

Ruin cities: sources of nostalgia, consolation, revenge, tectonic landscape and inspiration

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Ruin cities haunt our imagination and arouse our curiosity for a number of reasons. Those features in them that interest an artist are the characteristic of timelessness that they accrue over the years. Furthermore, they serve as inspiration for creative works. Composers like Felix Mendelssohn and Jean Sibelius, artists like Giambattista Piranesi and Giorgio De Chirico, and architects like Aldo Rossi, Alvar Alto and Giorgio Grassi come to mind. By making reference to the notion of the sublime, this paper will consider selected instances where ruin cities served as touchstones of creativity. In architecture, motifs from ruins are not simply transferred to the new design but also transmuted, where in art and music these processes occur implicitly through a change of medium. While the creative processes in art, music and architecture are analogous, it is not easy to establish common ground among them. In architecture it is less difficult to grasp these processes than other fields because we are dealing with tangible aspects like monumentality, structure, texture and fabric. Indeed, monumentality, structure and texture can equally be used in musical appraisals and architecture. In the works of architecture we explore the inventiveness that comes about as a result of architects using ruin cities as analogues. Needless to say all inventions are inventive derivations, a fact that is of relevance to the practice and pedagogy in creative fields. We hope our study will therefore shed light on the analogical procedures involved in selected creative fields.

Key words: ruin cities, transfer, transmutation, abstraction, imagining

Bouvallige stede: Bronne van Nostalgie, Troos, Wraak, Tektoniese Landskappe en Inspirasie

Bouvallige stede prikkel ons nuuskierigheid vir n aantal redes. Die onvoltooide aard van ruïnes in sulke stede stel hulle in staat om n glorieryke verlede op te roep en hartseer uit te straal. Hierdie kenmerke, naamlik tydloosheid, onvolledigheid en melankolie het juis sommige musici, kunstenaars en argitekte geïnspireer. Werke van komponiste soos Felix Mendelssohn en Jean Sibelius, kunstenaars soos Giambattista Piranesi en Giorgio De Chirico en argitekte soos Aldo Rossi, Alvar Aalto en Giorgio Grassi kom by n mens op. Dit is egter nie net die produkte van hierdie kreatiewe persoonlikhede wat van belang is nie, maar ook die proses waardeur hulle inspirasie van ruïnes in bouvallige stede verkry het. Deur te verwys na die idee van die verhewe, word gevalle waar sulke ruïnes as bronne van kreatiwiteit gedien het, hieronder ondersoek. Motiewe van ruïnes in argitektuur, word nie bloot oorgedra na nuwe ontwerpe nie, maar word oorgedra en ontwikkel van verander. Dit is anders as in die geval van musiek en kuns waar hierdie prosesse natuurlik plaasvind weens veranderde medium. Terwyl kreatiewe prosesse in musiek, kuns en argitektuur analoog is, is dit nie maklik om n gemenedeler te vind nie. Dit is in argitektuur makliker om hierdie prosesse te verstaan omdat mens met tasbare aspekte soos struktuur en tekstuur omgaan. In die argitektoniese werke wat hieronder bespreek word, ondersoek ons vindingrykheid. Dit is na alles die vindingryke afleidings wat relevant is vir die pedagogiek in enige kreatiewe veld.

Sleutelwoorde: bouvallige stede, ontleding, abstraksie, verbeelding

Landscape as a construct of the mind and not simply something objective out there is familiar (Schama, 1996). The word tectonic has two meanings. It originally comes from the Latin word *tectonicus*, meaning *building* and suggests that it is anything constructed. A different interpretation of the term *tectonic* has come into architectural terminology from theoretical works attributed to Semper (1851) who, quite simply put, saw it as framed construction. He distinguished it from load-bearing construction which he saw as *stereotomic*.

When considering cityscapes or urban landscapes, the earlier definition, namely that ‘tectonic’ is something that is constructed, is of relevance.

The phenomenon of urban landscapes affected by ruination is not new. It has in recent years however, received a great deal of attention in the arts. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen what appears to be a distinct flourishing – in the realm of global events, popular culture and the work of visual artists – of images of decay (Dillon, 2011: 10). Such decay has been heavily emphasized in terms of our planetary ruination, but has also taken hold, particularly as a result of the latest global economic recession, of urban and architectural materiality. Contemporary ruin cities, such the abandoned Detroit Motor City (see figure 1), have accrued a huge cache of attention in the visual arts. If we look at such ruinous landscapes through the eyes of artists, we may find new interpretations, interpretations that not merely remind us of the inevitable demise of all that is material, but interpretations that have the ability to inspire awe and veneration. In this regard, the notion of the sublime provides insight.

The sublime could be seen as something that is not opposed to beauty but is a quality of higher order than beauty (Budd, 2003). It is a quality that combines the contrasting experiences of horror and harmony (Raman & Olivier, 2009: 11). These experiences, according to Burke (1958), simultaneously overwhelm and frighten us first. The transition from the landscape of being fearsome to being beautiful is indeed a complex one. The sublime experience, according to Immanuel Kant (1951: 77), entails a conflict of the faculties of imagination and reason whereas beauty entails a harmonious state between imagination and reason. He sees the sublime to be an aesthetic encounter with an object, where the sensory impression of the encounter cannot be related to an idea of reason by imagination (Geertsema, 2006: 103-120). It is through such encounters that artists have responded to the overlapping human necessity for nostalgia, memory, consolation, and even entertainment, which ruinous landscapes provide. By making reference to modern and ancient ruin cities this paper hopes to illuminate these encounters.



Figure 1

Contemporary Ruin City Detroit, Michigan

(source: Getty Images. 2013. Detroit bankruptcy: Motor City runs out of fuel with debts of \$20billion, available at: www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/detroit-bankruptcy-motor-city-runs, accessed 23 January 2014).



Figure 2

The transition from the landscape being fearsome to beautiful is complex,
(source: Getty Images. 2013. Detroit bankruptcy: Motor City runs out of fuel with debts of \$20billion, available at: www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/detroit-bankruptcy-motor-city-runs, accessed 23 January 2014).

The manicuring mind-set

Ruin cities are the remains of urban landscapes made by man that, as time went by, have fallen into a state of partial or complete dilapidation, due to neglect, deterioration or deliberate destruction. Their expressive qualities are to a large degree determined by the extent to which these landscapes have been subject to human intervention. We thus seek to establish why fragmentary elements and their aura of destruction arguably provide more of an inspiration than complete edifices and how they do so in selected examples of creative works in literature, art, music and more centrally, architecture. Ruins are important in their own right, not just because of what they once were. It could be argued that they should not be relentlessly cleaned up in pursuit of making them permanently monumental. Some ruins in urban landscapes become memorials; others get renovated and re-used, whereas others merely become sanctuaries for the imagination. We all find beauty in neglected ruinous landscapes, the old sites where nature has planted the surfaces with wild flowers, mosses and crawling creepers, preferring this respect for times past to the outlook of preservationists who seek to restore these treasures to their original glory, often attracting souvenir shops and other invasions. Reconstructions are often resisted for reasons of authenticity and ruins are left in their state of disrepair after a degree of structural consolidation in order to ensure public safety. These havens for poets and artists are often manicured, protected with guardrails and notices. Here, Woodward (2001) points out that the artist is inevitably at odds with the archeologist. He argues that in the latter discipline the scattered fragments of stone are parts of a jigsaw, or clues to a puzzle to which there is only one answer, as in a science laboratory; to the artist, by contrast, any answer which is imaginative is correct.

Here perhaps lies the key to understanding why ruins and ruinous landscapes provide sources for creative compositions whether in art, poetry, music or architecture. In all these fields, unlike in the supposed problem solving acts popular among the so-called design methodologists where the search is often for a singular solution, the search is for multiplicity and diversity. All the same, one should not underestimate the wish of authorities to stabilize and pass on the ruins as our heritage to the next generation in at least the same condition in which our generation found them. In other words their survival is certainly important. When an English archeologist discovered Machu Pichu, otherwise known as the Lost City of The Incas, the ruins were completely overgrown by the surrounding jungles. Since then the site has been attentively manicured and preserved to facilitate restoration and tourism. Renovations continue today. In this respect there is a school of thought, which argues the best way to ensure the survival anything is to use it with care. It is with this outlook that Giorgio Grassi, the Italian architect approached his project for the Roman theatre in Sagunto, Spain. Grassi removed what he and the administrators felt were incongruous and unwanted accretions added in a circumspect way in order that the theatre may be used for performances. Whether this approach diminishes the power of the ruin is open to debate but at least it did not attempt to return the theatre to its past glory, compromising its qualities of timelessness in the process. Of course ruins tell a story of our past and our history. Byron, Shelley, Keats and Stendhal were inspired by the Italian ruins and their writings reflected on the grandeur that was Rome. Poets and writers have since ancient times referred to Rome as the eternal city, and it could be argued, that it is the ruin landscapes of Rome that that evoke this sentiment.

Nostalgia and beyond

Nostalgia can be understood as sentimentality, affection and longing for times past. It certainly plays a part in the actions of artists and designers who find inspiration in ruin landscapes. It could be argued that our strongest expression of nostalgia is not for the ruins of famous monuments, but for those that were rarely visited, overgrown with plants that were never envisaged. And furthermore, that this nostalgia is reduced when ruins are tidied up and organized. The surge of nostalgia can be felt in many passages in the book *In Ruins* by Woodward (2001). He sums up Stendhal's account of a visit to the Colosseum, where the traveler saw an Englishman riding his horse on the floor of the arena. "I wish that could be me", remarks Woodward. Even in relation to monumental ruins such as those of Rome, our sympathy is for the raw state, un-intervened by archeologists, protectionists and ministry officials, hence our admiration for Piranesi's etchings of Rome. Piranesi could be described as the first Italian who brought glory to the architectural remains of his country and saw in them a poetic charm. In depicting these ruinous landscapes, he sought to invest his plates the same charm that the actual ruins had for him. He tried to understand the work of the architect, adding missing portions into his etchings for pictorial effects. He would add objects such as altars, tombs, vases and other accessories (Woodworth, 1902: 278). It is interesting to ask whether adding these elements in drawings is acceptable to our sensibilities, as opposed to reality. The answer may well be an affirmative, the reason being drawings do not do permanent damage to the ruin out there but inspire others to do new compositions based on what Piranesi has thoughtfully added. This may be why Piranesi's etchings evoke more than nostalgia. Indeed one can almost argue that one learns a great deal more about Roman urbanism from Piranesi's etchings than from over-preserved ruins of Rome or their reconstructions in model form. Contrary to idealized reconstruction in the form of models and drawings, urbanism in Rome, as opposed to that of the Roman colonies, was rather ad-hoc, each emperor adding his monument as a matter of expediency. A number of

Piranesi's etchings capture this. These etchings depict the disposition of Roman monuments as though a jeweler would spread his multiple collections in a glass chest with no specific spatial relation between each piece.

Revenge, memory, consolation and entertainment

It could be argued that for those roughly treated by society, ruins provide a sweet pre-emptive revenge, in reminding us of anticipating individuals' and society's eventual demise (De Botton, 2005: 240). In *Ozymandias*, Shelley illustrates this demise in a heartrending sonnet about the mighty Ramses II of Egypt. An inscription on the fallen ruin of the statue of Ramses II reads:

And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

But there is no reason, De Botton points out, for the mighty or even the humble to despair, Ramses is laying in pieces the sand. Shelly goes even further in his poem *Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills* about Venice, and anticipates its death:

Underneath Day's azure eyes
Ocean's nursling, Venice lies,
A peopled labyrinth of walls,
Amphitrite's destined halls,
Which her hoary sire now paves
With his blue and beaming waves.
Lo! the sun upsprings behind,
Broad, red, radiant, half-reclined
On the level quivering line
Of the waters crystalline;
And before that chasm of light,
As within a furnace bright,
Column, tower, and dome, and spire,
Shine like obelisks of fire,
Pointing with inconstant motion
From the altar of dark ocean
To the sapphire-tinted skies;
As the flames of sacrifice
From the marble shrines did rise,
As to pierce the dome of gold
Where Apollo spoke of old.

Sun-girt City, thou hast been
Ocean's child, and then his queen;
Now is come a darker day,
And thou soon must be his prey,

Germans, masters at formulating compound words for fugitive and rare states of the soul, such as *weltschmerz* and *wanderlust*, coined new terms to describe the feeling for old stones – *Ruinenemfindsamkeit*, *Ruinensehnsucht*, *Ruinenlust* (De Botton, 2005: 244). These terms are idiosyncratic to German and can therefore not be directly translated into English. They could, however be interpreted as communicating the emotions of yearning, longing and sentimentality.

From the 18th century onwards, animated by similar emotions, travelers set out to contemplate ruin cities. During this period of the picturesque aesthetic movement, numerous artists painted these cities, and landscape designers and architects incorporated reconstructed ruins as part of their composition. As a matter of fact classical ruins were so much the rage that people began building them where real ones were scarce (Mayor, 1938: 282). Many of these fake ruins still survive, such as the one at Schönbrunn, or the one at the Parc Monceau. 18th Century French painter Hubert Robert anticipated time by painting the great buildings of modern France in ruin form that he was later called Robert des Ruines. In England, Joseph Gandy did a painting of the Bank of England with its ceiling caved in. Also, the views of Piranesi, whose work has been described as pictorial propaganda for the antique, sets Horace Walpole to imagine what Saint James's Palace would look like in ruined form, two thousand years later. In the 1870's, artist Gustave Dore, did an illustration of a New Zealander, an inhabitant of a country that at the time represented the future, sitting on a broken arch of London Bridge in an imaginary 21st century London that resembles a latter day version of ancient Rome, sketching the ruinous remains of St Paul's and the then brand new Cannon Street Station – similar to how Englishmen had once gone to Athens or Rome to sketch the Acropolis or the Colosseum.

Often, metaphoric revenge gives way to an urge for preserving memory. The term memory against forgetting is often used to suggest that memory is necessary in order to ensure atrocities which create the ruins will never happen again. Interestingly a book may serve this function too and hence Rusty Bernstein's (2000) book on apartheid in South Africa is simply titled *Memory against forgetting*. More often than not, what for all intents and purposes be called stylized ruins, are built for the same purpose of preserving memory against forgetting. The Jewish History Museum, Berlin is one of them. As Jones (2007) puts it, Daniel Libeskind's building seduces the visitor into the self-delusion of somehow being there, then.

The first time I went I was devastated by its coup de grace, a tall, dark, ice-cold tower whose heavy door is closed behind you. You're supposed to feel as if you've gone to Auschwitz and - it becomes hideously vulgar as soon as you put this into words - the doors of the shower block have shut behind you. But when I went again recently, I had to admit it was sublimely pleasurable, like visiting the dungeon of a medieval castle. What had it got to do with anything, beyond its own emotional effect created by light and shadow?

Here then begins the entertainment value of ruins. More importantly, Jones (2007) argues that here history becomes something else when you turn it into memory. History is an inquiry into the past; memory is a conviction about the past. When a historical event is treasured as memory, understanding is replaced by reverence. Monuments, films and books do not help or assuage or begin to atone for what happened to the dead. The dead are not here anymore. Memorials are for us. Jones even wonders whether this way of forcing memory will ever ensure those atrocities will not happen again and all we are left with is a mild form of consolation. But at some stage even consolation does degenerate into entertainment of sorts. This of course is not a new phenomenon. On his visit to the ruins of Pompeii Goethe noted: "Many a calamity has happened in the world, but never one that has caused so much entertainment to posterity as this one" (De Botton, 2004: 244).

From *The Aesthetics of Decay*, another seminal book on ruins by Robert Ginsberg(2004), comes a valuable philosophical contribution on the expressiveness of ruins. A full, living, and active building allows us, only with great difficulty, to understand its own full meaning and aesthetic structure. By contrast, only its depletion and decline into ruination liberates the essential in the forms and in the intentions imposed upon the building by human utilitarianism. There is in ruins, Ginsberg argues, something of the creativity of being, a certain independent utterance

of the material, and the observer gains the right and the ability to enter into an intimate contact with it. At the same time, Ginsberg continues, that form obtains an independence from function which in the fully active structure it never has. “The ruin celebrates matter, form, and function. It concentrates on the free life that each may lead. The ruin also insists on the interaction of each, the fulfilling of one by the others” (Ginsberg, 2004: 47). Even more ambitiously, the ruin teaches us the art of attending to the foundations of being that lie beneath the accepted world, “the ruin gives us practice for the pause in the midst of imperfection” (ibid).

Melancholy

De Chirico’s (1888-1970) paintings have a sense of ruins. They are sad. His images are illuminated by cold flat light and cast long, dark shadows. They have a mysterious, silent, static character. De Chirico (see figure 2) was an avid reader of the pessimistic writings of Nietzsche. Nietzsche was influenced by the daring pre-Socrates philosophers, such as Heraclitus and Pythagoras, more than the fifth-century BC Athenians with their closely reasoned arguments. Far from being a systematic philosopher, Nietzsche’s writing lack any unifying programme or set of principles, they are rather a compilation of self-contradicting aphorisms (Henning, 1982: 138). What interested De Chirico most in Nietzsche’s writings was a strange, dark poetry, infinitely mysterious and lonely, based on the atmosphere of an afternoon in autumn when the weather is clear and the shadows are longer than they have been all summer, because the sun stands low in the sky (ibid: 140). These writings can be interpreted as a melancholic and evocative ruin.

De Chirico illustrates his resonance with these writings: “Nietzsche describes various states of the soul. He speaks of the mystery of autumn. This provides a more poetic climate than the traditional fall. It is the earth’s period of convalescence. Entirely too many people see life in the spring, and that, argues De Chirico, is death. This clearly illustrates the atmosphere in which he was painting during his metaphysical period” (Mazars, 1962: 116). It could be safely assumed that De Chirico read Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and was impressed by the philosopher Apollion dream-inspiration for artists. Italian-Swiss poet Guillaume Apollinaire noted of Chirico’s work: “The strangeness of the plastic enigmas proposed by De Chirico still escapes most people. To describe the fatal character of contemporary things, the painter used that modern recourse...surprise”. He indicates how De Chirico compares the notion of surprise with that of the enigma of sudden revelation, and how, in his way of thinking and working, revelation has always played the central role: “a revelation can be born of a sudden, when one least expects it...it belongs to a class of strange sensations which I have observed in only one man: Nietzsche” (Henning, 1982: 140).

De Chirico’s work had an immediate impact on architect Aldo Rossi after attending an exhibition of his work in 1970. His paintings informed both graphic work and buildings of Rossi. The loneliness and implicit silence of De Chirico’s paintings, their melancholy and mystery are made concrete in Rossi’s Modena cemetery (Johnson, 1982: 52). Just as nature represents infinite space, so do ruins represent infinite time. De Botton argues that ruins bid us to surrender our strivings and our images of perfection and fulfillment. “They remind us that we cannot defy time and that we are the playthings of forces of destruction which can at best be kept at bay but never vanquished” (De Botton, 2005:240). In this respect Rossi’s recourse to anything resembling ruins as source for a cemetery seems entirely appropriate. De Chirico saw Nietzsche’s writing as inspirational ruins and Rossi in turn read the painter’s works equally so. In a drawing of the cemetery, Rossi turns the humans into shadows, similar to De Chirico’s portrayal of a little girl in *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*. Shadows walk in

Rossi's shadowy cemetery, a city of the dead that approaches the surreal (Johnson, 1982: 52). Rossi wrote of De Chirico:

In my project Pilotta at Parma (1964) I sought to understand the architectural relations of the cities of Emilia through the space of the porticoes, the piazzas, the architecture of shadows... There does not exist, perhaps, a more precise and architectonic relation between study and reality than the piazzas of Italy of De Chirico' (Johnson, 1982: 50).



Figure 3
Giorgio de Chirico, Gare Montparnasse(The Melancholy of Departure), 1914, oil on canvas, 140x184.5 cm, New York (source: Jordaan 2012).

Reference to the painter's work can be found in architectural elements such as porticoes, conical towers and smokestacks in several of Rossi's projects. It is of course common in architects' work to discern multiple influences rather than a singular source for ideas. Thus Rossi's work, although it has its parallel in the paintings of De Chirico is always implicitly governed by neo-rationalist conceptions of directness, simplicity and even severity.

Ruins as tectonic landscape

Many buildings of Alvar Aalto too combine ruins as sources of ideas together with others. The Russo-Finnish war left behind considerable ruination of many distinguished buildings in Karelia, some of which today belong to Finland and some to Russia. These ruin landscapes have always been a haven of inspiration for musicians, poets and architects. Jean Sibelius's Karelian symphony is well-known. Aalto repeatedly visited the ruins of Karelia, often with his assistants on sketching tours. He has indeed suggested that these ruins influenced his work considerably. One example is his Säynätsalo town centre and its relation to what he himself called the *tectonic landscapes* of Karelian ruins and Italian hill towns as its origin. In conceptual

terms, the building can be interpreted as ruin in a forest clearance. The programmatic issue Aalto was facing was how to symbolise the democratic ideals of small town in this project. For Aalto Mantegna's painting of Christ in the Garden depicting a town on a hill surrounded by landscape was evocative of possibilities. Hill towns in Italy consist of an ensemble of buildings consisting of the church, *palazzo comunale*, market, a loggia and so on organised around a *piazza*. These configurations could be seen to follow the Aristotelian ideals that argued the market or commercial area should be located near the *piazza* but slightly at a lower level. This ideal is met in Siena which was one of Aalto's favourite Italian cities. The Säynätsalo town centre consists of a raised courtyard connected to the surrounding landscape by the famous grassed steps surrounded by the library, council offices, caretaker's apartment and crowned by the council chamber and at a level below shops are provided. The square is a transformation of the Italian Piazza to suit Finnish conditions and to this day is a gathering space for many civic and cultural events. The other changes that Aalto makes to the original model are the church here is replaced by library; the shops are the equivalents of the market. The council chamber has its pride place and with its immense height and dramatic butterfly truss is as imposing and dignified as the one in Siena. From the interior perspective of the Säynätsalo town centre the Italian hill town manifests, whilst, from the vantage point of the mystical surrounding forest, the ruin quietly resides.

Conclusion

Throughout time, artists of various fields have transferred and transmuted motifs from ruins and ruin-like art. In painting, poetry and music these processes take place implicitly as there is a change of medium. In architecture, they are more overt as they refer to tangible qualities such as monumentality, structure, texture and fabric. Artists and architects use ruin cities as analogues that can be understood in the way these decaying landscapes evoke nostalgia, revenge, memory, consolation and entertainment. Indeed, the inventive derivations from ruined cities and ruin-like art are multiple and diverse; as we may find in awe, veneration, inspiration and possibly, utopian promise.

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