PLAT 3.0

OF RUINS AND ANTI-RUINS

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Death and destruction are constants in our world. From the earliest beginnings of humankind, they have pervaded human existence and thinking. Whereas destruction is one of the driving forces in the unfolding of human history, cultural production can be seen as its sublimation and the medium for its reflection. Although destruction in its various guises produces immeasurable suffering, it is a fundamental source of fascination among mankind. From the pictorial testimonies of battles and the literary accounts of natural disasters since classical antiquity, to the Baroque's obsession with the vanity of all things and Romanticism's admiration of the night and the ruin as symbols of death and deliverance, to the enthusiasm for warfare and its artistic implications in Europe at the verge of World War I, destruction is constantly reflected in human consciousness and cultural expression.

Whereas the causes and manifestations of destructive forces are countless and diverse, their readings, perceptions, and artistic interpretations can be traced along two fundamental lines: slow decay and swift demise. These are exemplified by two paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Willem Claeszoon Heda's *Still Life* (1632) shows a table on which fine dishes contain the leftovers of a decadent meal. The scene captures the moment after the meal has ended. All human presence and action is removed; the objects alone fill the frame. These objects bear traces of former events: bites of food have been eaten, a silver cup has been toppled over, and a glass has been broken. The objects' material richness contrasts the crude condition in which they are left. Even the most precious is afflicted by transience—decay's insistent agency can't be concealed. If we read the painting through the verses of German Baroque poet Andreas Gryphius,[1] it becomes obvious that the objects' vulnerability to decay represents our own. The constant presence of death and decline are made visible in order to issue a warning to the living: *memento mori* (remember your mortality). Beauty's veil is lifted to reveal the omnipresent forces of destruction which can only ever be temporarily hidden. Forebodings of the transience of life, of the vanity of the physical world, of the fragility of all matter, and of the duality between the rich abundance of earthly pleasures are all clearly expressed. However, this is shown through an aestheticized depiction of a peaceful everyday setup, which does not describe specific incidents but rather, sets the stage for a general melancholic contemplation of the constant agency of destructive forces.

1
"Tales of our mighty deeds like dreams must fade away. How then should Man—Time's plaything—ever hope to stay? Oh think, what are those objects we prize beyond compare, Mere shadows, dust, and wind—all worthless, false and vain;" Andreas Gryphius, *The Vanity of This World*, 1637, accessed January 3, 2013, http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/es-ist-alles-eitel/.

Above: Willem Claeszoon Heda, *Still Life* (1632)

Whereas Willem Claeszoon Heda's painting establishes and sublimates decay and transience as basic principles of the world, Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* (1562) explicitly depicts acute, violent destruction. An army of skeletons – an embodiment of death – set out to cause mayhem and suffering. The scene shows people being tortured and killed amid a devastated landscape. Fires burn in the distance and blacken the sky with clouds of smoke over buildings in ruins. Dead, leafless stumps remain between torture instruments, graveyards, and corpses. The painting can be read as a compendium of techniques for human violence and torture. Various weapons are used to slash bodies and break skulls; people are herded together, trampled, abused, drowned, hung from gallows, and crushed by wheels. The stretch of land and all its inhabitants are a barren and nightmarish wasteland. The death portrayed by Bruegel is no abstract law of nature – as is the decay of matter – but the result of violence and cruelty enacted by humans. The painting aims not to show the triumph of death over humankind, but rather the triumph of one group of humans over another by means of violence and force. Despite its overwhelming presence in the scene, death is hereby no actor, but the consequence of willful human behavior. Although the painting is laden with symbols, it is highly explicit in its demonstration of the brutal realities of human violence and the resulting material and spiritual ruination.

Most of the cultural debate on the perception of destruction can be situated within a field defined by implicit aesthetic reasoning on the one hand and by the explicit demonstration and communication of violent events on the other. Two questions arise: how, and in which ways, is architecture related to destruction, and to what extent is the conception of architecture based on conceptions of its destruction or its destructive effects?

At first glance, the essence of architecture, as a discipline of construction, seems defined by its ability to withstand destructive forces and to establish a safe and rational ground for the unfolding of civilized human life. Architecture must also set up a realm in which human control is made possible and the wild forces of nature can be countered or repressed. The three principles *firmitas* (firmness), *utilitas* (utility), and *venustas* (beauty) were put forth by Vitruvius[2] as the underlying goals of architecture. It is no coincidence that firmness is listed as the first of the three principles, as the stability and longevity of an architectural structure is the prerequisite for its utility. Likewise, the endurance of its form and proportion as a mirror of the natural laws of harmony are, according to the Vitruvian theory, the source of its beauty.

2
Vitruvius Pollio, *Ten Books on Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

It is, however, also obvious that buildings as compositions of physical matter are always subject to decay and decomposition, and therefore their firmness and strength can only be temporary. Every building's ultimate fate of becoming a ruin – a potential and only temporarily deferred condition – underlies every built environment. Instead of regarding the ruin as an imperfect and degraded form of architecture, the German sociologist Georg Simmel proposed viewing it as an end to the struggle that is constantly carried out between human spirit and nature, decided in favor of nature from the moment a building falls into decay. Whereas architecture epitomizes our alienation from and violation of nature, ruination restores the initial order of nature, freed from human occupation:

This unique balance – between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward – breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we fell, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image.[3]

3
Georg Simmel, "The Ruin," in *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 259.

4
Novalis, "Die Lehrlinge von Sais", in *Schriften* Vol. 2, ed. Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck (Berlin, 1802), 66-74.

Simmel clearly follows the Romantic tradition, which conceives of death and destruction as redemption and a return to natural innocence, or to the original source of being (*Urgrund* or *Heimat*[4]), stripping away death's negative and abhorrent characteristics to reframe it as redemptive fulfillment. Moreover, we can clearly establish a link between Simmel's understanding of the architectural ruin and the genre of the still life in painting, like that of Claeszoon Heda discussed above, or of other painted views of ruins, such as those by Caspar David Friedrich and Hubert Robert. Whereas the still life is an artistic reflection on the passage of time and the fragility of physical matter, Simmel's understanding of the ruin is an architectural sublimation of both the laws of decay and the accumulated acts of human violence. The ruin and the still life both depend on the establishment of aesthetic distance from immediate reality. The events that caused the ruination recede into the background, just as their occurrence might have been forgotten in the course of time. Past events – both happy and tragic – confer value upon ruins, enshrouding them in an atmosphere of drama and melancholy, as they become objects of aesthetic and ethical speculation and connect us with the transience of life. The ruin is freed from everyday functionality, and, as an artifact of bygone destructive transformation, becomes open to a renewed condition of innocence in the tradition of the picturesque. In this state, it also functions as a meaningful witness and warning to the living. Ruination understood in this way does not depreciate the architecture's value, but in fact relocates it to a timeless and, to a certain degree, guiltless realm of aesthetic contemplation.

Being very aware of this functioning emotional mechanism of the ruins evolving from the Romantic tradition, German architect and Minister of Armaments and War Production during World War II, Albert Speer, anticipated and incorporated the condition of ruination into the initial designs of Third Reich's representative architecture. For architecture that serves ideology and power, material durability and the impression its ruins make after a long period of time are crucial. To this end, Speer was eager to carefully plan the ruins his buildings would one day become, either through the gradual processes of decay or through the acts of war he himself propelled. In his *Theory of Ruin Value* (*Ruinenwerttheorie*), he proclaimed, "By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models."[5] Inspired by the architectural remains of imperial Rome, the Nazi regime, with its totalitarian ambitions, was eager to simulate a direct proportionality between the size and longevity of their built constructions and the political and ideological values they propagated. In this context, destruction was planned to produce impressive and dignified ruins—potentially elevating the regime's ideological canon into a state of universality endorsed by time. Thus, using the Romantic conception of the ruin with its ability to evoke emotional states in combination with an exaggerated understanding of Vitruvian *firmitas*, Speer formulated deliberate ruination as one of the basic principles of architecture and produced monuments of anticipated aggression as political instruments.

5
Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 56.

Whereas Simmel and Speer are engaged with the emotional and dramatic perception of ruins, Robert Smithson's works reveal ruination and gradual destruction as embedded principles of architecture and thus extract the ruin from melancholic aesthetic contemplation, situating it amidst everyday territories. In his *Hotel Palenque* (1969-72),[6] Smithson captures the state of a hotel building complex that is neither new nor totally abandoned – typical of most of our current building stock – and depicts its oscillation between decay (growth in entropy) and constant efforts toward maintenance, renewal, transformation, and extension. The struggle that Simmel sees decided in favor of nature remains undecided

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Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*, 1969–72. 31 chromogenic-development slides, with audio recording, dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Above: Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
***The Triumph of Death* (1562)**

in Smithson's work. It forms the underlying endeavor of human activity, which prominently appears in building: the establishment and conservation of a certain degree of order that is never complete but constantly defended. The ruin is not situated at the end of a building's lifespan, but is a constant and ever-present condition of architecture. Each physical architectural structure finds itself caught between destruction and renewal, reaffirming and re-establishing its strength, functionality, and beauty over and over in a dynamic process. Smithson describes a perspective on architecture that is dynamic, imperfect, and in constant transition. An understanding of buildings as transitory everyday ruins contrasts with the Romantic concept of the heroic ruin and with its political exploitation, placing the complexity of decay and transformation at the heart of pragmatic and aesthetic architectural thinking.

Rather than entering a process of balance between the forces of decay and destruction and counter-attempts of maintenance, renewal, and transformation, Modernism developed a strategy of extensive extinction. The ruin as an object of contemplation, as well as an object to be taken on and transformed, was wholly rejected. Instead, the concept of the ruin was expanded to encompass – thanks to the various protagonists of Modernism – almost all existing and traditional buildings and urban structures. The *tabula rasa*, a virginal blank slate, emerged as the platform upon which the modern built environments would be erected and served as a symbol of the complete rupture between old and new. The creation of *tabula rasa* territories employed acts of destruction as both a necessary means to clear the ground for new construction, wiping out traces of history that interfered with the Modernist vision. The technique holds not only rational but also emotional, disruptive, and symbolic dimensions. Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* was not intended to be realized on open ground but in the center of historic Paris, showing an important shift in the understanding of the city and in the historical role of architecture. Rather than the juxtaposition of multiple urban conditions and buildings of various ages, the *Plan Voisin* suggests the singular, pure modern architectural project, with a few strategic exceptions, at the expense of existing context. Modernism's mission and promise to establish a bright new order – presented as a liberation from the social, political, and physical ties associated with the congested and corrupted traditional city – required surgical acts of elimination.

This destruction was not merely based on rational arguments, as Modernism promoted, but also sprung from a whole-hearted rejection of the old as well as the social systems linked to it. The historic city not only represented the problems of living conditions, sanitation, and traffic congestion, but also embodied traditional values as well as ideological and social constructs that Modernism openly challenged. Destruction under Modernism can be viewed as a disruptive, but simultaneously sterilizing, surgical operation. It is only secondarily, and at times reluctantly, concerned with destroying physical matter. As a highly charged act, it is directed both towards the material artifacts and the order they imply: it is a way to accomplish the expulsion of meanings, values, and usages from corrupt matter and thus to realize a "better" or "new" order.

In this sense, the perception of the existing environment as ruins bears similarities to Simmel's thinking. Rather than allowing nature to triumph over the human spirit, a tremendous and strenuous effort of intentional razing is undertaken to produce new construction in which a new and modern human spirit (in many ways similar to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*[7]) triumphs over an obsolete human spirit. The adjacency of this cultural operation to the aggressions of the two world wars is foreshadowed in Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*: "We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world."[8] While the long-lasting monumentality of the new became one popular track in the course of twentieth century architecture, the architecture of transience in demand of constant renewal is another. Antonio Sant' Elia proclaimed that "architecture will be fundamentally short-lived and transitory. Our houses will last less time than we do. Every generation will have to make its own city anew."[9] In this dictum, the tabula rasa doctrine – the habitual and recurring destruction of precedents – is posited as a necessary premise for architecture. In step with the progression of time and cultural development, the expiration date of built structures has to be set and understood. Such an architecture, planned with its certain destruction in mind, could be seen as producing an anti-ruin: a structure of newness erected in the place of the old that does not leave traces or manifest struggles, but always starts anew.

Destructive forces – whether they are perceived and interpreted as Claeszoon Heda's symbolically encoded contemplation on the fragility and ephemerality of all matter or rather understood as Bruegel's description of the world as a landscape of guilt – spare no material structure. No architecture can escape its ruination. Conversely, the ruin is a highly valuable concept regarding any architectural output. Depending on how architecture is conceived, perceived, and handled relative to its gradual or abrupt destruction or likewise, as an agent that produces destructive effects, it modulates our relationship with history and with our immediate environment. It has the potential to connect us with or disconnect us from various versions of the past and potential futures. As archives and relics of countless events and as the prime medium through which human life transpires, it always transcends the realm of pure material form to encompass the complex dynamics of historic, social, and cultural transformations as well as the persistent forces of nature. Architecture does not merely consist of passive, static, stable forms; on the contrary, it constitutes open structures intertwined with the incidents of their historic context and thus, plays an active role in constantly shaping and re-framing our relationship with the world.

7
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York and London: Macmillan, 1896).

8
Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Le Futurisme," *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909.

9
Antonio Sant'Elia, "Futurist Architecture: Manifesto," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 201.