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[**The Ruins of Capitalism**](#)

By depicting urban decay and ecological crisis, ruin imagery shows the people and places that capitalism left behind.

by [Dora Apel](#)



Birches Growing In Decayed Books, from *Detroit Disassembled*, 2010. Andrew Moore

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Images of urban abandonment and decay produced by deindustrialization and disinvestment have become pervasive. And no city is pictured in books, exhibitions, web sites, films, and popular media more than Detroit. Although deindustrial landscapes are scattered across the world, most notably in the former leading manufacturing centers, Detroit has become the preeminent example of urban decay, the global metaphor for [capitalist decline](#), and the epicenter of a photographic genre: deindustrial ruin imagery.

By highlighting poverty, urban deterioration, and economic and ecological crises, ruin imagery underscores the inability of capitalist society to protect its citizens and its cities. As national economic imperatives clash with the demands of globalized capital, the decrepitude of cities like Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland feeds a pervasive cultural pessimism that foresees violent disintegration and collapse — whether through viral pandemics, ecological destruction, warfare, or deindustrialization.

Hence the paradoxical appeal of ruin imagery: as faith in a better future erodes, the beauty of decay helps us cope with the terror of apocalyptic decline. In the cultural imagination, the idea of Detroit has come to serve as the repository for the nightmare of urban decline in a world where the majority of people live in cities.

Detroit ruin imagery also serves another function — it geographically circumscribes and isolates the anxiety of decline, making the predominantly African-American city a kind of alien zone. The ubiquitous photos of derelict skyscrapers, churches, businesses, and homes, and abandoned factories like the [Packard Plant](#) — the nation's largest ruin — are repeatedly compared to war zones, hurricane wreckage, and the aftermath of a nuclear explosion.

The effects of ruination are stark, to be sure: Detroit's unemployment rate in 2014 was the highest of the nation's fifty largest cities and more than three times the national average, while the higher education rate was well below it. City services are slow and inadequate, but property taxes are high, continually threatening poor residents with [home foreclosures](#) and the city with yet more blighted, abandoned houses. Nearly 40 percent of the city's population [lives below](#) the poverty line.

But photographs of crumbling neighborhoods, by their nature, explain very little about the complex causes of decline or the ramifications of ruination for the city's future, or the nation's. Instead, the city, as produced through images, takes on different meanings in different contexts. In the popular imagination, Detroit is seen as both representative of urban decline *and* as a uniquely mismanaged city.

As the former leading manufacturing center in the world and now a failing city that is predominantly poor and black, Detroit is construed as both exemplifying inevitable economic trends for which no one is

to blame, and as a highly racialized city that has caused its own decline through incompetent or corrupt leadership.

Detroit is thus regarded as demonstrating either the historical inescapability of decline or its own history of irresponsibility. In this way, the rest of the country is lulled into believing that Detroit's downward spiral is either deserved, unavoidable, or a combination of the two.

These constructions of the city allow the real agents of degeneration — corporations and the capitalist state — to evade responsibility and justify the city's takeover by the state, its forced [bankruptcy](#), the attack on workers' pensions, the privatization of city services, and other threatened austerity measures.

They also serve as disciplinary warnings to struggling cities and towns from Maine to California. By placing the debt burden on poor, black, and working people while blaming no one or the city itself for such iniquities, Detroit and its representations assume a pivotal role in shaping the future of city life in America.

A standard trope in ruin imagery is the suggestion of a timeless struggle between nature and culture. The photographs of [Andrew Moore](#), in [Detroit Disassembled](#), or Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, in [The Ruins of Detroit](#), are two well-known examples that focus on the pastoral reclamation of the built environment.

Moore's *Birches Growing in Decayed Books, Detroit Public Schools Depository* [shows](#) young trees in a carpet of rotting books that reach toward the sky through a hole in the roof of the former book depository. The upward diagonal perspective and warm light create a sense of renewal in adversity, while evoking the seemingly natural cycle of trees to books and back to trees. Vibrant with color, the photograph offers a commemorative tribute to the resurgence of nature.

Marchand and Meffre's photographs are taken in dark, overcast light conditions. Cool and drained of life, they suggest a somber lamentation for a state of irreversible decline and mortal rigor. The [last image](#) in the book shows the photographers themselves as two tiny silhouettes walking down an alley amid the derelict buildings of the Packard Plant. The alley appears to be a vacant street and the desolate facility a metonym for the city, which by implication is also empty and abandoned. The image offers a mournful farewell even as it commemorates the city's picturesque appearance.



Southern Part, Packard Motors Plant, 2009, from The Ruins of Detroit, 2010. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

These are flip sides of the same aesthetic strategy. Marchand and Meffre's photograph bemoans city decline as a deindustrialized wasteland even as it finds beauty in decay, while Moore's photograph engages in romanticized reveries on the struggle between nature and culture and sees the same beauty in decay.

The metaphor of nature reclaiming the city, whether used in negative or redemptive terms, neutralizes the actual processes that have had such a destructive impact on the city: virulent racism, anti-unionism, and industrial restructuring. This neutralization is compounded by the fact that most ruin imagery rarely contains evidence of an urban populace — many observers are surprised to learn that Detroit still has almost seven hundred thousand residents.

In December 2013 the *New York Times* published three photos by Marchand and Meffre to accompany a front-page article announcing a federal judge's ruling that Detroit was qualified to enter bankruptcy without protections for city pensions.

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

National Edition

Michigan: Showers moved to the far north with snow at first. Highs 40s to 50s. Showers ending tonight. Lows 20s northwest to 40s southeast. Weather map is on Page B14.

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JIHADIST GROUPS GAIN IN TURMOIL ACROSS MIDEAST

A CHALLENGE TO OBAMA

Officials Say Militants in Syria Could Threaten U.S. and Europe

By ROBERT F. WORTH
and ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON — Intensifying sectarian and clan violence has presented new opportunities for jihadist groups across the Middle East and raised concerns among American intelligence and counterterrorism officials that militants aligned with Al Qaeda could establish a base in Syria capable of threatening Israel and Europe.

The new signs of an energized but fragmented jihadist threat, stretching from Mali and Libya in the west to Yemen in the east, have complicated the narrative of a weakened Al Qaeda that President Obama offered in May in a landmark speech heralding the end of the war on terrorism. The leaders of the Senate and House intelligence committees, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California and Representative Mike Rogers of Michigan, raised warnings in an interview on CNN on Sunday when they said that Americans were "not safer" from terrorist attacks than in 2011.

The concerns are based in part on messages relayed this year by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's overall leader, indicating that he views Syria — where the number of jihadist rebels and foreign fighters is steadily rising — as a promising staging ground.

Some analysts and American officials say the chaos there could force the Obama administration to take a more active role to stave off potential threats among the opposition groups fighting against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. But striking in jihadist groups in Syria would pose formidable political, military and legal obstacles, and could come at the cost of some kind of accommodation — even if only temporary or tactical — with Mr. Assad's brutal but secular government, analysts say.

"We need to start talking to the Assad regime again" about counterterrorism and other issues of shared concern, said Ryan C. Crocker, a veteran diplomat who has served in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Uncle of Kim Seen as Purged In North Korea

Leader Believed to Be Consolidating Power

By CHOE SANG-HUN
and DAVID E. SANGER

SEOUL, South Korea — Kim Jong-un, the 30-year-old leader of North Korea, came to power two years ago so inexperienced and untested that the reclusive government named his uncle as the North Korean equivalent of a regent to watch over him.

On Tuesday, the National Intelligence Service of South Korea reported that the uncle, Jang Song-chak, had been stripped of his powers, apparently by the young leader he was supposed to supervise. It was the biggest in a series of purges, promotions and reshufflings of elites that seem to have remade the government in the image of its young leader, who inherited his title, and apparently techniques for keeping the government in control, from his father and grandfather.

The political changes, which were not announced by North Korea and could not be independently confirmed, follow a series of upheavals, especially within the military. American intelligence officials and some outside analysts speculate that Mr. Kim is sidelining the stalwarts of his father, Kim Jong-il, and elevating a new set of generals and party officials who owe their loyalty only to him. But there are also hints, one American intelligence official said, that "there was some kind of broader contest for control, which Jang lost, at least for now."

Early in the young Mr. Kim's tenure, American intelligence assessments questioned whether he would have the staying power to remain in office, and said he was regarded by the North Korean military as spoiled and naive.

Two years later those assessments are reversing. He is now seen as fully in charge. Mr. Kim has already begun testing the loyalty of top officials by dismissing or demoting them and letting them try to win his favor again — often by spying against others, another technique of leadership inherited from his father, according to South Korean officials and analysts.

Mr. Jang's apparent fall from power came after his two deputies at the administrative department of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea were executed last month on charges of "corruption and anti-party activities," according to South Korean officials.

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VISIONS OF A LOST CITY The remains of, from top, Michigan Central Station, the ballrooms of the Lee Plaza Hotel, and the St. Margaret Mary School.

Detroit Ruling Lifts A Shield on Pensions

Decision Backing Bankruptcy May Resonate in Other Cities

This article is by Monica Davey, Bill Vlasic and Mary Williams Walsh.

DETROIT — In a ruling that could reverberate far beyond Detroit, a federal judge held on Tuesday that the battered city could formally enter bankruptcy and asserted that Detroit's obligation to pay pensions in full was not inviolable.

The judge, Steven W. Rhodes, dealt a major blow to the widely held belief that state laws make public pensions unassailable, and his ruling is likely to resonate in Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and many other American cities where the rising cost of pensions has been crowding out spending for public schools, police departments and other services.

The judge made it clear that public employee pensions were not protected in a federal Chapter 9 bankruptcy, even though the Michigan Constitution expressly protects them. "Pension benefits are a contractual right and are not entitled to any heightened protection in a municipal bankruptcy," he said.

James E. Spotts, a lawyer with the firm Chapman & Cutler in Chicago who specializes in municipal bankruptcy and was not involved in the case, said, "No bankruptcy court had ruled that before. It will be instructive."

For people in Detroit, the birthplace of the Motown sound and of the American auto industry, Judge Rhodes's decision that the city qualified for bankruptcy amounted to one more miserable, if expected, assessment of its wretched circumstances. The city has lost hundreds of thousands of residents, the judge said, only a third of its ambulances function, and its Police Department closes less than 9 percent of cases.

"This once proud and prosperous city can't pay its debts," said the judge, who sits in United States Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. "It's insolvent. It's eligible for bankruptcy. But it also has an opportunity for a fresh start."

Appeals were expected to be filed quickly. At least one union filed a notice of appeal on Tuesday, and other unions and pension fund representatives said they were considering contesting the outcome as well. But the ruling also allows Kevin D. Orr, an emergency manager assigned in March by the state to reverse Detroit's finances, to proceed swiftly with a formal plan for starting over — a proposal to pay off only a portion of its \$18 billion in debts and to restore essential services, like streetlights, to tolerable levels.

Mr. Orr said he intended to file the formal blueprint, known as a "plan of adjustment," by the first week of 2014. That plan could include efforts to spin off city departments in outside entities, to sell city assets and to reinvest in failing city services. Mr. Orr has said his goal is to bring Detroit, the nation's largest city ever to file for bankruptcy, back to life.

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WEST COAST IMPACT The Detroit decision could alter the course of bankrupt cities in California. PAGE A4

\$100 BILLION DEAL The Illinois legislature voted a day of force back-room arm-twisting by passing a deal to shore up the state's pension system. PAGE A4



Kevin D. Orr

The December 4, 2013 front page of the *New York Times*, featuring three photos of abandoned sites by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

The top photo showed the Michigan Central Station, a grand civic structure whose abandonment serves as a symbol of city failure. Below that were images of the formerly luxurious ballroom of the Lee Plaza hotel, with its beautifully painted ceiling and overturned piano, and the classroom of a former Catholic school.

By eliding the active human presence in the city and the combative local response to the judge's ruling, the front-page trio of ruin photos suggested an already dead and mummified city. This was reinforced by the boldface caption, "Visions of a Lost City," which in turn provided ideological support for cutting municipal workers' pensions: if the city is already lost, there is no need to worry about the thousands of people who are fighting to survive or to preserve their meager pensions ([which average](#) only \$19,200 a year).

If the victims of the city's decline disappear, the discourse of ruination becomes one about architecture and landscape and the city's inevitable "reclamation" by nature, whether that means a return to a pre-civilized state or the emergence of a new ecological idyll. Photography that focuses only on the beauty of decay in architecture thus [distances](#) the viewer from the effects of decay on people and obscures the ongoing crisis of poverty and unemployment.

This effacement of the populace also reflects and reinforces their invisibility to corporations and the capitalist state, who helped create the patterns of ghettoized, racialized poverty that have long prevailed in the city while simultaneously absolving themselves of any responsibility.

The point isn't to suggest what artists and photographers should or shouldn't photograph; rather, what's important is examining the cultural work that ruin imagery performs and the political uses to which it is put. The romantic narrative of the beauty of decay in the ruin image produces pleasure by containing and controlling the anxiety of decline through the safety and distance of representation.

This is the cultural function of ruin imagery; the mental mastery of the terrifying is its nature and purpose. Even as it makes evident the disastrous effects of capitalism, the more aesthetically refined and pleasing the ruin image, the more effective the distancing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the proliferation of ruin imagery has activated a debate over "ruin porn," a term that raises the question of whether such photos should be dismissed as voyeuristic and exploitative or whether they make visible what might otherwise remain hidden from history. The ruin porn critique depends on a dichotomy between "insiders" and "outsiders," between those who regard themselves as city loyalists whose lives and work are affected by the city (and therefore have earned the right to profit from it), and those whose who are merely "drive-by."

For many poor Detroit residents, ruin imagery in the national media is a source of demoralization and embarrassment — regardless of who has taken the photo — and there are plenty of local photographers who shoot the decaying landscape. They fear the irreversible marginalization and estrangement of the city from a host nation that views the city from a position of aestheticized fascination, at a comfortable remove.

This sense of powerlessness evokes feelings of anger and resentment — not against the conditions of the city directly, but against the pictures that convey them. They seem to make those conditions worse by publicizing them, making the city seem alien and pathetic and, perhaps worst of all, provoking pity as a depersonalized response to “distant suffering,” akin to seeing pictures of starving children in Africa.

But history is rife with scenes of disaster and decay that draw outside photographers and reporters, and they are responsible for a great many indelible images as well as written history. Picturing the abject always carries a risk of exploitation, yet those pictures also act as witnesses to history. Like all witnesses, they are subjective and imperfect. Yet they offer perspectives that might not otherwise be seen.

“Ruin porn” is therefore a highly problematic tool of critical analysis, because the appetite for ruin imagery only grows larger as abandonment and decay spreads, and because insiders ultimately cannot retain “ownership” of the ruins. The ruins of Detroit, like those of Baltimore or St Louis, are America’s ruins.

Such imagery visually intensifies the realities of economic and cultural deterioration. By making these devastating effects starkly visible in carefully composed portraits of decay, they induce a variety of affects, from pleasure to unease. Like late romantic art and literature that criticized the imperial pretensions of empire, contemporary ruin imagery also functions as an implicit criticism of our domestic status quo. The aesthetics of decay serve as a warning of decline even as the images participate, wittingly or not, in constructing the dominant narrative of Detroit.

These images can thus lament, elegize, or celebrate the decay they depict; they can implicitly critique the forces or effects of decline; they can embrace those effects as beautiful or melancholic; but they cannot disguise the halt in progress that ruins represent. As fears of decline grow, the threshold for compensatory aesthetic pleasure also increases, requiring more images of dilapidation and post-apocalyptic disaster in order to achieve a sense of safety. In this way, ruin imagery is imbued with ever greater cultural power.

Not surprisingly, the fascination with Detroit’s urban ruins intensified as the city negotiated the bankruptcy crisis. And despite the narrative that seeks to marginalize and isolate the city as responsible for its own decline, Detroit has become emblematic of failing cities everywhere.

Yet just as ruin imagery challenges the logic of neoliberalism and the capitalist state as an effective protector of its citizens and a source of progress and rationality, it also challenges us to consider how our declining cities may be reclaimed and reimagined.

It invites us to think about economic reorganization and democratic planning, as part of the forging of an egalitarian society based on need and not profit — where cities meet the requirements of their collective populations, provide the basis for individual fulfillment, and help sustain the earth’s environment.

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