

RESEARCH REPORT

Coen van Bergeijk

Contemplating Ruin

Generating a Toolset for a New Appreciation

Abstract

When buildings, sites or industrial landscapes are abandoned and forgotten, decay adds a new layer to the architecture. It evokes feelings of beauty and the sublime, of awe for nature, of the transience of existence, of the futility of human endeavour, of distress, of excitement, of freedom, of play, of aggression and of pleasure. In this research I try to make sense of all these different concepts and feelings by asking how decay adds value to the built environment. I then use the found notions as resources for my thesis design. This research thus functions as a guide for future development and the curating of decay.

This essay is structured along three key values I found embodied in ruin: artistic, social/biological and psychological/emotional. They cover most of the ground in the common appreciation for ruin, yet remain often separated in the literature. The different chapters are not mere expositions of history or psychology, but are all arranged along the topic of architecture and how we as designers can use and learn from these values.

From these ways of perceiving ruins and decay, I distil a toolset from which architects and designers can learn, and use to understand and appreciate decay. These tools are: tranquillity, transience, fragmentation, ambiguity, asylum, affordance and testimony.

Key Words: architecture, theory, decay, fringe, urban wildscape, brownfields, sublime, regional identity, trauma, memory

Introduction

Decay is a part of life. Everything withers, everyone ages, and all eventually fade away. Some might feel conflicted or even sad about this, but the fact is that the transience of material things holds a special beauty that is different than any newly made object. Ruins evoke a mixture of fear and delight, because we can't fully determine them. Most have fond memories of places where the newness has faded and decay has taken root, colonized by plants and animals, full of graffiti and broken windows. Antique aqueducts near Rome, desolate lands full of ivy and brambles on the city's edge, the derelict villa from that holiday long ago, walls full of graffiti in the squatters' hangouts; places where supervision lacked and everything seemed possible. It is those feelings that make places like these so special. It seems unreal that such places still exist in our well-organized lives, but yet they do and add an incredible value to the urban environment.

However, most of the antique ruins have now become pacified. The sublime landscapes through which Goethe and Shelly roamed are transformed into gentle urban parks; their monuments fenced off and stripped of all vegetation and danger. Little is maintained of the wild character of the ruins, leaving behind an empty shell. More values vanish as the ruin is domesticated.

The same goes for our more modern ruins. With the constant urge for progress that characterizes our society, there are bound to be some casualties. Disused and forgotten by the people not immediately involved with them, post-industrial areas are often left vacated of formal society. Obsolete factories, empty shopping malls, abandoned villages and creepy hospitals litter the urban fringes of many European and American cities. These areas as well rapidly disappear. Urban development and gentrification irreversibly change these forgotten areas in the western metropolises and too often the present values are ignored, exploited for financial gain or poorly mimicked. They form an eyesore for developers and city officials, and many have fallen to the sledgehammer. Derelict areas like these prosper however in natural life and create a safe haven for people in the margins. Insubordination of all sorts can roam freely through these areas.

This essay, however, aims to celebrate decay as something to cherish, something to curate. For designers there lies a challenge on how to appreciate and eventually preserve these wild and unplanned spaces. In this thesis I will try to clarify that decay not just damages a building, a street, an environment, but simultaneously adds something nameless, some mysterious

component to the experience of the built environment. I will explore these elements and try to find the answer to the question of how decay adds value to the built environment. However, this is not a plea for ruination or anti-preservation. I merely try to understand the factors that shape our perception of decay. I intend to use the findings of this research in the design phase of my graduation project, which strongly deals with decay and its influence on the experience of the built environment.

Method

This essay is structured along three key values I found embodied in ruin: artistic, social/biological and psychological/emotional. They cover most of the ground in the common appreciation for ruin, yet remain often separated in the literature. The different chapters are not mere expositions of history or psychology, but are all arranged along the topic of architecture and how we as designers can use and learn from these values. I will, however, stay in my own comfort zone of the Western world, where I know my way around. Other cultures and parts of the world all have different connotations on age and decay, but that is for a next research to explore.

The first section of this research will explore the depths of history and review the artistic value of decay. The visualization of ruin in the arts is off all ages, but the usage differs from period to period. From the Picturesque to the Sublime, from Piranesi to #ruinporn, this chapter will try to explain how decay is used as a means for different messages. The different theories about decay and their spatial consequences are discussed generally, but this is not an historical treatise. The feeling of transience, of the idleness of human endeavour, is historically as well as today strongly evoked by ruination, but there are more factors to deal with. The urge to fill in the missing elements as well as the juxtaposition of decay and newness are both linked to the weathering of a structure. We will see this depicted in the different manners to recreate ruin in the arts.

The necessity of ruin for the social realm is treated in the second chapter, namely that of the Urban Wildscape. This edgeland, between the urban and natural world forms a safe haven for marginalized groups of people as well as plants and animals that seek shelter from regulated urban life. It forms a special décor for all sorts of informal activities and provides a new wilderness in the urban jungle. The same could be said about the plant and animal world, which seek shelter in these forgotten spaces. Brownfields and fringes are rapidly becoming the richest areas of biodiversity in the world and are therefore invaluable to our fast urbanizing world.

The last chapter deals with the psychological values of decay. Emotions such as loss and trauma are important for the construction of a regional identity and will be discussed in relation to the old mines in the Ruhrgebiet. However, also the potential of decay in the fading or amplifying of memory and solace is enormous. In this chapter multiple examples will be discussed as well as the broad theoretical framework to come to a final set of values of decay for the built environment.

In the end I will have gathered a certain amount of notions, which could be combined in a toolset for future evaluation of decay in the built environment. The toolset I propose in this thesis is intended to help guide the analysis of future projects having a direct involvement with decay. Nowadays the ruinous is rapidly transformed into trendy hotspots for the urban elite. Too often, however, designers do not fully understand the ambiguous and paradoxical values of places of decay. The question remains whether some of these places add more value to the built environment when transformed into conformist safe-places, but even when it does; it remains key to understand the particular values of the places involved. When solely the aesthetical qualities of ruin are maintained or even enhanced, maybe a wholly invisible layer of emotional relevance disappears. When transformed to a monument, maintaining the structure as a memory, the social or ecological values might disappear. This toolset hopes to help the designer to make a thorough analysis and a considerate choice in what to enhance and what to abolish. It helps understanding the values often almost invisible and helps to create a balanced project for everyone involved.

Results

The Aesthetics of Transience

To summarize the history of ruin value is an almost impossible job. Multiple levels of appreciation existed alongside and practises around the world shifted every few decades. This is however not the purpose of this chapter. What we have seen in the previous pages is a reoccurring cycle of appreciation. I believe this forms the key to understanding and enables us to apply a framework to the notion of ruin value. In the ruins of ancient Rome opportunistic greed was followed by indifference, curiosity and finally led to adoration. The same cycle appeared in the United Kingdom with the numerous ruins of the abbeys and gothic churches after their dissolution. After being plundered and used as quarries for building materials, locals let the ruins deteriorate until artists came along to immortalize the structures. This spiked general interest and soon the fortunate sought to add the picturesque to their gardens.¹ In a smaller scale, this cycle occurs even in recently abandoned structures, but I will talk about that in a later chapter. The point is that like all appreciation, ruinophilia is engaged in cyclical.

When ruins are cleansed from their vegetation and used as décor for various activities, what happens with the ruin value? If they are reused as framing for new functions, what happens to their independence? If ruins are restored to their former glory, what beauty remains? If framed by fences and flower beds, what power is retained? If rearranged to follow modern standards, what authenticity do they have? As something that is both timeless and a product of time itself, the ruin is difficult to act upon. Every act of preservation or restoration inevitably reduces the effect of the ruin. However, the structure also needs to be protected from the elements that created it, as otherwise they slowly disappear and are bound to be forgotten.²

It remains key to understand that the absence, caused by the deterioration of the structure, is filled in by the beholder. The *fragmentation* of ruins results in mentally piling up the broken columns and naming the industrial commodities. The imagination finishes the fragmentation, rendering a unique image for everyone. For some it may be a reminder of the inevitable onset of time and the *transience* of existence. Others find peace and *tranquillity*. The aesthetical qualities of ruin and decay have a strong effect on the human mind and will remain to do so as long as humanity leaves their proverbial rubbish on the surface of this world.

Where the Wild Things Are

It is clear now that ruins are *ambiguous* landscapes. The presence of 'wild' plant and animal life in the city blurs the distinction between urban and rural, just as the fringe distorts the relationship between private and public, as well as the division between accepted and unaccepted behaviour. To take it even further, the distinction between man and nature is being challenged, as both seek refuge in this undefined space. The urban wildscape is a hybrid form, a realm of transition.

What we can clearly observe is that the nature of a ruined site is never inert or rigid. It is a volatile and vulnerable ecosystem that greatly depends on regional features and the changing environment. The temporality of the industrial brownfield or urban wildscapes makes plant and animal life, as well as people, adapt quickly. To survive, a constant change is necessary. However, in the wildscape the refuge can find *asylum* from the constant surveillance and maintenance of the crowded city.

As seen above, the ruin takes on a new function as an *affordance* for play. The absence of surveillance, the often derelict and mangled space forms the perfect adventurous landscape for the physical and emotional growth of both kids and adults. Ruin transgresses of the relationship between the body, the surrounding, materials, nature and even other people. Yet these activities are all but completely ignored by planners of public space. The in-between space is crammed full and there remains little for social development and rebellious behaviour. Luckily, our constant urge for progress is bound to leaving behind left-over spaces, thus creating a never-ending cycle of decay and regeneration.

The Ghost of Ruin

More happens in the wastelands than meets the eye. A layer of memory and identity wraps itself around the abandoned structures and lost landscapes. The obsolete railway tracks and harbours are witnesses to the industrial revolution, the voids in the city are a reminder of the terrors of

¹ Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins*, 108-114.

² Michael S. Roth et al, *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*, 1

war, of racism, of nationalism, the abandoned shopping malls a reminder of failing capitalism. Every ruin has its story and cannot be fully appreciated without.

Although ruin could thus evoke strong feelings of trauma and nostalgia, the aesthetic and social values discussed before are often simultaneously present and inseparably connected to the experience of ruin. In plain daylight, the death camps could look almost peaceful, without ivy the passage of time is hard to witness. The sublime, transience and temporality of ruin are still present in traumatised architecture. They help to hear the *testimony* of the structure. It is because of this that sometimes the feelings don't reach the surface and the ruin is no witness to the memory expected. It is then no more than a pile of broken masonry.

It is however clear that the architecture of trauma has roughly the same appeal to modern visitors as it did with Shelly and Wordsworth. Although the ruin has changed from toppled columns in an idyllic landscape to the remains of war stricken cities and testimonials of genocide, whether it is on a grand tour or a field trip from a beach resort, people seem to be drawn to these testimonies of trauma.

Again we see a fading of boundaries. History and memory are intertwined, as are haunting and nostalgia. Ruins are more than in a single sense ambiguous. As everybody summons different 'ghosts' from the ruins, what they say is manifold.

Conclusion & Discussion

We have seen that ruins are testimonies of the past, persisting in the present. They speak of futility, of transience and of the power of nature. They are awe-inspiring, timeless and evoke a deep sense of tranquillity, while being almost painful to behold. Ruins are filled by imagination and form a décor for contemplation. They offer asylum to people and animals in the margins and are substitutes for a lost wilderness. Decay lets plants grow and animals hide. It offers a canvas for artistic freedom and insubordination. It teaches children to be adults and adults to be children. Degradation lets one interact with the material world and find a place in the environment. Ruin can offer solace and can act as places of mourning. They are warnings for future mistakes and draw visitors in search of excitement. They evoke nostalgia, while offering hope for a better future.

But how, whilst having so many qualities, is it then possible to refine the value of decay for the built environment? In the preceding research I have treated a very broad array of subjects, discussing a vast spectrum of values. From this, tools for appreciation can be distilled. In the conclusion of this thesis I put them together to create a set of values, to be used not only in my graduation project, but in future dealings with ruin and decay. As said in the introduction of this thesis, too often now areas of urban decay or post-industrial areas are transformed according to the latest trends. Gentrification takes hold and something intangible gets lost from these areas. Although often beautifully repurposed, more gets lost than initially can be perceived. As designers too often not fully understand the ambiguous and paradoxical values of these places, only a fragment of the spirit remains. For instance, when focussing solely on the aesthetic qualities, the social necessity of these places diminishes. On the other hand, when leaving an area to the forces of nature or the hands of people, the memorial values may disappear. It is hard to distil a single value from ruin. As seen in the previous pages values range from highly intangible to concrete, from psychological to aesthetic and from cultural to natural. The toolset presented here helps to make sense of all the different layers of appreciation possible and hopes to guide the designer to a balanced project.

Tranquillity

As the ruin is neither part of the past nor the present, time does not flow in these spaces. A deep sense of tranquillity can be aroused shut off from the world. For people to escape the constant chaos and distraction of urban life, these oases are a rare good. In this rare moment of suspension the people can find the peace and quiet they cannot find in their own lives, as even at home people are constantly reminded of the outside world through television screens, computers and phones.

Transience

The first artistic notion the ruin evokes is of course that of transience. The leftover carcasses of ancient civilizations and towering structures of former industries are reminders of the futility of human endeavour. Everything goes back to where it started and nature will prevail. This is a quality that is maybe solely aesthetical and therefore better suited for art than architecture, but the sublime feelings evoked are indeed valuable for the built environment. It makes people reflect upon their existence and their place in the world. Maybe this will raise some respect for the world we live in and the plants and animals we share this world with, as an appreciation for the inevitable forces of time and decay.

Fragmentation

The current practise of refurbishing ruins and areas of decay leaves little room for imagination. Medieval ruins being 'finished' with concrete toppings, old factories 'filled in' with new structures, these projects, although popular and often beautifully done take something away from our perception of ruin. Although the new and the old form a juxtaposition of materials and forms, it becomes impossible to derive a personal meaning from the deteriorated structure. The dialogue of what has remained and what has perished is one of the strongest ciphers of our interest in ruins. Sometimes it is better to leave it to the imagination.

Ambiguity

The ill-defined character of the wildscape makes it such an interesting and diverse place. As the boundaries between private and public, urban and rural, legal and illegal fade, the human and natural worlds coincide. The enormous potential this raises is invaluable, because it gives the opportunity for freedom. Plants and animals can prosper, cultural initiatives may sprout and people will find places to be themselves. As the area does not impose limits, the possibilities for expression thrive.

Asylum

Informal and even illegal activities are inseparably connected to living in groups. To ignore these transgressions of conformity is to be utterly naïve. People in the margins of society need and deserve a place to act about and be relatively free of repercussion. But not only people have a need for places free of surveillance. Plants and animals, compelled to urban environments, seek refuge in these places of little maintenance. It is these areas that thrive in biodiversity and it is here it should be left to develop.

It is, however, almost impossible to maintain the values of the terrain vague after actively intervening in the non-designed character of the place. Altering almost always means sacrificing the wildscape. While intending to make it accessible for everyone, the space becomes restricted for marginalized groups of people. Even opening up a place for creative initiatives, drives out people lower on the ladder. There is, therefore, a choice to make.

Affordance

As shown in the chapter about play, the material found in the urban wildscape becomes during play a tool for testing the skills. The scattered remains of an interior transform into projectiles, den materials and obstacles. The untidiness of derelict structures helps children and adolescents to interact with each other and the material world. It teaches to be responsible adults by seeking out the limits of desired behaviour. What is more, the direct influencing of material teaches care and knowledge of the world, just by breaking and shattering it. These activities are impossible in the regulated spaces we normally occupy and it is in this the wildscape offers freedom and affordance. By playfully interacting with these strange environments, people will appropriate the structure and make the sounds, smells and other characteristics their own.

Testimony

The ruin has often less an objective than a subjective message to the beholder. People derive identity from symbols, which are stronger when being evidence of roots. Remembrance is fixated to architecture. Decayed structures and mangled landscapes are especially strong in evoking nostalgia and trauma, as their fragmented formation is subject to mental addition and the accumulation of psychological layers. Apart from that, ruin can act as a testimony to trauma,

soothing the pain, while being a physical reminder of the devastations of war, natural disaster and atrocious crimes. They often become a magnetic point for tourism as well as for victims.

With this toolset it becomes possible to distil the values of decay even without the genuine ruin present. It could be possible to evoke the same sensations with new architecture without relying on the deteriorated remains. It is by no means a strict formula, but the above-stated characteristics, without making a ranking, are a necessity for urban life. If a ruin gives either meaning to a place, support biodiversity or insubordination, evokes the sublime or the imagination, while being juxtaposed against contemporary structure, we as designers are obliged to take every present value in account and act accordingly.

The subject is composed of knowledge from multiple disciplines in which I neither am nor pretend to be an expert. This research aims to be informative, but goes further by implying that there is a set range of notions to be distilled from the different disciplines. As an architect, it is possible to combine these superficial excavations to a thorough thesis. By combining and comparing these different viewpoints I am able to pick the topics and notions I find interesting while discarding the ones I deem superfluous for my topic. This makes this thesis in no way a work of thorough scientific overview, but rather is it building a broad theoretic cadre for a multisided topic. This way, this thesis is not bound to a single extensive research on a single subject, limiting the theoretical horizon, but draws out of a variety of sources. The literature used for this research consists, therefore, mostly out of seminal or influential works, as I found myself too often in field of expertise not my own. A last remark should be made: although this is a literary study, it is also a reflection, where I do not shy away from framing the proposed facts and subjectify the results. I am contemplating ruin.

References

General Literature

Arnold-de Simine, Silke. "The Ruin As Memorial - the Memorial As Ruin." *Performance Research* 20, no. 3 (2015): 94-102.

Braae, Ellen. *Beauty Redeemed : Recycling Post-Industrial Landscapes*. Risskov: IKAROS Press, 2015.

Edensor, Tim. *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality*. Oxford U.K.: Berg, 2005.

Huyssen, Andreas. "Nostalgia for Ruins." *Grey Room* 23, (2006), 6-21. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.uba.uva.nl:2048/stable/20442718>

Jorgensen, Anna and Keenan, Richard, editors. *Urban wildscapes*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

The Aesthetics of Transience

Mostafavi, Mohsen & Leatherbarrow, David. *On weathering : The life of buildings in time*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993.

Roth, Michael S, Lyons, Claire L. & Merewether, Charles., *Irresistible Decay : Ruins Reclaimed*. Bibliographies & Dossiers, 2. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997.

Woodward, Christopher. *In Ruins*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2001.

Where the Wild things are

Doron, Gil M. "...badlands, blank space, border vacuums, brown fields, conceptual Nevada, Dead Zones ...", *Field* 1, no. 1 (2007): 10-23

Doron, Gil M. "The Dead Zone and the Architecture of Transgression", *City* 4, no. 2 (2010): 247-263

Endensor, Tim, Evans, Bethan, Holloway, Julian, Millington, Steve & Binnie, Jon "Playing in Industrial Ruin", in *Urban Wildscapes*, edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, 65-79. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

Garrett, Bradley L. "Urban Explorers: Quests for Myth, Mystery and Meaning." *Geography Compass* 4, no. 10 (2010): 1448-461.

Gobster, Paul H., "Appreciating urban wildscapes", in *Urban Wildscapes*, edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, 33-48. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

Gunnell, Kelly, Murphy, Brian and Williams, Carol. *Designing for Biodiversity: A Technical Guide for New and Existing Buildings*. London: RIBA Publishing, 2013.

Solà-Morales Rubió, Ignasi de. "Terrain Vague", in *Anyplace*, edited by Cynthia Davidson, 118-123. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

Ward Thompson, Catharine. "Places to be Wild in Nature", in *Urban Wildscapes*, edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, 49-64. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

Woodward, Christopher. "Learning from Detroit", in *Urban Wildscapes*, edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, 17-32. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

The Ghost of Ruin

Arnold-de Simone, Silke. "The Ruin As Memorial - the Memorial As Ruin." *Performance Research* 20, no. 3 (2015): 94-102.

Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Crang, Mike, and Penny S Travlou. "The City and Topologies of Memory." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, no. 2 (2016): 161-77.

DeSilvey, Caitlin, and Tim Edensor. "Reckoning with Ruins." *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4 (2012): 465-85.

DeSilvey, Caitlin. "Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things." *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2016): 318-38.

DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated decay: Heritage beyond saving*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Edensor, Tim. "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 6 (2005): 829-49.

Edensor, Tim. "Waste Matter - the Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World." *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016): 311-32.

Egberts, Linde. "Chosen Legacies; Heritage in the construction of Regional Identity." Diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2017

Heatherington, Catherine, "Buried narratives", in *Urban Wildscapes*, edited by Anna Jorgensen and Richard Keenan, 171-186. London ; New York: Routledge, 2012.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius Loci : Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. London: Academy Editions, 1980.

Trigg, Dylan. "The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins." *Memory Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 87-101.

Other

Clément, Gilles. "le Tiers Paysage." Accessed December 6, 2017. <<http://www.gillesclement.com/cat-tierspaysage-tit-le-Tiers-Paysage>>

Egberts, Linde. "Heritage in the construction of Regional Identity." Lecture at the Challenging Eternity Crash Course, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, March 1st, 2017

Griffioen, James. "School's Out Forever" 2 February 2009. *Vice*, Accessed June 28, 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/jmdqw4/schools-out-forever-625-v16n2>

Morton, Thomas. "Something, Something, Something, Detroit" 1 August 2009. *Vice*, Accessed June 28 2017. <https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ppzb9z/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8>

Muller, Pierre-Henry. "Urbex exploration urbaine" *Boreally*. Accessed December 6, 2017. <<https://www.boreally.org/urbex-exploration-urbaine/#urbex>>

Pham, Diane. "Ruin Porn: An Internet Trend That is Older than You Think" 27 November 2014. *ArchDaily*, Accessed June 28 2017. <<http://www.archdaily.com/572531/ruin-porn-an-internet-trend-that-is-older-than-you-think/>>