A REFLECTION ON THE AESTHETICS OF RUINS

The ruins of a house in Altadena. March 2025. Photo by Myriam Mahiques

Recognizing urban devastation, spatial order, the value of ruins, and their significance as manifestations of architectural absence, is critical when analyzing the possibilities for the development of future habitable environments. To consider ruins only as superficial elements or residues constitutes a limited and imprecise appreciation of their relevance.

After the postmodernist trend of paying homage to the past with Kitsch buildings aesthetics, there has been a resurgence of architectural restoration implying that the implicit value of ruins has been under a process of exploration. Thus, many buildings were recycled regardless of their aestheticism. Parallel to these restoration activities, a new architectural trend has emerged, supported by archaeology and cultural geography that considers these recycled products as artifacts reduced to an artifice. In contrast, there is a tendency to celebrate ruins that are fragmented and incomplete in themselves.

Gas Works Parks, Seattle. Designed by landscape architect Richard Haag (1975). The industrial building was allowed to decay naturally and incorporated into a park. Close-up of the ruins of the gas plant. Photo credit arq. Myriam Mahiques. June 2024

Gas Works Parks, Seattle. Renovated area for children's play. Photo credit arq. Myriam Mahiques, June 2024.

These concepts have their precedent in the Renaissance, when a cultural elite considered ruins to be legible remnants, as a repository of written knowledge. They were taken as an example of purified architecture for a new appreciation of its innate beauty and venerable decay, to the point that the excavations of Pompeii and other discoveries in Rome marked their traces in the architectural styles of the sixteenth century.
In the seventeenth century, ruins are the image of natural disasters in the course of human history, the cities of antiquity are revered as solemn sepulchres; It is the law of nature that everything will irretrievably fall into ruins.
Albert Speer, who was Hitler's architect, contributed to the field in the 1930s by introducing the concept of "ruin value" in his publication "Die Ruinenwerttheorie" (The Theory of the Ruins Value). He argued that buildings should be designed so that, in the event of their eventual collapse, they would leave behind aesthetically appealing ruins capable of enduring overtime without maintenance. Speer not only built the model of the Zeppelin in Nuremberg but also showed how it would appear in ruins after hundreds of years. His expectation was that the twisted remains of iron would arouse the same heroic enthusiasm as the great buildings of the past that had inspired Hitler. For public buildings, Speer proposed not to use iron structures as much as possible, as these materials would not be seen as aesthetically acceptable ruins. This Nazi ideology indicated that the strength of the ruins should surpass generations, and show, indestructible, that the empire, although decadent, would impose its mark on the future through the spirit of whatever its greatness was.

It is very difficult to define what ruins are; by definition, they are the irreparable remains of human construction by a destructive act or process; we cannot speak of them as objects, even though we know that one day they will reach their end, the question lies in how this end is reached. On the one hand, we have artificial ruins, such as some designs by Deconstructivist or Structuralist architects, as is the case of Peter Einsenman's artificially excavated cities in Germany; on the other hand, abandoned villages due to various reasons, such as proximity to nuclear power plants; or cities practically destroyed by natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, floods), by confrontations in wars (Kosovo, Serbia, Iraq...), where it is not possible to determine if what has been destroyed is part of the destructive process of war, or has been achieved by criminal actions or perhaps because the building has been identified as a cultural target and its disappearance adversely affects the collective memory. The interpretation then becomes moral or religious, setting aside aestheticism, depending on whether it is seen from the past or the present of the building.
Such diversification leads to a different understanding of the concepts of ruins, and this is how they awaken feelings of respect, emotion, melancholy, at the sight of them. And even terror if we take into account that the Egyptians systematically destroyed their building remains

believing that the site was cursed and, according to legends, threw salt into the area in question as a symbol of eternal sterility. (Bevan, p.19).
The critic George Bataille, quoted by Bevans, has suggested that monuments (referring to public buildings) can not only symbolize the enemy, but be so themselves. Thus, the stones of the Bastille were broken and sold as souvenirs – almost relics – and the same was repeated with the fragments of the Berlin Wall two hundred years later.
Although the ruins no longer show the original building, they can be imbued with a new meaning, managing to be containers of memories and transformed into funerary monuments (memorials), more explicit than the remains of wars. Such is the case of the "Wall of sorrows", an abandoned building in East Cleveland, Ohio, that was home to vandals and drug dealers; now it is a reminder to those who have fallen by urban violence. The transformation was made by the friends and relatives of the deceased who began to hang pieces of wood chipboard with the names of the victims painted on them, then murals were painted and offerings were grouped together. The building, although demolished in its materiality, has taken on new life, freeing itself from architecture and transforming itself into a kind of vernacular work of art.

In theory, there are two ways of perceiving ruins:
The classical theory where the object is perceived as a fragment of a previous whole: the subject *understands* the fragment as part of the past, which he reconstructs with his imagination, consequently, the fragment is an aesthetic unit that is found pleasurable. In this case, the aesthetic interest starts from the imagined reconstruction, and not from the contemplation of the original building.
The Romantic theory, where the present perception of the ruin causes the subject to *think* about the past, then the fragment provokes mental associations in the person who perceives, which turn out to be a mystery, since the facts that have been associated with the ruin are not known; at times, the subject lives imaginatively in the past and discovers its unalterable condition.
However, mental reconstructions are not so simple, because ruins interact with nature, are absorbed by it, change over time, a dynamic situation that is part of the aesthetics of ruins. In order to be aesthetic objects, ruins need someone to perceive them, beyond mere description, as happens with any piece of art.
An intermediate situation would be that the subject bases himself on its current materiality and finds it worthy of consideration, in its own right, so that the ruin is perceived as a formally pleasing sculpture, and is appreciated by what is simply seen without the recourse of the reconstruction of the original whole tied to a blurred past.

A current look

In its traditional analytic conception, Aesthetics was related to the Philosophy of Art. Environmental aesthetics is a new sub-field of the philosophy of aesthetics that emerged at the end of the 20th century, originated in part as a reaction to this artistic emphasis, whereby the focus shifted to the appreciation of nature and the environment. With the growing impact of climate change, the role of environmental aesthetics is established in a new era: the Anthropocene (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024).
Nowadays the ruins have become popular and are the subject of scenery, paintings, photographs, digital games, as analogies of decadent societies.
Before determining the appropriate course of action for the ruins—whether disposal, preservation through recycling, or conservation for artistic and tourism objectives—it is essential to undertake an ethical assessment of their identification. In disaster situations, the recovery of even minor elements may hold significant importance for the impacted community.

Folk sculptures among the ruins of a house in Altadena. Photo credit arq. Myriam Mahiques, March 2025.

In Altadena, four initiatives have been registered after the forest fires of January 2025 (M. Malea, 2025):
1. Project Chimney. The non-profit House Museum in Los Angeles conducted a survey to document the architectural remnants of the fire. They managed to locate 55 historic chimneys that were feasible to be saved.
2. Save the Tiles. An initiative by Altadena resident Eric Garland, it is about saving the artistic ceramics that adorn fireplaces.
3. A Thousand Voices Project: led by the artist Alma Cielo, it recovers ceramics and mosaics.
4. Historic house relocation project: carried out by the Omgivning architecture studio. It involves the transfer of historic homes in Los Angeles and the County designated for demolition, to Altadena. According to the studio's creative director, Morgan Sykes Jaybush, moving and rebuilding a home is two-thirds the value of a new home, and apart from this, it carries a historic character that is beneficial to those who have suffered such great losses.

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