

Reclaiming Time: The Past, Present and Future in Ruins

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For centuries, abandoned spaces and ruins have fascinated mankind. They are mysterious, elusive and contrary to everything we experience in our day-to-day lives. They are silent, unkempt and decomposing. It is easy to be psychologically affected by these kinds of spaces, but there is often more than meets the eye. These abandoned spaces represent more than peeling wallpaper and broken windows. The greatest revelation within ruins is that of time. Ruins represent a time outside of our own. They are reminders of the past, and prophecies for the future. By acknowledging the passage of time, we allow ourselves the opportunity to better understand the present.

Historically, the great renaissance thinkers like Alberti, studied the ruins of ancient Rome, not to mourn with great emotions the loss of a once great society,¹ but to understand the historical path of time, which influenced their understanding of their present and future. This idea of ruins representing the future and inevitable fate of construction can be seen in J.M. Gandy's painting *The Bank of England in Ruins*. Gandy and English architect Sir John Soane worked together in the early 1800's. They were inspired by the renaissance thinkers who had regarded their own ruins as historical lessons and markers of time. As a result, Gandy's painting of Soane's Bank of England in ruin speaks to their

understanding of the pinnacle of a buildings relevancy, and before even being built, we are shown the building in ruin, the building in the future, its final phase of existence.

Today, recording ruins primarily takes photographic form. Ruin photography has become so popular that it is often difficult to separate photographic works that aim at expressing personal reflections of time from works that are merely touristic pilgrimages. It seems that today, Detroit is the mecca of urban ruins (Figure 1).² Attention over the abandoned skyscrapers, public institutions and homes has grown immensely through photographic publications. It is important to separate the visually disturbing from the reality of the situation. To emotionally dwell on what the ruins were before they were ruins is a trap. It disconnects us from the present and prevents us from understanding the future. In regards to this in understanding Detroit, writer Geoff Dyer says:

Ruins don't encourage you to dwell on what they were like in their heyday, before they were ruins. The Colosseum in Rome or the amphitheater at Leptis Magna has never been anything but ruins. They're eternal ruins. It's the same here. [Michigan Central Station] could never have looked more magnificent than it

does now, surrounded by its own silence. Ruins don't make you think of the past, they direct you toward the future. The effect is almost prophetic. This is what the future will end up like. This is what the future has always ended up looking like.³

The melted clock in Detroit's Cass Technical High School for example has become a popular photo (Figure 2). Like the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, anyone touring the urban ruins of Detroit wants to see the melted clock. The symbolism of the ruined clock is obvious, the hands no longer describe the time of the present, they are frozen in the past, and the clock itself has succumbed to a similar decay as the building. The multiplicity of seemingly identical photographs, however, shows little reclamation or understanding of time.

The interesting thing about the existence of our modern ruins, particularly of Detroit is that they are our own. They are ruins that are not disconnected from the present. The simple fact that these abandoned spaces resonate in our collective memory opens up a greater potential for understanding and personal reflective thought. It seems however that there is an absence of context in the majority of Detroit's photos, which is essential to the understanding of modern ruins. This absence does not perpetuate the greater understanding; instead the photos settle for shocking our reality and escaping into an un-relatable world of fantasy that does not represent the present. In his article "Detroitism," John Patrick Leary explains that this fetishizing of the ruin as an object and absence of historical, social and cultural context is explored. The main two targeted published works of Leary's article are *Detroit Disassembled* by Andrew Moore and *The Ruins of Detroit* by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.

The sensationalism, and emotional mourning that are meant to be expressed by

these photographs is exactly what Alberti and others were against in their own understanding of their ruins. An example of this sensationalism as described by Leary is that:

photos tend towards overwrought melodrama, like the photograph of an abandoned nursing home tagged with a spray-painted slogan, "God Has Left Detroit." Moore leans on the compositional tactic of ironic juxtaposition, an old standby of documentary city photography.⁴

In another photograph (repeated in Marchand and Meffre's collection) of the East Grand Boulevard Methodist church, its Biblical invocation, "And you shall say that God did it," looms above its sanctuary. The irony is obvious, heavy-handedly so, yet the photographer's meaning is less clear. One feels obliged to raise the obvious defense of the Almighty here: If anyone or anything "did it," General Motors and the Detroit City Council had a hell of a lot more to do with it than God did. And who said God was ever here in the first place?⁵

This compositional inclusion of the phrase involving God is meant to be startling and it succeeds, but it is neither truthful of the past, present nor future (Figure 4). It is nothing more than "ruin porn"; a term circulating the photographic communities. Leary says:

All the elements are here: the exuberant connoisseurship of dereliction; the unembarrassed rejoicing at the "excitement" of it all, hastily balanced by the liberal posturing of sympathy for a "man-made Katrina;" and most importantly, the absence of people.⁶

The photo on the cover of *The Ruins of Detroit* is an interesting choice, which to me represents the greater body of work since it lacks greater context. It is of the Michigan Central station, the most famous ruin in Detroit (Figure 3). The photo is framed so to avoid *any* context of place. The photograph consists of the building façade at full bleed, no sky, no ground, no people and no city. It could be anywhere in the world, it is a photograph about an object, not a photograph of a social, political or economic situation for which this ruin is integrally linked. This is part of the reason why the image exploits the misery of Detroit without presenting a discussion for solutions. It turns the city into an object. It seems as if photographs of Detroit's ruins are distracting viewers from the present, instead substituting false prophecies of the future. This is an unfortunate misstep since the abandoned spaces of Detroit still resonate with the slow social and economic recovery of the city and the nation.

This fascination with Detroit's post-apocalyptic landscape could stem from our growing cultural fear of the end of the world. The visual nature of Detroit's ruins embodies our worst fear for the future. We are poisoning our planet and seeing the catastrophic results, technology is decomposing traditional social interaction and the dragging on of a global financial crisis is leaving little room for future hope. In an attempt to understand this grim future, we are becoming fascinated with the apocalypse (be it the Y2K, the end of the Mayan calendar, or the increased popularization of zombies in media.) Detroit may seem like the perfect real abandoned landscape, and yet it is not abandoned. There are people who still live and work in Detroit who want to be seen for their unique creativity and success, rather than pigeonholed and exploited for their ruins.

Photography aside, Detroit's ruins still hold potential for the successful interpretation of

time. Various projects are underway that have been inspired by reflecting on the meaning of the Detroit ruins. The Roosevelt Park Master Plan for example, is the result of community members banding together to preserve a piece of their local history. Leading the charge is Phil Cooley, a young local entrepreneur who is interested in the cultural revitalization of Detroit. Conceived in 2008 with Tadd Heidgerken and uRban Detail, Roosevelt Park is situated in front of the Michigan Central Station. The station was originally built in 1913 by the two architectural firms Reed and Stem as well as Warren and Wetmore, the same architects who designed Grand Central Station in New York City. Michigan Central Station however has been abandoned and left to decay since closing in 1988. The Roosevelt Park Master Plan does not physically change the building, but instead creates a plaza in front. This plaza projects the geometries of the station on to the horizontal plane. This design feature will act as a memorial should anything ever happen to the station.⁷ The plaza itself will contain an amphitheater and skate park while using the Michigan Central Station as a backdrop. The Master Plan will be implemented via a series of small to medium scale interventions.⁸ This is an attempt at reclaiming community space while encouraging something (be it preservation, restoration etc.) to happen to the Michigan Central Station in order to avoid demolition.⁹

While many of Detroit's photos use a living-breathing city to express a prophetic warning of an apocalyptic future, the photos of Devon OpdenDries, an Alberta photographer are about architectural space and time (Figure 5). The abandoned spaces that OpdenDries photographs are primarily in Alberta. His work is reflective and space provoking, while much of Detroit's are flat, shallow and meant to disturb the viewer. OpdenDries' photographs do not aim to emotionally mourn; instead he shows ruins and abandoned spaces for what they are. In

addition to a visual understanding of spatiality, light and architectural narrative, he enhances features of the space through light painting, which is a process of applying alternative sources of light to surfaces and extending the exposure time of the camera. When asked what it is about abandoned buildings that interest him, he said:

The conclusion I have for now is that, in our lives we're always in a constant state of change. Nothing in this world is permanent. I see it as an eerie attachment almost like being in a graveyard where it reminds you of where you're at in the world. It helps you to realize that the things that you cherish will pass away, things that you do will pass away. Its like a ground for me and that I can go to those places and be reminded that I'm not really a permanent part of the world and that everything that we take pride in is meaningless. It sounds sad to say that but it's also freeing. It's freeing in that you don't have to worry so much.¹⁰

The realization of time is inherent in architectural ruins. It is a moment of clarity, removing oneself from the now to reflect on the past and future in order to better understand the present. Time is borrowed, not infinite. Steel and concrete will eventually come to an end, and so will we. This freeing feeling is much like an inner clarity and sense of peace. As a result there is often a heightened sense of consciousness of oneself in space. The excitement of exploring the unknown can turn normally automatic responses into conscious decisions. Safety is often a major concern, which can influence how one reacts to a space, but in addition to this, the way one engages with the space is completely intuitive. It is no longer about what the building was; it is now a new space to be understood on a personal level.

Second only to sight, the next most powerful human sense experienced in these spaces is that of silence. The silent void of humming operating mechanical systems, doors closing and people murmuring is real silence, and this real silence is the most powerful sound that exists.¹¹ This silence is perhaps the most profound in industrial typologies since during their original operation they would have been overwhelmingly loud, but now rest dormant.¹² In this stillness, an individual's awareness of themselves in regards to the space is heightened. They can hear the sound of their breathing, their footsteps and their heart beating in their chest. Silence is sometimes interrupted by the sound of nature as it slowly decomposes the buildings. These sounds include the ghostly sounds of owls and pigeons as well as the dripping of water and howling of wind. This nature invasion also ties back to the sense of borrowed time. This connection to time, of life and death, in combination with a heightened conscious awareness is what makes these abandoned spaces so compelling.

According to OpdenDries, his creative process in creating a light painting involves a personal response to the space, as well as a conscious and controlled application of light that is meant to highlight the important aspects of the space, be it structure, machinery etc. By controlling the light, OpdenDries controls the color, shadows and quality of the space. He goes beyond the role of photographer and becomes an artist. The spaces inspire, but then he transforms them, makes them his own by complimenting the existing. By highlighting certain elements he creates a subject and a context, adding layers of information. Through this artistic control, we as viewers gain a heightened sense of space and aesthetic of decay than a typical photographic documentation. His photos do not dwell on the past as a lost narrative, but instead highlights what exists as a

product of history. The application of light reinvigorates the space, creating an atmosphere outside of the present. His photos are exploratory in nature. Going through his photographic sets as a whole reveal the trek and discovery of the abandoned explorer. In addition to the application of light onto surfaces, OpdenDries has also created a character to exist in the space. The light painted figure reintroduces human scale into the photos. He is anonymous, void of any presuppositions of human character. This allows him to act as a ghostly memory, or perhaps as an otherworldly guide in the space. He represents those who used to inhabit the space, as well as the current urban explorer rediscovering the lost building in the present.

OpdenDries has photographed many abandoned spaces throughout Alberta. As a pilot, he has been afforded the opportunity to scan large areas for hidden treasures. He is now looking to travel outside Alberta for new abandoned spaces. He does not however want to photograph Detroit because he feels like now is not the time because Detroit's ruins carry too much social weight.¹³ The ruins of Alberta are far more disconnected from our time than those of Detroit.

Another interesting character interested in abandoned architecture and space is Gordon Matta-Clark (Figure 6). What is interesting today is that his building cuts only exist as photographs, even though at one point in time they were physical transformations of abandoned spaces. Comparatively with the photographic work of OpdenDries who adds light to enhance the space, Matta-Clark is subtracting material in his architectural intervention. Matta-Clark's building cuts were related to the building material, context and architectural space. He used abandoned spaces as the medium by which he could question our current built environment. According to Pamela M. Lee, author of *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*:

The metapsychology of Gordon's art was to embrace the abandoned. He worked in old buildings and neighbourhoods in a state of rejection. He would nurture a building that had lost its soul.¹⁴

It should be mentioned that his nurturing of a building was not to restore it to a past form, but instead to give new meaning to the building.

"Day's End" by Gordon Matta-Clark is a building cut in an outmoded warehouse located on a pier in the lower West Side of New York. Set on the waterfront of the Hudson River, the abandoned steel truss and corrugated tin warehouse was chosen by Matta-Clark for its cathedral like interior space and availability. Matta-Clark's intervention was based on the sun and the circular/oval form. There are three primary cuts, the large pointed curve on the West facade, a smaller circle in the top corner, and a curve in the floor which exposed the water of the pier. The west facade cut, was the main source of light to the interior, as well as the main signifier of the project to people who approached from the outside. This cut charted the sun through the day. It is said that at the end of the day, the light on the interior was at its most remarkable, hence the name of the project, "Day's End". Quoting Lee:

In the vastness of its interior and its tenebrous choreography of shadow and light – a shifting from murky blackness to utter refulgence – the work functioned as a kind of late capitalist pantheon, charting the time of one's experience within the building as measured by the inexorable drift and spread of light across its darkened surfaces. [...] For [the sun's] passage within Day's End was structurally coincident with the building's historical passage into outmodedness, illuminating the twilight of the pier itself.¹⁵

Lee also describes the space as “like a cathedral”, in which the light created by the cuts increased the sacral energy of the space. Matta-Clark even referred to the large cut in the west facade as a kind of “rose window”. In contrast to this heightened sacral feeling, there was also a deep association with fear. The large cut in the floor that opened to the water ten feet below was very powerful and frightening. This destructive cut exposed a sort of abyss that the viewer felt fearful of.

This project is particularly interesting because of his attention to time and context. The warehouse maintains its identity but the spatial character of the interior is enhanced. In the space one has a heightened sense of oneself, and of time. While time is at the forefront of the experience, the project is also inspired by its context, which can be seen in the choice to remove part of the floor and to reveal the fact that this building is actually over water and not the ground. This not only enhances the psychological experience of the space, but also adds to the understanding of the building as a constructed space, something the renaissance thinkers were interested in when they looked at their own ruins.

To conclude, when we get lost in the nostalgia of what was, or distracted by the visual shock of decay, we lose the ability to understand the spectrum of time and our role within it. We cannot recreate what the building was, so there is no reason to dwell and mourn for it. What we have is a product of the past that can be appreciated for what it was and how it became that way. We can learn from it, and let it inform our present and future. Both OpdenDries and Matta-Clark’s work shows personal reflective thought on the ruins themselves, and their work shows the meaning and power of abandoned spaces. Detroit holds much potential for this kind of reflective creation, which can be seen in projects like the Roosevelt Master Plan, however

it seems that the bewildering visual aesthetic of Detroit’s ruins is distracting many viewers from a deeper understanding. There is no question that abandoned spaces and ruins are a fascinating subject. They are reminders of the past, and prophecies for the future. By acknowledging the passage of time, we remove ourselves from the now to better understand the present.

¹ Mark Binelli, "How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings - NYTimes.com," The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/magazine/how-detroit-became-the-world-capital-of-staring-at-abandoned-old-buildings.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed January 13, 2013).

² John Patrick Leary, “Detroitism by John Patrick Leary – Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics,” Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics. http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/ (accessed November 28, 2012).

³ Binelli, "How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings - NYTimes.com."

⁴ Leary, “Detroitism by John Patrick Leary – Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Detroit Lives*, DVD, Directed by Thalia Mavros, Docurama, 2010.

⁸ “Tadd Heidgerken Architect .” Tadd Heidgerken Architect. <http://www.taddheidgerken.com/> (accessed December 12, 2012).

⁹ *Detroit Lives*.

¹⁰ Devon OpdenDries, Interview by author, Skype Interview, December 3, 2012.

¹¹ Touch the Sound: A Sound Journey with Evelyn Glennie, DVD, Directed by Thomas Riedelsheimer, (New York, NY: Docurama, 2004).

¹² OpdenDries, Interview by Author.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000). 54.

¹⁵ Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed*, 127.

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Images

Figure 1. Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre, *Ruins of Detroit*. Source:

<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/index.html>

Figure 2. Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre, *Melted Clock, Cass Technical High School*. Source:

<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/12.jpg>

Figure 3. Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre, *Michigan Central Station*. Source:

<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/01.jpg>

Figure 4. Marchand, Yves and Romain Meffre, *East Methodist Church*. Source:

<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/15.jpg>

Figure 5. OpdenDries, Devon. *Devon OpdenDries' Photostream*. Source:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/opdendries/>

Selected Images:

OpdenDries, Devon. *The Roundhouse*. Source:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/opdendries/2534266683/in/set-72157624640053939>

OpdenDries, Devon. *Skeleton*. Source:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/opdendries/3510840658/in/set-72157624640053939>

Figure 6. Matta-Clark, Gordon. *Day's End*. Source:

<http://decayaesthetics.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/days-end-by-gordon-matta-clark/>