



## Ruin as a Paradigm of Spatial Conception

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### Abstract

The ruin is one of the resurrecting themes in contemporary spatial discourses. Since Arata Isozaki's project of future city in 1962, which is a city suspended above the ruins of classical columns in giant scale, various insightful arguments about the meaning and function of a significant ruin site have put the landscape of ruin into cultural and spatial spotlight. In the context of Taiwan, the 921 Earthquake Museum of Taiwan represents similar connotation in terms of its disaster reminding, meaning searching and cultural redefinition. In the site of disaster, local government preserves some in-spot scenes after earthquake, such as collapsed school structures and raised river beds, to serve as reminders of the disaster. The study tries to look into these ruins and search for their spatial and cultural connotations, as well as their potential in spatial conception and place formation. Some architectural projects such as Isozaki's Tsukuba Center and Koolhaas's conception of Berlin Wall will be used to further explain the possibility of ruin as the inspiration of spatial conception.

**Keywords:** ruin, Earthquake Museum of Taiwan, Tsukuba Center.



## **Introduction**

Ruins and their restorations could be an inspiring spatial paradigm, and much of the power they extract is about the transforming lands from dreadful past. Among the dreadful past, the energy and life have always regain their standpoint, especially from those spots considered as margins and interstices. (Potteiger, 1998: 213-214) On the other hand, ruins invite speculation and explanation. Fragments and traces inspire various spatial redefinitions. The study will trace various architects and designers' interpretations about different types of ruins, and their ideas about the inspiration that ruins can provide for spatial redefinition and transformation. Ruins could be described by matter, form, function, incongruity, site, symbol and aesthetic experience as Robert Ginsberg did in his book *The Aesthetics of Ruins*. (Andrew, 2006: 48) He also divided ruins into two categories: the Romantic and the Classical:

The romantic attitude includes sensitivity to times of day and night, and to the weather. There is an atmosphere, perhaps even mystery, and ruins are appreciated in their current states. This contrasts with the Classical attitude, that of the archaeologist, who seek to reconstruct the past from present remnants of earlier, completed constructions. Both... depend on imagination to make sense of ruin. (Ibid.)

To appreciate ruins, it requires two parties to create a spatial experience: the ruins themselves, and the people who experience them. People and their reactions toward ruins create the sense of place, thus resulting in phenomenological registration of space. The study is about the relationship between people and ruins. People's perceptions toward ruins change according to the advancing of time. The spatial conceptions of ruins also change owing to people's different attitudes. The various interpretations of ruins symptomize different cultural and spatial connotations. Looking into the typology of ruins, such as Roman ruins, medieval ruins, Renaissance



ruins, romantic ruins, industrial ruins and modern ruins, it contributes to a systemic understanding of our history and memory. By investigating the relationship between people and ruins in various time periods, we might extract creative energy to redefine our spatial conception and place formation. Contemporary artistic and architectural circles have showed specific interesting in ruins and its relationship with people. The ruins have become a paradigm of spatial conception which deserves further attention.

### 1 The Romantic Pictures of Ruins

In the article *Subjectivity in the Fictional Ruin*, Joanna Augustyn states that the fine line between fiction and reality disappears in most critical treatments of ruins. (Augustyn, 2000:433) A genre of ruin painting, the caprice, developed in the eighteenth century. The genre depicted an imaginary composition of celebrated ruins and monuments. In the same article, Augustyn states:

...with which the artist juxtaposes monuments far away from each other in reality...As an element of landscape, however, ruins constitute the background of the principle representation...The caprice represents the move of the ruin in painting from the background to the status of subject. (ibid.)

The genre of caprice involves interesting notion of representation, because the painting portraying ruins is itself an artwork like those ruins, thus possessing a hint of double-coding. On the other hands, the ruins act as a stage was also evident in other historical documents. In the article *Staging Ruins*, (Jong, 2010) Sigrid de Jong argues that the temples in Paestum are actually theatrical features: "The landscape surrounding the temples functioned as scenery and the ruins provided a stage." He also argues that on this stage an experience in three steps opened:

First, the building itself can provide a certain experience by the conscious use of certain elements... Second, the experience of such a building can follow the intention of the architect, but through selection



the viewer recreate the building as a sequence of emotions or scenes... Third, the representation of this experience can have three different results. It can follow a sequence... It can express the wandering eye rather than a clear sequence...But the representation can, finally, also ignore the experience by transforming it into an abstraction...and considered in relation to its applicability to contemporary architecture...(Ibid., 348)

In all three conditions viewers play their parts and could define the result. The viewer could be a measuring architect, a stylish connoisseur or a moody poet. The performance of the dramatic effect follows from architecture to experience to representation. It not only tells us about the relationship between architecture and theater, but also unfolds new possibilities for spatial conception, as well as redefines the pattern of place formation. Besides, as spectators identify themselves with depicted characters, such as architect, connoisseur or poet, there could be an urge to actually go the site and add a real character to the scene.

Additionally, renowned eighteenth century artist Giovanni Piranesi's works on ruins often depicted ruins in different ways. He pictures them realistically, with their architectural elements overgrown with vegetation, and surrounded by local people and animals. His works represent the actual situation, without any historical reference.(Ibid., 345) On the other hand, Piranesi's works on Rome superimposed contemporary eye on visual reminders of a grand past. Seeing the works of Piranesi, the past seems so present that people's sensibility would have difficulty to obliterate it. On the intersection of incident and reflection, Piranesi's Rome had profound influence on cultural conception of the late eighteenth century. Piranesi once wrote:"These speaking ruins have filled my spirit with images that accurate drawing, even such as those of the immortal Palladio, could never have succeeded in conveying..." (Wendorf, 2001: 162-163) This writing definitely shows the influence of ruins on Piranesi. He was so familiar with Palladian forms because he had come from Venice, and even Palladian forms could not match



the inspiration he had gained from ruins. The surviving fragments of Rome's ancient past superimposed on a reconstructive splendid view of Rome. This double vision dwarfed contemporary architects' achievements, which was comparatively unimaginative, at Piranesi's time. From this context, we might argue that Piranesi's ruins had critical contribution in forming contemporary spatial conception, and provided an advanced thinking in cultural connotation. However, Piranesi is an emotional romanticist. Whereas he mainly portrays architecture in a completely objective manner, he values in some prints natural themes, trees, and people. He sees these elements with similar interests as he see vaults, arches, and columns. On the other hand, he may pay much attention to spatial effect than to romantic performance. In the etching *Villa of Maecenas* (1764), he mainly concentrates on the spatial impact of architecture.

The romantic pictures of ruins show romantic mood and fractural forms. The emotional expression of ruins often accompanies with spatial value of architecture. Ruins could be considered as a specific structural configuration. The configuration may still convey the original spatial concept of architecture. This essence may be sensed from the surroundings, or from the sense of place. In short: "These values can be perceived and appreciated naturally only as a metamorphosis of the originally projected architecture." (Zucker, 1961:130) The meanings of ruins lie on its interpretation from original architecture. A multiple and insightful interpretation comes from genuinely catching the architecture's sense of place, the *genius loci*, as well as the intimate relationship between people and architecture.

## 2 Modern Ruins

Modern ruins could be resulted from man-made or natural disaster. Much human misery and sadness from the recent past is connected with ruins : postwar Hiroshima, post-meltdown Chernobyl, post-Katrina New Orleans, or the remains of Berlin in 1945. Contemporary people's, especially artists',



interests in ruins might result from the collapse of modernist ideals, and the troublesome sensation that it was just an elaborate folly whose optimism we have lost forever.(Williams, 2010) In this context, the study will pick up the ruins of Berlin and Hiroshima to elaborate their spatial and cultural connotation.

Rem Koolhaas's Conception of Berlin is especially inventive in catching the connotation of ruins. Berlin is an archaeological site upon which lie many layers of physical and mental ruins. It is a mixture of destruction and resurrection. Before the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, the no-man's-land between the two strips of the wall was an physical ruins offering itself for different interventions. This urban ruin, the no-man's-land, provides a site for possibilities of various interpretations and constructions. Among them, the *Exodus* project in OMA's 1972 proposal, or the angels' walking scenes in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* in 1987 provide intellectual narrative and interpretation. According to Fritz Neumeyer:

For anyone who, like Rem Koolhaas, shares "a special penchant for gray zones,"... "Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible... To imagine nothingness is...the Berlin Wall. They all reveal that the emptiness of the metropolis is not empty; that each void can be used for programs... leading to the mutilation of both activity and texture." (Neumeyer, 1990:44)

This strategic scrutiny toward the ruins represented by sites around Berlin Wall requires a new perception of the city and a different approach to socio-spatial involvement. The potential of the ruins could be transformed into the eagerness to reconstruct the townscape, as well as provide a fertile ground for spatial intervention and place formation. In *Exodus*, Koolhaas elaborates to establish an architectural oasis in the behavioral sink of London: "A strip of intense metropolitan... runs through the center of London. This strip is like a runway, a...strip ...of collective monuments. Two walls...to prevent...contamination ...by the cancerous organism that threatens to engulf it."(Koolhaas, et al., 1972:19-20) The old town will not be able to compete



with it, and London will become a pack of ruins. This amazing statement anticipates a utopian strip erected in the center of London, with all expected advantages and benefits that a reasonable citizen would like to obtain, but its containing of collective monuments implies that itself could have been ruins. This utopian strip might have the trace of the no-man's-land around Berlin wall, thus a glorious resurrection from previous ruins becomes one of the main themes in *Exodus*. In *The Voids of Berlin*, Huyssen states that the pressure of history creates the void called Potsdamer Platz. The bombing of 1944-45 made the old Potsdamer Platz a ruin. The building of the wall in 1961 further cleaned the area. The tearing down of the wall in 1989, Huyssen argues, "made this whole area between Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz into that prairie of history... It was a void filled with history and memory..."(Huyssen,1997: 73-75) The ruin of Potsdamer Platz and the strip around Berlin Wall are loaded with meaning. As fragments, they may possess more significance than when they were part of a whole. Ruins have always been filled with nostalgia, but many cities in the 21th century may not afford to have many ruins. "In future, real ruins may be replaced only by their memory."(Williams, 2010: 2) In the film *Wings of Desire*, Berlin is the main spot for all the significance of ruins. It begins with a colorless world of fatigue and decay, then transcends the condition as an impetus for rebirth. Furthermore, the ruins near Berlin Wall also divide the city, therefore the registering of the ruins also anticipates an era of "reconciliations, celebrating life and affirming a future."(Caldwell, 1991: 53) In the film, the angels carry knowledge and memory, and the burden of the past anticipates transcendence. Meanwhile, the old man Homer, the poet of memory, sees that the Potsdamer no longer exists, and he recalls when history turned ugly. But the recollection is not enough, and he desires to savor again the coffee and tobacco once sold in what is now "ruins" in the middle of Berlin. (Ibid., 48) The multiple meaning of these scenes is magnificent. The spatial district, the ruin, transforms into cultural representation by poetic narrative and staged images.

On the other hand, Postwar Hiroshima is related to Arata Isozaki's thinking.



Isozaki once made a statement :

... The exhibit I curated at the Japanese Pavilion of 1996 Venice biennale...entitled “Architects as Seismographers,” directly provoked by this disastrous earthquake in the region of Kobe... I have frequently called to mind the scenery of ruins. By ruminating on the image of Japanese cities bombarded in 1945...a return to that point where all human constructs were nullified that future construction would again be possible...Ruins to me were a source of imagination... Professing faith in ruins was equal to planning the future...(Isozaki, 2006: 97-100)

The expression of the conception of ruins in modern cities can also be found in Isozaki’s essay: *City Demolition Industry, Inc...* (Isozaki, 2007a). lately, Isozaki lectured in Harvard’s GSD, (Isozaki, 2007b) in which he discussed the relationship among Terragni’s Danteum, Katsura Palace and his own project Tsukuba Center. By citing Botticelli’s “The Chart of Hell” in the beginning, his lecture contained an apocalyptic notion. The spiral in Botticelli’s *Picture of Hell* was employed to interpret Danteum, Katsura and Tsukuba’s spatial formations. In the end of lecture, Isozaki used a colorful illustration showing Tsukuba Center in ruin. The lecture implies that the starting of a construction may be inhabited in ruins. On the other hand, Arata Isozaki’s project of future city in 1962 gave a dramatic image between technology and ruin. It showed a city suspended above the ruins of gigantic Doric columns , as well as highways passing through the emptiness between columns. (Baek, 2006: 71-72) The project possessed a hint that the structures will eventually be brought down and form another layer of ruins on top of existing ruins. This conception of ruins symptomizes the recognition of nihilism looming around modern technology. Furthermore, Isozaki stated:

At the instant when perfect saturation—complete restoration—has been attained, the former ruins face the coming of another void and reversion to the ruins state. Within a time that imposes these conditions, ruins inevitably face corrosion. (Isozaki, 2001: 45)

This outline has insightful message leading toward an oriental formation of





the spatial conception of ruins. This spatial conception has strong connotation of ephemeral life which is the main character of the physical world, with space and time as its backdrop.

### 3 Industrial Ruins

Industrial ruins are produced by capital abandonment of sites of industrial production. They can be considered as the marks of capitalism in that the sites are derelict and it is no longer profitable. (Mah, 2010: 399) The industrial ruins are caused by various socio-economic reasons. One of the important issues about industrial ruins is that the regeneration often transforms the landscape of industrial ruination. For the people who worked on the sites of industrial ruins, the reflection of their decays could be tinged with “sadness, loss and a sense of anger, but also...with a sense of resignation and a sense that this story has become well-rehearsed.”(Ibid., 411) Another issue is about a localized memory and living memory. In some cases, these Industrial ruins are considered as cultural heritages thus being transformed into museums, cultural facilities or monuments. The collective memory, place memory and nostalgia are often related with deindustrialization which causes social reconstruction. (Ibid., 399) Therefore various studies have concentrated on the transformation process of the landscape of industrial ruination. In the transformation process, new ideas of spatial conception and cultural meaning are produced.

One of the most eye-catching scenes of spatial conception comes from Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic work makes industrial ruins an abstraction. When they approach abandoned industrial architecture, they “abstract from the locality and from the social context of factories.”(Krivy, 2010: 841) Workers and the setting of the factory are excluded from the environment. The result is the objects reduced into isolated forms and shapes, and free from their context and all association. The purpose is to show the *singularity* of the object under its specific qualities. They arrange industrial



objects according to topology, thus extracting an impressive *singularity*. The photos of industrial objects are arranged into grids like methods used in botany or zoology, and the rhythm and repetition produce a situation of anonymity. The result allows us to read these industrial objects “ahistorically and extra-socially.” (Ibid., 845) In short, the artists do not pursue objects’ industrial monumentality which based on engineering rationality, but preserve their personality which oozes the hue of ruins or soon-to-be ruins. The merit of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s industrial photos may lie on their spatial and cultural connotation, which provides an experimental ground for narrative possibilities and further interpretations. On the contrary, many industrial ruins are designed to be tourism locations. The heritage tourism was once connected with locations from historical period with essential marks such as the Rome or Renaissance, but today it expands to more recent sites such as industrial ruins because the industrial revolution created an era where the transition from modern to obsolete happens vary rapidly. (Rudd and Davis, 1998:85-86) The old technology and industrial ruins could produce a sense of nostalgia, thus attracting tourists and improving local economy. Industrial heritage such as textile manufacturing plants, distillers, oil refineries, shipping yards and mines may become popular sites for tourism industry. Some societies are removed spatially and culturally from traditional industry. The separation of public from industrial sites creates a specific nostalgia or curiosity for industrial objects, and this may be one of the main reasons that industrial sites become tourist locations. Besides, the industrial archaeology also has direct connection with industrial ruins. According to Buchanan, the industrial archaeology means:

Filed of study concerned with investigating, surveying, recording and, in some cases, with preserving industrial monuments. It aims, moreover, at assessing the significance of these monuments in the context of social and technological history. (Buchanan, 1972:20)

The study will take two sites as examples to further catch the essence of industrial archaeology. The first is located in New York State, along the lower Wynantskill, where the steam descends over 125 feet. Over there the



Burden Iron Works was built between 1822 and 1875, which was one of United States' largest industrial enterprises at that time. Its amazing 60 ft. water wheel, of which only the pit and some conduits remain, is best remembered now. "Rolling mill, puddling forge, machine shops, and warehouses have vanished except for foundations...the ground contains a wealth of artifacts which will help locate the specific iron-making processes and enhance understanding of the technology involved."(Abrash, 1974: 237) This summary shows the industrial objects in ruins and the reasons of industrial archaeology: to help add knowledge of industrial processes and technological history. However, the action of industrial archaeology often encounters obstacles because a ruin site lacks the status of great antiquity and offer little traditional esthetic interest. Moreover, the site of industrial archaeology could be badly damaged by highways and housing programs. (Ibid., 239) The second example is Lochrin Distillery in Edinburgh. It operated intermittently between 1780 and 1848. At that time it was one of the largest distilleries in Scotland. The distillery buildings had been demolished during the 19th century, and the remains of the distillery survived below ground. A 2005 investigation revealed the historical context within which the distillery operated. A distillery plan of 1838 and the Ordnance Survey Mapping of 1851 show historical context. The details of various fragments of ruin possess a precious memory as well as a possibility to reconstruct the distillery in its heyday. In the conclusion of an article about industrial ruins in Lochrin Distillery, Heawood disclosed:

Excavation has demonstrated that the distillery was dynamic and that the still house was rearranged at last three times. In what was now regarded as 'traditional' malt distilleries, the stills might be repaired or replaced every 10-15 years, but the same basic still house tends to be retained. Lochrin...producing a relatively low value high volume product...the still house needed to be adapted several times to accommodate new configurations of stills of differing shape and capacity...dynamic technical development can be driven by political and administrative change...(Heawood, 2009:53)



In this brief, the investigating of industrial ruins produces a fascinating narrative possibility regarding precise details of technology influenced also by political. The strong cultural connotation attests specific nostalgia of location and daily life, as well as enhances a sense of place identification. To conclude, the industrial ruins are related with a cultural geography of de-industrialized landscapes which could be transformed into a heritage reflecting a sanitized recovery of the past. In this context, Summerby-Murray argued that: "The heritage discourse is constructed through the creation of memory and the processes of commodification and consumption...The resulting landscapes...with a tendency to be overly romanticized and sanitized or at odds with contemporary images..." (Summerby-Murray, 2002: 48) Many industrial ruins are reinterpreted and remade following the process of deindustrialization. There is a doubt that the memory of industrial heritage is shaped by selective decision making that "commodifies the industrial past for contemporary consumption in forms of heritage tourism and elements of municipal image promotion."(Ibid., 49) With the creation of spontaneous or fake nostalgia, we may need a more critical interpretation of industrial ruins and their role in the identification of place formation. From the aspect of contemporary cultural conception, many industrial backdrops are ignored in favor of high-technology and service industry. In image creation, the authority may take rural or pastoral era as priority than industrial time. While many regenerated decay industrial sites represent the remaking of the industrial past in the post-industrial era, the field of industrial archaeology provides a rich source for the "interpretation of material artifice, producing processes, and heritage sites."(Ibid., 49) This interpretation helps make the identity of industrial era, create a sense of place and engender significant spatial and cultural connotation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To further look into the representation of ruins, Benjamin once wrote in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:



The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the Trauerspiel is present in reality in the form of the ruin...the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay...Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (Benjamin, 1977)

This insightful statement catches an essential core that a ruin, as a physical reality, could possess allegorical meaning for cultural or spatial interpretation. On the other hand, "allegory may give primacy to the philosophical and ruins to the historical." (Morra, 2007: 214)

Ruin as a paradigm of spatial conception is evident in various discusses in this study. Following the study's disclosing of various connotations of ruins, Taiwan's modern ruins, such as the 921 Earthquake Museum of Taiwan, may gain a wider backdrop for its cultural interpretation and meaning searching. The Earthquake Museum represents a specific spatial conception, with connotation in disaster reminding, place identification and cultural redefinition. In the site of disaster, local government preserves in-spot scenes after earthquake, such as collapsed school structures and raised river beds, to serve as reminders of the disaster. Ruins like these possess particular spatial and cultural connotations waiting for identification and reinterpretation. Following this light, the 921 Earthquake Museum is a genuine form of major natural danger, of dread, and hopefully of the starting point of good judgment and effective reaction. In our media era, the revealing of the accidents, such as an earthquake and other disasters, often are carried out by television, newspaper or internet. People are easy to forget what have happened after watching TV, reading newspaper or checking internet. The Earthquake Museum not only inscribes the disaster on our minds and gives people the in-spot experiences of major hazards, but also unmask nature's other face whose features are breakdown and waiting for human's reconciliation. Without hiding the lack of our knowledge about earthquake and possible miscalculations, the museum acts an antithesis of lyrical illusion of nature



and progressive science. Beyond television's shadow, the ruins showed in the museum are genuine witnesses of the disaster who possess solid and unmistakable memory.



Ruins of Shihlin Paper Mill, Photo by Author

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