirm the heterogeneity of brutalism, as Gráfica (2016), or Deville & Tobin have already pointed out (in Arcement, 2016).
- Spontaneity is said to be the most common resource for brutalism, synonym for provocation and creative freedom. However, the methodological design gives rise to doubts as to its exacting measurement: for example, is it possible to operationalise an abstract term in a qualitative analysis such as is used here? At what moment does a graphic proposal stop being predictable and become “creative”? It derives from the design of the templates and the WordPress phenomenon (Sánchez, 2016) as an example of a conventional formula, but it doesn't seem to be enough in itself: this one judgement could lead to error in interpreting solutions as original when they are not especially innovative. These unknown quantities, in short, are applicable to many techniques, whose mere description is predicted to be insufficient for taking on a study of this kind with any guarantees.
- Occasionally, numbering techniques out of context may produce distorted results. For example, the presence of symmetry in the results is barely anecdotal, but at first sight this data does not seem to be exclusive to brutalist sites. On the other hand, in some categories of websites (portfolios or magazines), certain techniques (realism and

diffusiveness, for example) are difficult to analyse because the description is not carried out on the images they include (in news items or designers' graphic pieces) but on the design determined by the CSS.

- In general, the obsession for cataloguing and defining new visual trends in a contemporary context leads to a capricious, indiscriminate and not very exacting usage of the terms. It even begs the question as to whether the designers even identify themselves with the movement their work is associated with, or whether their intentions coincide with the general aims of the trend it is classified under. With regard to this, Lipovetsky & Seroy question the influence of trends today; in their opinion, "there is no longer a dominant school: it is the era of proliferation, deregulation, a fusion of styles and tastes. Today's style is not so much one of an era, embracing all styles, as one of the designers' themselves" (2015, p. 216).
- This paper's desire is simply to research the formal features of the brutalist movement, without making any judgement on its suitability or the value of its contribution for improving communication in the field of interactive design, problems it would seem urgent to approach in future studies. In fact, as Ganci & Ribeiro indicate, "brutalism's provocation is yet more evidence that much research is still needed to help designers to understand the consequences of visual web design" (2016, p. 107).

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Full description of visu2al communication techniques*

**Regularity-Irregularity:** Compositional regularity is based on uniformity and homogeneity of the elements which make up the piece. Visual resolution is organised, following a pre-established pattern, and usually stems from a uniform space via a clearly defined grid. Irregularity is based, on the other hand, on diversity and on a visible plan of distribution to reinforce the surprising, unusual and dynamic feature.

**Unity-fragmentation:** Unity is related to the presence of several pieces which sacrifice their individuality in order to be perceived as a whole. The different elements are interpreted as a global image. In fragmentation, on the other hand, a decomposition of elements can be seen within the space, interpreted independently: thus reinforcing the independent nature of each of the units.

**Economy-profusion:** The technique of economy refers to those compositions created from a small number of units, while profusion alludes to a richness and abundance of elements in the composition.

**Reticence-exaggeration:** As with economy, reticence seeks the minimum amount of energy in the construction of a message. However, compared with the former, it does not affect the number of units so much as their size and relevance in the composition. Exaggeration, the reversal, is that formula which resorts to great visual intensity and refers, above all, to the increased size of the elements of the composition.

**Neutrality-accent:** Neutrality is based on a monotonous composition, with no clear points of attention; contrast is kept to a minimum. The technique of accent or focalisation comes into play when this monotony is interrupted by elements which aim to draw the viewer's attention towards the so-called centres of visual impact.

**Transparency-opacity:** Transparency refers to a technique whose foreground elements (or a detail of these) reveal the objects situated behind. Opacity indicates the concealment of visual details which impede the viewing of the other compositional units. It is usually created intentionally to hide certain elements or to give way to layers with new meanings.

**Coherence-variation:** In coherence, the elements are governed by one and the same formal criterion and some uniform visual features. Its opposite, variation, is the technique whose elements admit original changes and modifications.

**Realism-distortion:** Realism purports to be a true representation of the motif it represents, free from manipulation and touching-up. In distortion, reality is willingly deformed to produce specific effects and lend a particular bent or tone to the message.

**Singularity-juxtaposition:** Singularity is a composition based on the absolute protagonism of one of its components which eclipses the others and forms the main point of the message. Juxtaposition, for its part, is based on the complementarity of two or more of the composition's units which contain similar relevance and acquire a mutual dependency in order to give meaning to the image.

**Sequentiality-randomness:** Sequentiality seeks to establish a logical order or rhythmic pattern from the elements and is usually used to explain developments or changes. In a given visual composition it is a synonym of hierarchy. Randomness, however, suggests a certain disorganisation of the elements.

**Sharpness-diffusiveness:** Sharpness strengthens the outlines and fixes the composition through definition, clarity and precision of the units' features. Diffusiveness aims for a softer or more blurred definition of the elements.

**Continuity-episodicity:** Continuity is defined by the existence of links and connections between the elements. In episodicity there is no proximity between the pieces, whose individual nature is reinforced by the dispersion of the parts.

**Depth-flatness:** On two-dimensional surfaces depth offers a three-dimensional sense, while flatness refers to the total absence of perspective in a composition. They are usually the basic criteria of visual trends such as *skeuomorphism* and *flat design*, respectively.

## ***Appendix 2. Full list of websites analysed***

The references analysed match the 50 most recent entries of the website Brutalist Websites (<http://brutalistwebsites.com>), compiled on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018 (Table 4):

Página web	URL
1-814-75-Round Call / Text toll Free	<a href="http://round.design/">http://round.design/</a>
Alex Firs	<a href="http://alexfirs.com/">http://alexfirs.com/</a>
Arina Alexandrova	<a href="https://a-r-i-s-h-a.com/">https://a-r-i-s-h-a.com/</a>
Asya Sukhorukova	<a href="http://asuk.work/">http://asuk.work/</a>
Ben Schwartz	<a href="https://www.benschwartz.co/">https://www.benschwartz.co/</a>
bob.farm	<a href="https://bob.farm/">https://bob.farm/</a>
Chains Club	<a href="https://chainsclub.de/events/pudel-in-chains">https://chainsclub.de/events/pudel-in-chains</a>
Charles Villa	<a href="https://www.charlesvilla.fr/">https://www.charlesvilla.fr/</a>
Duskmann by POLO	<a href="https://duskmann.com/#project">https://duskmann.com/#project</a>
Estileras	<a href="https://www.estileras.com.br/">https://www.estileras.com.br/</a>
Foku	<a href="http://www.foku.ee/">http://www.foku.ee/</a>
Gene Tellem	<a href="http://genetellem.pro/">http://genetellem.pro/</a>
God natt, Oslo	<a href="https://godnattoslo.no/">https://godnattoslo.no/</a>
Gruppe Magazine	<a href="http://gruppemagazine.com/">http://gruppemagazine.com/</a>
Imogen	<a href="https://imogen.fyi/">https://imogen.fyi/</a>
Jacopo Tripodi	<a href="http://www.jacopotripodi.com/">http://www.jacopotripodi.com/</a>
Ji Soo Eom	<a href="https://jisooeom.com/">https://jisooeom.com/</a>
Karel Mertens	<a href="http://karelmartensatyle.net/">http://karelmartensatyle.net/</a>
Low+Tech Magazine	<a href="https://solar.lowtechmagazine.com">https://solar.lowtechmagazine.com</a>
Mariano Pascual	<a href="http://marianopascual.me/">http://marianopascual.me/</a>
Measurements of Space and Time	<a href="https://jyoon10.github.io/risd/measurementsospaceandtime/home.html">https://jyoon10.github.io/risd/measurementsospaceandtime/home.html</a>
Meta Marathon 2019	<a href="http://metamarathon.net/">http://metamarathon.net/</a>
Monica Magsanoc	<a href="https://www.monicamagsanoc.com/">https://www.monicamagsanoc.com/</a>
Multiplo	<a href="https://www.multiplo.biz/">https://www.multiplo.biz/</a>
Officeus	<a href="http://officeus.org/">http://officeus.org/</a>
Ore.e Ref.	<a href="http://oree.storijapan.net/">http://oree.storijapan.net/</a>
Osebo	<a href="http://osebo.net/">http://osebo.net/</a>
Panorama Inc.	<a href="https://pnrm.co.jp/sandal/">https://pnrm.co.jp/sandal/</a>
Paul Fletcher-Hill	<a href="https://paulfletcherhill.com/">https://paulfletcherhill.com/</a>
Pieter Paul Pothoven	<a href="http://pieterpaulpothoven.com/">http://pieterpaulpothoven.com/</a>
Pli Revue	<a href="http://plirevue.com/">http://plirevue.com/</a>
Public Possession	<a href="https://www.publicpossession.com/">https://www.publicpossession.com/</a>

Rio Grande	<a href="http://riogrande.xyz/">http://riogrande.xyz/</a>
Roman Sazonov	<a href="https://madebyroms.com/">https://madebyroms.com/</a>
Rui da Paz	<a href="https://rui.cool/">https://rui.cool/</a>
Sabina advertising	<a href="http://sabina.ch/">http://sabina.ch/</a>
Sameul Kilgus	<a href="https://samkilg.us/">https://samkilg.us/</a>
src +	<a href="https://src.plus/">https://src.plus/</a>
Steph Davidson	<a href="http://parallelover.se/">http://parallelover.se/</a>
Sterling Chang	<a href="http://sterlingchang.com/">http://sterlingchang.com/</a>
Studio Villa	<a href="https://studiovilla.co/">https://studiovilla.co/</a>
The Restart Page	<a href="http://www.therestartpage.com/">http://www.therestartpage.com/</a>
The Road Back Home	<a href="http://www.theroadbackhome.net/">http://www.theroadbackhome.net/</a>
Under Consideration	<a href="http://under-consideration.com/">http://under-consideration.com/</a>
Vicky Boyd	<a href="http://vickyboyd.com/about.html">http://vickyboyd.com/about.html</a>
Voicemail stories	<a href="http://voicemailstories.herokuapp.com/">http://voicemailstories.herokuapp.com/</a>
Walter Santomauro	<a href="http://www.waltersantomauro.com/#/list">http://www.waltersantomauro.com/#/list</a>
Washer / Dryer Projects	<a href="https://washer-dryer-projects.com/">https://washer-dryer-projects.com/</a>
«hlebozavod9»	<a href="http://hlebozavod9.ru">http://hlebozavod9.ru</a>
«besymag»	<a href="https://besymag.in/">https://besymag.in/</a>

Table 4. Full list of websites analysed. Source: author's own production