Learning from the Ruins: Theorizing the Performance of the Incomplete, Imperfect, and Impermanent

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Introduction

Ever since Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* architects have operated with the notion that the building is complete when the construction is finished, and that any subsequent alterations are degeneration.[1] When literally applied his definition of beauty as *concinnitas*, that is, the "reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse,"[2] deems any later change as a cause for the building's decline. Furthermore, Alberti understood architecture as consisting of design and execution, implying that the architect's realm is complete when the construction is finished. Today architects continue to strive to make the building perfect and wish to keep it so permanently.[3] With this notion comes the supremacy of the architect's intention over the users' reactions. Consequently, architectural criticisms often have focused on the architect's intention and how it was met by the design and execution. This is the case both in the professional and educational settings. When we discuss design with our students, we seem always to look for the correlation between intention and design. Similarly, architectural history explains a building through the sociocultural context of the original construction and rarely includes the events and rituals that may have come afterward and which actually play a great part in forming the building's cultural values.[4]

Architectural Reality

The notion that architecture is complete when the construction is finished is problematic because, first of all, it does not reflect the reality. In fact the "afterlife" is the very "life" of the building. Take, for example, the Colosseum in Rome, one of the most celebrated pieces of architecture from antiquity and whose meaning changed from a place for spectacles to a temple of the sun god, a Christian site of martyrdom, and a place of romantic rumination, till it became a site of archaeology, tourism, and entertainment. Its physical properties served as a source of building materials, a backbone for squatter houses and fortresses, a specimen of classical architecture, a medium of growing flora, and a stage for Fascist propaganda. The building changed physically and metaphysically as it took part in politics, economics, and religion through the course of time.

Architectural Values

The notion that the building is complete when the construction is finished also is problematic because it leads us to neglect certain architectural values. Each year tourists all over the world flock to ruins from the Acropolis to Jerusalem and from Angkor Wat to Machu Picchu, fascinated by the lives of people who were displaced for political, cultural, or unknown reasons. These world-famous ruins fascinate us because they are artifacts of bygone civilizations, but we often find ourselves drawn to no-name buildings that have survived a chain of alterations. What the

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[1] Trachtenberg.
[2] Alberti, 156.
[3] See, for example, Richard Wolheim's account on Richard Meier's abhorrence of improvisation.
[4] Jones.

Colosseum and a nineteenth-century, brick-and-timber warehouse converted into an Indian restaurant have in common is the vestige of their survival in their less-than-desirable state. It may also be considered a type of anthropomorphism, in the sense that a parallel is drawn between the human existence and the state of architecture.

Architects as Everyday Experts
The crisis of architectural signification and significance – in short, the lack of both meaning and meaningfulness – we see today is partly a symptom of the alienation between the experts and the public. The architect complains about the clients' lack of appreciation, while the general public sees little beyond the buildings' function or appearance. Architecture seems to have lost its ability to provide a concrete embodiment to the human values and aspirations. Almost three decades ago Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher and sociologist, observed, with the development of specialized fields came an unexpected and undesirable consequence: an increasing distance between the experts and the public:

> What accrues to culture through specialized treatment and reflection does not immediately and necessarily become the property of everyday praxis. With cultural rationalization of this sort, the threat increases that the life-world, whose traditional substance has already been devalued, will become more and more impoverished.[5]

Habermas called for "re-appropriation of the experts' culture from the standpoint of the life-world." In order for architects to become once again what Habermas called "everyday experts," they need to change the way of thinking about their work. We will attempt to do so by reflecting on our own experiences at the ruins. Sometimes lay (everyday) tourists and other times professionals (experts) of human perception and architectural production, we will examine what physical properties draw our attention and what preparations affect our engagements.

Learning from Ruins
There are many instances today, as each year tourists all over the world flock to ruins. But we cannot say that any building in ruinous state attracts us in the same way. For example, we face buildings after destruction, such as the Atomic Bomb Memorial Dome in Hiroshima or the World Trade Center in the devastating aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with troubling thoughts instead. Our conundrum in these cases comes from the discrepancy between the benignity of those who have used the building and the ideology of those who led it to destruction, and from the loss of innocent lives. Other types of engagement in architectural ruins include that of archaeology, which is based on the scientific quest for historical facts. My first question then is what draws us to rumination over ruins. The ruin fascination often is explained by such notions as the picturesque, romanticism, or historical consciousness, which however, refer to the viewer's taste, and do not address the architectural properties at work.

What lets us enjoy ruminating over the incomplete, imperfect, and impermanent state of architectural ruins, when we feel troubled by other pieces? Or, how do we explain our negative reaction toward a case like Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, whose imperfection (leaking roof) forced the owner to abandon it (impermanent) after attempting to use it as a barn, until the cultural agency restored it to its "perfect" state as a museum piece? And why do we approach the same architectural ruins differently when we have archaeological interests in them?

Distanciation
One possible explanation is our stance toward past intentions. The apparent passage of time, as

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[5] Habermas, 9.

well as the obvious absence of use or purpose, puts us considerably removed (distanced) from the political or cultural motives of the original construction or subsequent destruction. With adaptive reuse projects, the visible discrepancy between the building's physical features and the newly introduced purpose and fittings asserts the removal of the original intention. To compare, in a case like Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye or the World Trade Center site, the architect's or the destructor's intentions are in the forefront of our understanding, concerning us first and foremost with the failed project or hurtful volition. Similarly, in the case of archaeology the original intentions or in some cases the causes of destruction are our main interest.

Textual Autonomy
A second explanation, not unrelated to the first, is our engagements in the physical properties themselves. Liberated from concerns over the intent of the original construction or of the subsequent destruction, we seem able to apply more attention to the colors and textures of materials as well as the forms and arrangements of compositions. It is as if the distance from the past intentions detaches the artifact further away from the symbolic (political, societal, and cultural) meaning and lets it present its own indexical attributes in front of our eyes.

Imagination
Thirdly, ruins' incompleteness allows us to work our imagination. Those parts that are clearly missing entice us to fill the gap with our mind's eye, and those few that remain – a number of ornamental or structural fragments – work like synecdoche to expand to the whole. In either case, the physical state of the ruins engages our imagination to generate the complete state of the building and human activities that could have taken place. What little is left in the architectural ruins help us to identify with the past, if it is an imagined one.

Application
Practicing architects may consider it out of their professional realm to make their work incomplete, imperfect, and impermanent, for they may see these qualities only as a result of the passage of time, just as the architects of the Colosseum never dreamed of what would happen to it. I am not necessarily recommending the creation of inferior artifacts. A leaking roof, as in Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy right after its construction, is an instance of the imperfect that does not impress us. Nor am I suggesting that the architect create a semblance of age. Artificial ruins certainly abounded, but fakery is not what the architect should rely on to produce an engaging artifact. Instead, we should learn from the mechanisms – distanciation, textual autonomy, and imagination – which can still apply to new, non-ruinous designs, of how the physical attributes of architectural ruins engaged the viewers.

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