Causality: Ruin Time and Ruins

Florence M. Hetzler

Abstract—A ruin is defined as the disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature upon an edifice without loss of the unity produced by the human builders. Ruin time, proposed as the principal cause of ruin, serves also to unify the ruin. In a ruin the edifice, the human-made part, and nature are one and inseparable; an edifice separated from its natural setting is no longer part of a ruin since it has lost its time, space and place. A ruin has a signification different from something merely human-made. It is like no other work of art and its time is unlike any other time.

I. INTRODUCTION

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present . . .
"Burnt Norton"
—T.S. Eliot

Many have written about ruins from the viewpoint of Romanticism, as Rose Macaulay did [1]; others have viewed ruins as monuments that have worth because of their age, the history they express or the memories they recall; and still others, such as Alois Riegl [2], have viewed them as objects of contemplation, especially in the case of religious monuments.

Many paintings have incorporated ruins. Among these paintings, one might cite some that appeared on the wall next to Isaac Newton's Principia (dated 1687, the year of its publication) in November and December 1986 at the Morgan Library in New York: Classical Ruins with Statues of Hercules and the River Nile and Figures by Giovanni Pannini (1691–1765), The Figures Among the Ruins of a Church in Prague by Roelandt Savery (1576–1639), Capriccio with a Round Tower and Ruins by a Lagoon by Canaletto (1697–1768), View of the Temple of Neptune and the Basilica at Paestum by Hubert Robert (1733–1808) as well as various ruins at Paestum by Piranesi. One also finds copies of ruins in many public parks and private gardens.

Even Nathaniel Hawthorne spoke of needing time and ruins for nurturing romance and poetry. He wrote in 1859 in the preface to The Marble Faun:

No author without a trial can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace posterity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. Romance and poetry, ivy, lichen and wallflowers need ruin to make them grow [3].

II. DEFINING A RUIN

My own view of ruins is quite different. As I have stated in the past [4], I believe that ruins may be considered works of art just as works of music, painting, etc., may be. A ruin, however, is a special work of art. It includes the human-made and the nature-made and has its own time, place, space, life and lives. Ruin time is immanent in a ruin and this time includes the time when it was first built, that is, the time when it was not a ruin; the time of its maturation as a ruin; the time of the birds, bees, bats and butterflies that may live in or on the ruin; the cosmological time of the land that supports it and is part of it and will take back to itself the man-made part eventually; as well as the sidereal time of the stars, sun and clouds that shine upon it, shadow it and are part of it. A ruin is the disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature upon the human-made without loss of the unity that our species produced.

A ruin is thus a combination of various factors: of the art, science and technology that produced the structure in the first place; of nature, including earth, rain, snow, wind, frogs and lizards; and of time, which causes an edifice to become a ruin. Time is the intrinsic cause of a ruin as a ruin. One should also note that all the senses save taste are employed in the appreciation of a ruin [5].

The 'ruining' may be started by human or natural causes but the maturation process must be done by nature in ruin time. Otherwise there is only devastation and there is no unity forming the ruins. A ruin also has a uniqueness that comes from the people who made that which is

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Fig. 1. Castle of Siegfried de Rachewiltz, Tschengls, Italy. Over time this castle has become more or less integrated with nature.
being ruined, from the nature that is ruining it and the nature that is integral to it, as well as from the kind of percipient who views or otherwise experiences it. A ruin has a maturation time and even a cycle of maturation times.

Initially the architectural part may be seen as beautiful. After a period of change this beauty of architecture will disappear and a new architecture occurs, one not intended by those who made the original. With nature's changes there is a new beauty created by nature in ruin time, namely, ruin beauty. A ruin is, indeed, a new category of being. As more of the changes of nature and the different times of being that constitute it occur, it may be considered, at different times, either a work of art, albeit a different kind of work of art, or again merely a ruin [6].

The castle of Siegfried de Rachewitz, the grandson of Ezra Pound, provides a good example of what I term a ruin (Fig. 1). Time was needed for this castle, located at Tschengls in the Italian Tyrol, to become more or less integrated with the nature that constitutes it. In fact, one cannot say where that nature ends. One is aware of clouds, snow-capped mountains and wildflowers; the sound of hand scythes as the farmers cut the hay, the sound of cowbells as the cows go down a path near the castle; the movement of the black-and-white cows and the maids who lead them down the path; the musty smell within the walls and the touch of the multi-textured stones that are part of the ruin's architecture. One is also aware of the fact that the castle is placed on top of a mountain and stands as a presence in the shape of a great ship. Instead of being surrounded by water, its location is enhanced by fir trees and the sound of birds. The walk up the mountain to the ruin is also part of the ruin.

This castle is a ruin, whereas Schloss Brunnenberg, in Merano, Italy, where Siegfried de Rachewitz lives with his family, is a ruined ruin. The latter was not allowed to lead its life of ruining but was restored. It has its own beauty and it may be a work of art, but ruin time has not allowed it to have the being of a ruin or ruin beauty. Each being has its own time and each ruin has its own ruin time—a time that connects with the sky and earth much as do the earthworks of Walter De Maria, whose Lightning Field (completed 1977) draws the attention of the viewer not just to the poles that connect with the earth and sky but to the elements that change around these poles [7]. This earth art is not a ruin, but it is one with the earth. It has earth-art time but not ruin time [8]. One might also refer to Peter Hutchinson's Threaded Calabash, an example of underwater earth art. This work, done in 1969 in Tobago, West Indies, was made of rope and five calabashes and was placed upon a coral reef in water 30 feet deep. But it, too, did not have ruin time. Because of the ephemerality and the lack of tenacity of its material, this work has probably disintegrated. It is and never can be a ruin for another reason. It does not have the required size.

A ruin must initially be a work of architecture, even if that is a humble stone abode, as in the case of the beehive dwellings on the Garvellach Islands in Scotland's Inner Hebrides or a stone barn on Wolfe Island in the St. Lawrence River in Canada. A ruin may be under the water and to see it one has to swim. Such a ruin is located under the sea near the northeast coast of Crete. It is the former town of Driros that fell into the sea. One may swim over and in the ruins of old houses, and real fish may also swim over the dolphin mosaics that are still visible on the floors of the houses. A ruin may be without a roof or it may have Gothic arches that remind one of whale bones vaulted against the sky and allowing the sun to fill the ruin and to shine on the walls' reliefs. The sun becomes part of the ruin. Beyond the frames of these bones one sees the clouds, and the ruin—that of a Carmelite convent whose original harmony was jolted by the earthquake of 1755 in Lisbon, Portugal, and which

Fig. 2. Part of the ruins of Persepolis, Iran, the former palace of Darius and Xerxes. Perception of these ruins includes the experience of oppressive heat and the presence of sheep, goats and shepherds as well as the edifice itself.
submitted itself to ruin time—has a kind of spatially infinite dimension.

In considering a ruin, one must also acknowledge subjective time, the time of the perciipient. This time may be affected by the time of day—dusk or dawn, moonlight or sunshine; by the mood of the perciipient; and even by the temperature, as, for example, the intense cold of the island of Danskoy, the location of the Arctic ruins of the factory built by the balloonist Salomon August Andree while preparing for his unsuccessful balloon trip over the North Pole. The ruins of Volubilis in Morocco and of Persepolis in Iran cannot be perceived without the experience of oppressive heat. The photograph of a part of the ruins of Persepolis (Fig. 2) was taken in such heat that I had to use a shepherd’s head-covering to hold the camera. The dry heat was not only part of my perception of the ruin but had been part of that ruin since 330 B.C. when Alexander the Great and his hordes started the destruction of this palace which through nature and ruin time has become a ruin with beautiful shapes that share in its insistent co-creation. The lions standing guard, the stairs with the reliefs on the walls next to them, the cuneiform writing and even the column barely discernible in the distance all give shape to one another and to the ruin as a totality. The blues and the pinks of the marble shine in the light of the oppressive heat. The texture of the marble gives this ruin a uniqueness. Sheep, goats and shepherds are parts of this ruin. Peter Brook also added a new dimension to the ruin when he presented his play Orghast at the time of the Shah’s celebration there. The ruin has a unique ruin time just as the time that constitutes other ruins is different, as in the case of Borobudur on the island of Java in Indonesia or the Buddhhas in Bamyan in northern Afghanistan where the material is a clay mountain. In Bamyan, as in Michael Heizer’s earth art, the art is carved out of the land and is part of it.

A ruin, the architectural part and the earth part, has an integrity that resonates far [9]. The architectural part is one with the land. It is also one with the heavens to which it is open. On the island of Samos in Greece there is an edifice called “Twelve Doors”. Trees grow out of this former temple and basilica and shade the human-made part. Burned grass, a dry gully and grapevines distinguish this ruin. The time of the ruining process includes the time of the trees within the ruin.

The process of the ruination has a unique time. The Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum in New York may be considered for aesthetic and historical reasons, but it is not a ruin. It is a ruined ruin because it has lost its own ruin time, space and place. Ruins cannot be moved; their locus is a component whether it be that of the Ring of Brodgar in the Orkneys or the Stones of Callanish on the island of Lewis in Scotland’s Hebrides. Imagine removing the standing stone alignments of Corsica to the Nile! And where would one put Karnak or Luxor? If the H.M.S. Breadalbaine, the British ship that took part in the Franklin expedition and sank in the Arctic ice, were brought up, it would not be a ruin. But Franklin’s camp on Beechey Island in the Arctic is a ruin.

Ruins must also be semiotically different from what they were before they became ruins. If one visits the Parthenon, one should not feel the need to bring an oil lamp for Athena. The Parthenon stands on its own and signifies itself. The same is abundantly true of the formerly lost city of Macchu Picchu (Fig. 3). When Hiram Bingham found this city in 1911 it was covered with vines and many kinds of vegetation [10]. The time of this city includes its time as a non-found city—its time buried in the earth and covered with the being of the earth. When one approaches it now as a visible city, one sees the configurations that have been revealed by the removal of what kept it from view. This now-visible ruin includes the sound of the Urubamba River that has been rushing by for centuries, the
gigantic presence of the mountain Huayna Picchu next to it and the flowers, lichen and algae on the rhomboidal windows that look out upon the immense Peruvian landscape. The Andean terraces here that were made by the Incas long ago are not considered as places for raising crops. These ridges are part of the rhythm and shape of the ruin and have a new significance, too, as does the whole ruin, which often is shrouded in white mist that makes the ruin invisible, especially in the morning. When the sun pierces the mist, then the buildings, lizards and spiders can be seen as parts of the whole. All aspects of this city ruin seem to grow together and may return to the earth together. There is still the tenacity of the stone and its struggle with the vegetation. There is a persistent resistance of stone and shapes to nature.

III. RUIN TIME

Time creates the ruin by making it something other than what it was, something with a new significance and signification, with a future that is to be compared with its past. Time writes the future of a ruin. Ruin time creates the future of a ruin, even the return of the man-made part to the earth, which will eventually claim what is its property—that is, that from which the architectural part is made. As articulated by Georg Simmel:

When we speak of ‘returning home’, we mean to characterize the peace whose mood surrounds the ruin. And we must characterize something else: our sense that these two world potencies—the striving upward and the sinking downward—are working serenely together, as we envisage in their working a picture of purely natural existence. Expressing this peace for us, the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together like a tree... [11].

One understands what Simmel meant if one considers the menhirs of the site of Pelaggiu in Corsica (Fig. 4). The standing stones are well on their way to a peaceful return to the earth. Ruin time creates a peace that is absent in the case of a devastation, where the human-made and the nature-made are not one but separate. Devastations do not have the ruin time necessary for maturation [12]. Coventry Cathedral’s remains are not ruins; there is no unity. An excellent example of a devastation can be found on Deception Island in Antarctica (Fig. 5), despite the fact that it has as its setting one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The shores of this volcanic island help form a bay which is actually the crater of a volcano which erupted and destroyed a large whaling station. The buildings and machinery of the station, though partially covered with black volcanic ash and enhanced by penguins, seals, snow, icebergs and volcanic steam, are a part of the devastation. There has been no causality of ruin time that would allow the human-made to be integrated with the greatness of nature.

Ruin time unites. It is beyond historical time. It includes the biological time of birds and moss. In it is the synergy of the various times of the various beings involved in a ruin. The part of China’s Great Wall that is visited by tourists is not a ruin. Ruin time has been removed by too much restoration. If, however, one takes the train from Peking to Ulan Bator, Mongolia, one can see the Great Wall as a beautiful ruin, sometimes surrounded by swirls of sand in sandstorms, and surrounded by camels and farm carts as well as by wild horses. The Great Wall includes the landscape through which it serpentine. And if one were in a plane flying over the wall, one would perceive more globally the integrity of the ruin, that is, the conjunction of the wall and the land dotted by people, animals and sparse vegetation. One would see with certitude that a ruin may be defined as the disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature without loss of the unity that a person or people produced.

Size is important to the appreciation of a ruin; so too its shape, not only of the architectural part but of the natural part. The approach to a ruin may also be included in the ruin. To get to Borobudur, a former Buddhist temple, one walks through a small village. One can smell the food that is being cooked on the spot. Morning mist mingles with the smoke from the small village houses. One does not think of this as a place where one is called to worship any more than one does in the Buddhist caves at Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta or Bagh in India. In Borobudur and the caves there is size, time, shape, architecture and nature. They are real ruins.

IV. RUIN BEAUTY

Since nature is involved in a ruin, I believe that ruin beauty comes closer to the sublime and the ineffable than either nature’s beauty or artistic beauty considered alone [13]. In a ruin the beauty of nature intersects with man-made beauty in a unique manner. Both natural beauty and artistic beauty are more limited and qualified when taken individually than when considered in this new form, namely, ruin beauty. Together they yield a new kind of beauty and a new time. One might call the aesthetics of ruins the aesthetics of the sublime par excellence, since it includes nature and the human-made in a natural setting [14].

V. RUIN ART

The ruin brings together nature, the human-made and the human being—all unified in ruin time. There is a new integrity and a new time—a confluence of nature time, human-made time and human time. There is not just the juxtaposition of these times but a unity of all three, a unity that exists no place else in the universe

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and certainly no place else in the art world. This time defies definition, which is one of the reasons a ruin defies capture in experience. No art can capture simultaneously nature plus the human-made plus the human being plus the original place.

Ruin art is an ultimate in art. Its time creates the ruin. Eventually, when the human-made can no longer hold nature at bay, nature takes over, but not until then. When nature does take over, cosmological time takes over. The insistent move towards the not being of a ruin has come to a stop. The ruin, however, will always exist as having been.

REFERENCES AND NOTES
10. On 28 February 1986, at the Explorers Club, his son, Alfred Bingham, showed slides of the city as it was when his father found it.

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