

Clocks for Seeing: Time and the photography of Ruins

Sally Gaule

School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

E-mail: Sally.gaule@wits.ac.za

We read on the surfaces of buildings the accretions of time. The photographic portrayal of ruins offers a way to reflect on the ravages of time, and show the imprint of time. Once buildings lose their original purpose they become subject to the influence of obsolescence, invasions, re-appropriations, renovations and economic transformations, forces of nature, neglect and gentrification. Invasions by nature once formed the aesthetic of early photography of ruins. Today photographers are more concerned with changing economic fortunes, re-appropriations and the marks made by political violence. In depicting this broad terrain, contemporary photographers have offered new insights into our understandings of the forces that have shaped our built environment, and of the subtleties of photographic representation itself. Tracing the history of photographs of ruins, this article sketches the aesthetics of early architectural photographs of ruins and the changing context and approaches adopted by photographers in relation to them.

Keywords: architecture, photography, time, ruins

Uhren für das Sehen: Zeit und die Fotografie von Ruinen

Photographien von Gebäuderelikten messen immer auch die Zeit; in den äußeren Umrissen der Gebäude betrachten wir das Vergehen der Zeit. Sie reflektieren das Wüten derselben und zeigen den Abdruck, den die Zeit hinterlässt. Sobald Gebäude ihren eigentlichen Zweck verlieren werden sie zu Opfern vielfältiger Einflüsse: Opfer von Obsoleszenz, von Übergriffen, Wiederaneignungen, Erneuerungen und ökonomischen Umgestaltungen. Opfer von Naturgesetzen, von Verleugnung oder Gentrifizierung. Die Ästhetik der frühen Photographie von Relikten fusste auf deren Umgestaltung durch die Kräfte der Natur. Das hat sich im Laufe der Zeit gründlich gewandelt. In der zeitgenössischen Photographie werden die wechselhaften wirtschaftlichen Geschehnisse, die Wiederaneignungen und die Spuren, die politische Gewalt hinterlassen hat, thematisiert. Damit hat sich ein ganz neues Feld aufgetan, die zeitgenössischen Photographen ermöglichen uns damit eine neue Sichtweise auf unser Verständnis jener Kräfte, die unsere Architektur maßgeblich beeinflussen. Und damit deuten sie ebenso auf wichtige inhärente Feinheiten photographischer Repräsentanz. Dieser Text betrachtet die Geschichte der Photographie von Relikten, umreißt die Ästhetik früher Architekturphotographie und stellt die unterschiedlichen Herangehensweisen und Parameter da, die Photographen dabei entwickelt haben.

Schlüsselwörter: architektur, fotografie, zeit und ruinen

This article reflects on photography and the depiction of time. It explores the changing use of photographs of buildings and of architectural ruins, and the ambiguous nature of time in the photography of ruins. The marks of time and nature on the built environment and how these are read by photography are explored. A discussion of the early photography of ruins is located in the vision of photography as an art, akin to painting, and points to the aesthetics of early photographic techniques. The themes time and the photographic reading of time in architectural ruins are developed in more detail in the sections on photography and the ruins of war, photography's industrial images, and the ruins of modernity.

The photography of war is a theme that has concerned photographers since the invention of the medium. War's visible effects on the built environment depict the ruins of war, but also convey metaphorically the horrors of war. Accordingly, how the aesthetic of this canon of photography has altered is due in part to the shifting emphasis in photography from a straight documentary reading to promoting a polemical or allegorical reading. In depicting this broad terrain, contemporary photographers have offered new insights into our understandings of the

forces that have shaped our built environment, and of the subtleties of photographic representation itself.

The photographers and teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, were instrumental in changing our perceptions of defunct industrial structures. Their work drew attention to the unpretentious clarity that characterised the design of industrial buildings. Presently new uses are being sought for many of these empty husks. By using a systematic approach to photography their work changed our perception of these previously overlooked structures and their aesthetic. But, their methodology also opened up a new conceptual framework for photographic practice; one that was to have far reaching consequences in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Johannesburg's industrial structures are discussed in the light of the Becher's oeuvre. In addition, the author's photography of the Gas Works in Johannesburg provides a commentary on the changing use and economic decline of these buildings and thereby the complex interplay between architecture and time.

In the final part of this paper, the photography of modernism is discussed. Modernist buildings were famously photographed at the moment of completion, without the marks of age, and the wear and tear of nature. This image of modernity has persisted. Many original photographs of modernist buildings were published and republished creating an impression that the buildings themselves have remained the same. The reality is quite different. When modern buildings age, their materials - glass, steel and concrete - weather in ways that is at variance with the aesthetic of the ruin. The story of the Volkskas Bank Building in Roodepoort provides a case study of this aspect of ruins in South Africa. This case study reveals that indeed it is change that is essential to the endurance of modern buildings.

Photography and the depiction of time

Photographs of ruins reflect the expression of change, and simultaneously invoke an awareness of slow reclamation by nature. This was something Fox Talbot recognised early when, in his first published picture, *Queen's College, Oxford* (1843), he drew attention to the capacity of the new medium to capture, "the injuries of time...the abraded state of the stone..." (Jammes 1972: 12). Photographs of ruins share with the aging human body, the visible marks of time. When we look at photographs of ourselves we are struck by how we have aged or changed since the picture was taken. Through photographs we follow, Susan Sontag (1979: 70) observes, "in the most intimate, troubling way, the reality of how people age. To look at a photograph of oneself, of anyone one has known or of a much photographed public person is to feel, first of all: how much *younger* I (she he) was then. Photography is the inventory of mortality".

Photography was sometimes simply used to record, and sometimes as the basis for restoration. Viollet-le-Duc's (1814-1879) images of Notre Dame were made as reference material before restoration commenced (ibid: 76). The *Commission des Monuments Historiques* in France established its pioneering *Mission Heliographique* in 1851 to create an inventory of its monuments (Elwall 2004: 15). In India, the Archaeological Survey had a dual function, "accurate delineation and preservation", as Maria Antonella Pelizzari (2003: 33) puts it.

Apart from preserving a past that threatened to disappear, the depiction of the ephemeral, the transient, the fleeting, became a core objective of modern photography and formed a substantial theme in the praxis of photography throughout the 20th century. When we look at pictures of South Africa by Ernest Cole (1940-1990) or David Goldblatt, (born 1930) a striking

feature of their images lies in “what has been”¹: of a past that has disappeared. Likewise, Eugène Atget (1857-1927) and Walker Evans, (1903-1975) Craig Owens (in Campany 2003: 262) wrote, “preserve that which threatens to disappear”.

Attempts to depict time in the image lie at the core of this expression. Geoff Dyer (2007: 224) explains that Walker Evans “was... interested in what any present time will look like as the past. Or, to put it another way, what new buildings will look like when they are tinged with ruination, like old plantation houses”. In referring to time in an image by André Kertész, (1894-1985) he observes: “What is striking is that from the start – before long ago became long ago – ... Kertész’s vision was touched by the loss that was to come” (Ibid 29). Most notably, Roland Barthes (1984: 15) referred to cameras as “clocks for seeing”. The invention of the camera Regis Durand (in Campany 2003: 242-44) wrote, belonged to a moment in history when rapid change began to characterise modern life, and became synonymous with Modernity itself. Consequently, depicting the transitory and momentary, in contradistinction to the permanent became a theme that has endured throughout the 20th century.

In 1990, contemporary artist Thomas Struth (in Campany 2003: 251) spoke about his work in relation to Eugène Atget, and Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla Becher, (b1934) saying, “it’s always at that time when important phenomena disappear... therein lies the task of the photographer, practically like a surgeon, to reveal and to preserve the essential structure and type of these historical phenomena”. Observe for instance Struth’s streets of New York, (1978) in which the depiction of one-way streets and diverse styles of architecture point to the irreversible and inexorable pace of development. Moreover, the medium of photography itself was seen to arrest time, forever preserving a moment for eternity. As such, photography is often considered “as a point in time”, as Norman Bryson (2000: 54) evocatively puts it, a moment with no before or after, but rather, “a world captured in an instant of its unfolding”. The highpoint of which was represented in the photojournalism of the 1950s, famously demonstrated by Henri Cartier Bresson’s term the “decisive moment”.

However, the picture of a ruined building would seem to resist this reading, offering up the visible effects of time that have caused its surfaces to become worn, weathered and abraded. As Geoff Dyer (2004: 185) asserts, “the experience of ruins is not so much a physical space as a force field, a place where time has stood its ground”. But it is Brian Dillon’s (2011: 11) words that best describe the ambiguous nature of time in the photography of ruins,

“ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of and portal into the past, its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. At the same time the ruin casts us forward in time, it predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity. The ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us. Ruins are part of the long history of the fragment, but the ruin is a fragment with a future, it will live on after us despite the fact that it reminds us too of a lost wholeness or perfection”.

The notion that the photography of ruins is based on a romantic view of the past, antiquarian and outmoded is countered, not only by contemporary photographic practice, South African and global, but also by the events of the modern era itself. Our present century began with a moment of complete devastation that fateful September morning in 2001 and in its wake, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Later political turmoil in Libya and Yemen, coupled with economic collapse in the latter part of the decade are prime examples of present catastrophe. Indeed, Brian Dillon’s (ibid 10) assertion that “we live now, though we might say we have always lived in a time of ruination”, points not only to the conflict that characterises the present age, but of constant cycles of building and destruction to which our cities are subject.

The forces that shape the growth, renewal and destruction of cities are tropes that have interested South African photographers. For example, Jo Ractliffe's (b 1960) *Terreno Ocupado*, focuses on Luanda five years after civil war. Guy Tillim's (b 1962) images of the built environment in downtown Johannesburg, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, and Angola convey the ghostly effect of the changing occupation of African cities, and shift our gaze away from the imprint of colonialism. Mikhael Subotzky and Michael Waterhouse's *Ponte City*, which they referred to as a "highrise ghetto"² illustrates the tension between the ruin and the derelict building. David Goldblatt's ongoing concern with aspects of ruin in Johannesburg, from his pictures of forced removals in Fietas, to the more contemporary "Ruins of Shareworld" express a dimension of the ruins of modernity.

Early photography of ruins

The subject of ruins forms a theme in photography that virtually dates from the time of its invention. One explanation for this is that the discipline saw itself akin to art, and sought the same subject matter as painters. Robert Elwall (2004: 14) observes, "underlying photography's early vision was an unquenchable belief that the true aim of photography was to imitate paintings and engravings—which dictated that their subject matter be chosen in accordance with picturesque conventions, such as the elegant relics of ancient architecture, the ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles and abbeys".

Therefore, the subject of buildings formed a dominant trope in early photography. Although the pictorial appeal of buildings was considerable, another reason for their appearance is that they were especially suited to the apparatus of early photography; buildings were well illuminated by the sun and above all, they did not move. Indeed, the scarcity of images of interiors at this time is attributed to the limitations of technique (Pare 1982: 15). However, the results of these early efforts must surely have impressed even the most skeptical, not just for the beauty depicted in their textures and surfaces, but also for their technical accomplishment, which was considerable.³ In early photography making a single image was no mean feat. For example, a picture such as *Notre Dame* (C1841) by the Bissons Frères (Bissons brothers) (1814-1876) and (1826-1900) bears mute testimony to this. First they had to carry a heavy camera, tripod and chemicals onto the roof of the cathedral along with glass plates for the exposure. Then they had to erect a dark tent in situ, and coat the glass plates with collodian for the exposure. Once this was done, the plate had to be inserted into the camera, exposed, and thereafter, developed and fixed in the dark chamber on the roof before the collodian could dry (Pare 1982: 15).

The beauty of these images is twofold - the scene depicted and the physical properties of the print. Early salt prints contain a subtle grain that is a hallmark of that technique, and offers a vibrant surface quality rarely equalled later. Salt printing, one of the earliest printing techniques in photography dating from 1839-1860, uses a mixture of Sodium Chloride (salt) and Silver nitrate. In collodian and albumen prints the tonal range is vast and subtle, displaying a depth of delicate variation. Water in early photographs is depicted with a silky limpidity that is seldom paralleled today. The paper itself had a weight and materiality that modern resin coated papers lack. JM Coetzee (2001: 350) seems to endorse these observations about the visual power of early photographs when he asked, "why is it that a photograph of a street scene from the Cape Town of 1902, has a subtlety of gradation of blacks that one no longer sees in today's photographic prints?".

Consequently, surface luminosity and the subject matter of photography have had a major influence on what we now consider beautiful. The very name under which Fox Talbot (1800-1877) patented the photograph in 1841 was the calotype, from the Greek, kalos, meaning beautiful, magnificent (Jammes 1973: 11). Moreover, as Susan Sontag (1979: 28) states, “photography has succeeded in somewhat revising, for everybody, the definition of what is beautiful and ugly. Bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera’s eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes. More beautiful, by modern taste”. Indeed she makes the claim that photographs are “aesthetically indestructible”, comparing their visual impact to the surfaces of weathered buildings, which she asserts increases rather than lessens over time. As she states,

“when they [photographs] get scrofulous, tarnished, stained, cracked, faded, they still look good;... they resemble architecture whose works are subject to the same inexorable promotion through the passage of time; many buildings and not only the Parthenon, probably look better as ruins”(1979: 79). “Indeed”, she continues, “photography has served to enlarge vastly our notion of what is aesthetically pleasing” (1979: 105).

Photography and the ruins of war

War is a theme that has concerned photographers since the invention of the medium. Moving away from the depiction of armed conflict, and particularly overt violence that reached its zenith in photographs of the Vietnam War, the traces of conflict on the built environment and the landscape concerned photographers such as Gabriele Basilico,(b 1944) Sophie Ristelhueber, (born 1949) and Guy Tillim, testifying to the allegorical shift in this area of photography.

Looking back from today’s perspective at photography’s early achievements, we recognise the power and ambiguity of their fragmentary character, and their ability to convey allegorical meaning. For example, Roger Fenton’s (1819-1869) photograph ‘Valley of the shadow of death’ (1853-56) taken during the Crimean war, is considered particularly remarkable for its use of metaphor to convey the horrors of war.⁴ Absent of people, it depicts a stark and bleak landscape that betokens the inevitability of death. This approach to photography influenced contemporary French photographer, Sophie Ristelhueber whose work is concerned with traces of conflict. For example, her body of work titled *Fait (Aftermath)* depicts the scars left on the desert floor during the first Iraq war, and *Beyrouth (Beirut)* is a meditation on the ruins of war in that country.⁵

In looking back at Fenton’s pictures today we see them as modern. David Mellor (2009: 218) points out that, “Fenton had come to be symptomatic of a certain modernist documentary approach; flattened, disconsolate, and seeking aggregations of standing reserves of material. Ristelhueber follows his trajectory of documentarism: it was ‘modern’ and ‘classical’, and part of a distinctive kind of topographic impulse in the early and mid 1980s in the north of England”.

Michael Baxandall (1985: 59-60) suggests that although an older artist may exert an influence on a younger one, influence may ratchet the other way. That is to say, the older artist ends up in a new relation to the younger one. This is also the case with much early photography. As the field of contemporary photography is extended and expanded, we look back at early photographs from a different perspective. We recognize in the works of Roger Fenton (1819-1869) Felice Beato (1832-1909) or Samuel Bourne, (1834-1912) not only technical and aesthetic achievement, but also how they resonate with contemporary concerns. Fenton’s ‘Valley of the shadow of death’, or ‘Queen’s target’ for instance, eschew mere representation or documentation making possible a polemical or allegorical reading of the image. This is key to the way in which

we see early photography today; it is becoming repositioned by contemporary photographic practice. In part this has been precipitated by the massive increase in contemporary photographic production, by digital technology, and by the increase in critical writing on photography.

Photography's industrial images

The photographers and teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, had a major influence on the art of photography from the 1960s. Their influence continues in the work of their students who are amongst the foremost photographers practicing today.⁶ They photographed industrial structures ironically, at the moment when they were beginning to become obsolete, which they organised as typographic studies and presented with laconic simplicity. Their insistence on objectivity became the organising principle in their work, and together with subjects from heavy industry, which they termed, “anonymous architecture”, they “set new standards of perceptual aesthetics”, Suzanne Lange (2004: 7) observes.

Their work today is celebrated for two reasons: first, for the wealth of technological and historical information contained in these erstwhile functional structures, and second as art (Campany 2003:24). Their rigorous approach to photography is akin to the scientific descriptions and classifications attributable to engineering (compare, the Bechers photographs to those from the album, Head, Wrightson and Co (SA) Ltd, Steel Headgears and Ore Bins, from the Barlow Rand Archive in South Africa). (Figure 1) See for example Mine Heads by Bernd and Hilla Becher, taken in South Wales, Belgium, Germany and the United States between 1961 and 1983⁷. The former, produced about 1925, presumably by a South African mining engineer, appear to be for the purposes of documentation. However, the Becher's objective and strictly systematic approach is strikingly complementary.⁸ Thus, although these images were made with vastly different objectives in mind they suggest an analogous approach in the recording of the structures.

The austere evenly lit structures, which make up the Becher's oeuvre, appear comparatively less inflected and artful than those from the Barlow Rand archive. Beyond that, the Becher's approach is remarkable for ascribing to the subject of functional engineered industrial structures the status of 'art', and for highlighting photography's properties of objectivity, which in this instance actually resist allegorical interpretation. In so doing they offered a new avenue of photographic expression—emphasising surface rather than depth. Their approach to photography eschews attempts to show either specific locales or a particular moment in time. Rather time in these images resides in the historic moment of their construction; structures built for and as a result of industrialisation. Little or no discernable difference is perceptible in a picture taken in the Siegerland in Germany in 1961 and one taken in West Virginia (US) in 1983. The consistency of their methodological approach renders these images both placeless and timeless, a property now being explored by contemporary photographers such as their former student Thomas Ruff, (b1958) and acclaimed Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto⁹, (b1948) among others. Furthermore, the Becher's work has greatly influenced the way in which we view the aesthetic of these structures.

Since 1989, the Ruhr area of Germany, where much of the Becher's work was undertaken, has attempted to find new uses for its defunct industrial architecture. It is likely that renewed interest in industrial heritage is attributable to the Becher's images, which fostered attention on subject matter that had previously been overlooked. However, their images are also important as

a testament to history, referred to above. Photographer Gabriele Basilico (2011: 28) perceptively remarked on this aspect of their work in these words:

“I understood that the work of the Becher’s also tackled the representation of Germans under the influence of the manufacturing world. Their photos were products of the culture which shaped industry, and the Bechers knew how to transform industrial remains into heroic objects which formed part of their history, encompassing their drawbacks and the negative effects passed on to the environment, but which also acted as testimony of a history which changed the face of the world”.

Johannesburg’s mining town beginnings are likewise testament to a rich industrial history that had profound effects on the world, but are similarly overlooked.

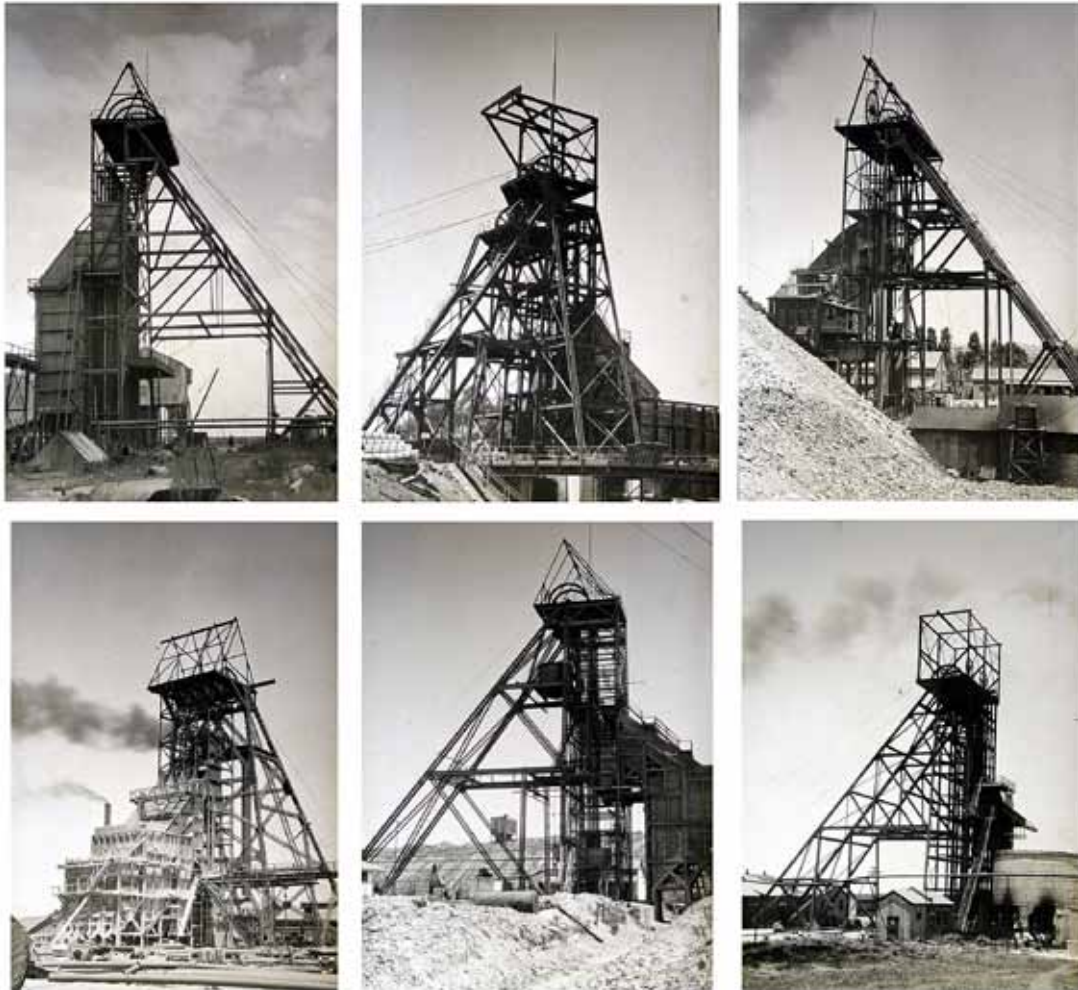


Figure 1

Head, Wrightson and Co (SA) Ltd, Steel Headgears and Ore Bins, from the Barlow Rand Archive in South Africa. From top left to bottom right:

1 Apex Benoni GM Com, 2 Brakpan Mines, No 3 Shaft, 3 Government GM areas Ltd, No 3 Shaft, 4 Consolidated Langlaagte Mines Ltd, East Shaft, 5 Consolidated Main Reef GM co, No 4 Shaft, 6 Springs Mine Ltd, No 4 shaft

With kind permission of Barlow Rand Archive.

Johannesburg’s industrial ruins

The ruin and the derelict building are similar in many respects, yet they are perceived differently. Key to this perception, Gilda Williams points out, is how the ruin calls for preservation while the

derelict building calls for demolition (Williams 2011: 94). Neither function as viable structures within the urban fabric. The former is associated with romantic notions of a glorious past, and of slow reclamation by nature, and above all, beauty. The latter is allied to vagrancy, homelessness, detritus, and excrement, and is frequently considered ugly. As empty husks they are perceived in contradictory ways. But, it is their very emptiness that is attractive, alluring, romantic. When we look at old buildings we do not merely see them as neutral objects, we invest our looking with imagination, creating in our mind, an alternative conceptual vision while simultaneously being mindful of what is there.

Since its beginnings Johannesburg has had an aversion to old buildings preferring to demolish or implode its old structures only to rebuild new ones in the latest style. Rarely in Johannesburg are buildings left to the dignity of gradual decay. By contrast, the manufactured pseudo ruins of Monte Casino in the north of Johannesburg represent a further contradiction - we eschew the old and derelict yet construct new buildings that emulate them. In Newtown a litany of plans for the redevelopment of Newtown appeared and reappeared in rapid succession. Almost thirty schemes existed for the renewal of its old Turbine Hall and Boiler Houses. Among the proposals were shopping malls, a health and racquet club, cinemas, and the relocation of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, a clothing chain called Edgars and a headquarters for AngloGold Ashanti. Despite all this interest, Newtown confounded city planners over this time, and none of the schemes actually managed to get beyond the proposal stage (Gaule 2005). By the same token, Bankside power station in London stood empty for two decades before it was transformed into Tate Modern, in 2000 (Williams 2011: 94). In the case of the Johannesburg Gas Works, new economically viable uses for the buildings are being sought by heritage initiatives. But, in Johannesburg, an obsession with newness has countered desires to preserve its older structures.

The Johannesburg Gas Works

The Johannesburg Gas Works is an iconic building and is one of the few remaining industrial buildings in the city. Remnants of the mining industry, including the mine dumps themselves, have virtually disappeared from the landscape of the Witwatersrand. But the Gas Works remains a visible part of the city: visible yet inaccessible since entry is prohibited. When the opportunity arose to photograph it for the heritage architects Laüferts and Mazvingudze careful consideration had to be given to how it was captured. When it was decommissioned the preservation of key elements of its workings were retained, with the idea of using these fragments to explain the process of gas production at a later stage. Photographs seemed an apt form for depicting the structure since they are by their nature fragments, and also complemented some of the ideas put forward in Brian Dillon's argument, mentioned earlier. With this in mind heritage architects, Laüferts and Mazvingudze sought to create a Gas Works museum on the site that would show early industrial processes no longer extant and of methods of gas production that are in danger of being forgotten. The photography of ruins and the Becher's oeuvre were important precedents. But above all, the photographer sought to create images that would meaningfully portray the structure and what it stood for. Photographing it meant connecting theoretical issues of photography of ruins, referred to in the preceding part of this paper, and practical aspects of photography that the author faced. In this particular building the two issues would meet.

The building itself speaks to many of the debates discussed earlier in this paper: how the buildings stand for a now obsolete past, how they could be adapted for a new purpose; how the scale, structure and form of buildings were built in the functional tradition, designed for the purpose of housing machinery which was itself shaped by uses dictated by industry rather than

the creative inspiration of an architect; and lastly, how the buildings hover between dereliction and ruins. Moreover, the increasing dominance of sustainable energies/buildings/ practices offer opportunities for imaginative rethinking and reuse of extant structures. Economic constraints themselves form the foundation for innovation.

Gas was first produced in Johannesburg in Newtown in 1892, in the complex of buildings in President Street that generated electricity and gas. When demand for gas outstripped supply a new building was erected in Cottesloe that began operating in December, 1928, the year Johannesburg acquired city status. Over the decades, additional retort houses were constructed on the site, their dates, 1948, and 1952, still visible upon their facades. Production ceased in 1992 when the retorts had to be shut down because of intense heat, and blockage of the pipes that caused the gas to leak out of the windows. From that time on, only its massive cylindrical gas tanks, that silently rise and fall as demand and supply dictate, continued to be used on the site. From that time on, no capital was invested in the buildings. Since then a number of proposals for their renewal have been put forward. An objective of one of the proposed renewal programmes was to increase public awareness of the significance of these buildings, to draw attention to their industrial beauty, the detailing of their bricks, and their former utilitarian purpose.

The Cottesloe Gas Works in Johannesburg is an emblematic building. Visible from Bunting and Solomon streets the building is by-passed daily by thousands of commuters. Few photographs of it exist. On the perimeter the words, “Danger, No Entry, Keep Out”, are emblazoned on the walls warning us that the site and the buildings are unsound. Yet, for architects and artists alike, its sculptural quality, the textures of its materials, and its quiet unpretentious brickwork, offer a space of imagination or reimagining; a place of opportunity.

Although the buildings are visible from the road, remarkably few people have had the opportunity to see beyond the confines of the perimeter wall. Fewer still have been inside its vast industrial spaces. Photographing the site was an opportunity to explore what had previously been occluded, and also to think about how photography could act as a commentary on its changing use and economic decline. Pigeons flew through the empty shells, the weeds grew up, and only the swishing sound of gas passing through its pipes could be heard in its halls. These sounds, and above all, the silence were to be suggested in the photographs. In addition, the author hoped to convey something of the experiential quality that walking through these multi volume spaces gave. By photographing in the rain and on cloudy, misty, foggy days, as well as in sun, an ethereal aspect of gas could be suggested (see for example figures 2 and 3).

A property of enduring photography is to sensitise us visually to things that we only glance at. Photographs can only offer a fragment, a partial view, and as such, cannot convey everything about a building. This is its strength. With a partial view, there is the possibility to see more. The photographs are intended to reflect the buildings’ previous vital economic and social purpose, and to offer the spectator alternative views, presenting a *space for imagination*. Industrial architecture, with its insistence on functionalism, offers the photographer of architecture an opportunity to compose and order its elements in ways that evokes both aesthetics and function (see for example figures 4 and 5). A building such as the Johannesburg Gas Works offers this precisely because the building is no longer useful, and as such the images do not have to promote the work of its architects and designers, as is the case with much contemporary architectural photography.



Figure 2
Gas Works 2011.



Figure 3
Gasworks Interior, 2011.



Figure 4
Interior, Gas Works 2011.



Figure 5
Gas Works from Solomon Street 2011.

Although mindful of the Becher's pictures of gas tanks, alternatives to their approach had to be sought. The scale of the gas tanks makes them, along with the buildings themselves, a landmark in the area. As JM Richards (1958: 20) remarks, "one of the most important effects aesthetically of the industrial revolution was the introduction into the landscape of structures which had nothing to do with the human scale, but reflected rather, the superhuman nature of the new industrial activities". Consequently, the scale of the structures and the sublime quality of surfaces were a key component of the photography. By placing the camera within relative proximity of the tanks and having it fill the frame, the scale of these structures could be emphasized (see for example, figure 6). In addition, the green and yellow boxes in the foreground of figure 7 are old gas meters, themselves part of a now obsolete technology and economy, whose inclusion in the image was an attempt to make visible this issue. Photography was used, not simply as a tool to illustrate the buildings, but to offer musings on the interplay between architecture and time.



Figure 6
Gas Tanks 2011.



Figure 7
Gas Tank with old gas meters 2011.

The ruins of modernity

What is striking about photography's early decades is how few contemporary buildings were photographed (Elwall 2004: 10). It was only in the 20th century that modern buildings began to attract photographers as subject matter. As the Pictorialism of the 1920s gave way to the New Objectivity of the 1930s attempts to define photography's standpoint as separate and at variance with painting got underway. Photography's concerns at this time began to coincide with contemporary architecture's insistence on directness of expression and truth to materials (Ibid 120). A straightforward approach was adopted by these photographers who sought to highlight shape, structure and geometry of form that matched the crisp clear lines of the architecture of the time. See for example the photographs of Lázló Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897-1966) who brought a sharply focused documentary quality to the depiction of the built environment. Abstract images mirrored the architectural design of the period. Such images are attributable not only to the rise of smaller easier to use cameras, but also to architecture's preference for smooth industrial materials such as glass, steel, concrete and marble, and, above all, of designs that were "resolutely aloof from the landscape" notes Robert Elwall (2004: 124). Indeed the absence of context in much architectural photography of the 20th century would seem to be attributable to architecture's insistence on the tabula rasa. These images, produced in the service of publicising modern architecture are now considered the acme of architectural photography. Moreover, by perpetuating and reproducing the same images over and over again, the perception accorded was that the buildings themselves appeared not to have aged. Consequently they seem eternally timeless and perfect. The photographs preserved an image of modernity untouched by time. Julius Shulman's (1910-2009) (2007: 8) images are an example; the night time shot of Pierre Koenig's Stahl House (1960) apparently being the most reproduced architectural photograph in the world.

Time and timelessness

What images of ruins subtly point to is the notion of the photographic trace - traces of life, the grime from wear and damage from use and misuse that denote human presence, and the marks made over time. The ruin in early photography is testament to time, while in photography of the modern era the absence of time is a feature of the photograph. Rents on the surface of buildings are testament to the accretions of time. Like monuments themselves, photographs bear the traces of age: they are fragile and perishable, and this is part of their aura. Aura lies not only in the visible effects of age of the building, but also in the materiality of the print itself, which may change over time. The silver in the print rises to the surface, it cracks, it fades, and marks from fixer and casts made from exposure to light may be evident on the surface. This too is an aesthetic of photography.

In his essay “Short Shadows”, Walter Benjamin (1999: 701) contrasts the traces left on possessions by the individual living in the 19th century, to their absence in modern architecture of the 20th century.

“...living in these plush compartments was nothing more than leaving traces made by habits,for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark—the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the monogrammed antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in the front of the fire.... This is what has now been achieved by the new architects, with their glass and steel: they have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces”.

Benjamin associates the absence of the trace in the modern era with sanitised materials and a concomitant poverty of experience, as he states:

“Glass has no aura; it is a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed. A cold and sober material into the bargain. Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession. Do people like Scheerbart (author of *Glass Architecture*) dream of glass buildings because they are the spokesmen of a new poverty?” (ibid 734).

In actuality these materials do age. Steel rusts, glass cracks, its joints discolour, it streaks and stains, it loses its transparency, and concrete is subject to water marks. However, the effect of this is not aesthetic, or rather, it is not an aesthetic we value. As time passes, a rift has opened up between the images of perfection perpetuated by the modern photograph, and the reality of stained, weathered surfaces, and structural defects to which these buildings were subject (Elwall 2004: 124). Is this the reason, perhaps, why we fail to value old modernist buildings in Johannesburg? It is to this question that this paper now turns.

Volkscas Bank

Johannesburg is home to many significant modernist buildings, and the city boasts many fine examples of the period of modernity, but few of these demonstrate any real engagement with particular local conditions. The South African architect, Gabriel Fagan (b 1925) was one architect whose work arose out of a responsiveness to local conditions and therefore sets it apart from mainstream modernist architecture in Johannesburg. Pretoria University’s architecture programme where the young Fagan qualified, championed European-style modernism coupled with an awareness for local materials and, as Roger Fisher observes, it fostered, ‘a will to achieve a distinct cultural identity in all its manifestations’ (1998:126). After graduating, he worked for Volkscas Bank, during which time he designed a number of buildings for their branches, including Belfast Bank, 1954, Hartwater Bank, 1959 and Roodepoort Bank 1959.

The Volkskas Bank building in Roodepoort was an iconic building, and its structure and style arose out of a direct response to the regional styles that the architect saw and admired in rural areas such as the Karoo. Moreover, few if any studies have been undertaken about the fate of his bank buildings since Volkskas was bought out by Absa in 1997. The opportunity arose when the author interviewed him in December 2010 in Cape Town, when he made mention of the Roodepoort Bank building.

On the corner of Van Wyk Street in Roodepoort stands the former Roodepoort branch of Volkskas Bank¹⁰, designed by Gabriel Fagan (b 1925) and completed in 1959. Its sleek glass structure formed a landmark in the city. Its glass façade became symbolic of the ‘transparency’ that Volkskas hoped to promote. At the time of its completion it embodied Johannesburg’s sense of modernity and progress and represented the modernity of the Highveld. At the time, the city fathers were keen to establish an identity for the city of Roodepoort which was only to acquire city status in 1977, and with it relative autonomy from Johannesburg, situated only 15 kilometers away. Gabriel Fagan’s bank was one prime result. After 1991 however, the fortunes of Volkskas declined, and the bank was taken over by Absa, which found no need for a branch in Roodepoort and hence the building was sold to a general dealer. In 2002 Mr. Mahomed Suliman bought it from Absa. Apparently he offered the bank R450 000.00 prior to the public auction, which they refused. Sometime later that year, when it went up for public auction, Mr Suliman was the only person to bid for it. He paid R79 000.00. As the previous owner had used it as a grocery store, and had stocked the entire building, including its glass staircase, with perishable goods, rats became a problem, so that when it went to auction it was a rat infested building. Mr. Suliman indicated that this may have been the reason no one else appeared to bid for it. He spent months cleaning it and removed all the goods left behind by the previous tenant.¹¹ It is now let in sections, a cell phone shop at the former entrance to the bank, a general dealer where the ground floor banking hall used to be. The upstairs offices, accessible from the glass spiral staircase, have been subdivided into living spaces (rooms) with communal toilets. Inside the general dealers they sell generators, clothing, shoes, suitcases, curtains, umbrellas, hi fi’s wigs and televisions. It is run by a Chinese family who have a satellite link to Chinese TV.

Archival photographs in the holdings of Absa Bank show the building in a pristine state, (figure 8), depicting few trees, cars, and people. The image the building conveys in the photograph is not only of impeccability, but an image unobstructed by signage, people and traffic. A visit to the site in December 2010 to see the building came as something of a shock. The photographs that I took during 2010/11 show a very different picture, not quite a ruin perhaps, but a ruined building. Corrugated iron shutters and security gates now secure the entrances, MTN cellphone signage adorns the façade, and newly constructed walls can be seen through the glass façade, once so prized as a clear skin that sparkled in the highveld light (figure 9, and figure 10). Adhesive tinting on the north and south façades has mottled, and the constant cleaning that glass requires no longer occurs¹² (compare figures 11 and 12). Washing is now strung across the glass staircase that once gave access to the manager’s office (compare figures 13 and 14). The architect’s intentions once embodied in the ideal image of the building and depicted in the photographic archive, now gives way to an image of adaptations, new circumstances, and uses, unimagined by the architect, and unpredictable when the building was originally designed.

Timelessness is a characteristic that is valued, above all in architecture, signifying both the building’s ability to endure over time and of an unchanging quality that would liken it to a monument. Yet the reality is usually quite different. Buildings do change, so clearly demonstrated by the Volkskas building. As Aldo Rossi once observed about his own Northern Italian locale, “there are large palaces, building complexes, or agglomerations that constitute

whole pieces of the city and whose function now is no longer the original one. When one visits a monument of this type...one is struck by multiplicity of different functions that a building of this type can contain over time and how these functions are completely independent of form” (in Hollis 2010: 9).



Figure 8
Roodepoort Branch, courtesy of Absa Bank Archives.



Figure 9
Roodepoort Bank, December 2010.



Figure 10
Roodepoort Bank, South Façade, 2011.



Figure 11
Roodepoort Branch, Reproduced with kind permission of Absa Bank archives.



Figure 12
Roodepoort Bank, North Façade, 2011.



Figure 13
Branch Roodepoort, reproduced with kind permission of Absa Archives.



Figure 14
Roodepoort Bank, December 2010.

Even though the Volkskas building is no longer in pristine condition, and may not be valued as an architectural masterpiece by its inhabitants, what is noteworthy is how it has lent itself to being adapted to present circumstances. Although its materials may not have been maintained in the way that the architect envisaged, the design has endured, lending itself to adaptations that bear testimony to the changing needs of its users. Despite the renovations that have taken place, some of the building's original use and function are still evident. The columns in the banking hall permeate the space of the general dealer, a walk-in safe is used to secure valuables, and above all, its modernist aesthetic is a marker of time. In contemporary photographs the opportunity exists to depict an expanded temporal field. The building's past is still clearly visible in the present not as a time capsule, but rather as duration. The photograph is not timeless, but rather 'timefilled'¹³.

Conclusion

In the photography of architecture, there is, as Richard Pare (1982: 12) puts it,

"An intention of space ...portrayed through the intention of time. The photographer seeks to reveal aspects of space through his understanding of the effects of time. Time past, in the cumulative age of the building, time present in the photographer's moment, and time future in our present, all are interwoven, becoming an inseparable unit in the perception of each image".

The issue of time in photography is a complex one: and arguments about how time is perceived in photography is one that contemporary photographers are attempting to problematise. Indeed the

experience of photography not just as a point in time, but as duration forms a significant aspect of contemporary photography. Although much photography has celebrated the momentary impulse, most notably perhaps in the work of photojournalism, mentioned earlier, now it would seem, photography attempts to subvert the momentariness of photographic representation.

In the case study of the Johannesburg Gas Works Geoff Dyer's statement about the ruin as a 'forcefield' is evoked, since it is here that time has stood ground. The building stands as a monument to the industrial age, obsolete in its present form, yet awaiting an imaginative proposal to find a new use for the structure. The Roodepoort Bank on the other hand shows the converse: its adaptations have eschewed the original purpose of the building. Although its modernist beginnings have been overshadowed by subsequent changes to the building, it endures in a way that the Gas Works has not, because it was adaptable to the changing needs of its new owner. The challenge of documenting these structures was to depict meaningfully a sense of both time past and time present in these pictures, and also to yield elements of their former beauty, which have been somewhat overlooked over time.

Nearly all photography contains an element of time travel. In our mind we remember what was there and simultaneously view the scene or building from our present perspective. The ruined building itself is a metaphor for time, and offers the photographer a subject in which the passing of time is made manifest. In the case of architecture, the alluring visible effects of time may be read on the surfaces of buildings while changing economic and cultural forces, aesthetics, and functions of buildings are mute testimony to the passing of time. The power of photography in depicting the built environment is such that it is a window onto the past that may offer a polemical reading both of the architecture and photography.

Notes

- 1 A phrase coined by Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* Fontana Paperbacks: London 1984: 85.
- 2 They called it the 'highrise ghetto',... juxtapoz.com. Evan Pricco: ponte city, jhb, Friday 8 dec, 2011, <http://www.subotzkystudio.com/accessed> 20.6.12.
- 3 Perhaps today we are more difficult to impress, as André Jammes points out, 'Our modern eyes have become so used to the photographic image that we find it difficult to imagine the astonishment and incredulity of the first subscribers to the Pencil of Nature'. See Jammes, A (1972). William H. Fox Talbot: 12.
- 4 See Roger Fenton, *Photographer of the Crimean War*, Secker and Warburg: London, 1954.
- 5 Significantly, these images by Fenton are considered be among the first photographs of war, taken at a moment when armed conflict was changing, and the Crimean war particularly was considered 'the last of the old wars, by some, and the first of the modern wars by others'. See, Roger Fenton, 1954, 3. Likewise,
- 6 Ristelhueber's *Aftermath*, also records images made of the effects of another shift in conflict: that of a war managed largely by technology and smart bombs. See Ian Walker, 'Desert Stories or Faith in Facts', in Martin Lister (1995) (Ed) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, Routledge: London and New York: 236-252.
- 7 Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Andreas Gursky, are among the most celebrated photographers working in this field. All studied under the Becher's at the Dusseldorf Academy.
- 8 Unfortunately permission to reproduce the Becher's images for this paper was not granted. However, the reader is directed to look at images from their publication, Becher, B and H. (1985). *Forderturme, Chevalements, Mineheads*. Essen: Museum Folkwang.
- 9 Susanne Lange notes that they searched industrial archives in the Ruhr and Siegerland looking for commonalities and differences to their own intended programme, 2004, 17.
- 10 See for example, Sugimoto's *Seascapes*.

- 10 Volkskas Bank was launched in April 1934 as a co-operative to serve the Afrikaner community who were experiencing difficulty in obtaining credit from established banks. In 1940 it became a fully fledged commercial bank and by 1950 had 100 branch agencies and a forex division with shares listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. It became part of Absa Bank in 1991. Absa Museum, Johannesburg.
- 11 Sally Gaule and Mahomed Suliman, personal communication.
- 12 The issue of constant maintenance and cleaning that modernist buildings require is made evident in Jeff Wall's photograph, 'Morning Cleaning', (1999) see Michael Newman, 2007.
- 13 Douglas Huebler refers to this in his 1977 'Statement', arguing that "the most compelling images produced by 'modern art' are those which are 'timefilled' rather than 'timeless'", in Company 2003: 248.

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Sally Gaule is a major-time Senior Lecturer in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand. She practices and writes about photography.