



Derelict architecture: Aesthetics of an unaesthetic space

Małgorzata NIESZCZERZEWSKA*

ABSTRACT

The main focus of this article is the question of the aesthetics of an unaesthetic ruined space. The author also pays particular attention to the ambivalence that exists in contemporary derelict architecture, referred to as 'modern ruins', and tries to show that such locations can be viewed as an 'in-between' space.

KEYWORDS

derelict architecture; *ruinophilia*; formativity; work of art; time; temporality

* Ph.D., lecturer at the Department of Urban Studies in the Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań, Poland. E-mail: mnieszczerzewska@gmail.com.

*If history no longer moves, then history becomes untimely.
Out-of-time and out-of-place, temporal depth is erased.
As the future and past undergo doubt, a suffocating present
closes in. Velocity, the only recognizable form of temporal
passing, surges and withdraws but never attains an end.*

D. Trigg, *The aesthetics of decay:
Nothingness, nostalgia, and the absence of reason*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary ruins are very ambivalent places. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle claim, that images of ruins resonate with other images of destruction and decay. Ruins evoke not only the buildings from which they hail, but a transhistorical iconography of catastrophe and a vast visual archive of ruination as well. Collapsing, derelict buildings always involve reflections about history, the nature of the event, the meaning of the past and the present, progress and crisis, revolution, apocalypse or dialectic process. Therefore, the aestheticization of ruins is unavoidable (Hell & Schönle, 2010: 1). The architectural ruins always hover in the background of an aesthetic imagination that privileges fragment and allegory, collage and montage, freedom from ornament and reduction of the material (Huysen, 2010: 19). There is certainly an aesthetic component to decaying buildings that provides an opportunity to enjoy and contemplate them outside of their original context and stumble upon unusual images that do not present themselves in intact structures. Hell and Schönle recall Michael Roth's argument, that only in a secularized world ruins can become objects of contemplation and aesthetization (Hell & Schönle, 2010: 1–5). This argument is confirmed by urban explorers, which very often define industrial ruins as new sanctuaries. Due to their silence, stillness and unaesthetic mess, derelict factories, churches, private houses and hospitals provide new mental and bodily experiences in regulated, controlled and aestheticized city space.

BETWEEN *RUINOPHILIA* AND *RUINOPHOBIA*

In late modern discourse about ruins and ruination of culture three approaches are to be found. First of all, the philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and other researchers are of the opinion, that contemporary times are characterized by particular *ruinophilia*. Svetlana Boym points out, that we are fascinated by a ruin as an object, a ruin as a concept, and ruination as a process. In our increasingly digital age, ruins appear as an endangered species and physical embodiment of modern paradoxes (Boym, 2011: 58). This acknowledgment finds

a confirmation in many activities of artists, urban explorers and ordinary people. Tim Edensor, one of academics and passionate of ruins states as follows:

For me, however mundane they may seem, ruins still contain the promise of the unexpected. Since the original uses of ruined buildings has passed, there are limitless possibilities for encounters with the weird, with inscrutable legends inscribed on notice boards and signs, and with peculiar things and curious spaces which allow wide scope for imaginative interpretation [...] ruined space is ripe with transgressive and transcendent possibilities (Edensor, 2005a: 4).

In this case, the ruin gaze is colored by nostalgia, which has some utopian element, but, as Boym claims, no longer directed towards the future (Boym, 2010: 58–59). In modern *ruinophilia* there is no continuous identity between a ruin and a building from which it hails. The nostalgic is enamoured of distance and not of the referent itself. It is not only a nostalgic desire for use value (Stewart, 2011: 36–39), but something that Edensor calls a ‘post-industrial nostalgia’ which focuses on ‘dark urban nightscapes, abandoned parking lots, factories, warehouses and other remnants of post-industrial culture’ and is rather based not on the romantic but ‘gothic sensibility’ (Edensor, 2005a: 13).

The second, actually opposite approach (first of all characteristic for the economists, some architects, local governments or developers and many city dwellers as well) is characterized by some kind of *ruinophobia*. Potentially dangerous character and a common sense of ugliness are the main factors responsible for the notion, that derelict places which lack sensual and aesthetic control do not belong to anyone and therefore they lose any positive value and become a part of ‘anxious landscapes’ (the term borrowed from Antoine Picon [Picon, 2000]). Post-industrial ruins, peculiar ‘blots on the landscape’, are places, which ordinary people are usually afraid of.

These two above-mentioned approaches can be derived from Edward Relph’s theory of peoples’ relations with a place. Subjective feelings and emotions cause human beings and places to interact with each other. These relationships do not need to be strong or positive. Sometimes a strong place attachment or identity (*topophilia*) can be developed, but aversion, distaste or fear of some places may appear as well and then we can talk about *topophobia* (Seamon & Sowers, 2008; Żmudzińska-Nowak, 2010). An average user of abandoned and derelict places would probably share the latter. The material condition of place and its aesthetic values play of course a huge role in this negative reception. According to Edensor:

The negative notions of industrial ruination infer aesthetic judgements which widely diverge from the tradition of compiling celebratory accounts of non-industrial ruins. Highly aestheticized ‘picturesque’ representations derived from romantic perspectives

have dominated n writings on ruins, but rather than industrial ruins, these accounts have typically focused on classical or archaic ruins (Edensor, 2005a: 10–11).

Between these oppositional approaches we can situate a third one: some peculiar perspective of ‘not seeing’ presented by the most of city inhabitants. Separated from highly designed, themed, regulated and controlled urban space, contemporary ruins serve only as sites which are appropriate for alternative, marginal practices, and not regarded as ‘normative’ or ‘respectable’. A decayed building does not match the aestheticized environment of the cities, therefore it quickly becomes invisible in particular way.

If we consider these three approaches toward abandoned buildings, we may notice, that the most important factor that decides about the choice of one of them is predominantly a feeling, not an intellectual argument. It might derive from Dylan Trigg’s argument about the contemporary ‘lack of reason’ led principally by some kind of ‘irrationalism’. This suggests an anti-intellectual emotionalism and vague intuitionism toward the contemporary sites of dereliction. We are told much about the ‘feel’ of the ruins but little about what they might imply conceptually (Trigg, 2006). Luigi Pareyson formulating his theory of the ‘formativity’ states, that in every human activity is inscribed a feeling, what actually means the personal engagement (Pareyson, 2009: 49). If we think of a ruin as a form of architecture and then as a work of art, we may connect it, according to Pareyson, with spirituality:

There are works of art, which do express and speak nothing, but their style is enormously persuasive, because it is a spirituality of an author itself. [...] Even the most styled arabesque, the coldest architecture and the most polished contra point, do not express any feeling itself [...], but they content the all civilization, the way of interpreting the world and behavior toward life, the way of living/ thinking/feeling, the whole of collective and personal spirituality that became a style (Pareyson, 2009: 50).¹

If we consider the aesthetics of contemporary ruins, we mean actually the aestheticization of decay, demise, abandonment, amorphism and atemporality. We speak about the aestheticization of a non-place, an alternative and marginal place, an ‘in-between’ space, a place which is threw out, literally and metaphorical, from the space of contemporary city. Thus ruins litter the space of the city. Therefore I decided to consider contemporary ruins in two aesthetic dimensions: between form and deformation, and between multi-temporality and atemporality.

¹ All quotations from Pareyson, 2009 trans. by M.N.

BETWEEN FORM AND DEFORMATION

According to Edensor, ruins, as the remnants of architecture, do not have one shape but are manifold in form. Because they are fashioned by the era in which they were constructed, their architectural styles and functions differ very much. Their shape also depends upon the strategies mobilized by firms toward them after abandonment:

Some are left to linger and decay for decades, turning into heap of rubble over years, while others stay for a while until the first signs of decay take hold and then are demolished, and some are eradicated shortly after abandonment. [...] The rate of decay also depends upon the constituent materials of the building and upon local industrial strategies (Edensor, 2005a: 4).

An aesthetic dimension of ruins belongs to a different order than the one observed in postmodern urban realms. They do not resemble an architectural work any longer, but begin to look like a specific, accidental, surrealist sculpture as a form that emerges due to a process of decay and collapse. The lack of care about the place causes both the loss of architectural shape and colour, a very important factor for the sensual, aesthetic experience. Subject to many factors, buildings become similar to stone and earth (Simmel, 2006: 173). The way in which a building actually decays also depends on a material, that was used to its creation. It is a huge difference between a ruined architecture made from *e.g.* limestone or brick or a decayed building created once from a reinforced concrete. Adrian Stokes in *The pleasures of limestone* affirms the so called 'diseases of a stone', *e.g.* exfoliation, florescence, stone weathering, which are a beginning of a decaying process (Stokes, 2011: 25). There are particular chemical changes, that belongs to the beauty and liveliness of stone. It is the natural carving that records time in immediate form with the pattern and color of surface:

Of all weathering, that of limestone, as a rule, is the most vivid. It is limestone that combines with gases in the air, that is carved by the very breath we breathe out. It is limestone that forms new skins and poetic efflorescence: above all, limestone is sensitive to the most apparent of sculptural agencies, the rain (Stokes, 2011: 25).

Abandoned and forgotten places are threatened by a slow decay, they 'fall inside', and possessed by natural forces are becoming rather an element of nature than a place in the city. Quite different situation can be observed in case of a concrete material, where the building may often not lose its primary form for long years. Rose Macaulay in *A note on new ruins* points out, that new ruins are for time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless, but they smell of mortality (Macaulay, 2011: 27). And they are very quickly covered by

unaesthetic dust, that is a cumbersome residue tainting what it touches and must be eradicated. Dust is always seen as dirt, a 'persistent contamination exuded by death onto the world of the living' (Olalquiaga, 2011: 33). Dust, that always comes from outside, is a fragmented reminder of something that is already gone. Especially, if we consider abandoned buildings made from concrete, which do not lose their shape and form very quickly, we can easily ask the very important question: where does the ruin start, and where does it end? Is well-preserved but empty and neglected building already a ruin? Much more useful would be to change the question and ask, if ruin is an object or a process (Hell & Schönle, 2010: 6)?

The most important factor of shaping a ruin is a fact, that the architect of a building is a particular man, and the architect of a ruin is time. Pareyson claims, that an artist always subdues the materiality to make it his own. But it can be done only under condition, that the materiality meets an artist half way and gives him an access to its characteristic traits, from which he, due to his efforts, extracts the possibilities of forming (Pareyson, 2009: 58). So we can write, that the aim of forming as an activity of time is a deformation of a building. Forming means first and foremost 'doing'. In this case we talk about 'doing' which is actually creating a 'way of doing'. Time as an artist makes up his work of art in collapsing the building without any preconceived plan. Let us connote the theory of 'formativity' again:

Forming makes up his own *modus operandi* during activity, defines a canon of a work by creating it, understands it by following it and materializing a project. Forming means then 'doing', but such a doing, which, simultaneously, creates a way of doing while doing (Pareyson, 2009: 71).

A ruin is a work of art created by 'doing' without any preconceived method. The artistic production is here an adventure. The activity of time as an artist is, at the same time, searching and finding, trying and success, attempt and fruition. The problem is, when does this work of art end? When can we still talk about a ruin and not a pile of rubble? This simultaneity of an invention and creation cross-refers to ruination as a process and not ruin as a completed object. While forming a ruin, time — as an artist — still makes new attempts, as if it wasn't satisfied with its work. Experiments are driven by a presage of discovery of a final shape of ruin. If we consider the ruination as a process, a collapsing and decaying of a building, we can compare it to the process of forming that Pareyson calls 'being in motion'.

During the process of creating, a form simultaneously exists and doesn't exist. It doesn't exist, because, as formed, it can appear actually after the process is done. It exists, because it is working in an initialized process of forming (Pareyson, 2009: 89).

A collapsing and decaying architecture changes its shape and structure all the time, it is still forming and is heading for a total deformation. I propose, that in contrast to a construction, composition and integration, which constitute a creative work of a man as an architect, the process of ruination should be marked by a deconstruction, decomposition and disintegration. Pareyson writes about a dynamic perfection of a work of art, understood as coherence and uncertainty. Such traits could also be found in a ruin. But, in contrast to architecture it was once, this what concentrates it around its center, is not a whole, harmony and proportion, but fragmentation, disharmony and disproportion. According to a classical work of art, 'adding or taking away an element of a work of art would not only change it, but could rather destroy its integrality, its completeness and entirety' (Pareyson, 2009: 111). Opposite to these words, a decaying building viewed as a work of art created by time in cooperation with nature, is characterized by uncertainty. Its forming is based on destroying the integrality, completeness and entirety of an architectural work. The beauty of derelict architecture, so affirmed by urban explorers and photographers of industrial ruins, comes from its fragmentation, decaying and rottenness. The beauty and perfection of ruin as a work of passing time depends on its possibility to change and modification. It is a work of art in which everything can be changed, nothing is on its place and the viewer can easily think about reversing the order and coherence. Ruins are uncompleted because years after years they lose their elements, and this is actually the sign of their perfection. Forming of a collapsing and decaying architecture is a process that cannot be separated from the form itself. Two buildings which look the same in their architectural form become probably quite different as ruins after they have been abandoned. Every ruin is unique. Thousands of photographs and films of abandoned architecture whose authors try to show and picture every detail of these sites of dereliction certify, that in the work of art as a whole nothing is detached or less important. There is nothing in ruin that should be neglected, there is no unnecessary and unwanted detail to be found (that is why there are multiple photographs of things being forgotten and abandoned in empty buildings). Pareyson thinks alike, writing that

even the smallest hollow seems essential for the aesthetic effect and therefore for the existence of the work of art. [...] This is true, that one cannot understand the whole if one doesn't see particular elements, because the whole manifests itself only through the connection of the fragments (Pareyson, 2009: 125, 128).

In contradiction to the controlled and aestheticized architecture, there are numerous objects, forms of matter and fragments in the ruin, that the eye cannot identify at first sight. They appear unclassifiable, especially because of their transformation under conditions of decay and collapse (Edensor, 2007a: 221).

In their incompleteness, they are already complete. But the seeing eye can easily recognize in fragmented ruins the idea of a whole, even if this whole is just called nothingness.

BETWEEN MULTITEMPORALITY AND ATEMPORALITY

Ruins reveal an ambivalent sense of time and embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes (Hell & Schönle, 2010: 5; Dillon, 2011: 11). Decay of a building is a concrete reminder of the passage of time as a new owner of an empty building and the work of time as an architect. According to Sarah Wanenchak, contemporary technology changes our remembrance of the past, our experience of the present, and our imagination of the future by blurring the lines between these three categories, and introducing different forms of understanding and meaning-making to all three. We are able then to 'remember the future, imagine the present, and experience the past'. The contemporary, post-industrial derelict buildings,

are gentle reminders of our own transience. They lead us to questions just as the imagining of the past did: What will our contemporary structures look like in fifty years? In a hundred? Who will remember us? Who will stand in our abandoned spaces and wonder about us? We can imagine these things because they suggest an end without really being an ending — there is always, after all, someone else to look and wonder, comfortingly embodied in ourselves (Wanenchak, 2012).

The phenomenon of modern *ruinophilia* is uniquely suited to call attention to our increasingly atemporal existence, and to outline some of the specific ways in which it manifests itself. The question of atemporality seems very important if we consider a contemporary fascination of industrial ruins and their digital images. In the past few years, the popularity of photographing ruins has measurably exploded. First of all because of an ability to find locations via the internet, the omnipresence and inexpensiveness of digital photography, and the plethora of forums and photo sharing sites to distribute images. The interest in the subject has increased exponentially and there are thousands of photographs of abandoned locations uploaded daily to image sharing websites and hundreds of gallery shows (Christopher, 2012). These websites remind some digital data archives, and every archive can be described as atemporal and multitemporal at the same time. The photographs of decaying buildings placed on the Internet exist 'out of time' in peculiar way, although they remind of the time and its 'destroyable' work at the same time. On the other hand, in order to capture these images, photographers must enter the spaces themselves, therefore physical presence is necessary and physical experience is unavoidable. Digital images of ruined and abandoned spaces therefore must be understood

to have fundamentally physical roots. There were bodies in space, even though the body — the photographer — is usually unseen in the produced image, and this physical, bodily experience of urban explorer took place at the particular real time (photographers entered, saw and captured the ruin during specific days, hours and minutes). Photographers document these physical spaces because, in the moment of their experience, there is something remarkable about the spaces themselves (Wanenchak, 2012).

Edensor compares large ruins to a labyrinthine structure which permit the making of a multitude of paths, in contradistinction to the largely linear routes through space determined by processes of production.

Thus movement through a ruin is determined by whim or contingency in an improvisational path-making, according to what catches the eye or looks as if it might promise surprises or appears pleasurably negotiable (Edensor, 2005a: 87).

Labyrinthine structure of ruins bears comparison to the working of memory as well, as it demonstrates how passage through space destroyed by time stimulates memories that are elusive and dependent upon conjectures about the traces of people, places and processes which haunt ruins (Edensor, 2005a: 87; Edensor, 2005b: 834). Therefore it can be acknowledged, that the working of memory can be atemporal and multitemporal at the same time. Movement in contemporary sites of dereliction takes also much more time, and therefore it enables the explorer to feel time quite different than while 'everyday living in the city'. The ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us, and therefore our cultural and aesthetic gaze that we turn on derelict architecture is a way of 'loosening ourselves from the grip of punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time' (Dillon, 2011: 11). Boym also compares ruins to a labyrinth, but she expresses it quite different. She maintains that a tour of ruin leads us into a labyrinth of ambivalent temporal adverbs, such as 'no longer' and 'not yet', 'nevertheless' and 'albeit' (Boym, 2011), that allows us to assign to contemporary ruins an additional, interesting meaning.

Wanenchak emphasizes atemporality of contemporary abandoned buildings as follows:

Through the experience of the space, explorers and photographers (and blends of the two) break out of a conventional experience of the present and into a space where the artifacts of history feel at once fresh and new, and ancient and decayed. Imagination is a key to the atemporal experience of these places: one can exist in an abandoned, ruined space and see shards of a dead past on which one can construct a live imagining — who were the people who lived and worked here? What were their lives like? What were their stories? What happened to them? What happened to them in these spaces? (Wanenchak, 2012).

There is one more interesting approach to the theme of ruins and their temporal dimension. Hanna K. Göbel in her book *The re-use of urban ruins* (2015) writes, that contemporary urban and lab culture is characterized by the 're-use' turn. Nothing should be forgotten, wasted or thrown out. The re-using and recycling cultural 'obsession' is applied to architecture as well. Things and buildings in contemporary culture are treated as temporal commodities. Designing social temporalities is a preference to stabilize, curate and market possible, but also contingent state of affairs (Göbel, 2015: 202). That allows us to admit, that abandoned buildings stay — metaphorical and literally — in opposition to this turn. They are atemporal, because they are unuseful. They are multi-temporal, because they are the accumulation of many 'asynchronic moments'. Aesthetic and bodily experience is not linear in this case.

SUMMARY

The presented approaches can be treated as a reflection upon the ambivalence of an aesthetic of contemporary ruins. Abandoned and derelict buildings function both out-of-time and out-of-place as well. Their ambivalence situates them somewhere between *ruinophilia* and *ruinophobia* in social meaning, between determined forms of buildings from which they hail and a deformed shape of ruins, and between multitemporal and atemporal dimension of an abandoned architecture. Contemporary ruins are distinguished, like other archetypal archives (rooms with hundreds of shelves and drawers), by a specific quiescence and motionlessness. Paradoxically, the past of the ruin, with all its varieties and fates focuses itself in the aesthetic here and now. Therefore, urban explorers/photographers and other artists who are fascinated with modern ruins often name themselves 'archaeologists of the present'. Decaying buildings embody present and recent past, and suggest how is the future to be imagined. For ordinary inhabitants of the city, ruins are, according to Brian Dillon, a part of the long history of the fragment with the future that will live on after us despite the fact that it reminds us of a lost wholeness and perfection (Romany, 2011; Dillon, 2011: 11).

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