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Another One Bites the Dust!^[1]

Gabriela Salazar

Abstract

The contemporary landscape is rife with ruins, from circumscribed tourist attractions to urban decay and demolition sites. When examined, our aesthetic experience of these sites ranges from historical distancing to the sublime and, when found in our local communities (e.g., Providence, RI), to discomfort, displacement, and horror. In particular, this paper is interested in how certain forms of demolition, from slow and messy to explosively dramatic, can be understood as compressed and heightened experiences of the traditional sublime ruin. Additionally, as contemporary artists often use the vernacular of the ruin in their work, this paper considers how three artists, Gordon Matta-Clark, Rachel Whiteread, and Robert Polidori, utilize established aesthetic categories of the ruin and destruction to create meaning and emotional power in their art.

Key Words

contemporary art, contemporary artists, demolition, destruction, Matta-Clark, Polidori, ruins, sublime, urban decay, Whiteread

A land without ruins is a land without memories—a land without memories is a land without history.

—Abram Joseph Ryan (1838-1886)^[2]

Architecture is the only art form that society condones destroying.

—Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Decay*, 2005^[3]

1. Enter, the Ruin and Her Suitors

In the opening act, there are no surprises.

Location: A street in a present-day city. As the sun rises, bustling crowds and traffic fill the scene. Dusk settles and the stage slowly vacates.

And then, for whatever reason, a building falls out of use. The door is padlocked, soon breached; windows are broken, boarded, covered in plastic; the plastic comes loose and flaps in the weather. As floors cave in and the roof fails, light shines through the windows from inside out—they are bright spots in an otherwise dark face of brick and splintering wood.

All seems lost. Yet, before long, a ribbon of chain-link fence skirts the façade, and a long-necked and noisy suitor begins to court the building. As he sidles up to her, walls come tumbling down around them both. Just as quickly, the actors leave the scene. The stage is empty, save for the encircling fence—a reminder that the plot^[4] has undergone a seismic shift.

Ruins can evoke extraordinary narratives. From the early Renaissance to today, they have been depicted and used in art for this purpose.^[5] In contemporary art, artists are exploring present-day ruins as sites for their work—from the run-down neighborhoods of London and New York City to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans—drawing on traditional meanings of the ruin to inform current discourse. It follows that we should ask ourselves why and how are ruins still so emotionally powerful in our modern imaginations? What transforms a simple

dilapidated building into a ruin, with all the concomitant meanings and associations? And how has the translation of 'ruin' into the contemporary urban landscape transformed its use in art?

2. The Ruin and the Sublime

In the traditional process, a ruin is produced from a human-made structure. Usually, these structures were originally built to last for some time. They are emblematic of the culture, people, or society that created them, and so their dissolution, either by human or natural forces, is particularly poignant in relation to their intended longevity. The ruin, in its exposed and broken state, is a literal inversion of our expectations of inside and outside, of void and containment, of structure and safety. In our contemporary experience, this destruction by war, earthquake, or just time is often arrested and carefully calibrated to remain in a state that matches the current definition of 'ruin.' Like the Coliseum in Rome, the Parthenon in Greece, the city of Pompeii, and the Mayan and Aztec cities dug out of mountains in Mexico, these ruins become tourist destinations, where our experience of them is often mediated by a history lesson or their juxtaposition with signs of control and order, such as information booths, gates, souvenir stands, and scaffolding.(Figure 1) They can transport us in a limited fashion to the world that created them, but more acutely (and accurately), they reflect back to us our own society; they are a reminder of our own transience.

Figure 1



Roman aqueducts and tourism office, Segovia, Spain, 2006. (Gabriela Salazar)

Our ongoing struggle with time, the elements, nature, and each other all become crystallized in the remains of buildings and structures that were made to support and give meaning to another culture's best efforts at the time. These days, to maintain a ruin from antiquity takes a lot of work and resources. In 2008, *The New York Times* ran a brief article on the ruins of Pompeii, which stated, "The Italian government declared a year-long state of emergency at Pompeii on Friday to try to rescue one of the world's most important cultural treasures from decades of neglect....Some 2.5 million tourists visit Pompeii each year, and many have expressed shock at the conditions."^[6] The research needs of archeologists and historians aside, the fact that a ruin, by definition a neglected, destroyed object, can suffer from *too* much neglect so that people who came explicitly to see a ruin would be shocked, is a strange development. There

seems to be a level of decay that is expected, or acceptable, in a ruin; beyond that point we are disappointed in our own culture for its inability to maintain the ruin, to preserve the artifact. A perfect tension needs to hold between the decrepitude of the structure and the determination of our culture to keep it recognizable.

Between these poles lies the sense of authenticity. As part of her analysis of authenticity in *The Substance of Style*, Virginia Postrel (following Walter Benjamin) defines it as an "aura" that shows "the signs of history.... By this definition, authenticity is reflected in the changes and imperfections left by the passage of time—the signs of use, adaptation, and experience."^[7] When the ruin falls into too much disrepair, either by neglect or over-visitation, the clues to its prior uses become obscured and obliterated. Ruins require imagination to experience them,^[8] and so when a ruin crosses a certain threshold of deterioration, the structure loses much of its appeal, for without those defining human characteristics and clear spatial relationships, we can no longer imagine with any certainty what went on inside it. Physically unstable or unrecognizable, the ruin then threatens to reflect our inabilities and weaknesses as a society, or our impotence in the face of the unrelenting power of nature, neither of which is attractive to our modern sensibilities. Though at a remove from us, like a map of a faraway place, the over-ruined ruin hints at the path to our own dissolution.

Though this tourist-oriented experience of the ruin has roots in the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, the first conscious use of ruins in art appeared during the Renaissance, when treatises on architectural details began to appear and the elements of ruins—broken columns, arches, pedestals, etc.—graced the title pages of these tomes as mash-up imaginations of landscapes.^[9] Archeologically inaccurate, these plates show little interest in the associative qualities of ruins and are more concerned with their formal properties, using ruins as a device to explore the depiction of space and perspective. Around this time, ruins also began to appear as landscape props in paintings of Biblical stories, but were still mostly relegated to background or scenery status. The increased visibility of the ruin motif in Western society coincided with a shift from Classicism to Romanticism in literature and the arts. It wasn't until the seventeenth century that the qualities of ruins began to take on metaphorical connotations, intensifying in the eighteenth century in the visual, applied, and landscaping arts into a mania or cult. Ruins showed up in paintings, wallpaper, ceramics, and even as necessary features, prefabricated or artificially constructed, in a garden or estate.^[10]

Concurrently, the meaning of the ruin changed from a source of formal beauty and appreciation to a site for invoking horror, fear, awe, and death. (After admiring the engineering and cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, it's only logical that, eventually, a certain dread would set in considering the now-decrepit state of those cultures' most cherished edifices.) Further, ancient ruins, for a long while even reviled,^[11] became entwined with Romantic ideas of the sublime and the picturesque.

Edmund Burke, laying the groundwork for the rise of Romanticism in the eighteenth century, described the sublime as the highest of aesthetic experiences, "an idea belonging to self-preservation, ...its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress...."^[12] He asserted that a sense of terror results from our fear of death, and anything that reminds us of death "...is a foundation capable of the sublime...."^[13] For Burke, the sublime is a delicate construction of pain and enjoyment; the "delight" that results from the sublime is actually a removal, by either a physical obstacle or psychological distancing, of some of the immediacy of that

terror or pain:

In all these cases, if the pain and terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror; a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. [14]

This removal allows us to retreat from pure terror to the more rational, present ground of self-preservation, a measured, proactive, and possibly enjoyable response when looking into the face of our own annihilation.

By the eighteenth century, ruins had become a popular subject in Western art. They were immortalized by painters such as J.M.W. Turner in his paintings and watercolors of Tintern Abbey at the very end of the eighteenth century, and Thomas Cole in his five-part series, *The Course of Empire* (1834-1836).

Figure 2



Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire (Desolation)*, oil on canvas, 1834-1836. [33]

(Collection of The New-York Historical Society, Accession #1858.5)

These paintings exploit the effect of a fading light to highlight the sense of loss in the crumbling structures, and create a sense of awe, fear, and wonder at the exposed spaces with the judicious placement of tiny human figures. Following Burke's definition, these images could simultaneously signify our mortality and immateriality, giving us pleasure as we, from a (relative) state of safety and health, considered their noble and terrible decline.

As we expand our experience of ruins to those beyond the bounds of a painting or Romantic garden landscape, a proper context or framing continues to be crucial to our sense of "delight." All ancient or tourist-destination ruins share a common underlying foundation, which is temporal or experiential distance. Our chronological remoteness from those ancient cultures gives us a reprieve from the psychological demands of their structural remains. In the context of preservation, paintings, and attractions, the ruin's ability to remind us of the inevitable march of time and history is often superseded by a relief that such a fall from grace could never happen to us. The presence of modern additions to these ruins, of our scaffolds and the like, create a frame around the meaning of the ruins, just like a frame contextualizes a painting in a room, separating

the experience from our reality. These sorts of ruins are walled-off, caged, delimited by a certain place, time, frame, and perspective, just like watching a movie or reading a book. When we leave the site, the immediate experiencing is basically over. With even more distance, we are just as likely to convert our “sublime” encounter of preserved ruins into an affirmation of the strength and indestructibility of our own culture, as we are likely to gain perspective on our ephemeral existence. How does this compare, in our cities and on an almost daily basis, when we are confronted with what amounts to contemporary ruins?

3. Dénouement: Ruin Enters the Contemporary Landscape

In the modern urban landscape, buildings are constantly in the process of coming up or falling down; landfills and scrap yards appear on the fringes of neighborhoods, piled high with debris; a car crashes or is dismantled in the street. Ruins are all around us. We build and discard the buildings we live and work in as if they are shells to grow in and out of.^[15] If, after their useful life is deemed over, there is not enough money or incentive to put something new in their place, these structures litter our sidewalks like empty soda cans and disrupt the continuous façade of the street like a bad or missing tooth. As David Lowenthal states, “[T]he juxtaposition of old and new heightens one’s awareness of age: Americans do not bother to repair something old, they would rather give it a new face, even if that means leaving a lot of old faces around pending replacement...”^[16] In the meantime, these “old faces” become familiar to us.

Because they are not preserved in their state of decay as a site separate from the day-to-day, these contemporary ruins ask us to question the consequences of their existence in our lives, our societies, our greater culture, and even in the world. In his discussion of the aesthetic appreciation of human environments, Allen Carlson writes, “to aesthetically appreciate our human environments without any reference to morality seems...morally irresponsible, if not morally bankrupt...”^[17] Which leads us to ask, what are the moral concerns associated with urban ruins?

As one contemporary example, the streets of downtown Providence, RI (where I had the opportunity to live and study for two years), hold many structural remains of the effects of socio-economic and political factors at work. Between 1940 and 1990, “Providence’s population declined by more than a third (-36.6%), from 253,504 in 1940 to 160,728 in 1990, one of the steepest mid-century rates of population loss among American cities.”^[18] At the same time, the population of the state increased by more than 40%, with all of the growth occurring outside of the city center. According to a study conducted by a private consultant for the EPA and the organization Grow Smart Rhode Island, this loss of density deprives cities

of their ability to rejuvenate themselves by redeveloping old properties and facilities through the market. Thus, urban centers have been left with many aging and deteriorating properties, facilities and infrastructures. As a result, some properties have been abandoned by their owners with city taxes left unpaid. This has produced a decline in these cities’ property values and tax revenues.

...Many remaining city residents who own homes meanwhile find that they must pay higher taxes and yet live with a decaying urban environment. Thus, the decaying cities *push* the non-poor out as much as the suburbs *pull* them in....In this circular process, it does not matter whether the suburban sprawl or the urban decay came first: once the process has been set in motion, it keeps going.^[19]

This economic cycle is the rational justification for fearing urban decay. A decline in population is usually a precursor to, and then an excuse for, a decline in urban infrastructure. More viscerally felt and ethically problematic are the daily effects of the cycle: emptier and more dangerous streets; the loss of business and ability to provide a livelihood in the area; an increase in the ratio of poor to wealthy residents without the tax-base to adequately support services and schools for them; and eventually, destabilization of the desirable homeostasis of the city.

Equilibrium is the mortar that keeps our definitions standing. For a traditional ruin to function as such, there has to be a balance between nature and human: too much of one or the other and the ruin loses its appeal. In a city, stability comes from a diverse mix of residents and business that is, over the long run, economically self-sustaining. In the gaping eyes of the derelict building one can glimpse the horror of the looming death of the urban landscape: the building embodies the disruption of the balance. Now an eyesore, it is symptomatic of the ills of the city, and therefore our society. However, the derelict building does not, by definition, fulfill the role of "ruin" until it is *itself* in a sufficient state of poised decay, simultaneously considered both standing and falling down, horrific and beautiful.

4. The Speed of Demolition and Our Experience of It

Dissolution usually takes one of two forms: slow decay at the hands of nature and vandals or a dramatic finale under the pendulum of a wrecking ball. When buildings come down gradually as a result of neglect, they are constant reminders of our transience, our inability to maintain appearances, our fallibility, and the decline of the value of our environment, which is why the second scenario is as common as the first.

We can't stand to look upon them, so we tear them down. As Lowenthal states, "Decay is most dreadful when it seems our fault."^[20] By taking control of the course of disintegration, we have the option to reverse our aesthetic experience and to see the destruction as a sign of our power to shape our surroundings, to make things better, cleaner, neater, safer.

This reverse narrative, and the possibility for redemption, depend heavily upon what goes in the place of the ruin and how much the residue of the original structure is allowed to remain visible as a reminder of its former existence.

The process of tearing down buildings and inconsistent or ambivalent replacement is an especially interesting spectacle in many once-thriving urban centers.^[21] Again, I had the opportunity to witness this process first-hand in Providence, and I will use examples from that experience here. When the transitory ruin is replaced by a new, well-designed building or a beautiful park, our faith in our society and in the ever-forward growth of our economy and culture is usually affirmed. If it is cleared for a parking lot (especially one that is newly landscaped, like the one outside of the Rhode Island School of Design's Fletcher Studio Building (Figure 3)), we may be disappointed at the loss of a familiar structure, but the replacement is a reassurance that our surroundings are at least being maintained and the new construction quickly becomes familiar to us in turn.

Figure 3



Fancy landscaped parking lot next to RISD Studios, Providence, RI, 2008.
(Gabriela Salazar)

Most distressing is when the now-empty lot is *not* filled, when the ghost image of the former structure can be seen on the adjacent building's wall and the bone-like rubble is left to line the ground, such as the lot on the other side of Fletcher (Figure 4). In this instance, we are not reassured or allowed to put a frame around the ruin; instead, we are fearful at its implication. Like a missing tooth, we notice the absence and don't get used to it because the function of our teeth, to chew and to look good or, in the case of a building, to house our activities and to help maintain the function and feel of the city, is compromised.[\[22\]](#)

Figure 4



Remains of DOWNCITY DINER fire, other side of RISD Studios, Providence, RI.[\[34\]](#) (ArtinRuins.com)

Also, when a familiar building is taken down, we often become aware of our environment as if experiencing it afresh; the loss makes us sensitive to what surrounds it. To be an emotionally powerful experience, these ruins do not need to be important feats of engineering or emblematic of our society in their original forms, only familiar to us and part of what gives our surroundings a sense of place. At the sight of a decades-old abandoned industrial structure in her neighborhood being torn down, one

Brooklyn resident exclaimed, "I feel like my heart was just ripped out.... My son says he felt like he just witnessed an execution."^[23] Our surroundings become a part of our physical experience, impossible to distance them, and their removal can and does affect us physically.

Demolition can be a spectacular manifestation of our need and ability to rejuvenate our surroundings or relocate blight to the periphery of our experience. The actual destruction of a building in the urban landscape is a compressed, even heightened version of the traditional experience of a ruin. The process, which in the case of the traditional ruin is usually mysterious to us from the effects of time and distance, is almost too obvious when you can see the yellow Caterpillar backhoe trolling over its spoils with its nose to the ground, like a rat in a landfill. Yet within our ham-fisted machines and dynamite is the frightening realization of our own power. On the scale of the individual aesthetic response, demolition exposes many conflicting possibilities. It can summon deep feelings of nostalgia and sadness for a lost time and place, and when vestiges of the building are left behind, this feeling can even persist after the demolition is complete. It can attenuate feelings of anxiety surrounding the structure, especially if it had become hazardous or a site of undesirable behavior (drug dealers, teenage vandalism, etc.). At the same time, it can be a harbinger of hope, of things to come, as when a derelict building is razed to build a park, garden, or community center. It can be an annoyance—a polluting, noisy, cloud of machines, gasoline fumes, toxic debris, and barricades that disturbs the daily routine. It can be like losing a loved one, a violent death, a reminder of our own transience. And it can be a spectacle, an out-of-the-ordinary experience, or a re-experiencing of the ordinary. What is most fascinating about demolition is that through it the negative connotations of urban blight can become a positive, if short-lived, aesthetic experience, similar to the tranquil terror invoked by the sublime.

There is beauty, art, and even spirituality in demolition. In his book *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition*, Jeff Byles describes demolition as "hunkered down at the front lines between the built and the unbuilt, the past and the future, even the living and the dead."^[24] He goes on to tell the story of Anna Chong, an expert wrecker whose firm took down the Sears Merchandise Center in Philadelphia, possibly the largest structure ever imploded. She is known to sprinkle holy water on a site before demolishing it and, when working in Japan or Korea, refuses to demolish a building on the fourth of the month or put explosives on the fourth floor because the numeral four is associated with death in those countries. Her former partner Eric Kelly, explains, "We know God's really in control of these things.... Because of the work we do, we're probably a lot more spiritual than most people." Witnesses to large-scale, detonated demolitions have described them as "supercharging of space,"^[25] a "catharsis,"^[26] and, in describing the personal myth of another well-known wrecker, "a kind of parable in which the moral tenets of his faith find their concrete, earthly expression."^[27] When the Seattle Kingdome was destroyed in 2000, the blast was celebrated with parties, violin serenades, and champagne (requisite for any proper spectacle). Mark Loizeaux, who choreographed the complicated implosion, proudly said it looked like "a pressed flower."

Figure 5



Pedro Perez © The Seattle Times

Seattle Kingdome, Seattle, WA, after implosion.[35]

“It was just steel, concrete and dynamite,’ said a witness, “but together it performed like nature at its angriest: lightning like flashes followed by thunderous cracks, then ground-shaking collisions and a blinding dust storm.”[28] Even when at the hands of man, destruction brings us back to associations with nature and its beautiful, powerful—shall we say sublime—aspects.

On the other hand, demolition by slower means, like excavators, backhoes, loaders, cranes, and wrecking balls, exposes the insides of a building in a protracted and crude anatomy lesson, where we, as voyeurs, witness the lives and histories of the rooms where people lived and worked as if they were once-living organs. The poet Théophile Gautier, in describing the unimaginably gargantuan demolition efforts during Haussman’s reconfiguration of Paris’ streets during the second half of the nineteenth century, found inspiration in the “mystery of intimate distributions.”

... “A curious spectacle,” he wrote, “these open houses, with their floorboards suspended over the abyss, their colorful flowered wallpaper still showing the shape of the rooms, their staircases leading nowhere now, their cellars open to the sky, their bizarre collapsed interiors and battered ruins....This destruction is not without beauty...the play of light and shade across the ruins, over the random blocks of fallen stone and wood, make for picturesque effects.”[29]

Inside becomes outside, private turns public, and we are allowed to be voyeurs without embarrassment.

After moving to Providence, I witnessed at least two demolitions: that of the old firehouse on Empire Street (a hulking six-story marble structure that I came upon already half-gutted in my first week, with public bathrooms and meeting rooms and wires and pipes all democratized by the same shorn exposure to the elements), and the destruction of a smaller three-floor commercial building on Washington Street that had housed a popular bar, The Talk of the Town, as well as a Chinese restaurant and a "gentleman's hotel" with an entrance in the back and, presumably, rooms in the stories above. By the time this second structure was being demolished sometime in the late winter of 2008, I was already feeling attachment to the streets I walked down every day, and so was quite shocked when a familiar dark alley along the way to my studio suddenly opened up to the sky, and the once-taboo hotel began to be stripped of its walls. Although it was not a building that I felt any sentimental attachment to, watching this building come down made me feel sad for the loss on the street, as it housed a couple of working businesses until just a few weeks before, and Washington Street is pocked with vacant lots already, diluting the energy of the once-thriving thoroughfare. And, of course, though unnerved by all the noise, I was also attracted to the destruction, to the fearsome machines with their vigorous arms and teeth and their beautiful and haphazard cutting through of rooms and floors and walls, to the exposed and vulnerable colors and interiors of a bygone era. For the three weeks that the building was coming down, I felt like I was watching a tragic play unfold, complete with a curtain call for the actors, storefronts left standing until the very last.

Figure 6





All pictures, demolition of Talk of the Town, 2008. (Gabriela Salazar)

As has been noted since Romanticism, experiencing ruins subsequently alters the way we feel about our built environment. As an entire city grows and shrinks, like the stones of one big ruin being worn away, reconstituted, and grown over, our spatial experience of the street and our landscape becomes more responsive to how these holes and vacancies affect the whole order. Each crushed bedroom and every hole in the streetscape has a narrative, and each is its own anonymous sacrifice to more powerful forces.

4. The Experience of Ruin in Contemporary Art

How have artists responded to these modern-day developments in the possibilities of the ruin? Is it correct to still use the terms 'sublime' and 'picturesque' when talking about the ruin in contemporary art? Rachel Whiteread, Gordon Matta-Clark (now deceased), and Robert Polidori are three artists approaching the established idea of the ruin through the vernacular of the contemporary ruin. Issues of the sublime and picturesque still figure in their work, but they are coupled with a speed of destruction and report that are impossible to imagine in the time of Turner and Cole. For the most part, the ruins of Romanticism were about slow decay and slow discovery. But of course (like any good ruin), by the end of its run, *Ruinenlust*^[30] had crumbled into the realm of kitsch, and awe became overgrown with sentimentality. In the art of Whiteread, Matta-Clark, and Polidori, love of the ruin has imploded into a surrealist urban redevelopment effort, a cross between Haussman's Second Empire destruction and PeeWee's Playhouse, made possible by a natural disaster.

Yet there is still something formally composed about their work, especially Polidori's photographs. This formal organization only heightens the tension in their art and highlights the conflict between the rational force and those forces that we cannot escape, over which we have little or no control.

Rachel Whiteread is interested in the voids and textures created by the things we use every day, including the spaces we inhabit, like rooms and stairwells. In *House* (1993), Whiteread cast the entire inside of a three-story Victorian house on a street where every other house had already been knocked down.

Figure 7



Rachel Whiteread, *House*, concrete and existing structure, 1993 (now destroyed). [36](© Rachel Whiteread. Courtesy of Gagolian Gallery. Photo credit: Sue Omerod.)

Every interior wall was lined with concrete before the exterior walls were stripped away, leaving a mysterious ghost impression of the inside of the room facing out from between the floors. In the inversion, all of the familiar forms—fireplaces, windows, doorknobs, and architectural moldings—become strange to us, as the holes they left behind protrude oddly outward or inward, in opposition to what we expect. Also unnerving is the sheer bulk of those empty spaces. They make us feel the space outside the house as inside, and give a weight and urgency to the voids left by the people who inhabited the house. Because of the use of concrete, the structure feels of our contemporary landscape. (Who knew that every Victorian house held Modernist cubes inside?) The new concrete walls are a bulwark against further destruction, a self-preserving gesture as well as a monument to a street that had already been leveled. *House* is an entombed contemporary ruin, poised between exposure and complete opacity, in the process of simultaneous construction and destruction. It represents a new kind of dissolution for our culture, not the slow process of decay that makes the new old, but the surrender of the old to the new. Reflecting on the process of urban renewal, especially of the 1960s and 70s, *House* speaks to the temptation to scrap older structures, and the intimate but conflicting histories that go with them, for new narratives, a clean slate.

In his piece *Four Corners* (1974), Gordon Matta-Clark distilled the performance of destruction into a surgical procedure. Like Whiteread, he made a house call, choosing a site-specific approach, that reinforces the

references to actual ruins. He found a house in New Jersey that was already slated for demolition and, with a chain saw, cut vertical slices straight through the perpendicular axis of the house (front to back, side to side), disregarding the interior structure, and let the four corners fall outwards to expose the fissures.

Figure 8



Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting: Four Corners*. (322 Humphrey Street, Englewood, NJ), 1974 [37]

(© Gordon Matta-Clark.)

This composed destruction exhibits similarities to the way explosives need to be well placed and timed correctly to implode a building just so, with minimum superfluous impact and maximum visual effect. Broadly, both Matta-Clark and other artists of demolition are working with the spectacle of the destruction, yet the tools Matta-Clark uses are much more crude and also more invasive. They are analogous to the intimacy of being threatened by a knife versus being dispatched by a gun. There is a sort of quixotic beauty in one person's going at a house with a chain saw to make art; it is a parallel and counterpoint to the inane speed and drama of the implosive act. In both cases, the result is performative. Furthermore, in both situations, control over the final method and look of destruction is in the hands of human beings: they are declarative aesthetic acts. One could go a step further and say that Matta-Clark's act revivifies the old idea of the sublime. The precariousness of his work is very physically unsettling, yet because the cracks are so obviously human, our fear is mitigated enough that we can appreciate it aesthetically.

After the floodwaters receded in New Orleans, Robert Polidori documented the aftermath of the destruction in a series of photographs that were shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006.[31] The scenes are un-peopled, though the signs and symbols of people's lives are everywhere: furniture, pictures, interior decorating choices, doorways, windows, cars, all the detritus of modern living, all the trappings of "home." I saw this show right after the hurricane clean-up began, and found it to be a little like driving by a car crash: impossible to look at, impossible to look away. In examining them this second time a few years later on a small computer screen, I am struck more by their grace and baroque beauty than by the horror of people's possessions being utterly trashed, their homes swept straight across streets.

Figure 9



Robert Polidori, "North Robinson Street," C-print, 2005 (© Robert Polidori, courtesy of the artist). [38]

In the picture *North Robinson Street* (Figure 9), the symmetrically hanging ceiling fan, limp like a wilting daisy (echoes of the Kingdome's final resting shape), coupled with the straight-on perspective, creates a soothing tranquility and the imposition of rationality for all the clutter and chaos to live within. The outlines of the room, however devastated and exposed they may be, serve as a frame for what we can't understand, which is reinforced by the frame of the picture itself. These formal scaffolding structures, imposed by Polidori, shape the way we see the devastation from that hurricane. As there is almost nothing within the photograph that serves as a contrast to the destruction and make us feel its oddness, the photographs begin to take on the same mediated effect of the tourist ruin. We develop an archeological and socio-political interest, where we can appreciate the lives of the people who lived there, the clues to how they lived, and become angry at the government response at the time, but are harder-pressed to extrapolate the image to our own homes and our own lives. It's as if with temporal familiarity we need the contrast of regular everyday living to have the ruin affect us, whereas with temporal distance, the contrast with our modern selves only reinforces our feelings of detached observance.

In his essay "The Ruin" (1911), the sociologist Georg Simmel said of architecture that "it is the only art in which the great struggle between the will of the spirit and the necessity of nature issues into real peace, in which the soul in its upward striving and nature in its gravity are held in balance." [32] There is an aesthetic beauty in the ruin, not so much in its physical manifestations—the decay, the crumbling, the holes—but in what those manifestations represent in the context they are seen in. Ruins need to be close enough to our daily experience to maintain their power as sublime. Contemporary art of the ruin walks a tightrope between two poles of opposition in order to invoke some of the same aesthetic effects as ruins, while not falling into the expected tropes. That timeless tension between care and neglect, inside and outside, natural forces and human maintenance (or destruction) is what continues to make art about the ruin still meaningful to us today.

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Endnotes

[1] Queen, 1980.

[2] Abram Joseph Ryan, Answers.com. Quotations, Quotations Book, 2008. <http://www.answers.com/topic/abram-joseph-ryan>, accessed 8 December 2008.

[3] Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* (New York: Harmony Books, 2005).

[4] Pun intended.

[5] Paul Zucker, *Fascination of Decay: Ruins: Relic—Symbol—Ornament* (New Jersey: The Gregg Press, 1968), p. 11.

[6] Patricia Cohen, "Emergency at Pompeii," *New York Times*, 5 July 2008.

[7] Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style* (New York, Harpercollins Publishers, 2003) p. 111.

[8] Zucker, p. 3.

[9] Zucker, p. 12.

[10] Zucker, pp. 47-48.

[11] David Lowenthal, "The Look of Age," *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 144.

[12] Edmond Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful; with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), p. 110.

[13] Burke, p. 162.

[14] Burke, pp. 166, 168.

[15] One chicken-and-the-egg effect of the constant sloughing off of our built environment is the health of the demolition industry. As of the 2002 U.S. Economic Census (the most current data available), there are 2,097 wrecking and demolition contractors in the United States with almost thirty thousand employees. It's a \$3.1 billion business. Capitalism is adept at finding new markets: When buildings are built to have an average life of 35 years, both the builders and the wreckers profit. (Byles, p. 17.)

[16] Lowenthal, p. 126.

[17] Allen Carlson, "On aesthetically appreciating human environments," *Philosophy & Geography*, 4 No. 1 (2001), 17.

[18] H.C. Planning Consultants, Inc. and Planimetrics, L.L.P., *The Costs of Suburban Sprawl and Urban Decay in Rhode Island, Executive Summary* (Providence: Grow Smart Rhode Island, 1999), p. 1.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 2.

[20] Lowenthal, p. 147.

[21] The function and sense of purpose of preservation societies or websites like ArtinRuins.com, which chronicles the lives, demise, and reuse of both notable and negligible structures in Providence, comes from our desire to maintain the illusion that we are living in the present and

moving forward, even if it is a present surrounded by well-preserved examples of the past or buildings that we would rather not look at but at least hold the place for something better to come along. Either way, what's significant is that these societies give us some control over the way things look.

[22] Contrast the contemporary urban ruin to the contemporary ruin in the landscape: dilapidated barns, fences, and old silos all still conjure up picturesque and mysterious connotations, despite their possible ramifications of dying small farms, etc. (Of course, this experience may be a very different one for farmers.) Furthermore, a suburban ruin, like the abandoned strip-mall, is yet another case, as we usually only experience it as a singular destination or while driving by at high speeds. The distancing factor of being in a moving car on the road is the same if the strip-mall is bustling or not; and once we have no reason to go there, the strip-mall is barely pressed upon our senses, being neither here nor there during our trajectory.

[23] Byles, p. 4. It is this very sort of emotional attachment that we develop to the familiar that gives preservation groups their energy and near-religious zeal. For an extremely heartbreaking description of the three-year teardown of the original temple-like Pennsylvania Station in New York City, see pp. 135-165. Outcries over the destruction of Penn Station directly led to the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965.

[24] Byles, p. 18.

[25] Byles, p. 22.

[26] Byles, p. 71.

[27] Byles, p. 80.

[28] Byles, pp. 73-74.

[29] Byles, p. 121. Gautier also called Haussman "Paris's own Piranesi," referring to Giovanni Batista Piranesi, the Roman architect and engraver who created a series of still-fascinating etchings of crumbling Roman ruins in the late eighteenth century.

[30] Byles, p. 15. Phrase coined by Rose Macauley, means "lust for ruins."

[31] Slideshow at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/arts/design/22floo.html?_r=1.

[32] Brian Dillon. "Fragments from a History of Ruin," *Cabinet*, Issue 20 Winter 2005/06, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/dillon.php>, accessed December 8, 2008.

[33] Wikipedia contributors, "The Course of Empire," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Course_of_Empire&oldid=243386653, accessed December 8, 2008.

[34] Art in Ruins website. <http://www.artinruins.com>, accessed December 8, 2008.

[35] Seattletimes.com. "From Dome to Dust." <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/special/kingdome/gallery/photo5.html>, accessed December 8, 2008.

[36] Damien Hyldreth, Sculpture, "Mythologies, The Uncanny, Rachel Whiteread," www.damonart.com/myth_uncanny.html, accessed 6

December 2008.

[37] Artnet.com, "Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting: Four Corners*," <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/smyth/smyth6-4-2.asp>, accessed 6 December 2008.

[38] Michael Kimmelman, "What's wrong with this picture?," *New York Times*, 22 September 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/arts/design/22floo.html>.

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