

Stone cladding as artificial ruin for triggering nostalgia

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In observing recent journals, one notices the frequent use of stone cladding on building projects and associated advertisements, as a demand for a variety of stone cladding types. This article explores the idea of stone cladding (natural or synthetic) as a trigger for an inaccessible past. In light of Karsten Harries' thoughts on "mold and ruins", stone cladding as an artificial ruin for providing psychological comfort against the terrors of space and time is considered. It is the first part of this paper that reminds of the promise of creating architecture as Platonism of permanence and order as opposed to the temporality of chaos. Moreover the nostalgia for the imagined utopia that existed prior to what Mircea Eliade terms "the terror of history" is highlighted as indicative of the desire for spatial and temporal ruins. Furthermore the paper selects some past and present South African architectural examples whereby the will to identify with the idealized natural landscape is attempted through the idiom of stone. The stone cladding is shown to become the anti-architectural device that deconstructs itself towards the organic in an attempt to reconcile with nature, albeit in a picturesque way. Finally a critique of approaches to stone cladding ruination which attempt to oppose time is presented and contrasted with buildings which embrace decay and thereby do return to nature.

Key words: nostalgia, artificial ruin, Platonism of permanence, anti-architectural device, picturesque reconciliation

Klipbekleding as kunsmatige ruïne vir die versnelling van nostalgie

Deur waarneming van onlangse tydskrifte, is die gereelde gebruik van klipbekleding op bouprojekte en gepaardgaande advertensies, opgelet as 'n verskeidenheid van klipbekleding tipes. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die idee van klipbekleding (natuurlike of sintetiese) as 'n sneller vir 'n ontoeganklik verlede. In die lig van Karsten Harries se gedagtes oor *mold and ruins*, is die bekleding van die klip as 'n kunsmatige ruïne vir die verskaffing van sielkundige troos, oorweeg teenoor die verskrikkinge van ruimte en tyd. Dit is die eerste deel van hierdie skryfstuk wat herinner aan die belofte van die skepping van argitektuur as 'n Platonisme van permanensie en orde in teenstelling met die tydelikheid van chaos. Boonop word die nostalgie vir die gewaande utopie wat bestaan het voor wat Mircea Eliade noem *the terror of history* uitgelig as 'n aanduiding van die begeerte vir ruimtelike en temporale ruïnes. Verder kies die stuk sommige Suid-Afrikaanse argitektoniese voorbeelde van die hede en die verlede waardeur die wil om te identifiseer met die geïdealiseerde landskap deur die idioom van klip gepoog is. Die klipbekleding is getoon, al is dit in 'n skilderagtige pad na die wording van die organise, as die anti-argitektoniese toestel wat dekonstrueer in 'n poging om te versoen met die natuur. Ten slotte word 'n kritiek van die benaderings tot klipbekledingruïnasie wat poog om tyd te verset aangebied in teenstelling met geboue wat verval omhels en sodoende wel terugkeer na die natuur.

Sleutelwoorde: nostalgie, kunsmatige ruïne, Platonisme van permanensie, anti-argitektoniese toestel, skilderagtige versoening

The nature of ruins, as Louis Kahn said, is "the physical remains of an obsolete building, a building which in this ruinous condition can speak of itself, no longer obscured by its original use or function". This description, paraphrased by Fred Scott (Scott 2008: 95) "assume(s) a separation between function and being; between the temporal and the timeless" with the common result of ruination being a loss of enclosure and incompleteness. The ruin, continues Scott, "is something in process, belonging to the past, present and future" (Scott 2008: 96). In the same vein, Harries states that it is "In the moment of aesthetic appreciation (that) linear time is abolished as past and present appear to fuse" (Scott 2008: 96).

The attraction with ruins can be found predominantly in paintings where ruin architecture interlaces with that of the landscapes furnishing aestheticians with examples of the picturesque.

Yet what is usually represented in built artificial ruins of the eighteenth century is often related to a Greek temple or a medieval church (Harries 2000: 243-244). However in the South African built context one could argue¹ that the Conical Tower in the Elliptical Temple of the Zimbabwe ruins (figure 1) has particularly been inspirational for example in the work of Norman Eaton (figure 2).

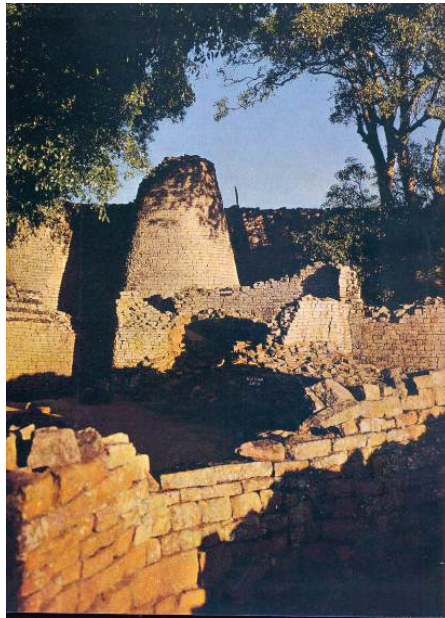


Figure 1
Conical Tower in the Elliptical Temple of the Zimbabwe ruins
(source: Bruwer 1965: ii).



Figure 2
Norman Eaton, Greenwood Village, The Willows, Pretoria, c. 1950
(source: Harrop-Allin 1975: 81).

Previously reference was made to ruins as physical remains with no obstruction of original use or function, in fact uninhabitable. On the other hand buildings in essence can be understood to be a domestication of space making space habitable as place (Harries 1982: 59). Through building, the intention is to substitute nature with crafty construction as a shelter or comfortable dwelling. Yet a dilemma unfolds in the habitability of architecture with straight lines as Hundertwasser might confirm². Human beings remain fascinated by impermanence finding Platonic order

stifling and lifeless, preferring the organic over the inorganic (Harries 2000: 240-241).

Exemplification

A vacant office building designed by Wynand Claasens is situated on a corner in Hatfield, Pretoria (figure 3). It is only the two street façades that are clad in stone as a deliberate picturesque motif or counter-image to its supporting structure of so-called permanence. Of interest here is that this building has never been inhabited and stood vacant for several years now. The mentioned façades could arguably be considered not only as an artificial ruin but perhaps also as Hans Sedlmayer would put it, “the bad conscience of architecture”. Moreover Harries quotes Sedlmayer’s claim that: “the picturesque appears as the mortal enemy of the architectonic” (Harries 2000: 245). Harries perhaps reinforces the claim here of the Hatfield building as artificial ruin, in that “the building deconstructs itself; and something of the appeal of ruins resurfaces, and transforms in contemporary architecture’s fashionable deconstructive impulse” (Harries 2000: 242).



Figure 3
Wynand Claasens, Office Building, Hatfield, Pretoria
(photograph: author).

In this sense what follows is illustrated (figure 4) as a contemporary house and garden in Bronberg Estate, east of Pretoria with “distinctive lines and curves”. The house designed by Thomas Gouws architects is arranged within four stone clad curves that form a fragmented - hence ruinous- incomplete cylinder. The architect is quoted: “The whole design process, of house and garden together, was a deliberate attempt to blur the boundaries between indoors and outdoors; to treat them not as competing spaces but as extensions of each other; and to keep the people who live there continuously in touch with nature via the garden, the stream and the natural plant life of the immediate environment” (Van Rooyen 2007: 113). Evidential in the illustrated example, is that the notion of stone cladding as artificial ruin, albeit surface deep, allows the illusory intertwining with that of the landscape and garden. It is in this sense that one ventures to say that by belonging together, both house and garden could be said to express a desire or nostalgia, to rediscover in organic nature lost divinity and humanity’s true home.



Figure 4
Thomas Gouws, House, Bronberg Estate, Pretoria East
(source: Van Rooyen 2007: 111).

In extension, in an article (Bunn 1998: 95) on the monumental use of stone, David Bunn refers to Herbert Baker's use of roughly dressed stone as a fascination with the picturesque pre-industrial style. Yet the African stone is an archaic material that can be revealed as a will-to-order by craftsmen. Thus, as Bunn puts it, in the idiom of stone we find expressed a search for an older language of rough rule that has already traced itself in classical and medieval ruins. Baker's renowned houses on Parktown ridge in particular, use hammer roughly dressed *koppie* stone coaxed out of the rock of the site, (without pointing to emphasize the organic). The houses appear to be intrinsically related to the landscape. Bunn's argument is that Baker "enables a metonymic association between settler identity and natural landscape" (Bunn 1998: 95-96), albeit only evident in the layer of stone cladding which is in juxtaposition with the architectonic habitable interiors.

If Baker follows Roman, Babylonian or Phoenician fallen empires as precedents for his Parktown ridge and Westcliffe houses (Bunn 1998: 96), then Johann Slee's Westcliffe houses with stone cladded bases revealing the architectonic supporting structure on the upper floors are as further related examples of interest in this investigation. The architecture here is said to combine the past (Baker) and the present (modern). The stone cladding is intended to anchor the house firmly to the earth and tradition. It was the *Visi* magazine (Myburgh Chemaly 2008: 63) that posed the question: "What is it with Johann Slee and stone?" His answer: "Fifteen years ago, I started to build stone houses in Westcliffe, Johannesburg. I went all over looking for the right stone and finally found it in Lesotho. Now everyone wants stone and everything gets cladded in stone. That's the really sad thing about trends..." The question now arises: Why is stone cladding as observed in South African architecture so desired? Based on the argumentation and exemplification thus far, the position hopefully is becoming clear with regards the possibility of stone cladding being an artificial ruin in a nostalgic way. A further question then is: Why the nostalgia?



Figure 5
Herbert Baker, Stonehouse, Parktown, Johannesburg, 1902
(source: Viney 1987; photograph: Alain Proust 1987: 199).



Figure 6
Johann Snee, House Herman, Westcliffe Johannesburg
(source: Snee 2000: photograph Ryno).

Nostalgia

In paradise, a bounded garden, there was no need for building. Building had to wrest place from space through domestication. Harries concludes that “every house may be considered an attempted recovery of some paradise” (Harries 1982: 59). Hermeneutic writers like Joseph Rykwert have inquired into the origin of architecture and agree on the notion of our need to control the environment. This need they say arose through the biblical act of mankind being banished (the fall) from an Edenlike paradise. The belief that a paradise once existed as our true home and that after the fall the natural world is a space of unfriendliness and homelessness requiring our need to control and remedy its deficiencies, still persists (Rykwert 1997: 13).

Building requires the transformation of chaos into cosmos with the help of platonic non-organic geometry (dubbed perennial Platonism by Harries) that allies itself with the help of technology in the 20th century machine aesthetic. Yet all the building and planning hasn't been able to provide the desperately sought security. Technology ironically increases rather than diminishes the terror of natural space. This is noticeable in the replenishing of natural resources and the feared repercussions thereof. Genuine dwelling (and here one refers to Heidegger's Building, Dwelling, Thinking) demands the destruction of an architecture in favour of ruins.

If one might imagine paradise been about a home rather than a house (that had been lost due to the fall) then the dwelling in the sense of a building cannot be remembered. Therefore the collective memory of home in the paradisiac sense kept alive by legends and religions, as Joseph Rykwert might suggest, is rather a state than an object (Rykwert 1997: 13-14). What humankind recalls is an idealized past. The state or condition of fallen humanity on the other hand is one of terror. That terror is both of space/nature and time/temporality. Man is essentially vulnerable, prone to decay and mortality and therefore him/herself in a constant process of ruination ever since birth.

How does humankind cope with this terror of space and time? Religious man unlike historical or modern man, says Mircea Eliade, defended themselves against the terror of time "by periodically abolishing it through repetition of the archetypes and a periodic regeneration of cyclical time". Therefore ahistorical societies, which still exist today, live always in an atemporal present. As mentioned previously, building attempts to deal with the terror of space and time through a will-to-order. Eliade reminds us that despite fabricating a linear history and the constant new beginnings, historical man is saturated with nostalgia for the myth of an eternal return (Eliade 1991).

Nostalgia can be defined as 'homesickness' or a 'longing for something far away or long ago'. Huyssen explains that the word is made up of the Greek *nostos* = home and *algos* = pain and speaks of some time; something in the past that is inaccessible. Moreover Andreas Huyssen lets us know (Huyssen 2006: 4) that temporality and spatiality are, as a necessity, allied in the desire for the nostalgic and that the architectural ruin, in particular, exemplifies the trigger for that space/time nostalgia. He says it is in the body of the ruin that the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful "trigger for nostalgia". Furthermore he substantiates that nostalgia since the European 17th century has developed into a modern disease per se.

Yet Huyssen stresses the present 21st century, albeit in the northern transatlantic, obsession of preservation, remakes and retrofashions (like stone cladding) that deny the ruinations of space and time. Shown (figure 7) is an artificial ruin which imitates a Roman bridge in Stone Garden, Buckinghamshire, England. Likewise the inauthentic ruins of modern man can be seen as the reflective nature of nostalgia and/or what Charles Maier pronounces in Huyssen's article: "nostalgia is to memory like kitsch is to art". (Huyssen 2006: 5).



Figure 7
Artificial Roman bridge ruin in Stone Garden, Buckinghamshire, England
(source: Enge 1991: 209).

Being and becoming

Allow me to briefly weigh up a 20th century authentic stone ruin with a 21st century stone clad artificial ruin in order to understand the former; in light of *being* and the latter; of *becoming* a trigger for nostalgia. The common ground is that both are situated in the terror of space and time of South Africa.

In the first case shown here illustrated is the derelict Coromandel House in Mpumalanga designed by Marco Zanuso in the 1970's. Interestingly the article referred to is aptly titled 'Paradise Lost' by its writer Nick Plewman (Plewman 2011: 75). Nevertheless what is of relevance is Plewman's description of the house as homage to the vast farm landscape under the terror of the South African raging sun. Zanuso's design deals with this terror by domesticating or taming space by creating an artificial environment complete with air-conditioning as a "refuge from the heat and glare". The terror of space provokes the building but at the same time the building as defense against the terror of space was intended from its inception to provide defenses against the terror of time. Plewman goes on to describe the design of "massive walls of hewn stone" (not stone cladding) arranged parallel to one another with rough stone buttresses struck to sheer sharp face that appear to connect the greatest strivings of human endeavour back to the earth and environment that can never quite be tamed (Plewman 2011: 76-770).



Figure 8
Marco Zanuso, House Press (Coromandel), Mpumalanga, 1974
(source: Plewman 2011: photograph: Dook 2011: 74).

The building intended for comfortable habitability is now neglected, unfurnished and uninhabited for over twenty years and a ruin. Any attempt at preserving a ruin is a peculiar habit says Scott (Scott 2008: 96). Preserving a ruin, he says, is as for a corpse. The process of preservation thereby intervention is itself ruination of the ruin. Instead of importance is that the ruin tells us, as Kahn suggests (mentioned in the opening sentence of this article) how it is made. Any cladding and ornamentation are the first to go through mould and wrot. I quote Hundertwasser's manifesto on this topic from Harries: "We must strive as rapidly as possible for total uninhabitability and creative mouldering in architecture" (Harries 2000: 242). The idea is to let the building merely *be* and in so doing not unlike anhistorical or traditional man embrace the atemporal present.

Now let us briefly visit the South African Institute of Architects Merit Award winning Stone House in the Mooikloof Estate designed by Johann Slee. Therein the house is said to have its origins in the earth built with the *ysterklip* quarried from the site as 200 mm thick stone cladding attached to a domesticated perennial Platonic building of straight lines. The stone clad walls, as the architect confirms (Myburg Chemaly 2008: 59) were inspired nostalgically by a ruined stone kraal wall that unites with the land it sits on. One cannot help thinking that another ruin, the Zanuso house, could also have acted as reference. Nevertheless what is of importance here is that we could see the stone cladding as an attempt to deconstruct by virtue of its roundness of edges an anti-image built against the majority of the dwelling which seeks to provide protection and comfort from the vast Mooikloof landscape beyond.

The shelter, one could say, controls the environment in an attempt to banish feelings of temporality. However the stone cladding is slightly schizophrenic in nature: On one hand the stone cladding is so neatly built and uniform it reflects the will-to-order and on the other hand it wishes to represent an idealized even romanticized past that redeems it from the tyranny of time. The stone cladding allows this triggering of nostalgia to *become*.



Figure 9
Johann Slee, Stone House, Mooikloof, Pretoria, 2007
(source: Myburgh Chemaly 2008; photograph: Dook 2007: 63).

Extrapolation

If one can accept that every building (or human) decays and is subject to mortality from inception (or birth) then every building is in a process of inevitable ruination. It is in this sense that one

can then say that both the organic stone cladding and the perennial platonic inorganic structure that supports it are therefore both in a state of ruination before the building works actually start. Their difference perhaps lies in what they represent. If both the stone cladding and the architecture it intends deconstructing continue decaying and return to the landscape, how can the stone cladding isolated be considered as the ruin to remind us nostalgically of a lost past or a paradisiac landscape?

It is arguably difficult or maybe impossible, (excluding hypnosis perhaps), to physically regress back to birth. Likewise the nostalgia to return to some Eden is unattainable. In this light this paper questions contemporary historical man's persistence with comforting images of domestication and permanence whilst simultaneously attempting to return, somewhat *instrumentally* through tools, or triggers of desire (i.e. stone cladding or fragmented relics) to an idealized place not subject to the terror of space and time.

In concluding I refer to an addition to the ruined Rice Storehouse in the Tochigi Prefecture in Japan by the architect Kengo Kuma His philosophy is to 'erase architecture' or a return to the anti-architecture through architecture. He employs stone fused both as cladding and supporting geometric structure. The Oyo stone he specifies does not have the imagined qualities of stone's strength, rigidity, weight and permanence. Instead it is weak and blends easily into the environment through rapid decay (Bognar 2009: 8-9). What matters here, is an embracing of ruination as a welcomed hint beyond the current obsession of stone as an artificial cladding for triggering nostalgia.



Figure 10
Kengo Kuma, Chokkura Plaza and Shelter, Takanezawa, Tochigi Prefecture, 2004-6
(source: Bognar 2009: 149).

Notes

- 1 Although Harrop-Allen (1975: 120) tells us that Eaton's work and specific reference to the "Zimbabwe forms of the 'village' at the Greenwood House...was entirely in keeping with its context" and "not the result of premeditated and holus-bolus importations of African forms", Bunn [1998] describes Eaton's referencing for the Greenwood village forms of "Conical stone towers...with stone huts and ceremonial stone gateway" as: "... the impression of a miniature Great Zimbabwe".
- 2 Harries elaborates on Hundertwasser sentiments with regards the "morally unendurable... uninhabitability of functional utilitarian architecture". To quote Harries : "No one has inveighed more passionately against ...perennial Platonism than the Viennese painter Hundertwasser."

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