

UNDER MY OWN CONSTRUCTION OF RUINS

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Here I stand in my hometown after 3 years. While wandering around the city center I become an observer. Something like a tourist in a place so familiar to me. Where does this notion of feeling like foreigner comes from?

As I am eye-drifting through the main square there is a clear image of the city I grew up in and lived in for 18 years. By this time I developed certain kind of memory based on every little detail which transformed this city. Let me rather call it a town since city evokes a feeling of a bigger scale. In this town lives around 90 000 inhabitants. Memories connected to places where we come from are of course personal but what I am more interested in is how we deal with the fact that these kind of places keep on transforming, with or without our presence. How do we define this places in between certain periods of time? I think that researching architectural leftovers (ruins), helped me a lot to define places I am interested in to talk about.

From the first gaze there is nothing particular what would change in this town. It looks like I haven't missed anything by the time I lived in another country. In fact I had no idea, how many detailed information were invisible to me in that moment. I am quite curious to discover these changes, and at the same time I feel like I would rather not know them, or ignore them if possible.

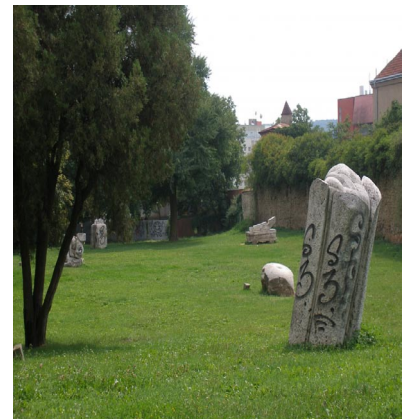
As I continue walking I pass by the park behind my old high school. Park¹ is called "The garden of Art", even though the only active art which takes place in this park is art of talking. I remember everything that happened in this park during the time I was its regular visitor. For example, how the city government tried to improve this park by building a children playground made out of plastic. Next to the playground was some kind of metal container which was supposed to be a grocery shop, a very small one. Of course everyone who used to spend some time in this park felt a change immediately. It was a city government changing and interfering into a life on its own. By life on its own I mean that this park was in some kind of decay but no one was really bothered by it. We used to enjoy this place because it was arousing the sense that nobody cares about it anymore. This improvement was attractive for mothers with kids, only for a short period of time - around 6 months and after that the shop was closed and playground not touched so much anymore.

The only reason which it was made for, was to fulfill promise from a governor of the town. The promise he made to the inhabitants before he was elected for his position.

For me this park was a ruined past with a ruined future, but ruin in the presence of it made most sense. I saw solution in accepting it for what it was in a "moment" instead of transforming it into something artificial.

When I am walking along this park in a direction to the city center, I am aware of the changes which are happening every now and then in most of the towns/ cities.

Ice cream shop is transformed into a chinese shop of toys, very memorable flower shop is replaced by a shop with mobile phones, place where I loved to get a snack is closed and abandoned building not giving you any hint of how delicious these snacks were like.



1. 'Garden of Art', Presov
Slovakia

Gentrification is a word which sum up similar kinds of transformations in every city.

This tour I am making in my hometown is coming to its end when I am faced with my favorite location. Exactly here, on this *Communist memorial*² we used to spend hours and hours because of varieties of functions we created for this place. It used to be a local “bar” when someone - anyone went to buy a tray of beers, living room (place you hang out when you are bored or just for relaxing), skatepark, dance floor always ready for breakdancers, meeting point for any further activities such as going to the cinema. It was opened 24 hours 7 days a week.

² This Communist monument is a memorial of SRR (Slovak Soviet Republic). This republic was a very short-lived communist state in south and eastern Slovakia from 16th June to 7th July 1919 with its capital in Presov.



² SRR Memorial , 1919

This place was everything except of the Communist memorial since hardly anyone knew what it symbolized. It makes me fascinated how this place was able to have different function everyday without any particular plan or agreement. Everyone just occupied it in his own way and created a function for it in the present. I prefer to call it a Monument since that is how I feel about it and by calling it a memorial there is a misunderstanding of what I am trying to underline. Memorial to me is something intended to celebrate or honor the memory of person or an event. It can be done so by a means of creating a monument but monument can be also simply an example of historic architecture. By calling it a monument I find it easier to talk about it in terms of memorial but in terms of architectural appearance too. Why was this place so attractive I don't really know. The answer might be partly discovered in a text by Robert Smithson in which he describes an parking lot of Passaic :

³ Robert Smithson,
The Monuments of Passaic

*“There was nothing interesting
or even strange about that flat monument,
yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity,
perhaps the “secrets of the universe”
are just as pedestrian not to say dreary.”³*

In fact I was standing in front of a monument made out of one type of stone called travertine. It was surrounded by a floor of the same shiny travertine stones framed by a half meter high panels of stone, which were just perfectly serving the purpose of sitting on. Of course stairs were not missing as an element for an entrance to this monument. Such a thing as stairs is quite repetitive element used in architecture as a symbol of entrance into particular place. One might say they announce the division between two different spaces. The act of getting up the stairs is already promising that you are ascending/escalating/arising somewhere.

For me the attraction to this location was lying in the abstract purpose of this monument. I am certainly not from the generation of socialism and therefore I don't find this monument scary or intimidating as this are the feelings communist memorials evokes in my parents generation. When I look at this place I see an abstract monument almost a ruin opened for many interpretations, place with a potential to be staged for any purpose which user requires.

Generation of my parents perceive it as memorial of concrete ideology. Monument which is a product of times where exist unity of consciousness and absolute belief in society. This place seems to be in between being a monument and a ruin. It is an in-between place, solitary presence which reasons we understand less and less, more and more we are looking for understanding them. Instead of understanding it, my generation was taking advantage of this place as much as we were able to. We found the location in which we could practice all the activities we were apparently missing in the town we lived in. The fact that it was not meant to be designed for these activities was probably even more exciting. Because it was not categorized or institutionalized it attracted a crowd of kids all week long.⁴

The reason might be also a location of it. Generally, such a large space in the city center is normally occupied by very reasonable projects of architects. It was a place in a transition and that was a reason for many young kids to get the most out of it.



⁴ Skateboarding on the monument



⁴ Kids hanging around the monument

There are plenty of examples of ruins integrated into cities, and it is very interesting to see how these ruins were used. Paintings of ruins depict specific historical or biblical scenes which are most of the time not “snapshots” but rather imagined scenes. The ways these stones

of ruins serve the function in a city center is important to observe. Most of the time they are an open spaces in a city used for variety of activities, mainly gatherings of any kind. The human figure in a painting is a mark giving some indication of the scale of the monument. Examples of these paintings can be find under the names of painters like *Marco Ricci (1770s) Figures among ruins*⁵, *Paul Brill (1580) Landscape with Roman Ruins*, *Giovanni Pannini (1744) Apostole Paul Preaching on the Ruins*⁶, *Zais Giuseppe (1735-1740) Ancient Ruins with a Great Arch and Collumn*⁷.



5. Marco Ricci (1770s),
Figures among ruins



6. Giovanni Pannini (1744),
Apostole Paul Preaching on the
Ruins



7. Zais Giuseppe (1735-1740),
Ancient Ruins with a Great Arch and Collumn

Realization that I am standing in front of a memorial, which was a monument in the past, which is ruin in the present, which signify a future was quite intuitive in the beginning. We tend to think of a ruin as a particular architectural building/object in decay connected to a certain site with a history and meaning. But here I would like to propose my own definition of a ruin. It is a left alone architecture on a site, not considered to be a national heritage and not admired for its potential to be used in a stage of transition. A place considered as lacking in spiritual, aesthetic or other humanizing qualities, a vacuum. For all its similarities with wasteland, ruin in my opinion shouldn't carry a nostalgia but rather a hope.

Maybe it suggest to be an remnant of a future more than one of the past. I personally believe that everything can in any stage fall into ruin and ruin is a stage of birth of things. The question arises : Why are we tempted to wonder around the places which lost their purpose or meanings, in so called "ruins" ? Stage in which ruins are calls for attention not necessarily for a change. It is like unfinished sentence or the act of retelling the story without exactly remembering how the story goes. It makes people curious. This idea of being unaware of history of particular architecture and this notion of intuitive way of using some space brings the architecture into more abstract form, in front of which, human has no responsibility and therefor loses respect. That is what makes him feel free and act freely in this architectural space. Figuring out or misusing a building is an interesting way

of defining an architecture for ourselves, and that becomes possible with a ruins I am talking about.

“The ruin is not in front of us;
it is neither a spectacle nor a love object.
It is experience itself: neither the abandoned
yet still monumental fragment of a totality,
nor, as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of baroque culture.
It is precisely not a theme, for it ruins the theme,
the position, the presentation or representation
of anything and everything.
Ruin is, rather, this memory open like an eye,
or like the hole in a bone socket
that lets you see without showing you anything at all,
anything of the all. This, for showing you nothing at all,
nothing of the all.
‘For’ means here both because the ruin shows nothing at all
and with a view to showing nothing of the all.”⁸

8. Jacques Derrida,
Memoires of the Blind:
The Self portrait and the other
ruins

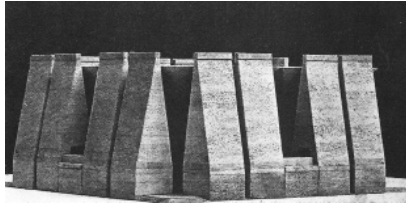
This quote is selected from a book ‘Memoirs of blind : The self portrait and other ruins ’ from Jaques Derrida, in a book author is discussing drawing as an act which is itself blind and the lines of the drawing are never fully visible to a viewer. The fragment I depicted from this book suggest a similar description of a ruin as I am trying to compose. To think of ruin as an experience moves the idea of an architecture into not only object fulfilling a function but the one creating experience. Ruins are architectural rarities which supports our imagination. And, well, this might be a factor missing in a practice of modern architecture. “*The more we see*” writes Lessing, “*the more we must be able to imagine. And the more we add in our imagination, the more we must think we see.*”⁹

Only a few architects of this era had/ have capacity to study ancient ruins carefully and use this inspiration in their own practice. I would like to give an example of The Architect Luis Kahn, one of the most influential architect of the last generation who was heavily influenced by ruins. His inspiration was coming from Rome where he spent four months during his fifties. The research he did there, cultivated the unbuilt project of him - the Hurva Synagogue¹⁰ in Jerusalem. More about this project is captured in a fascinating book - ‘*Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterworks*’, Kent Larson explores two main Kahn’s obsessions: sunlight and ruin, and it is all done by the most advanced computer-graphic technology which is able to visualize this never built project. I find it necessary to admit qualities in the plans which were perfectly mastered, even though the building was never realized. Projects like the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas and the Indian Institute for Management in Ahmedabad were built and I would say they carry some spirit of ruins in their design too.

9. Lessing Laocoon
http://www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_six/mehigan.html

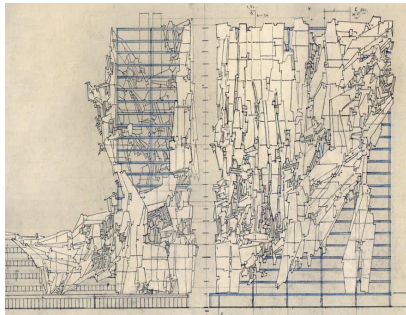


10. Hurva Synagogue, Jerusalem, Louis Kahn (visualisation by Kent Larson)



10. Hurva Synagogue, Jerusalem, Louis Kahn

11. Louis Kahn
(Interview, Perspecta 7 (1961); 9-18)



12. Selected from the book :
War and Architecture
by Lebbeus Wood, Princeton
Architectural Press, 1996



*"So therefore I thought of the beauty of ruins...
of things which nothing lives behind...
and so I thought of wrapping ruins around buildings;
you might say encasing a building in a ruin
so that you look through the wall
which has its apertures as if by accident...
I felt this would be an answer to the glare problem."*¹¹

Theme of ruin is very evident in theoretical and very experimental projects of an American architect and engineer Lebbeus Wood. His theory and architecture can be seen in his books, 'Radical Reconstruction' or 'War and Architecture'. What he suggests is a less material world through the utilization of poor and found materials, recycling from and of the ruins. Drawings¹² he makes have a sense of science fiction and great knowledge of statics, landscape and metrical systems.

One of the most recent artist picturing the future in retrospective by ruining architecture is the Danish collective SUPERFLEX's film 'Modern Times Forever'¹³. Movie shows 'Stora Enso', the iconic Alvar Aalto building in Helsinki, slowly degrading over 240 hours. It was projected for ten days and nights on a screen in front of the actual building. This project questions the time of a life of one building, arrogance of modernism, power structures and it is all captured in simulation of a ruin. It propose us to look at a building (which is a power of modernism, solid structure) in its fragility to disappear any moment or to turn into a beautiful ruin one day.



13. Modern Times Forever, projectes in front of Stora Enso building, Helsinki, project by SUPERFLEX

These are only a few examples from a pile of works where the main topic is ruin, its use and qualities. It is rather an example of ruin being a design. My investigation moves on to the question : What cause a ruin ?

“The major enchantment of a ruin relies on the fact that although being a man-made it seems to be a gift of nature.”¹⁴

¹⁴. Georg Simmel, The Ruin

Something essential is at work when Georg Simmel defines a ruin in this quote from his essay titled ‘The Ruin’. He returns the question of ruin back to nature and appreciates its quality in not being a man made but rather a gift of nature.

¹⁵. Georg Simmel, The Ruin

“This unique balance - between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward - breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature’s revenge for the spirit’s having violated it by making a form in its own image.”¹⁵

George Simmel points out the tension which exists within ruins. The same tension I was trying to give an example of earlier on in my essay. Where is a ruin there must exist a natural force which created it. This force might be coming from nature directly but I also see it as a metaphor to different ways of people dealing with a ruin - misusing an architecture purpose, not in a terms of violence but rather in a terms of curiosity of how to inhabit a space which doesn’t belong to us, and seems that doesn’t belong to anyone at all. It may be supposed that humans are curious about the things which tend to be absorbed by a history which they were not part of, like buildings which were here before us and lived lives of previous generations, survived repetitive demolition of past dreams of future. On one hand we don’t know what exactly happened to a building but on the other hand we can visually observe it and feel it from what is recorded in the material structure of the architecture.

Most of the human habitats were using nearest available construction material coming from the area building takes place and source was nature. Elements like wood, stone, sand are the base of construction until now. The rest of the space human decorate by all sorts of artificial objects they can find. When it comes back into demolishing a building, artificial materials - decoration is excluded and trashed while the only parts reused and recycled are the ones coming from the natural sources. The proof of ruin being a cause of nature is in its quality to be recycled, because stripped from all the unnecessary decoration it is a pile of stones. As each stone is shaped by water and wind, each building is shaped by the same powers. It brings me back to a philosophy of *Louis Khan* about nature and conclude that we should accept ruins of every kind as a natural metamorphosis. Metamorpho-

sis where design is transformed into intuition, brain is replaced by soul. We may even not always think of reconstructing what was lost in the natural life of a design, but rather study its details and find ways of making a use of it in present.

16. Louis Kahn,
book Complete works by
Louis I. Kahn by
Robert McCarter

Sometimes trying to reconstruct from old is just a human inability to adapt to new conditions and a fear of letting go. Visually I don't see a ruin as an old architecture not being able to keep up with a shape which it was designed for, I see it as a transition from design back into nature.

*"In every thing that nature makes, nature records how it was made.
In the rock is a record of how the rock was made.
In man is the record of how man was made."* ¹⁶

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