

18. Jenefer Robinson, "Simulation and Architecture," *International Society for the Philosophy of Architecture*, May 23, 2010, <http://isparchitecture.wordpress.com>.

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*Unimagined Beauty*

Ghost, lost, and ruined things are important but undertheorized objects of aesthetic appreciation. Perhaps one reason these structures have been largely ignored is that they are caught up in webs of appreciation in which the aesthetic gets tangled with nonaesthetic factors. But that tangle is precisely what makes them intriguing. Ghost buildings are those that no longer exist and are known only through memory, photography, paintings, and the like. Lost structures and places include ghost architectural structures as well as barely-still-visible places, such as the Hetch Hetchy Valley (which has since been flooded). And ruined structures are the physical remains of human-built structures that are in the process of decay. In this article, I discuss recent analyses of ghost and lost structures that have been developed by Jeanette Bicknell and Jennifer Judkins, and I offer my own analysis of ruins as a way of amending and refining their accounts. I present three criticisms of Bicknell's and Judkins's accounts. First, I argue that they are mistaken in believing that it is necessary to value what is missing to appreciate what remains. Second, I believe they overemphasize the importance of imaginative reconstruction to our aesthetic engagement with these structures. Third, I think they do not fully consider the myriad reasons why people visit sites of long-past events, such as battlefields.

In "On Things That Are Not There Anymore," Jennifer Judkins discusses the aesthetic appreciation of long-lost buildings and places.<sup>1</sup> Some examples she discusses include the site of the original Globe Theatre (which is now traced onto the floor of a car park) and Hetch Hetchy Valley. Other examples include places where important events occurred but no artifact was built or remains, such as the case with Runnymede—where the Magna Carta was signed. In these cases we attach a value to a location, rather than an artifact. The engagement with these sites Judkins envisages is one where there is an imaginative engagement

between what is no longer visible and what was once visible.

In "Architectural Ghosts," Jeanette Bicknell uses the title term to refer to human-made structures that no longer exist and now can be known only through traces that they have left. These traces may appear in our memory, in the landscape, and through photographs, drawings, and paintings. She uses the term 'environmental ghosts' to refer to features of the environment that can no longer be appreciated "first hand." Environmental ghosts might include a now disappeared glacier, Hetch Hetchy Valley, extinct species, and the like. Bicknell ambiguously distinguishes ghosts from ruins, stating, "If all that remains of a structure are piles of rubble or indentations in the ground, perhaps marked by a memorial plaque, then the structure is a ghost rather than a ruin."<sup>2</sup> Defining ruins is a difficult task for many reasons. Foremost, it is not clear when a structure sufficiently decays to become a ruin or when a ruin sufficiently decays to become a pile of rocks and ceases being a ruin, which is what Bicknell is pointing to in this quote. Obviously, this is a classic example of the sorites paradox. If one seeks a definition of 'ruins' that delineates such rigid markers as necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, the project is hopeless. I would prefer to define a ruin from the perspective of social ontology, where these objects are partially constituted by their communities viewing them as such. There are salient political reasons for such a definition. By allowing descendant and local communities to identify and define structures as ruins, these communities can exercise control over their own material culture. This would also allow some "piles of rubble or indentations in the ground" to be considered ruins and others lost structures.

In "The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux," Carolyn Korsmeyer posits that ruins are ontologically distinct from recently damaged objects. Her discussion emphasizes objects that are of a "considerable age," apparently ruling out the possibility of new ruins, such as industrial ruins, Rust Belt ruins, and ruins created through war.<sup>3</sup> A social ontology of ruins, on the other hand, avoids the omission implicit in Korsmeyer's account by including the possibility of new ruins.

Industrial ruins, such as the ruins of Detroit, have become a ubiquitous cultural category.<sup>4</sup> But according to Korsmeyer, "ruins bear the marks of the passage of time that is in the process of

gradually destroying them,” bolstering her view that ruins are elicitors of the sublime.<sup>5</sup> Korsmeyer’s focus on long stretches of time suits ruins of antiquity to the potential exclusion of new ruins. War-ravaged buildings lack a gradual origin story, yet should be considered ruins or remnants. Similarly, in my view, the trident staring into the empty space once occupied by the World Trade Center is a ruin candidate, even though it was created in minutes, not years.<sup>6</sup> Rose Macaulay’s *Pleasure of Ruins* briefly speaks about new ruins:

New ruins have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age, the true rust of the barons’ wars, not yet put on their ivy, nor equipped themselves with the appropriate bestiary of lizards, bats, screech-owls, serpents, speckled toads and little foxes which, as have been so frequently observed by ruin explorers, hold high revel in the precincts of old ruins. But new ruins are for a time stark and bare, vegetationless and creatureless; blackened and torn, they smell of fire and mortality.<sup>7</sup>

As Macaulay suggests, new ruins have different perceptual properties than old ruins, but they are ruins nonetheless. The nakedness of new ruins reminds us of our mortality, their death not yet dressed in the beauty of ivy, animals, or other adornments of nature.

Returning to ghosts, Bicknell argues that a conception of architectural appreciation is appropriate for architectural ghosts, since architectural ghosts share many of the same characteristics as “paper architecture” (structures that were designed but never built). While she admits that imaginative reconstruction may be required for appreciation, she believes one could appreciate the original structure as well as the traces.

In explaining imaginative reconstruction, Bicknell discusses the work that we do when reading a book; those of us who read the *Harry Potter* series imagined what the Hogwarts campus looked like well before watching the first Harry Potter movie. When we encounter ghost buildings, we do the same type of imaginative work; we use photographs, memories, and the like to reconstruct the building in our imagination. This is also, Bicknell argues, directly akin to what we do to aesthetically engage with paper architecture. However, Bicknell notes, unlike paper architecture, ghost structures exhibit unique qualities such as vulnerability and ephemerality.<sup>8</sup> Ghost struc-

tures, like ruins, provide *memento mori* in a way that paper architecture cannot.

Both Bicknell’s and Judkins’s accounts harken back to the classical conception of ruin appreciation, seeing the ruin as data for reconstruction. Robert Ginsberg, in *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, acknowledges, “The Classical attitude is a great supporter of archaeology as science: ‘Get in there and dig!’, it cheers.”<sup>9</sup> According to the classical conception, aesthetic appreciation of ruins requires imagining the ruin (or ghost or trace) as a previously existing whole. The object is taken to be instrumentally valuable insofar as it provides a basis for us to imagine and reconstruct the architectural structures and the civilizations that built them.<sup>10</sup>

Where the classical account is lacking, and by extension Judkins’s and Bicknell’s accounts, is in the insistence that we must value what was once there if we are to value what is currently there. Judkins states that “it becomes apparent that our appreciation of things that are not there anymore is enriched when we understand and value what is missing and when we have an accurate original location.”<sup>11</sup> Here is where I disagree. First, Judkins admits that there are cases where we cannot identify the exact location (for example, the Pilgrims’ landfall on or near Plymouth Rock), but we enjoy visiting the site nonetheless because of the mere possibility that it might be the genuine site. Second, I believe there are many instances of appreciation of sites where we do not know what is missing and yet value the site. There are sites of old battles regarding which we have very little information about what the landscape looked like at the time of battle or what (if any) structures existed on the ground, and yet people are drawn to these places. I return to the example of battlefields later.

But most importantly, I believe it is not necessarily the case that we value what is missing when aesthetically engaging with ruins and traces (however you want to draw that line). We can easily imagine cases where the original structure was banal or even ugly yet in its ruined form holds aesthetic appeal. Some ruins appear more beautiful in their ruined form than they did at the height of their architectural form. In such instances, we generally do not value what is missing; rather, we value the interesting interplay between nature and artifact, site and structure. In a ruin, the interaction between the natural and artifactual becomes

pronounced and thus becomes more of the focus of our aesthetic attention.

Bannerman Castle on the Hudson River provides us with an illustrative example of the aforementioned phenomenon. Inspired by Scottish castles and Moorish fortifications, Francis Bannerman VI shunned architects and engineers, preferring to design his eccentric castle and arsenal himself. The resultant structure was bizarre, if not a bit grotesque. Many visitors believe the castle is more beautiful in its ruined form than it was when it was completed. This is evidenced by the amount and type of tourism the castle now serves. Several companies run “artistic” tours of Pollepel Island (where the castle is located), providing opportunities to take photographs at dusk and dawn to maximize the effect.<sup>12</sup> Bannerman Castle has appeared in nearly every book about American ruins and has inspired countless professional photographers, painters, advertisers (who have used the structure in high fashion shoots), and movies (for example, Michael Bay’s *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*).<sup>13</sup>

Bannerman Castle shows us that something can be seen as more valuable, or at least more aesthetically valuable, in its ruined form. This implies that, at least sometimes, what we are valuing is not the original architectural structure but rather something that emerges once that structure is lost. This is partially evidenced by the fact that the ruined structure has spurred much more artistic production than the architectural structure. Therefore, I do not think we always have to value what is missing in order to appreciate the places where things are no longer there.

Additionally, classically inspired accounts also take us further away from what actually remains to be appreciated. I am arguing that part of ruin appreciation (and by extension appreciation of ghost, trace, and lost structures) is engaging with what is actually there. Under the imaginative reconstruction model, one might confine oneself to appreciating only the subset of properties of the site that would help with one’s reconstruction. To see that this is unduly restrictive, one need only observe that part of the pleasure we take in ruins is that many of their alluring aesthetic properties are unintended. We might still marvel at the intended elegance of a flying buttress, reimagining its interaction with the no-longer-there building, but if that is all we do, we miss opportunities to see beauty in the unexpected, unplanned

decay. Without using imaginative reconstruction, one may marvel at the ominous, looming quality of the broken flying buttress reaching out into empty space.

Moreover, focusing on what is on the ground has the benefit of increased accessibility to those who do not have the requisite historical knowledge. And those who have the appropriate historical knowledge do not have to value what once was there to enjoy what remains. Viewing ruins and other lost structures in the present tense has a third important advantage. It eliminates the need to parse purely historical features from aesthetic features. In “The Triumph of Time,” Korsmeyer mentions the many attempts people have made to distinguish the aesthetic from historical properties: historical properties are said to be external, while aesthetic qualities are internal to the object. However, she argues, this distinction is “clearly false” in the case of ruins.<sup>14</sup> To bolster her case she appeals to Alois Riegl, who distinguishes historical value from age value. Ruins, both Korsmeyer and Riegl assert, have both age and historical value, but only age value manifests immediately through visual perception. It is not my intention to argue whether or not such a division exists (between historical and aesthetic properties) but just to note that viewing ruins in the present tense has the advantage of avoiding these worries.

We should also think about the various reasons why people visit these ghost sites. Consider, for example, battlegrounds.<sup>15</sup> Many American Civil War battlefields are now marked with simple placards; beyond these signs, there are no obvious remnants of the historic battles that occurred there. As such, many battlefields qualify as lost, some as traces, and others as ruins.<sup>16</sup> Further, *pace* my earlier discussion, battlefields are an example where we might not have knowledge of the exact location of the battle nor have exact knowledge of what was on the field at the time of the battle, yet we value visiting them.

People visit battlefields for various reasons, and how we categorize or classify the site informs our appreciation. Battlefields can be seen as monuments to some, memorials to others, and even as ruins. Monuments are intentionally created objects designed to remind us of something worth honoring. Monuments do not preserve the past but exalt it. Memorials are designed to evoke a shared mournful experience that may help human beings bind together.<sup>17</sup> Many visit battlefields as

memorial sites, to honor sacrifices made, and to grieve the dead. Ruins are often (rightly) conceptualized as disjointed fragments that evoke the ephemeral, mortality, the fleeting, and elicitors of the sublime.<sup>18</sup>

Memorials, monuments, and ruins can all evoke nostalgia. Nostalgia necessarily involves imaginative construction, as it requires us to imagine the past. Memorials involve remembrance of things, people, or events. Monuments try to preserve time, taking you back to imagine a specific point in history. And while ruins can evoke nostalgia, they need not. As David Lowenthal says, “The provisional and contingent nature of history is hard to accept, for it denies the perennial dream of an ordered and stabile past. We seek refuge from the uneasy present, the uncertain future, in recalling the good old days, which take on a luster heightened by nostalgia.”<sup>19</sup> For example, many (white) Americans visit Civil War battlefields to evoke nostalgia for a bygone era.<sup>20</sup>

It makes sense that we return to sites where we have a personal connection. But what about sites we have no personal connection to, real or imagined? When I visited Iceland recently, I went to the site of the first Icelandic parliament, which could be classified as a trace or a ghost. To the best of my knowledge, no one in my family is Icelandic, nor do I have any particular feelings of kinship with Icelandic culture. It is not obvious that this experience evoked nostalgia, nor is it obvious that I reconstructed a picture of the past site in my head. But it is not hard to see that visiting these sorts of sites can easily present us with the bare experience of ephemerality and perhaps have more in common with ruin appreciation than one might have originally thought. In looking at the site from this present-tense ruin lens, I do not have to know or value what was once there in order to experience the unceasing presence of change, the imminence of nature, and the persistence of time.

In conclusion, the past really is a foreign country. Our aesthetic engagements with things that are no longer there allow us to visit—but never to emigrate. Perhaps nostalgia is the feeling that accompanies these visits when we feel a tie to the history of the site, but we can experience ephemerality whether or not we feel such a tie. I believe that looking at the experience of ruins can importantly inform our experiences of ghosts and lost structures. First, ruins teach us that we need not value (or know) what was once there to meaning-

fully engage with the site. Second, while imaginative reconstruction is one model of engagement with these sites, seeing it as the preeminent model cuts off other aesthetically valuable experience. Finally, through the example of battlefields (most often conceptualized as ghosts or traces) we see that while nostalgia is an important component, ephemerality might be more so.

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1. Jennifer Judkins, “On Things That Are Not There Anymore,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, this issue.

2. Jeanette Bicknell, “Architectural Ghosts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, this issue.

3. Carolyn Korsmeyer, “The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, this issue.

4. See Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (New York: Berg, 2005). The most famous article on the ruins of Detroit is John Patrick Leary, “Detroitism,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, January 15, 2011, [http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary\\_1\\_15\\_11/](http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/).

5. Korsmeyer, “The Triumph of Time.”

6. The trident has since been relocated and incorporated into the 9/11 memorial. For more information on its relocation, see “Historic Twin Tower ‘Tridents’ Installed into 9/11 Memorial Museum,” September 7, 2010, <http://www.wtc.com/news/historic-twin-tower-tridents-installed-into-9-11-memorial-museum>, and Holland Cotter, “The 9/11 Story Told at Bedrock, Powerful as a Punch to the Gut,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2014, sec. A, p. 1; [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/arts/design/sept-11-memorial-museum-at-ground-zero-prepares-for-opening.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/arts/design/sept-11-memorial-museum-at-ground-zero-prepares-for-opening.html?_r=1). It is an interesting question (although outside the scope of this article) whether or not a ruin can remain a ruin once it is no longer *in situ*. Can a ruin be radically relocated from its original landscape and still be considered a ruin? I think not.

7. Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), p. 453.

8. Recently a dinner companion told me about his recent trip back to Japan with his new bride. He wanted to show her where he lived when he was a teenager. When he got there, nothing looked familiar. He became frustrated when trying to find the places where once stood his teenage hangouts. Finally he stumbled upon the newly built subway station. In the station was posted a picture of the old subway tracks. Upon seeing this picture and recognizing that he was standing in the very spot his subway stop once stood, tears came to his eyes. What made that spot so powerful and what made him so emotional, I think, was both nostalgia for his past and engagement with ephemerality.

9. Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 324.

10. In furtherance of this conception, vegetation is frequently removed from ruins, as it is not seen as part of the aesthetic unity.

11. Judkins, "On Things That Are Not There Anymore."

12. See Hudson River Adventures, <http://www.zerve.com/HRAventure/Photo>.

13. For example, see "How Fall's Best Coats Make a Very Rugged Commute," *Esquire Magazine*, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/style/fashion-story/best-mens-over-coats-1109>.

14. Korsmeyer, "The Triumph of Time."

15. Judkins and Bicknell do not discuss these sites specifically.

16. If no such sign was present, the structure could be considered lost.

17. James Janowski, "Bringing Back Bamiyan's Buddhas," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28 (2011): 44–64, at p. 46.

18. I agree with Korsmeyer's analysis of ruins as elicitors of the Kantian sublime and believe that they may elicit both the mathematical and dynamical sublime. Where Korsmeyer and I might disagree is in the fact that I believe some inauthentic ruins (sham ruins or follies) might elicit the same experience but to a lesser extent.

19. David Lowenthal, "Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D.W. Meinig (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 103–128, at p. 104.

20. While not morally unproblematic, this imaginative reconstruction is common at Civil War battle sites.