

Ruins: Contemporary Conversations

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Introduction



Pieter Bruegel the Elder

c1653

“Consider Bruegel’s painting (The Tower of Babel): attempting to dominate space and time, the vast tower testifies to man’s power, but also to his impotence and to the terror of time. Even as building continues, what has already been built decays and returns to landscape....”¹

The aspirations of Western humankind would seem to find a kind of essence in Bruegel’s famous painting... “whose top may reach unto heaven;... lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”² So states the story of the tower in the Book of Genesis. What is of further significance however, is the notion Harris observes – that the simultaneous edifice’s construction is also its own decay. While a metaphor, it also is a commentary on not only time itself, but our own impotence and mortality.

Building as the domestication of space has its origins in ancient history as the mythical tower suggests. Furthermore, to build and particularly in the city, as Vincent Scully has observed, is to establish a kind of immortality: “We build in relation to those who built before us, and we build in relation to those who come after us... So that the city, from the very beginning, from the time cities are organized in Mesopotamia, the concept of immortality comes along... Gilgamesh, the king of the city, in the end, decides that the only immortality he has is the building he does in the city. Because with the city, with our building, we extend the normal limits of our lives, in the conversation between the past and the future.”³

But this immortality has limits.... namely death for mortals, buildings and even cities, ultimately as ruins. Ruins, the residuals of such ancient constructs, provide the possibility for a conversation as Vincent Scully once observed, between the past, present, and a potential future.

I would like to discuss elements of this conversation as the beginning of a dialogue that I hope will engage participants of this symposium set in the midst of the jungles of Yucatan and the ruins of Chichen Itza. I would like to begin the discussion with three topics that might address the ruin and its potential meaning in contemporary culture. The topics are:

- . Permanence in transience
- . Atonement
- . Renewal and the Spiritual

Permanence in Transience

Humankind has since its emergence been striving for the immortal. Its belief systems support such aspirations dating back in time that includes the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Mayans and on forward. But they are now all gone. As Karsten Harris has observed “ The condition of fallen humanity is shadowed by death.... And so will everything that he might leave behind: children, friends, works.”⁴

In this regard the notion of death expressing the fragility of life finds expression in the works remaining as ruin. But what is the meaning of ruin? What are its tasks? As Juhani Pallasmaa observes: “ the sole task of a ruin is to accompany time without resistance: vulnerability meets endurance.”⁵

In their book “On Weathering” authors Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow observed such phenomenon through the notion of erosion as an action of subtraction as well as addition. That is, as surfaces erode, newer surfaces emerge... layers of materials that reveal time itself- as both the constructing and deconstructing of the edifice itself. As they comment: “ In this alone, each duration implies a past that is caught up in the present and anticipates the future.”⁶ Furthermore, in the process of subtracting the “finish” of a construction, it is interesting to note that weathering adds the “finish” of the environment... that is of nature itself. Thus we can observe a continuous metamorphosis – the edifice’s beginnings and its ever-changing finish. To this extent then, the seemingly permanent edifice succumbs to the transience of time and nature’s forces. Perhaps, also, the printed word (now, the digital world) as Victor Hugo so succinctly pointed out in *Notre Dame de Paris (Ceci tuera cela)* has taken over the permanent architecture of stone, thus leaving it as an inevitable ruin... or has it?

Atonement

Inhabiting the earth and having dominion over nature has informed humankind for centuries, at least in Western culture dating back to the story of Genesis. This dominion for some however, has had consequences - environmental, cultural and moral.

For Alvar Aalto such consequences and the actions of nature were significant, not only architecturally, but also spiritually. The notion of incompleteness permeates many of his works as edifices in a state of transiency. Fragmentations, dematerialization and the presence of nature’s forces reinforce the metaphor of the building as a ruin. Running counter to the Modernist movement in rejecting the past and its obsession with the “new” Aalto’s work addresses time as a major component in the life cycle. Furthermore, as Goren Schildt observes: “The strong appeal of ruins to modern, alienated man does not arise merely from their representation of a supposedly harmonious Antiquity, but also from the atonement implicit in the way nature reclaims what man has borrowed. Romanticization of ruins expresses a pessimistic view of man’s earthly toil; complete reconciliation with nature is perhaps only possible after life has ebbed out.”⁷

There is also a kind of *absence* that occurs in the atonement notion of the ruin. For Kahn, ruins were “of things which nothing lives behind”⁸... a kind of void that required him to wrap his buildings in ruins. What kind of void does this suggest? Modernism, and capitalism, consumptive of nature’s resources in order to survive, provided Kahn with the cultural and moral belief system for a return to what he called “origins”... “my desire to sense Volume Zero, Volume minus one” ...new beginnings and a kind of renewal that could reconnect us with the larger, cyclical nature of the world.



Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, east hostels Dhaka, Bangladesh

Renewal and the Spiritual

Indeed, at Ise, the Shinto shrine temple of the Emperor of Japan is a reconstruction of the edifice that occurs every 20 years. The details and design of the temple never change, yet the reconstructivist act suggests a permanence that is not about materials, but rather spiritual concepts... the cyclical renewal of the nation. Rather than experiencing the weathering of nature, Ise suggests a renewable ruin of sorts that is constantly sustained and emblematic of the endurance of the nation itself.⁹

This notion of renewal is also a part of certain tribal cultures. As nomads, the Rendile tribe in Kenya, for example, continually moves and yet rebuilds their tent domiciles and their associations with place as a kind of renewal. This re-enactment sustains the culture, even as it recognizes the cyclical attributes of nature itself.¹⁰

In a more contemporary setting the artist James Turrell purchased several years ago an extinct volcano in the Arizona desert and thus itself, a kind of ruin based on nature’s forces. His purpose was to explore and extend his fascination with light and spirituality. At this location called “Roden Crater,” Mr. Turrell sought observations of the stellar constellations as a kind of spiritual journey. In so doing the project, presently moving toward completion, intends to provide what might be called spiritual experiences of the cosmos emerging from an ancient volcanic ruin.¹¹

As Turrell observes: “Roden Crater has knowledge in it, and it does something with that knowledge. Environmental events occur: a space lights up. Something happens in there, for a moment, or for a time. It is an eye, something that is itself perceiving. It is a piece that does not end. It is changed by the action of the sun, the moon, the cloud cover, by the day and the season that you’re there.... and it keeps changing. When you’re there, it has visions, qualities, and a universe of possibilities.”¹²



Roden Crater Arizona desert

What is profound about these explorations is that they look back at time as it emerged, the beginning of the universe, while at the same time looking forward through the volcanic period of Roden itself, and thus to our time... and of course, eventually beyond. This reconstructed natural ruin retains then, in many ways, its own cosmic time frame.

What these examples suggest are alternative definitions of the ruin... transitory fragments that might inform us as we move into an even more fragmented and certainly a more transitory world.

Endnotes

¹ Harris, Karsten, "Building and the Terror of Time," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, Volume 19, 1982.

² Genesis 11:4 (King James Version)

³ Scully, Vincent, A commentary in *Frank Lloyd Wright*, a film by Ken Burns, PBS, 1998

⁴ Harris, *ibid*

⁵ Pallasmaa, Juhani, *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, Helsinki, Rakennustieto Oy, 2005

⁶ Mostafavi, Mohsen and Leatherbarrow, David, *On Weathering*, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 60.

⁷ Schildt, Goran, *Alvar Aalto: The Decisive Years*, Rizzoli, New York, 1986, p. 230

⁸ Larsen, Kent, *Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterworks*, The Monacelli Press, New York, 2000, p. 11

⁹ There are several references to Ise. They include works by the following:

Breen, John and Teeuwen, Mark, *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2000;

Tange, Kenzo, and Kawazoe, Noboru, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT, 1965

¹⁰ Comments by Juhani Pallasmaa regarding the tribes nomadic attributes as they pertain to transience experiences can be found in his work: Pallasmaa, Juhani, *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, Helsinki, Rakennustieto Oy, 2005, p. 315

¹¹ There are several published works on Turrell's Roden Project that include:

De Rosa, Agostino, ed. *James Turrell: Geometrie di Luce Roden Crater Project*, Electra, Milano, Italia, 2007

The web site for PBS regarding Turrell's work is:

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/turrell/clip1.html>

¹² McDonald, Keith M., "The Roden Crater Project," *Sedona Life* 4 (January 1979)p. 47