

FROM RUINOLOGY TO RUINOPHILIA: PERSPECTIVES ON RUINED ARCHITECTURE DA RUINOLOGIA À RUINOPHILIA: PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE A ARQUITETURA EM RUÍNA

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Abstract

The culture of ruined architectures has been going through a rupture of meanings in recent decades. If initially its nostalgic character, tied to idyllic visual representations, played a fundamental role in its diffusion, mainly from the Romanticism movement in Europe, during the 20th and 21st centuries, the drastic changes in the architectural conformation of cities brought about a new scale of ruination and the way of representing and deciphering the meaning of ruins. Composed of three sections, namely ruinology, ruinophilia and counter-hegemonic action within ruins, this article seeks to broaden understanding of the field of study of the culture or ruins in architecture. Its purpose is to raise discussions that consider not only the historiographical aspect, but which can also advance into a wider sphere, one of phenomenological method, proposing perspectives different from the historically hegemonic narratives about ruins, in order to dethrone the predominant bucolic conception in theoretical-historical approaches, and to shift the discussion in the field of architecture and urbanism. This intention is based on the specificities of contemporary cities and their new engendering, such as the counter-hegemonic action of the urbex (urban exploration) movements in ruined spaces. Finally, the work draws into debate an understanding of ruins in a wider temporal arc, which in turn shifts the thinking, imagination and meanings of conceptual paradigms, making it possible for the culture of contemporary ruins to meld its intrinsic and multifaceted characteristics.

Keywords: Architecture, Ruin, City

1 Introduction

This study proposes to analyze the culture of ruined architectures in order to contribute to studies in architecture theory which look at architectural debris. This effort intends to expand the perspective of the debate that unfolds in this field of studies of architecture and which is often reduced to the dualism epitomized in the concepts of John Ruskin (1849) and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (2000), which restricts the dialogue to the restoration and conservation themes that have dominated the discussion on the subject of ruins. However, if we restrict this subject to such themes, the culture of ruined architectures would be stifled in a cognitive apparatus tied to historiography and bidimensional symbolic representation, particularly in the analyses of the nostalgic paintings that dominated the period of English romanticism, a fertile time for ruined architecture representation.

In the present work, however, an attempt is made to raise this debate on a broader field of understanding of ruins, one that shifts the thinking and imaginary contained in the previous model, tying studies to a critical reflection in which new conceptual paradigms make it possible to understand more assertively the culture of contemporary ruins. Such culture is thrust in the characteristics of contemporary cities, with their disruptive, multifaceted spaces which are the *locus* of urban explorations in the 21st century, an action carried out by the movement known as *Urbex*. This work is also meant to contribute to the debate by going beyond explanations that emphasize architectural phenomena contained in themselves, in buildings or their surroundings, bringing the dimension of contemporary social, cultural and aesthetic transformations to a spatial debate, as pointed out by Gottdiener (1994) in 1985.

The counter-hegemonic character of these interpretations and actions takes on a prominent role of relevance in the culture of ruins, as it unveils a hidden layer of the city, concealed under a preponderant image and narrative, which fails to consider the ruined spaces that are ubiquitous in the architectural conformation of urban space. Thus, by proposing perspectives unlike the historically hegemonic narratives about ruins, this article seeks to embed the city dweller and their lived experience into the city, as a method with a phenomenological character. Such phenomenology is indicated as the stepping stone to an epistemological turn that would effectively allow us to dethrone the bucolic conception predominant in theoretical-historic approaches to ruins, thus drawing contemporary field actions in ruined spaces closer to the ideological construct which was developed over time in the comprehension and representation of ruined architectures.

2 Ruinology

The ruins' appreciation culture began historically in periods far from 21st century-contemporary society. The historiography that sought to address and record the ruined architectural space developed *pari passu* with the archeological expeditions undertaken to areas surrounding ancient Rome and were linked to the growing fascination with objects from distant societies,

which increasingly filled antique rooms. The archeological excavations of layers of dead cities seemed to develop concomitantly with the Renaissance period, between the mid 14th and late 16th centuries, which valued classical antiquity and science (Knack, 2017). All this context was extremely important for the creation of institutions that would later emerge in the French society of the 17th and 18th centuries with architectural heritage themes and which, in the same fashion, sought to aggregate critical thoughts and discussions about ruins (Choay, 2006). Various paintings from those days depicted ruined architectures in their art, mixing the idyllic representation of a past time and the taste for architectural debris.

During that time, fascination with the symbolism of ruins reached its height in the Romanticism movement, which valued subjectivity and took place mainly in 18th- and 19th-century England. In those days, the bedazzlement at ruined architectures was quite significant, and brought about aberrations like the commissioning of paintings which depicted the ruins of buildings not yet abandoned or deformed by the action of time (Dillon, 2011). The narratives of ruined architectures conveyed mystery and a peculiar imaginative field which enabled multivocal impressions and descriptions of the architecture of times past. English writer Rose Macaulay's (1966) texts are proficuous in their details, as they catapulted the allegory of ruins into an imaginative world, capable of tracing and crossing historical times, besides alluding to the particulars of ruined spaces in a unique manner. Each word seems to open clusters, address nuances and expand insight of the cities' architectures as they were described.

Of historiographical character, Yi-Fu Tuan texts in his book *Landscapes of Fear* (2013) also sharply describes the presence of haunted and abandoned houses in rural 19th-century England. The author draws an indissoluble connection between decay and architecture, through short stories and narratives that sought to describe the somber ambiances which the ruins carried in their core. Thus, ruins grew prominent in arts and literature, and therefore played an important role against the hegemonic narratives of dominating groups of the period. That role seemed to apply to the direct intent of transmuting architecture's very historiography, thus expanding the understanding and the importance of finitude itself in the architectural narratives of the epoch.

Within this context, ruinology, i.e., the field of studies of ruins, seemed to be restricted to the bidimensional and symbolical representation of paintings; the public debate on it emerged and gained force particularly in the 19th century, emanating from the clash between the ideas of the British art critic John Ruskin and the French architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. Ruskin (1849) upheld the aura of ruins, the immanent and peculiar condition of the architecture that had been modified by time and which should be respected in the form in which it found itself. In turn, Viollet-le-Duc (2000) argued for the conservation and restoration of ruins, in view of his theoretical postulates of historical heritage preservation. In this scenario, the preservation of historical architectural heritage had gained higher standing in the public interest (Choay, 2006), and the questions raised by these emblematic authors engulfed the discussion around ruins for many years. Their theories gave rise to schools of thought, but considering the research perspective adopted in this article, this dualism ended up petrifying the critical thought and reflection of the culture of ruins, particularly in architecture.

With the arrival of the 20th century and the Industrial Revolution which spread from England to the world, however, city spaces began to suffer drastic ruptures. The new design scales and the spatial rearrangement of cities directly impacted the relationship of city dwellers and their experience in the urban environment, which also affected the meaning and understanding of the culture of ruins that developed until that period. Works like Tanizaki's book, *In Praise of Shadows* (2001), published in 1933 but not widely publicized until the late 20th century, demonstrated that, in contexts well beyond the Western theoretical supremacy, the appreciation of the aesthetic of shadows, of concealed objects, or even the appreciation of the experience through slits, ditches, unfinished or hidden things, was already part of a repertoire which escaped the conventional idea of clarity and the building's maintenance found in European and American heritage charters: "Every time I am shown to an old, dimly lit, and, I would add, impeccably clean toilet in a Nara or Kyoto temple, I am impressed with the singular virtues of Japanese architecture" (Tanizaki, 2001, p. 9).

3 Ruinophilia

The change in the architectural conformation and the spaces of 20th- and 21st-century cities, with their new circulation and communication flows (Ascher, 2010), irreversibly impacted the way city dwellers apprehend the city. This new scenario, initially thrust in society's industrial development, shaped a new *modus vivendi* where the scale of the architectural designs of sheds, factories (Hilbersemeier, 2012) and transport hubs brought along a new vivid architectural experience. However,

with the advent of the 21st century, the characteristics of metropolises and industrial cities, in little more than a century, made way to post-industrial, decentralized, sprawling, multinuclear cities, driving city dwellers to a post-urban experience (Felice, 2009), which increasingly develops and builds strength intertwined with electronic devices and the whole media apparatus (Santaella, 2003), questioning and anesthetizing the individual from direct contact with the city. This liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001) empties spaces and leads to the abandonment of different places, which directly affects the urban landscape, with newer and bigger ruins arising from the changes in the activities of the global economy.

Contemporary ruins burst out in this distinct urban panorama, since the cogs that feed the unstoppable production of cities finds, on their edges, places of severe environmental and urban degradation. The outflow from contemporary society's quick acceleration and from this hyperbolic mode of production discharges in another part of the city – on its edges – the waste and detritus from that production, thus creating another category in the taxonomy that pervades abandonment: ruins in reverse (Smithson, 1967). If Detroit, USA, has become one of the icons of contemporary ruin, its image not only conveys the fallacy of much-vaunted "progress", but it also tears apart, in a similar way, the intent to perpetuate the debate of ruins in a bidimensional, static field of the representations of past centuries. In this city, the brutal image of derelict sheds and ruins of industrial plants, such as the old Packard plant, which occupied eight consecutive blocks, causes a dense concussion in the city dweller and casts the bucolic nostalgia of the ruin of times past to a place far from the comprehension of contemporaneity's ruined spaces (Millington, 2010).

In this current context, the study of ruins seems to require a new methodological apparatus, one that possesses the tools to encompass the polysemy of meanings and ambiances enclosed in the ghostly apparatus of the dystopia of post-industrial cities. Thus, it is sound to say that the contribution of the phenomenological method has found, in the realm of architectural theory, reverberation among architects willing to widen their spectrums with the sounding board of philosophy (Otero-Pailos, 2010). This path can shift the historiography of ruins to an analysis imbricated in its ontological meanings, where ambiances seem to clarify a route for understanding this new range of contemporary ruined spaces. Therefore, multisensory perception and intersubjectivity set up a new link for understanding this indissoluble intertwining between physical and cognitive spaces (Merleau-Ponty, 1999), just like the value of ambiance/atmosphere soars from the value of the built object (Böme, 2020).

If previously the paintings and chronicles of travelers who recorded ruins brought a nostalgic air to the reading of that architecture, this was an aspect intrinsic also to the detachment and narrowing of city dwellers in the representation and apprehension of ruins, understood as "remains", distant scraps; in contemporary society, increasingly cybernetic and informatized, the development of digital images brought about a new equivalence in the impact of the semiotics of ruins (Kushinski, 2016). In addition to post-war documentaries filled with ruins, exposed in their contents, cinema would also enter the varied spectrum of representation of ruins, as in the emblematic film *Stalker*, by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (1979). Thus, fascination with contemporary ruins was boosted by the exorbitant growth in the images of ruins. Interconnected networks of media devices (Santaella, 2003) produced, in the last two decades, an aesthetic myriad of ruins, collected and disseminated by urban explorers who try to situate somber images, previously buried by the narratives imposed by media conglomerates and power institutions.

These explorers, also called *urbexers*, are the producers of a sort of multitemporal archeology, and have come from a global movement denominated *urbex*; they act in a counter-hegemonic manner, confronting the aestheticized narratives of enjoyment of cities. This action in the field operates in a threshold, an indefinite, ever-changing mental and physical space. Such explorers, as they infiltrate abandoned spaces – ghostly areas – in search of a more real experience of the city, away from the fanciful inductions of sterile consumption and tourism spaces (Garret, 2011; 2014), confirm the deceit of the much-vaunted democratic space, as presented in figure 1.



Fig. 1: Urbexer in action in the ghost locality of Lagoinha in Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil. Source: Souza, 2019.

Urbex's urban explorations of contemporary ruins, disseminated through social media, demonstrate clearly the fascination that the various textures and ambiances of ruins exert upon city dwellers. From Berlin, Germany, with its symbolic ruined buildings, such as the old Teufelsberg spy tower, to Homs, Syria, with its dystopian scenes of whole neighborhoods obliterated by the bombing havoc of civil war, any type of ruin gains notability in this group's media repertoire¹. The difference between slow ruin – the type shaped by neglect and the action of time – and fast ruin – as war and disaster ruins are termed – points to the tragedies that pervade and swarm the lexicon of digital media. These are shocking images that expose in a brutal manner the paradox of contemporary society. And they are, most of all, inconsistent with the sterile, monolithic image that is publicized about contemporary cities, since these are formed by landscapes both hybrid and fragmented, a condition intrinsic to today's urban-architectural spaces, as presented in figure 2.

¹ At this point, it is worth mentioning the preponderant role of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who, by photographing life in post-war Soviet Union in a free manner, as well as desolate settings and ruins in the second half of the 20th century (with the experience he acquired in the French army during World War II), brought into the phenomenological field an appreciation of all these settings.



Fig. 2: Hybrid landscapes in the conformation of the city of Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil. Source: Souza, 2019.

This experience of infiltrating ruins also carries a ludic aspect of major importance for the phenomenological method of approach to ruins. In this experience, city dwellers' bodies blend with the architecture, deconstructing paths and materialities, immaterialities, reversing the hegemonic order of materials and sharpening the exploration by and through bent ceilings, shattered windows, corroded drainage and ventilation systems, thus transforming the lived experience of architecture into a profuse multisensory ethnography (Desilvey; Edensor, 2012), as presented in figure 3, "Body, architecture and nature in the studies of Lagoinha in Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil".



Fig. 3: Body, architecture and nature in the studies of Lagoinha in Petrópolis/RJ. Source: Souza, 2019.

Therefore, ruinology and its field of studies are raised to a new paradigm, one in which time and history merge and blend with images from the past, present and future. The imagetic character of attraction of this architecture in debris generates a sort of “hysteria of ruins”. Now dethroned from its romantic and nostalgic prominence of centuries past, the ruin is vulgarized, leaving a position of immanence, of enshrinement, to take on an obscene quality of voracious consumption. This current attribute, which rests on the obsessive act of consumption of ruins, would be the meaning attributed to the term *ruin porn* – pornography of ruins; a *sine qua non* condition of all and any contemporary ruins, which, by exerting this compulsive fascination upon city dwellers, capture and shape the current paths for understanding and representing ruined architectures, bringing about an epistemological leap from ruinology to ruinophilia (Boym, 2011).

4 Counter-Hegemonic Action Within Ruins

As mentioned, the culture of contemporary ruins owes its wide profusion to the urban exploration movement internationally denominated *urbex*. *Urbexers* are unofficial groups of various city dwellers, like architects, geographers, historians and photographers, who have been systematically infiltrating abandoned places, exploring and recording hidden city spaces on videos, photographs and texts about the ambiances of ruined architectures. Such field action, even if devoid of an objective method, is of major importance in the arduous task of deconstructing myths and fallacies diffused by dominant groups and power institutions which insist on spreading a homogeneous, sterile image of cities. The recording and later dissemination of the images unveils the real, plural city, constituted by diverse, fragmented spaces, among which are ruined spaces, as presented in figure 4.



Fig. 4: Exploration in the ruined space of the old ski trail, Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil. Source: Souza, 2019.

The attempt of dominant groups to obliterate the plurality of cities is accompanied by speculative forces that turn urban landscapes into commodity-landscapes (Ronai, 2015) and which therefore conceal the nuances contained in urban space. In this context, urbexers' action, which is not linked to any power or institution, develops a profound rupture with the way we understand the spaces of a city and its hybrid landscapes. This counter-hegemonic action brings up and challenges the monolithic narratives which are made about cities, besides exposing a hidden city, which emerges in our mental apprehension of the city (Jeudy, 2005), as presented in Figure 5, "Ajar' city in the abandoned Petrópolis Paper Factory, Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil".

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Fig. 5: "Ajar" city in the abandoned Petrópolis Paper Factory, Petrópolis, RJ, Brazil. Source: Souza, 2019.

Just like Mike Davis (2007) pointed out the camouflaged woes of Las Vegas, deconstructing the hegemonic narratives of the neon images that circulate worldwide to promote that city, urbexers' actions plays a similar role. And yet it indicates an active stance in the way these city dwellers act within city spaces. Therefore, the apathetic attitude that increasingly afflicts individuals in a society, who find themselves far from real spaces, dissimulated by the hyperconnectivity of media (Santaella, 2003), suffers a setback. In exploring abandoned places and their ruined architectures, urbexers affirm their intent of rights to the city (Lefebvre, 2001), perhaps of another, imagined and probable city. Thus, this practice indicates a city exercise of escapism from city norms, a search for an alternative space of multivocal possibilities, a detour from the unpleasant perspectives and views on everyday life, thus evoking the imagination of other possible worlds, of alternative landscapes.

Such action upon the city in an emancipatory manner strengthens the city dwellers' self-assertiveness (De Certeau, 1974), which induces an attitude of combating the simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1991), which has become the lived experience in the contemporary city; a city dissimulated by a spectacular architecture, a publicity-architecture of fugacious values and tenacious control. This society of the spectacle (Debord, 2007), which conceals city dwellers' real participation, anesthetizes the urban experience, as Massimo di Felice (2009) points out in his writings about today's post-urban life. Thus, the counter-hegemonic action of urban ruin explorers, in its challenge of the hegemonic narratives, reveals a hidden side of the city. It emerges casually as a significant contribution to understanding the complex contemporary city, perhaps an embryo of resistance to the imperative, oppressive way in which the use of urban-architectural space is conditioned in the environments of the city.

5 Final Considerations

The research presented in this article has been developed ultimately with the intent of bringing to the academic debate nuances and specificities about the field of studies of ruins, which are often made invisible by the themes of conservation and restoration – themes that capture the thoughts in this domain of architecture theory. If the preservationist debate deserves attention and relevance in research of historical heritage, still, its cultural aspects remain, in our view, virtually unaltered in studies published lately. However, the drastic changes that assailed cities' spaces in the last century brought along a need for new critical reflections about the architecture that conforms this contemporary city and its representation. This city is constituted by multifaceted landscapes, even if dominant groups and power institutions insist on monolithic narratives with images of sterile spaces, totally detached from the plural and concrete reality of city spaces, ruined architectures assume, in this context, a critical role in apprehending and understanding the complexity of the contemporary city. Its scars, which are ubiquitous and mark the urban space, expose clearly the antagonism and the fallacy contained in the homogeneous, speculative and restraining narratives of the images that are made about cities.

Thus, understanding the temporal arc that drives reflections about the culture of ruins and attempting to indicate paths for the vital need for a new epistemology would be the cornerstone to making the leap from ruinology to ruinophilia. The purpose is to thus understand the *locus* and the various layers of not only physical city spaces, but also layers that consider alternative narratives and which allow the constitution of the real landscapes, fragmented and conflicted, which compose the repertoire of the complex contemporary city. Thus, the counter-hegemonic action of the *urbex* urban exploration group could prepare a variety of city dwellers to address and confront the *status quo* that imposes itself on the way of making and using a city's urban-architectural spaces. By infiltrating ruined spaces and producing accounts and records of that architecture in debris, *urbexers* catapult the imaginary and the meaning of ruins into the panorama of current times, which in turn depart from the traditional historiography to take on an ontological characteristic, more consistent with the intricate spaces that comprehend contemporary ruins.

This field action, which considers the lived experience of architecture as a phenomenological method of analysis (Otero-Pailos, 2010) of ruined spaces enables a new understanding of ruins, where the theoretical-historical approaches are conditioned to a tactile, aesthetic and sensory reality, which corroborates the premises for an epistemological and historical turn in the way of researching and investigating and, therefore, delineating subjectivities in the realm of architectural theory. And it thus dethrones, in a cordial manner, the detached and romantic stance on understanding the role of ruined architectures in the architectural composition and, notwithstanding, in the hegemonic narratives and the mental image engendered in the multivocal spaces contained in the urban landscapes of the present city.

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