ON (NEW) RUINS RECONCILIATION CAPACITY

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Introduction

Ruins capture our imagination, mysterious, full of hints to a past long gone, and future abundant with potential. To a world that struggles to expose, protect, and decipher its logic; ruins put up an obscure mirror. They are illogical, dysfunctional, and disorderly; they expose mankind’s faults and shortcomings. Ruins nurture creativity and playfulness, spark philosophical contemplation, and inspire unpredicted prospects. This paper takes a look at the characteristics of new ruins and analyzes their unique mysterious atmosphere. It contends that ruins usefulness is in their capacity to reconcile, and as such to yield alternative modes of operation, social and architectural.

During the several past decades the ruination process has greatly accelerated. Economical storms and technological eruptions rapidly transformed large industrial complexes, whole cities, and even regions into abounded ruins. This phenomenon has brought about a similar swell in the ways ruins are used, discussed, and understood. Diverse occurrences such as squatting, parkour, urban exploration, ruin photography, and ruin archaeology flourish through and in new ruins. New ruins unpredictable way of emergence has spread them on a varied range of localities, from the marginal to the condensed urban.

Ruins expose binary oppositions; they represent failure and achievement, attract and repulse. Ruins are objects of desire and disgust; they expose presence and absence, power and vulnerability. Ruins have no function, they have sensual materiality, constantly transforming. Ruins generate strong sense of nostalgia and melancholia; they inspire philosophical contemplations regarding the past, our place in the world, and our extinction. New ruins reconcile binary opposite conditions inherent in reality. This reconciliation potential is expressed in the ways ruins generate creativity, excite the imagination, and the ways experimentation and education can relate to them (Fig. 1).

2 Alongside the academic theoretical material, a large amount of internet sites were scrutinized as visual material. It allowed experiencing, however partially, the many points of view toward new ruins. Ranging from tourism, shelter solutions, crime infested areas perpetuating sadness and poverty, to environmental disasters, and to artistic material with endless inspirational energy.
Ruins pose intriguing prospects to the questions of how our public spaces are used, and for what ends? How can the process of design make responsible room for unpredictable conditions? What is the relationship between ruin and heritage? The role of ruins as negotiating the past, authorizing the present, and influencing the future has become a source for discourse. The paper focuses on ruins mental atmosphere and understanding their reconciliation capacity.

**Attitude toward Ruins**

The attitude toward ruins can be divided to negative understandings, and positive interpretations, including one that accommodates simultaneously negative and positive qualities. Negatively presented ruins are a result of misfortune or neglect, natural or manmade. They emerge as a result of economic, political, or social catastrophe. Ruins are mistreated, crime infested, toxic, and a continuing financial burden. Such derelict architecture is considered ugly. Italian scholar Umberto Eco explains the ugly as everything that displays degradation, dismemberment, and fragmentation. Man is repulsed by manifestations of the possibility of his own decline, in Eco’s words:

> Let us imagine we look at a tooth-less man in the street; what disturbs us is not the shape of the lips or the few surviving teeth left in his mouth, but the fact that these remains are not accompanied by the other teeth that should have been in his mouth. […] standing before this inconsistency and incompleteness of the whole – we are right to determine, without any emotion, that his face is ugly.

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On the positive side, ruins reflect historical achievements, a sign of heritage and tradition, source of inspiration and knowledge, remainder of hope and renewal. Ruins are embedded with symbolic meaning and complex philosophical messages. Ruins appreciation has flourished through history, ranging from the ‘cult of ruins’ during the 18th century, to their adaptation into Post-Modern architecture of the 20th century. Many theoretical interpretations have emerged as well, such as Paul Zucker’s who discussed ruins usage in art, architecture, and their relationship with nature. Ruins qualities of indeterminacy and uncertainty have been pointed out by Dana Arnold who reviewed ruins shifting role in shaping historical understanding: “where the past was used as means of validating the present”. Others such as Andreas Huyssen had critically observed the shift in society’s conception of ruins from a romantic artifact toward a negative object that contaminates space. Dalibor Vesely explored the power of ruins as it is manifested via representations, both realistic and imagined, to inspire new forms and sensibilities of (re)envisioning architecture. Researcher Tim Edensor endorses new ruins as repositories of memory, and locations of activity and performance. An example to contemporary understanding of new ruins scope and potential can be found in landscape architect Mira Engler’s analysis of the history and shifting qualities of waste spaces, she states:

Unofficial places where waste accumulates [...] retain a peculiar mix of disgust and fascination. [...] these places ripe for play, action, and fantasy. They evoke varied sensations and contain enduring delights. Children, less inhibited by accepted ideas of beauty, value, and cleanliness, like junk. They find much to explore in it, seeing it as diverse and stimulating.

**Atmosphere of ruins**

The uniqueness of ruins is manifested in their enigmatic feel. The fragmented forms, expressiveness of materials, lack of function, and binary oppositions, all contribute to this mysterious impression. Mysterious feel is subjective and undefined condition, therefore, this paper intention is to decipher this condition, inherit in new ruins, and evaluate it as their capacity to reconcile human condition. The experience of a ruin is complex and accumulating, sensual and holistic. Orhan Pamuk, Nobel prize winner for literature, writes of the term ‘hüzün’ which translates as a form of melancholy, unique to the city of Istanbul (Fig. 2). It is shaped by the overwhelming presence of ruins abundant throughout the city:

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[...] in Istanbul the remains of a glorious past civilization are everywhere visible. No matter how ill-kept, no matter how neglected or hemmed in they are by concrete monstrosities, the great mosques and other monuments of the city, as well as the lesser detritus of empire in every side street and corner – the little arches, fountains, and neighbourhood mosques – inflict heartache on all who live among them.12

This effect is also renounced in the words of architect Juhany Pallasmaa:

Melancholy is the recognition of the tragic dimension within the moment of bliss. This mental state combines happiness and sadness, possession and loss, understanding and bewilderment, into heightened experience of being. Melancholy is the sorrow accompanying the comprehension of limits.13

Form

We expect of architecture to convey meaning, intention, order, and logic. Ruins confront these propositions. In ruins, forms are detached from meaning, parts are missing or broken, systems malfunction, there is lack of apparent logic, and absence of human activity, but we view them as architecture. Ruins are not completely accidental, marks of order and coherency are still embedded in them. Yet the position of former order is unclear, its authority is lost.

Metaphorically fragments represent moral breakdown, loss of belief, detachment from tradition, and alienation from all that is good.14 The fragment invites completion by the imagination; it suggests the possibility of multi and changing interpretations. The fragment is exposed as representing the possibility of many truths, conflicting, and constantly shifting.

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The observer is pulled into an uncanny state of mind, compelled to think metaphorically and philosophically (Fig. 3). As such ruins are not the space of collapse and degradation but rather the realm of the possible and the evocative.

This peculiarity of ruins was understood by German artist, ‘Dada’ member, Kurt Schwitters. He was renowned for obsessively collecting fragments and debris of all sorts, using them as artistic material and inspiration. He attempted to use the accidental as methodology, a way to return to art its mythic, spiritual spirit. In his main artistic endeavour, ‘Merzbau’, there is priority for everything which is not complete, neglected, and unfit. At the time, Schwitters was pioneering the use ruins as materials that allow the new to re-emerge.

The atmosphere created by ruins and fragments can be traced in the works of Italian architect Piranesi, well known for his series of dark engravings, the ‘Carceri’ – dating 1749, depicting a series of imaginary prisons. Time and function, in many of the detailed engravings, are ambiguous; this enhances their allegoric and mysterious effect. The researcher Huyssen claims that the fragmentary ruins represented by Piranesi have a lack of completion “whose failure [is] the measure of their success”. This is also noted by Tafuri who refers to Piranesi’s works as illustrating the ‘principle of contradictions’, which do not offer solution only recognition. Piranesi has no intention to repair the world by rearranging it, but rather by accepting its disordered, and flowing state. He accepts the world’s contradictions and incompleteness as fate.

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15 Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *Spontaneity in Art*. Tel-Aviv: Am Oved. 2006. [In Hebrew].
Material and nature

In ruins materials lose their original state, some disintegrate faster, failure happens chaotically. Layers of material content are exposed and are rearranged along surprising formulations (Fig. 4). Nature, which was deprived from the building, emerges back to reassert itself. The complexity and diversity of shapes and compositions that exist in nature, ironically, by the process of neglect has been able to re-emerge.

The landscape artist Robert Smithson showed in his renowned ‘Tour’ that materiality of abandoned and neglected architecture can be evaluated aesthetically, and experienced emotionally detached from historical and political meanings\textsuperscript{19}. Materials in ruins encourage to explore, experience, and decipher. Yet we are repulsed, obliged to practice caution and reluctance. In ruins materials sensuality takes over as predominant. Vividly recited by Journalist Bill McGraw writing about the abounded Packard plant, a gigantic industrial ruin, once the pride of industrious Detroit:

Today, the complex is brooding, immense and silent. [...]A labyrinth of rusted steel, shattered glass, crumbling concrete, standing water, freshly dumped trash, vivid graffiti, junked cars and crud-encrusted artifacts of a bygone age. [...]It looms like a frightful fortress [...] Sturdy trees, some three stories tall, grow from numerous places on Packard’s roof [...]Green moss spreads along the floors in some areas, and oozes out of the walls in others. Chalky stalactites, several inches long, hang from the ceilings [...]\textsuperscript{20}.

This material condition creates a sense of loss, an atmosphere of sadness, a deep psychological force which is similar to Freud’s argument that the power of the uncanny lies in the fact that it should remain hidden but keeps coming into the light. An example of this can be seen in the architectural works of Italian architect Carlo Scarpa that intended them to be understood as a ruin from the outset. This is most evident in his restoration of the Castelvecchio museum in Verona. In it a ruinous process of becoming and decomposing is clearly established by his use of materials, both new and existing.

Function

Ruins have no apparent function; the signified is detached from the signifier. Architecture remains in its abstract form. The structure still preforms, it holds the building and transforms the loads downward. The space retains only its relationship to human scale with no other purpose or objective. If water trickle through the roof it is failure of the building, if water accumulate inside a building to the point that flock of fish thrive in it, it is in no way a failure of the ruin, for that matter neither for its success. What is a deserted prison, empty from convicts, free from its bars, in rejection equally from inmates and warders? Architecture as pure abstract ideal, stripped bare of function, meaning, or significance. A building, by becoming a ruin, has actually achieved its status as pure architecture. A ruin, is, among other things, a riddle, a mystery, it engages the mind as a question. The answer to which is a mute response. This is more profound quality in new ruins. They have not yet attained the quality of archaeological site, or symbol of historical meaningful place.

A similar perception toward architecture was adopted by the architect Louis Kahn. He valued architecture as at its purest when it is not yet finished and functioning, or in its mirror image as a ruin. Kahn turned his view to ‘beginnings’ as source of inspiration and deeper understandings. These concepts are subjective, as such they were communicated by Kahn in a poetic and personal manner: “When its use is spent and it becomes a ruin, the wonder of its beginning appears again.”

The architecture philosopher Neil Levine also states this about the relationship between architecture function and spirit:

As time passes, when it is a ruin, the spirit of its making comes back. It welcomes the foliage that entwines and conceals, everyone who passes can hear the story it wants to tell about its making. It is no longer in servitude; the spirit is back.

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22 Frampton, Kenneth in Bergdoll, Barry & Oechslin, Werner (eds.). 2006.
The ruin has no value of functional meaning. The arrangement of the elements is released from the need to be functional; they can not imply any coherent meaning. There is no linearity, no intention, and scale is not clear or unified. New ruins offer creative freedom, free from the constraints of reality. The role of imaginative reinterpretations of ruins is suggested by Armstrong:

[…] empty places are fundamental to the evocative potential of the city. They are latent places where the absence of use can create a sense of freedom and expectancy – the space of the possible.

**Time, philosophical wanderings**

The architectural ruin is an object that exists in the present but contains a past no longer existing (Fig. 5). It offers a strong incentive for feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. The ruin gives strong sense of absence, it contains both present and past, nature and culture, life and death. Ruin reflects time and its consequences:


30 Vesely, Dalibor in Bergdoll, Barry & Oechslin, Werner (eds.). 2006.
disintegration, destruction, and ultimately death. This aura is poetically pointed out by Japanese writer Tanizaki:

Still for better or worse we love things that carry marks of deterioration, decay, and dirt, and we love the color and tone that recall the past in which they were created. To live in those old houses among the old objects is in a mysterious way a source of calm and peace.

We are unable to ignore the past communicated as a puzzle from the ruins state, we cannot imply meaning to its present condition. As a consequence the future, the capacity to a variety of possible futures, suggested within the ruin, is a definite though provoking condition. Free from a specific destination to carry this thought in time, it becomes a philosophical contemplation about human condition in the world. Past, present, future? what is the point of human endeavour? Is fate of all doomed for ruin? Is there hope? The ruin pose the question and can do no further, it proposes no answer, it advocates no direction or attitude, it hold steady to an open question, sustaining us in a state of wonder and thought evoking meandering.

**Concept: simultaneous dual meaning**

Finally, we are confronted with a bewildering attribute of ruins, being a facilitator of simultaneous binary opposing conditions. Ruins are, at the same time, signs of failure and remainders of great achievements. They disgust and repulse, but by the same qualities, they generate attractiveness and desire. Ruins constantly remind of presence and use but do it through absence and void. Ruins expose man’s control of technology and victory over nature, yet render technology’s breakdown and nature’s triumph. We are confronted by these conflicted oppositions as practical problems, as metaphoric issues, and as philosophical concepts. Ruins are objects in a liminal state – objects that both exhausted their purpose while still await further interpretation. This liminal position endorses further the ambiguity of ruins and their mysterious qualities.

**Summary**

The paper discussed the complex mental structure that is created by and in new ruins. By the failure of the functioning building it is elevated to a pure and inspirational status. An atmosphere that generates a mental paradigm which offers us the possibility to reconcile with reality, with its ambiguous uncertainty and conflicting conditions. Ruins can be understood not only as misfortune or accidental but be initiated as a by-product of every human endeavour. As such ruin is a condition that exists internally, as potential, in every architectural act. Their quality is described by Armstrong saying that they:

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[...] can accommodate reflective meditations where marginal places provide a different beauty in the city. They evoke an aesthetic of disorder, surprise and sensuality, offering ghostly glimpses into the past and tactile encounters with a forgotten materiality\textsuperscript{33}. 

The reconciliation quality of ruins can be used in current experimentation and methods of architectural education. Examples for this can be seen in the attempt of the architect Lebbeus Woods to reconcile with the continuous process of distraction of architecture and to except it as fate. He does not wish to hide or fix reality but attempts to continue it in a positive way\textsuperscript{34}. In his own words: “the present – always both decaying and coming into being, certain only in its uncertainty, perfect only in its imperfection.”\textsuperscript{35}

The abundance of diverse and nihilistic social phenomena such as parkour, squatting, urban exploration, ruin photography; although radically different from one another, can all be seen as spontaneous responses to the ruins reconciliation trait. In a world in which everything is a commodity, and must have a value in order to exist, ruins represent a different attitude that resists this trap, ruins actually offer an escape, an alternative. The network of emotional and conceptual structure of ruins, emerges as a reconciliation capacity.

Ruins are not only a source of embarrassment, a mirror of society’s shortcomings; they are also a source of inspiration, a root for unexpected opportunities, and a source for sprouting the imagination. Their psychological mysterious condition, their presence as unexplored territories, their spatial and material potential, their reintegration with nature, all have the capability to inspire, to suggest, to offer, to allow, and to inject our built environment with new ideas, conditions, solutions and possibilities.

