

Life in Ruins

The Fetishisation of Decay in Contemporary Architecture

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Contemporary architecture is haunted by ruins. In recent years a great number of new buildings, or rather, not *entirely* new buildings, have been completed in which older fragments are embedded, or which rework older structures – but, crucially, without hiding the gaps between old and new. On the contrary, these buildings celebrate the collision of the contemporary and the historical. Sometimes the designers go further and produce ruination themselves: concrete is hacked away to create monumental, broken forms, fragments of outmoded decorative schemes are left hanging above floors that no longer exist, and new elements are inserted with great delicacy, as if the older buildings were precious relics worthy of preservation at any cost. This is sometimes far from being the case. In view of the care lavished on these remnants, we could call this approach a fetishisation of decay.

In order to better understand this tendency, this essay will briefly consider its roots and current motivations, and it will also sketch a taxonomy of its various manifestations, for not all ruins are alike. It will be my contention here that, while the majority of these buildings are indeed fetishistic, in the historical-materialist sense of the word, there also exists a utopian moment embedded within the phenomenon. In some cases this shines out from among these fragments, while remaining entangled with their aforementioned fetish-character – perhaps necessarily so.

Before embarking on a brief genealogical excursion, it will be helpful to introduce a couple of representative examples, which incidentally demonstrate its global spread. Among the most prominent designers working in this mode today is the Barcelona-based pair Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores. Their painstaking transformation of an abandoned Barcelona workers' co-operative into a theatre, Sala Beckett, was widely published following its completion in 2014 (see Fig. 1). The resulting structure retains much of the fabric of the building, and a great deal of its decoration, too. In the foyer, tiles trace the outline of a removed staircase, and patches of old paint and plaster cling to the wall. Other elements, such as floor tiles and window frames, have been carefully prised up and reused.

The architects describe their design as evincing 'the utmost respect towards the former social club', an attitude that may seem admirable on face value, but



Fig. 1: Flores and Prats, Sala Beckett, Barcelona, 2014, recent photo.

on closer inspection raises several questions.¹ Why was this decayed and not especially architecturally significant building worthy of ‘the utmost respect’? What does it mean to ‘respect’ a building? While the degree of careful labour brought to bear on this project, to which sheaves of intricate drawings attest, could hardly be called into question, it seems to me that a guilty conscience is also hard at work here. The area of Barcelona in which the project is located, El Poblenou, was once an industrial district with a predominantly working-class population, of which the social club was an important locus. However, since the 1992 Olympics the area has experienced waves of gentrification. It is now characterised predominantly by the usual markers of this condition: arts spaces, micro-breweries, and armies of tourists. The architects speak of ‘adapt[ing] the

¹ Sala Beckett / Flores & Prats. In: ArchDaily, 7 July 2019, <https://www.archdaily.com/799128/sala-beckett-flores-and-prats> (accessed 15.02.2022).

building to its new use without banishing its ghosts;² perhaps bringing to mind Derrida's assertion that when he speaks of ghosts, 'it is in the name of *justice*'.³ Justice, respect – there is a difference here, however. In Sala Beckett, the ghosts of the working class are invoked to haunt the amenities that have sprouted from the rubble of their world; but is justice done to them thereby?

As for respect, I take the architects' use of this word to imply a nod towards a vanished world, the world of the self-organising industrial working class, and its ruination. However, in a city that seems at risk of Venice-style museumification, and which is afflicted by a serious housing crisis – in which rents increased 30 times more than salaries in the five years preceding the pandemic – does this kind of respect amount to anything more than a gesture?⁴ Indeed, I would argue that the traces of the working-class city, with its co-operatively run institutions, are displayed here as if in a reliquary in order to bestow *authenticity* (what that might mean I will discuss a little further on) and ethical rectitude on a venue which, *avant-garde* credentials notwithstanding, has little to do with the milieu it supplanted.

For all the dubious logic behind what I take to be the guiding principle of this design, it is far from the most egregious example of its type. One particularly striking case study in this regard is provided by the British designer Thomas Heatherwick, who recently converted a 1920s grain silo in Cape Town into a luxury hotel and art museum. The new gallery, which opened in 2017, has at its heart a large atrium carved from the concrete tubes of the silo, into some of which lift shafts and stairwells have been fitted (see Fig. 2). The designer claims that the resulting space is modelled on an enormously scaled-up grain of maize of the sort that was previously stored here. (One might recall Marta Minujín's more critical reference to the global south's agricultural exports in this context.) The upper surface of the adjacent tower has been partially excised to accommodate hotel rooms, the multifaceted windows of which bulge from the retained grid like a fly's eyes – the better to monetise views of the harbour and mountains.

The grain silo was a key model for architectural modernism; as a representative of what Reyner Banham called 'a concrete Atlantis', it stood for the advanced technology and disregard for historical precedent that designers such as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier discerned in America's industrial architecture.⁵ Long after the heyday of this architecture, and of the architecture it informed in turn, Heatherwick has transformed one of its relics into a site of the postindustrial service economy. As such, it stands in the tradition established by cultural institutions like Tate Modern in London, and, like the Tate, it was intended to catalyse the economic revitalisation of a former industrial zone that had fallen into disuse. Indeed, the parallels to Herzog and de Meuron's conversion of London's Bankside Power Station are unmistakable, including the glazed superstructure,

2 Douglas Murphy: Ghost Storeys. In: *The Architectural Review* 242 (December 2017/January 2018), 1447, pp. 108–117, here p. 117.

3 Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge 2006, p. xviii.

4 Scarlett Reiners: How does Barcelona's Housing Crisis Compare to Other Cities? In: *CatalanNews*, 27 June 2021, <https://www.catalannews.com/society-science/item/how-does-barcelona-s-housing-crisis-compare-with-other-cities> (accessed 15.02.2022).



Fig. 2: Thomas Heatherwick, Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, 2017, recent photo.

although the glazing is more spectacular here, as befits a more nakedly commercial enterprise.

History and authenticity

While the relics of industrial modernity are treated somewhat differently in Barcelona and Cape Town – whatever else one might think of it, one could hardly call Heatherwick’s adaptation of the grain silo ‘respectful’ – both instrumentalise

5 Reyner Banham: *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Buildings and European Modern Architecture 1900–1925*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1989.

the *authenticity* conferred by the original structure. The use of this word requires some explanation, but to discuss it in any detail would be beyond the scope of this essay.⁶ Briefly, authenticity denotes fidelity to an essential ontological condition. As a contemporary philosophical category, it goes back to Martin Heidegger and the problem of meaning in a world from which meaning has been withdrawn – a discourse subsequently interrogated by Theodor Adorno. In recent years, Timofei Gerber argues, authenticity claims have proliferated, both in opposition to commodification and as an integral mechanism of the same tendency, via the assertion that one can discover one's authentic self via consumption.⁷

This observation is pertinent to the architectural context, where original materials and structures, and the patina conferred on these by time and hard use, are retained, exposed, or, alternatively, produced, in order to convey authenticity. In the face of the prevailing current of contemporary architectural production – still dominated by steel frames and glass curtain walls – these 'authentic' surface qualities produce a distinction effect. This distinction, a proclamation that the building in question is different from the mainstream, may be read in several ways. On the most basic level it is, as ever, a valuable marketing device, both for the buildings' designers and their patrons, the tendency in question not quite having attained the degree of ubiquity that would render it entirely non-distinguishing. Glazed towers still dominate cities around the world, after all. Furthermore, since these glazed towers are associated closely with financial institutions and luxury apartments, we can read this difference as intended to signify a distinction from the functions of these buildings and their patrons – in other words, from globalised financial capital. Instead of new, mass-produced materials, with uniform, unblemished surfaces originating in a singular moment of production, which are the same wherever in the world they are found, we have old, tattered fragments, assembled over the passage of time, heterogeneous in their appearance and anything but glossy. They are therefore ripe with the meaning conferred by historicity. Heatherwick, with disarming ingenuousness, calls the surface of the tubes within his silo museum 'soulful'.⁸ In fact, they were expensively recoated with concrete to enable the insertion of the new atrium: hardly authentic at all, if this attribute is taken to depend on original historical materials being left in an unaltered state. At any rate, the shine of the new is conspicuous by its absence, and this is enough, in the designer's opinion, to endow the building with that mysterious thing, a soul. Unlike Sala Beckett, which is – according to its architects – haunted by the ghosts of workers, the building itself is imbued with metaphysical substance, while the spirits of the proletariat are conspicuous by their absence.

6 On this subject, see Andreas Huyssen: *Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity*. In: Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (eds): *Ruins of Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010, pp. 63–87.

7 Timofei Gerber: *Revisiting Adorno's 'Jargon of Authenticity' (1964)*. In: *Epoché* 26, October 2019, <https://epochemagazine.org/26/revisiting-adornos-jargon-of-authenticity-1964/> (accessed 28.02.2022).

8 Tomà Berlanda: *Zeitgeist: A Spectacular Cultural Building is Not Entirely at Ease with its Financial Bedfellows*. In: *The Architectural Review* 242 (December 2017/January 2018), 1447, pp. 100–108, here p. 103.



Fig. 3: Hans Döllgast, Alte Pinakothek (reconstruction), Munich, 1946–73, recent photo.

The appeal to the past made by these recent projects is also quite distinct from an earlier appeal to history, likewise made in contradistinction to the shiny glass architecture of what has been called late modernity: postmodernism. Indeed, this latter tendency was defined by its rejection of authenticity, by its explicit reproduction and wilfully unorthodox compilation of historical signs, and by its use of veneers or other treatments that disguise one material as another. Postmodernism mockingly dismissed the postwar modernist orthodoxy of the glass box, seeking to reveal its inadequacy and indeed its inauthenticity, while simultaneously ridiculing the insistence on truth to materials and revelation of structure upon which modernism had staked its claims to authenticity. Instead, postmodernism revelled in inauthenticity, although in many cases it justified itself as the expression or satisfaction of the authentic desires of ‘the public’, however transparently these were ventriloquised, and however unconvincing the idea that they were to be met by unconventionally placed broken pediments.

By contrast, today’s ruin builders set out with the principle of never disturbing historically invested authenticity, an approach to restoration and reconstruction – and, more fundamentally, to truth and materiality – which has deep roots. The ‘anti-scrape’ doctrine of Morris and Ruskin was, like many of their ideas, significant in the development of modernism, and it gained fresh impetus following the Second World War, a prolific generator of ruins. As modernism achieved hegemony at the same time, second-generation modernists found themselves having to deal with the question of restoring historical monuments. A key example is Hans Döllgast’s work at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, which he completed in 1957 (see Fig. 3). Döllgast had been an assistant in Peter Behrens’s studio, where some of the factories that defined the heroic age of industrial

modernity were designed; now he had to repair a neoclassical edifice by Leo von Klenze. His answer was to fill the gaps with a modernised approximation of the historical fabric: simplified, stripped of ornament, and clearly distinguishable from the original. To rebuild the gallery as it had appeared in 1933 would not only have falsified the historical record, i.e. the destruction invoked by National Socialism, but it would also have been false vis-à-vis the historical moment in which the new work was done. And this was a moment, contra Morris and Ruskin, of industrially produced materials.

At around the same time in Italy, Carlo Scarpa was coming to similar conclusions about working with historic buildings. His famous adaptation of the Castelvecchio in Verona went further than Döllgast, however. Scarpa stripped back the previous restoration work from the early 1920s, which had given the castle a kind of fantasy past, and instead introduced gaps into the building's fabric. He thereby produced a ruin. Scarpa and Döllgast were both dealing with the aftermath of fascism, with its taste for fabricated histories and national homogeneity. Instead they insisted on historical rupture (which they equated with material rupture, i.e. montage) and on the tricky question of architectural truth. In doing so, both were subscribing to a form of Hegelian historicism: to build in a non-contemporary way is false. This approach was codified in the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites of 1964, commonly referred to as the Venice Charter. According to this document, 'Any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp'. Furthermore, parts added to monuments 'must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence.'⁹

The moral legitimacy endowed on this approach by the historical conjuncture in which it developed has endured, and has helped the approach itself to endure. An important recent work in this tradition is the Neues Museum in Berlin, which was widely celebrated on its 2009 reopening. This followed a protracted restoration by David Chipperfield and Julian Harrap. Consciously looking to Döllgast's example, the architects elected to leave the bomb-damaged elements of the building on view, thereby retaining a record of Berlin's cataclysmic past. Given the specific history of the building, the restoration basks in the same moral sanction as the pioneering essays in this approach. However, the enormous critical success of this project has led to its example being emulated in situations in which there is hardly such a case for the retention of historical traces, for instance Battersea Arts Centre in South London. After this building caught fire in the course of a programme of renovation in 2015, the architects, Haworth Tomkins, decided to retain the fire-damaged materials, and, instead of rebuilding the decorated vault of the main hall, to install a filigree representation of this feature. Why this random fire, which caused no loss of life, should be commemorated, is unclear to say the least. The result is that Heideggerian historicity – history valorised as a quality of being as such – has trumped Hegelian historicism – history valorised as a process towards an end.

9 Jukka Jokilehto: The Context of the Venice Charter (1964). In: Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites 2 (1998), 4, pp. 229–233, here p. 232.

Industrial traces

We can observe a similar tendency in numerous other comparable recent cases. Returning to Sala Beckett in Barcelona and the silo hotel-cum-gallery in Cape Town, however, the authenticity connoted by these projects is more specific than mere historicity: here the referent is the heroic period of industrial modernity, the vast productive forces it unleashed, and the people who both generated and suffered those forces. Yet in postindustrial economies these forms of life have vanished (or have at least been suppressed), leaving behind only the architectures that accommodated them. While cities such as Barcelona and Cape Town attempt to extract leisure expenditure from visitors – in some cases, all-too successfully – this postindustrial economic activity encompassing luxury hotels and the hyper-financialised global art market, is draped in allusions to heavy industry.

It is curious that at this moment in the twenty first century, when organised labour has been so thoroughly defeated by the political representatives of capital, its spirit should be invoked in such a way – hardly the revolutionary class of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* raiding the dressing-up box of history, but rather the third generation of the *Buddenbrooks* costuming themselves as reapers for a Halloween party. Less surprising is the fact that, when the gambit has been adopted by ambitious city councils and the oligarchic backers of such developments, the ironic subtext of Andy Warhol's use of the term 'factory' has long since dissipated.¹⁰ But despite its apparent lack of self-awareness, Heatherwick's adaptation of a grain silo raises a more profound question than the designer can perhaps have imagined: was the Modernist valorisation of industrial form ever more than skin deep? Suffice it to observe in this context that for modernists of the heroic phase, industry represented the future, not the past, and utopia rather than melancholy. What architectural historian K. Michael Hays called the 'factual indexicality' of Hannes Meyer's industrial materials becomes in their recent excavation a *melancholic* indexicality, a reference to a dead mode of production.¹¹

Even for those of us who cannot afford weekends in Cape Town or to invest in blue-chip art, the patina of industry has become a familiar sales technique. Indeed, this aesthetic of exposed brick, subway tiles, filament bulbs, rough woodwork and welded pipe is pervasive and has been so for some time. Originally derived (I would speculatively suggest) from the Manhattan lofts that were converted by artists into studios in the 1960s, and latterly into fashion boutiques, restaurants, and incredibly expensive apartments, this look was disseminated internationally by Starbucks, and has since expanded to encompass shops everywhere (as well as the domestic sphere), occasionally *ad absurdum*.¹² To give an

10 On Warhol's factory as Morrisonian reformed workshop, see Jeremy Deller: *Love is Enough: William Morris and Andy Warhol*. Oxford: Modern Art Oxford 2015.

11 K. Michael Hays: *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995, p. 155.

12 On the wider urban context of this design phenomenon, see Martha Rosler: *Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism*. In: *e-flux journal* 21 (December 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67676/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-i/> (accessed 15.02.2022).



Fig. 4: Brandlhuber+Emde and Burlon, Antivilla, Potsdam, 2010–15, recent photo.

example from the latter pole of industrial chic: the Dirty Burger chain, which was set up during the US-barbecue-inspired ‘meat wave’ of London’s restaurant scene in 2012 by the multinational Soho House Group. The chain’s first location in Kentish Town was a lean-to shed of rusted corrugated iron, its entrance squeezed behind a fire escape, where one ate in an atmosphere evocative of a backstreet chop shop. In such cases material authenticity has unmistakably become a fetish, albeit a fetish in which the labour behind the materials is, rather than being obscured, brought to the fore and *itself fetishised* – but only as a spent force, not a living relation.

While Flores and Prats’s Sala Beckett is a sincere gesture to the industrial past, and Heatherwick’s hotel-cum-gallery and the Soho House Group’s burger chain are exploitations of the same, a 2015 building by German architect Arno Brandlhuber is a more reflexive essay in this tendency.¹³ Over the course of five years, Brandlhuber and his collaborators Markus Emde and Thomas Burlon turned a former East German lingerie factory located in Potsdam into a private villa (see Fig. 4). Named ‘Antivilla’ by the practice, the building (which was originally much less obtrusive, essentially resembling the villas that surround it) was somewhat perversely transformed into a stark concrete cuboid, much more explicitly connoting industry than it had previously done. Furthermore, large openings have been roughly punched into its walls, and the resulting glazed but

13 Douglas Murphy argues that Flores and Prats’s theatre is incommensurable with ‘the banality of the “pre-stressed” hipster café look’, constituting instead ‘an architecture’. While this is certainly convincing in terms of the substantiality of their work, the result still partakes of a wider cultural tendency of which the distressed burger chain is the debased expression. Murphy 2017/18 (see note 2), p. 117.

gaping holes give the uncanny impression of an inhabited ruin. To some extent the building echoes the aesthetic of brutalism, like much of Brandlhuber's work; but whereas it could be argued that brutalist works also intentionally evoked ruins, and even sometimes incorporated fragments of older buildings (as in the Barbican Centre and the old London Wall), these two flourishings of ruin-mania are nevertheless quite distinct. While we can take the brutalist moment to represent (as with Scarpa and Döllgast) a working-through of history by a younger generation of modernists, and a coming to terms with the trauma and rubble of the war, for more recent ruin-producers, besides working through the legacy of industry, there is the matter of the – closely related – ecological imperative.

The architects of the Antivilla state that their approach to the old factory was premised on the fact that 'demolition [...] would have caused a massive loss of energy'; in addition to the questions of authenticity and historicity discussed above, it is this concern with sustainability and waste that motivates many contemporary ruin-builders.¹⁴ The construction industry is estimated to be responsible for eleven per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions, with concrete production accounting for large proportion of that figure; in the face of this statistic, there is a growing demand that architects should change the way they work.¹⁵ Alongside calls for the use of renewable, less energy-intensive materials, there have also been widespread demands that older buildings should be re-used rather than demolished and replaced.¹⁶

However, where arch-provocateur Brandlhuber is concerned, the invocation of such concerns is hardly straightforward. The extremes to which this doctrine has been adhered to here, in the context of a building for private use – a villa, no less, and one simultaneously converted from *and into* a 'factory' – charge this material rhetoric with a superabundance of meanings. Two possible readings stand out: either this jarring exaggeration is intended as a polemical insistence on the necessity of material conservation, designed to force the issue into the German public sphere, or it is a sly – and rather cynical, given he is the author of this villa – comment on the embourgeoisement of the relics of heavy industry (in other words, precisely the phenomenon naively evinced by Heatherwick and Dirty Burger). This is a particularly contentious topic in Germany, where the former East still suffers the consequences of the rapacious devouring of its state-owned businesses by West German firms following reunification.¹⁷

I suspect that the answer is that Brandlhuber is making both of the above points simultaneously, and rightly so, since they are historically and materially

14 bplus.xyz: Antivilla, <https://bplus.xyz/projects/0131-antivilla> (accessed 15.02.2022).

15 World Green Building Council: Bringing Embodied Carbon Upfront, <https://www.worldgbc.org/embodied-carbon> (accessed 15.02.2022).

16 See for instance the Architects' Journal's 'RetroFirst' campaign, initiated in 2019. Will Hurst: Introducing RetroFirst. In: Architects' Journal, 12 September 2019, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/introducing-retrofirst-a-new-aj-campaign-championing-reuse-in-the-built-environment> (accessed 15.02.2022).

17 Marcus Böick: In from the Socialist 'Cold,' but Burned by the Capitalist 'Heat'? The Dynamics of Political Revolution and Economic Transformation in Eastern Germany after 1990. In: Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy 16 (2020), 1, pp. 143–154.

intertwined. The uncomfortable, literally *Unheimlich* effects manifested in this project speak to the unresolved contradictions between nostalgia for a lost way of life, specifically that of the organised working class, their production and their political representatives, and the dire ecological consequences of the system that they produced and were produced by. These consequences, and their recognition by a nascent and necessarily underground environmental movement, led in part to the internal weakening and eventual destruction of the German Democratic Republic, and thus to the end of the political dominance – however compromised or corrupted – of the class in question.¹⁸

Secret justice

In the above case studies we have encountered several motivations for contemporary ruin builders, and varying degrees of sincerity and cynicism. They share a common context, however: the decline of industrial production and its replacement by postindustrial, service-based economies, and relatedly, the growing ineluctability of the environmental consequences of industry, what I have referred to above as the ecological imperative. We have also briefly considered the possible motivations of previous groups of ruin-builders, the restorers of bomb-damaged monuments and brutalists, whose approaches I attribute to the postwar context which demanded a re-engagement with history on the part of modernists. Of course, the production of ruins goes back much further than this, as other essays in this volume describe in more detail. Nevertheless, it will be useful to the remainder of my argument to consider one earlier example of ruin culture at this juncture. There are few better places to do this than in Potsdam (a fact that may also have informed Brandlhuber's nearby Antivilla), for it was here that an early and very striking example of the Romantic ruin was produced, in the form of a small pleasure palace built by Friedrich Wilhelm II on Pfaueninsel between 1794 and 1797 (see Fig. 5). Constructed under the direction of Johann Gottlieb Brendel to plans by Michael Philipp Boumann, the palace is essentially a two-storey cube with two cylindrical towers; between these rises the 'ruins' of a third storey, with artfully broken masonry, and one of the towers is also incomplete.

Friedrich Wilhelm came to the Prussian throne three years before 1789 and directed much of his modest energy against the philosophical currents accompanying the French Revolution, particularly religious unorthodoxy. His island retreat can be read in this context as an assertion of Germanness – it is Gothic, or at least it tries to be – and of the antiquity and hence legitimacy of his lineage, for what could be more antique than to inhabit a ruin. Both of these allusions have the effect of shoring up his authority in the face of the rising bourgeoisie across the Rhine. But I think it is also possible to detect a kind of aristocratic death-drive at work in this design, highly speculative as this suggestion may be,

18 Martin Blum: East Germany's Ecological Revolution: The Third Way. In: Euripides Altintzoglou and Martin Fredriksson (eds): *Revolt and Revolution: The Protestor in the 21st Century*. Leiden: Brill 2016, pp. 33–41.



Fig. 5: Johann Gottlieb Brendel, after plans by Michael Philipp Boumann, Schloss Pfaueninsel, Potsdam, 1794–97, recent photo.

with the decay of the building anticipating the defeat at Jena nine years later; only ghosts live in ruins.

A great deal has been written on ruins since then, far more than can be addressed here, but it is worth briefly returning to one of the key texts on the subject, Georg Simmel's essay *Die Ruine* from 1911. This much-remarked piece of writing has generally been discussed in terms of the polarity between art and nature that Simmel establishes, as is his usual practice, as the twin terms of a dialectic governing his subject. Here I will focus on a less well-known passage in the essay, which suggests an aspect to Simmel's thought rarely detected; indeed, he is normally regarded in quite the opposite terms. Simmel speaks at one point of 'the aesthetically satisfying impression [given by ruins], which is associated with the tragedy or secret justice of destruction [heimliche Gerechtigkeit der Zerstörung].'¹⁹ Though he is usually seen as working in reaction to Marx, there is an unmistakable revolutionary flavour to the phrase 'secret justice of destruction', even if the revolution in question is more Nietzschean than communist.

The notion that ruination expresses a secret desire for the destruction of the status quo, implicitly clearing space for something better, has informed my reading of Schloss Pfaueninsel. It also casts new light on numerous other examples of ruins. One recent case study to which this interpretation can be applied is to be

19 Georg Simmel: Two Essays. Transl. David Kettler. In: *The Hudson Review* 11 (1958), pp. 371–385, here p. 382.



Fig. 6: MVRDV, Tainan Springs, Tainan, Taiwan, 2020, recent photo.

found in the unlikeliest of places: an abandoned shopping mall. Located in the Taiwanese city of Tainan, it was turned into a water park by the Dutch architects MVRDV in 2020 (see Fig. 6). The mall was not entirely demolished in order to realise the project; instead, fragments of the building's concrete frame have been retained, and in places these now rise from shallow ponds, in which children (and adults) play in summer months. The remaking of a place of consumption as a place of play is striking, although it should be pointed out that commerce has not been entirely banished; some parts of the retained structure will be rented as retail units.

Nevertheless, this site encapsulates, thanks to the ruin-production of MVRDV, a significant and yet unfinished historical process. Before the mall this was a working harbour, which was filled in when shipping dropped off; when the mall began to decline in turn, the units were gradually emptied, and in its place came the park. This sequence traces the transition from heavy industry, to consumerism, to – something else. It is the final position in this sequence which remains undefined, and which cities around the world are currently confronting.

As the mall declines as a building type, it potentially takes with it – it is not too much of an exaggeration to say – an entire way of life: Americanised, car-based, and focused on acquisition. (Not that shopping has stopped, of course: rather it has retreated to the private sphere.)

Numerous solutions have been posed to this conundrum, from breaking malls into smaller units, repurposing them as office space or homes, or demolishing them and starting again. The example of Tainan Springs suggests an unusually ludic response to this question, in which the land formerly set aside for commerce is returned to the citizens for play. This ruin therefore has an unmistakably utopian dimension, speaking of another world in which leisure is no longer equated solely with consumption, public space is no longer commercialised, and cities are owned by the people. As such it is reminiscent of Benjamin's observation regarding the 'revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"'; significantly, he made this remark in the context of the first consumerist building type to become obsolete, the Parisian arcade.²⁰ In other words, Tainan Spring provides a spectacular enactment – almost apocalyptic in significance, if not in tone – of the secret justice of destruction being visited on capitalist society.

In view of this utopian aspect, Tainan Spring is quite unlike the other contemporary ruins considered in this essay. Yet it shares the historical context of the previous examples, the decline of industry and the rise of the so-called postindustrial service economy, even if in this instance that earlier economic model is represented by the phase of consumption rather than production. Furthermore, it shares – inescapably – the context of ecological devastation wrought by industrial capital and the consumerism that was latterly engineered to sustain it. But here, rather than the melancholy evoked by Sala Beckett or the Antivilla, or the exploitation of Heatherwick's hotel-cum-gallery and Soho House's burger chain, there is dancing on the grave of a dead form of urban life.

Affective tendencies aside, these buildings also share a rhetorical quality. Architectural reuse by no means need take the form of ruination: indeed, it goes on everyday around the world without such fanfare. This exaggeration of the architectural strategies in question must be read as a tactical intervention in public discourse regarding disposable commodities, architecture included. In this context, these broken forms and patinated materials take on a polemical force, an exhortation to other designers – and to the users of their buildings – to re-evaluate the supposedly obsolete and to retain the outmoded. Such a change, if pursued thoroughly, would run counter to the planned obsolescence of consumer goods, and hence to the whole life-support system of manufactured desire by means of which capitalism ekes out its survival. That this sign should also have appeared, seemingly simultaneously, as a fetish – as in the case of Dirty Burger et al. – is inevitable, although Benjamin did not anticipate this move. And even in the case of more aesthetically sophisticated examples, no one would claim that broken tiles and chipped paint alone are capable of turning the destructive forces of capital against themselves. In fact, they too are fetishes, even if they

20 Walter Benjamin: *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*. Transl. Edmund Jephcott. In: *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2005, pp. 207–221, here p. 210.

are fetishes of labour itself, and melancholic at best. Only when the architectural transformation in question is coupled with substantive change of function and ownership, through the destruction of a previous function and ownership – in other words, when the ruination which these projects imagine becomes a real ruination – has this any chance of transcending the fetishisation of decay.

I wish to thank Douglas Murphy for his advice during the preparation of this essay.

Abstract

Leben in Ruinen

Die Fetischisierung des Verfalls in der gegenwärtigen Architektur

Ruinen boomen in der Architektur. Gebäude von den Architekt*innen Flores & Prats in Barcelona, Thomas Heatherwick in Kapstadt und Arno Brandlhuber in Potsdam verweisen auf die Globalität dieses Phänomens. Diese Tendenz ist eine Reaktion auf die Glastürme der Spätmoderne und zugleich eine Kritik an deren Unhaltbarkeit und Unechtheit. Stattdessen wird nunmehr Nachhaltigkeit durch auffällige Wiederverwendung ruinöser Bauten verkündet; Echtheit wird durch die Erhaltung der ursprünglich verwendeten Industriematerialien zum Ausdruck gebracht. Der Autor erkennt hierin Fetischismus, wenn auch eine seltsame Art von Fetischismus, der die Bedeutung einstmals getätigter Lohnarbeit in den Vordergrund stellt. Anhand mehrerer Beispiele werden die Motive, die sich mit dieser architektonischen Tendenz verbinden, diskutiert. Abschließend wird ein Gegenbeispiel vorgestellt, das auf die Möglichkeit einer utopischen Form der Ruinenproduktion hindeutet.

