



ON-TREND: *soft brutalism*

Marple-based interior designer **Katherine Malouf** on the new form sanctuary



Teklan framed wool rug, from £895, layeredinterior.com

For the last decade, our homes have been dominated by a polite revisit to Modernism – all tapered legs, thin veneers, and the lightweight silhouettes of the mid-century era. But we are finally reaching a turning point. We are moving away from the lean and toward something with real gravity. What we are seeing in 2026 is the culmination of a decade-long journey: the evolution of Soft Brutalism.

The current Soft Brutalism aesthetic is not a sudden trend but a gradually developing style. Unlike its 1950s Brutalist predecessor, which was characterised by the stark, unforgiving aggression of *béton brut* (raw concrete) and often evoked the feel of a car park, the contemporary movement has softened its cold, industrial edge over the last decade.

The elemental versatility

The beauty of this shift is its remarkable versatility. Soft Brutalism is a chameleon; it pairs just as effortlessly with the rafters of a Cheshire barn conversion or a modern farmhouse as it does with the red brick of a North West mill or the sharp lines of a crisp new build. In a farmhouse, it adds a much-needed architectural anchor; in a new build, it introduces the soul modern boxes often lack. It is the sweet spot where raw architecture meets high-end comfort.

From authority to sanctuary

To create a Soft Brutalist sanctuary, keep the walls simple and the shapes bold,

Bespoke upholstery and soft furnishings – ottomans from £255 and cushions from £85, larissagreatrexdesign.co.uk, Manchester





Empire Poplar Root centre tables, from £7,658, bocadolobo.com



Brutalist mirror, £1,080, dustydeco.com

flooding the space with tactile yes moments. This movement intentionally moves away from floating or spindly furniture, favouring monolithic forms and heavy, grounded silhouettes.

By utilising the physical weight of these larger pieces, we can create a broken-plan layout that defines zones for work or relaxation without blocking light or needing permanent walls. A monolithic anchor, like the Empire poplar root centre table by Boca Do Lobo, stabilizes the centre of a room, while a heavy wool rug in 'edible' colours (oatmeal, mushroom, or moss) territorialises the space and grounds the furniture. For further zoning, hunt for vintage two-way shelving at Vinterior or Pamoto to section off a room with a brutally fabulous edge that remains porous and open.

This approach ensures that movement through the home feels intentional rather than cluttered. Favour wide thoroughfares that lead you toward a destination moment – perhaps that velvet chair positioned for the afternoon light, or a heavy marble benchtop that invites you to lean and linger. By reducing the number of pieces but increasing their visual mass, the room feels calmer. We are no longer weaving through a graveyard of small items; we are moving between significant, meaningful objects that ground our daily rituals in a sense of permanence.

Material truth and sculptural soul

While the furniture provides the mass, the smaller pieces inject the soul. In Soft Brutalism, metal is the jewellery of the room. Look for hand-shaped metalwork like

Nkuku's candle holders or look up Studio Henry Wilson's to find his beautiful cast-bronze accessories. Celebrate material truth: think uneven ceramic bowls or a raw, spiky amethyst cluster, where the violet, jewel-like colour creates an unexpected warmth against a matte backdrop.

To truly ground the aesthetic, the architectural 'skin' of the room must also reflect this elemental honesty. For stone, we move away from the high-gloss polish of the past and look toward honed or leathered finishes that feel velvet-soft to the touch. Think of a monolithic kitchen island in Travertine or a deeply veined Arabescato marble, surfaces that are meant to be lived on and allowed to patina over time.

Underfoot, we trade synthetic fibres for the heavy, raw texture of chunky wool carpets →



Surface Sconce by studio Henry Wilson, £1,650, thespecified.com



Camden armchair in Cloud Dancer, £1,995, darlingsofchelsea.co.uk



Lokoja candle holders, £30, nkuku.com



Air, (170x178cm)
by Ian Rayer-Smith, POA,
ianrayersmith.com

or sisal in tonal, ‘edible’ shades. For wall finishes, limewash or micro-cement provides a soft, chalky depth that mimics the “ghost” of concrete without the coldness. Even the joinery plays a part: instead of hidden, flimsy veneers, we look for solid timber with visible grain and chunky, integrated handles. These finishes ensure the architecture feels less like a built structure and more like a tactile, cohesive sanctuary.

This aesthetic tension – the deliberate dialogue between unapologetic geometry and fluidity – is beautifully realized through our local creators. Larissa Rex’s soft furnishings provide the structural ‘brute’ of the space; her bold chequerboards and rhythmic monochrome patterns act as a graphic skeleton, offering a sense of order. Yet, because these are artisanal textiles, that rigidity is subverted by a tactile warmth that makes the hard lines feel domestic and approachable.

Providing the essential atmospheric counterpoint is the work of Manchester artist Nan Collantine. Her paintings act as a release from structural discipline, using fluid, gestural brushwork and a nuanced palette to effectively ‘dissolve’ a room’s hard edges. If Larissa’s textiles represent the architecture, Nan’s work represents the light and air within it.

Finally, to truly anchor the sanctuary, we look to the visceral, large-scale works of Ian Rayer-Smith. Another Manchester powerhouse, Rayer-Smith’s abstract expressionist paintings are a masterclass in emotional weight. Where the architecture is silent, Ian’s work speaks. His use of thick, energetic mark-making and Renaissance light creates a sense of history and mystery that prevents a modern home from ever feeling clinical.

In a Soft Brutalist space, these works don’t just hang on the wall – they become part of the room’s heartbeat, proving that disciplined geometry and expansive, organic soul aren’t just compatible; they are a masterclass in harmony.

Designing for the future

Ultimately, Soft Brutalism is more than a fleeting trend; it is a return to the idea that our homes should feel as permanent as they are peaceful. It invites us to appreciate the weight of a hand-cast bronze object, the depth of a gestural brushstroke, and the comfort of a well-placed textile.

By blending the monumental with the artisanal, we create spaces that don’t just house our lives, but protect them. Whether you are sourcing a statement piece from a local maker or hunting for a weathered treasure at a Cheshire vintage market, the goal remains the same: to build a sanctuary that is as honest as it is beautiful.

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katherinemalouf.com



Crossed, by Nan Collantine,
(90x120cm), POA,
nancycollantine.co.uk