

## Super-Material Culture: Thinking Through a New Discourse of Ruins

### ABSTRACT

The discourse on ruins, like ruins themselves, is fragmented and dispersed. Representing both decay and what remains, the ruins' relationship to temporality is complicated—they can be construed as means for both looking back, as well as looking towards the future. The recent resurgence of literature and theory on the subject matter is consolidating existing work and defining new lines of inquiry. This article investigates the current discourse on ruins through three recent texts. Significant to them all is the dialectical nature of the ruin as both the absence of, and endurance of, material form. All three texts consider ruins through the lens of the built environment and problematize classic conceptions of ruination in consideration of the contemporary moment. Looking at ruination through architecture theory provides a contrast to the romantic accounts of ruins that originally defined the discourse. Through these texts we can see certain limitations of the discourse of ruins, but also visible are nuanced approaches that redefine the ruin as more than just a site or object, but also a set of processes that reflect our relationships to material culture and the built environment. To this I assert a necessity to reconfigure the way we define ruins in light of the contemporary moment. The discourse of ruins, while still speaking through earlier tropes of a fragmented ruin studies, is no longer just a survey of the subject of the ruin—it is becoming a mode through which we evaluate the changing nature of our relationship to material culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Ruins, Ruination, Architecture, Super-materiality, Waste



The popularity of visual representations of ruins can be traced back to the beginning of the Enlightenment (DeMeyer 2012; Dillon 2011, 2014; Macaulay 1953; Woodward 2010; Zucker 1961)<sup>1</sup>. Our fascination with them has been a particularly modern phenomenon, not simply in terms of signifying modern aesthetic values, but also in the ruin's capacity to represent ideological conditions. Modernity purposes itself against the past, and thus ruins signify a progressive temporality in their state of decay. However, as the conditions of modernity change, so does our

relationship with the past thus shifting the character and significance of the ruin as we move through late modernity. The present moment is one of a “strange ruino-philia”, likely influenced by the heavy circulation of visual representations of ruins (Boym 2008: 58). The discourse on ruins, like ruins themselves, is fragmented and dispersed. However, unlike ruins themselves, the discourse that concerns them has not ever been a complete whole, a singular, explicit and unified discipline of ruins has never existed. While ruins have arguably occupied a larger part of history than for what the discourse accounts, contemporary thinking on ruination constitutes our relationship to ruins as defined by the experience of modernity. In consideration of increasing technological development, more recently we have come to define our time against the concept of speed (Virilio 2007). Several theorists have made the claim that the previous century was host to a significant shift from the traditional conception of modernity to a post/late/hyper/second modernity that still eludes explicit definition (Bauman 2000; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984). With technology redefining our relationship to space and time, our relationship with ruins, which are inextricably linked to both factors, has certainly shifted as well. Representing both decay and what remains, the ruin’s relationship to temporality is complicated—they can be construed as means for both looking back, as well as looking towards the future. As previously mentioned, the discourse on ruins has been scattered among a number of disciplines; however, the recent resurgence of literature and theory on the subject matter is consolidating existing work and defining new lines of inquiry. Whether there is a move to define ruins within a single discipline is debatable,<sup>2</sup> but the multivalent quality of ruins makes the subject best kept as an interdisciplinary endeavor—an intersection point of numerous modes of thought. The texts that this article reviews are not exclusively on the topic of ruins, rather they concern the influence of ruination on the built environment.

Significant to each of the texts that make up this review is the dialectical nature of the ruin as both the absence of, and endurance of, material form. All three texts consider ruins through the lens of the built environment and problematize classic conceptions of ruination in consideration of the contemporary moment. Looking at ruination through architecture theory provides a contrast to the romantic accounts of ruins that originally defined the discourse. Ultimately, architecture is the victim of ruination, and the texts that this paper explores question the ongoing relationship between ruins, the built environment and ideology as means of reflecting the contemporary discourse of ruins. Douglas Murphy’s work *The Architecture of Failure* (2012) addresses the ephemeral nature of ruination through iron and glass architecture of the 19th century. He addresses the ideological framing of exhibition buildings, their significance in failing to leave traces and how this history has defined contemporary, non-radical architecture. Philosopher William Viney uses the ruin as means of thinking through the philosophical implications of waste. *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (Viney 2014) reconsiders the relationship between temporality

and the ruin, asserting the ruin as an architecture of intercession. In contesting the natalist ideology of architecture, Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs's monograph *Buildings Must Die* (2014) uses the ruin as a frame of reference for reevaluating the role of architecture, stressing a particular value through the process of ruination.

Through these texts we can see certain limitations of the discourse of ruins. Also visible are nuanced approaches that redefine the ruin as more than just a site or object, but also a set of processes that reflect our relationships to material culture and the built environment. To this I assert a necessity to reconfigure the way we define ruins in light of the contemporary moment. The ruin cannot be thought of exclusively as a form with the definitive character of ruination, but rather as a state in which an object remains when it loses its original utility. The discourse of ruins, while still speaking through earlier tropes of a fragmented ruin studies, is no longer just a survey of the subject of the ruin—it is becoming a mode through which we evaluate the changing nature of our relationship to material culture.

There are three main points of review that I will approach these texts through. The first point is a hybrid of a classical and contemporary approach to thinking about ruins. From the onset of the ruin-lust of the enlightenment, ruins have been understood as being in a state of flux between decay and perseverance. In this sense, the material incompleteness of the ruin alludes to something that was at one point present. I refer to this aspect of ruins as super-materiality—the quality of representing something beyond its remaining physical form. The second point of review will look more explicitly at how these texts relate and diverge in constituting the relationship between ruin and temporality. The third point of review highlights a contestation in thinking about architecture as a purely natalist project and how the discourse on ruination challenges this. These comparisons will not be strictly between the featured texts, but also include fundamental works from the broader discourse of ruins to contextualize these current works.

### **Super-materiality: Ruins Beyond Remains**

I use this designation of super-materiality to consolidate and address the varying ways the discourse refers to the ability of ruins to call into question concepts, memories and sentimentalities on the basis of their state of decay. Cairns and Jacobs assert that in its incompleteness “the ruin is rarely received merely in and of itself” and that it “usually carries with it that which is not” something beyond its decaying form (2014: 168). This idea is not unique to Cairns and Jacobs, but rather is a defining element of what constitutes a ruin, an aspect touched on in each of the texts of this review. In conversation with Walter Benjamin's assertion that “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,” Viney defines the ruin's incomplete narrative construction as a necessary element for the translation of events of destruction into the ruin's physical form (Viney 2014: 128). The ruin as allegory highlights its ability to signify something beyond its explicit construction. Murphy's exploration of this idea in *The Architecture of Failure* (2012), utilizes

the Derridian concept of spectrality to describe this inconsistent presence of the ruin—but beyond ruin, he also argues that this spectral, or super-material quality, can, in the case of the glass and iron buildings of the 19th century, be present in architectural forms that are fragmented even when complete. Here Murphy, like Viney had earlier, turns to Benjamin’s allegorical ruin, but does so to constitute the non-decrepit ferro-vitreous exhibition structure as an “abstract-ruin” in its full form. While each of these texts concede the super-material operation of the ruin, Murphy’s abstract-ruin questions whether this super-materiality functions solely through the visible decay of the material structure. The idea that a structure absent of decay can constitute a ruin questions Cairns and Jacobs’s assertion that the ruin’s positivity is dependent on what it does not have—“completeness, full form, order” (168). While this construction of the ruin is consistent with how ruins have been constituted historically—it neglects the possibility of using ruination as a lens for questioning seemingly intact elements of the built environment. This acceptance of a broader idea of what constitutes ruin is also evident in the work of Andreas Schönle (2011) who argues that while common-sense usage indicates that ruins must present signs of decay, “well-preserved abandoned buildings can also be called ruins for rhetorical effect” (2011: 6). Murphy’s abstract-ruin and Schönle’s rhetorical ruin illustrate a shift to reconsider what can be thought of as a ruin within the discourse, and more generally indicate the growing complexities of thinking through ruins in late modernity.

In *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953) Rose Macaulay is cautious to note that new ruins are bound to lack the visual cues that we have come to recognize them through—they will be without patina, free from ivy, and not yet overcome with the nature to which they will eventually return. Similarly, Andreas Huyssen reminds us that “The chance for things to age and become ruins has diminished” (2008:19) and while this certainly affects the way we interact with the idea of ruination, it by no means indicates an absolute cessation of it. While explicitly defining ruins becomes more complicated as time renders them in a constant state of flux, and in some sense unrecognizable, the super-material character of the ruin is a qualifying necessity. In the introduction to *Ruins of Modernity* (2008), a formative anthology on thinking about contemporary ruins, Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle qualify this super-material aspect of ruins as “semantic-potential” (8). The classic framing of the ruin as an artifact-in-decay is insufficient for thinking about ruins in the contemporary moment. Murphy’s abstract-ruin is consistent with the discourse’s increasing questioning of whether ruins necessarily exhibit signs of decay. Viney (2012), for one, poses the idea that ruination can be defined through loss of utility rather than loss of physical matter. This idea of utility will be explored in relation to temporality in the following point of review.

## Temporality: Constituting Ruins in Time

The ruin is inextricably linked with temporality. In *The Salon of 1767*, Denis Diderot proclaimed, “only time endures” (in Lowenthal 1985: 78)—this notion is especially visible when we gaze upon the ruin. The onset of ruin—just by the beginning of the 18th century was tied to modernity’s push to define itself against the past and to this effect the ruin also became bound to the idea of progress (Dillon 2012). While ruins may seem antithetical to progress, they are a mechanism through which progress happens. Todd Samuel Presner reminds us “[d]estruction and ruins...are not simply the endpoint or culmination of the project of modernity, but the processes that are present at every stage of modernization” (Presner 2008: 194). This binding of ruin and temporality is just one of the aspects of the ruin’s dialectical nature, a relationship that is of specific focus in each of the texts of this review.

The relationship between the ruin and modernity is both complicated and crystallized in Douglas Murphy’s *The Architecture of Failure* (2012). The first part of the text focuses on the iron and glass architecture of arcades, exhibition venues and train stations—a building method that revolutionized engineering in the 19th century. The development of cast iron and plate glass, new methods of fabrication, and rapid urbanization culminated together in furthering the ferro-vitreous structure’s embeddedness in modernity and capitalism (Murphy 2012). Murphy specifically speaks of the Crystal Palace, the iron and glass building erected for the Great Exhibition of 1851, an event that was thought of as “the source of great pride, a flourishing of Victorian genius and technological prowess, the birth of liberal modernity” (2012: 12). This is the context to the argument put forth by Murphy that was discussed in the previous section. He qualifies these iron and glass structures, particularly the Crystal Palace, as abstract-ruins—victims of the logic of efficiency that lead to accelerated decrepitude through temporariness and flexibility (39). Murphy’s account of iron and glass buildings challenge classical conceptions of the ruin: even before these structures are dismantled, “rather than a vision of humanity’s transience as represented by broken columns and fragmented statuary,” the aesthetic of fallen iron and glass “is directly redolent of a corpse” (2012: 52). In Murphy’s account, the ruin and its ties to modernity become both obscured and radicalized in its industrialized form.

William Viney describes ruins’ tendency to “stand between survival and termination, continuity and annihilation...caught between time,” granting them an almost ineffable character (2014: 136). This reference speaks to the typical temporal quality that usually defines the dialectical nature of the ruin; however, the ruin for Viney has a particular relationship to temporality that is also based on past utility. Furthermore, his account of the ruin is unique in that he qualifies it within a discourse

of waste. Waste, for Viney, is “matter out of time” (2014: 2). This idea parallels his conception of ruins and their affinity to “differentiate themselves from other kinds of buildings by being made conspicuous in time, by being located in a time felt to differ from architecture which accords to a use or function” (129). The ruin for Viney is defined against both time and utility—it stands in a present state of non-performance, “a remnant of past utility that has been decommissioned” (129). In defining the ruin as a form of waste, he argues that discontinuity is conveyed through the relationship of the ruin to waste-time, rather than through visible wear and decay (2014). For Viney, the “ruinous” aspect of the ruin is less a matter of material form, but rather the suspension of utility. The dialectical nature of the ruin is made obvious in the tension between the previous function of the ruin, and the fact the object’s identity is still bound to it: “the castle no longer defends, the house no longer gives shelter, the sports arena no longer provides space for gaming or competition” (129). This conception of the ruin aligns well with Hell and Schönle’s introduction to *Ruins of Modernity* (2008), where they assert, “The ruin is a ruin precisely because it has seemed to have lost its function or meaning in the present” (in Viney 2014: 136).

In *Buildings Must Die*, temporality is framed more explicitly in relation to architecture than it is through a discourse of ruins. While the ruin’s relationship to temporality is defined through flux, architecture as a discipline tends to view temporality through the lens of durability. However, Cairns and Jacobs question this relationship between architecture and the desire for permanence—referring to David Harvey, they remind us that architecture is never eternal, that it is “always subject to time as ‘perpetual perishing’” (as cited in Cairns and Jacobs 2014: 65). Architecture has experimented with adaptability as a means to resist this perpetual perishing but Cairns and Jacobs remark that propositions for flexibility often remain “in the realm of the experimental and unbuilt” (120). Perhaps the largest detriment to the architecture’s inability to create buildings that can adapt and thus endure is that beyond its fantasy of permanence is a more perverse natalist quality. Using research by Adaptable Futures Group, Cairns and Jacobs cite that architectural design tends to function by “freezing out time, in pursuit of a static idealized object of perfection—a desire to create anew, a building to endure the future (125). This natalist aspect of architecture addressed throughout the texts will be explored next.

### **Natalism of Architecture, Macabre of Ruins**

Each of the texts under review describes a tension between architecture as a generative performance and the death and annihilation that seem immanent through ruins—this perhaps is most explicit in Cairns and Jacobs’s *Buildings Must Die*. The superfluous intensity of the book’s title is a necessary foil to architecture’s incessant natalism. The authors describe the profession as being particularly resistant to thinking about end conditions because of its immense investment into the idea of creativity, thus fashioning architecture through “the metaphor of life” (2014: 14).

To this Cairns and Jacobs ask, “when does the discipline ruminate on the finitude of the created work? Where are its treatises on afterlives, wasting, deterioration, and destruction?” (24). These questions speak to the central premise of the work, a demand that the negative conditions of architecture be taken seriously. The authors identify that when it comes to thinking about an architecture of ruins, the discourse has fallen into the realm of aesthetic theory rather than architecture theory. Cairns and Jacobs’s work seeks to introduce the rhetoric of the discourse of ruins into a terminal literacy within architecture, reinstating “decay,” “obsolescence,” “disaster,” “ruin” and “demolition” as the inevitable finality neglected by architecture’s natalism.

While Murphy does not think of architecture with the same “perversity” of *Buildings Must Die*, he finds a similar call to action in architecture’s failures as Cairns and Jacobs do in looking at the death of buildings. He, too, outlines the tendency of architecture to be seen as the “most optimistic of cultural activities,” a symbol of “growth, longevity and of immortality,” but proceeds with his argument in stating “architecture is also the medium of the ruin...Architecture collapses, erodes, and decays” (2012: 1). Murphy’s argument against certain forms of contemporary architecture is not entirely clear. He has an obvious distaste for solutionist architecture referring to it as “damagingly naïve” in that it denies the ‘meaning’ of a building to be of an architect’s concern (87), and he asserts, “architects should not be afraid of failure” (93). Murphy’s critique of the contemporary state of architecture is not an effective conclusion to what began as an incredibly insightful historical account of temporary iron and glass exhibition architecture of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Murphy is evidently enchanted by the failure of these exhibition structures. They were unable to secure permanence, either in their full form or as ruins and they were unsuccessful in revolutionizing modern architecture, yet because of this, they possessed a certain “radical aesthetics of disappearance” (2012: 76). It is obvious that Murphy feels this sort of radicalism is absent in contemporary architecture—he bemoans the monumentality and the eclecticism of the current period, but he is unable to compellingly connect the arguments of the first and second parts of his book. However, if we consider Murphy’s push for a radical and melancholic architecture alongside Cairn and Jacobs’s desire to develop a “terminal literacy” of architecture, death, decay and ruination can be seen as positing a critical value to the way we think about our relationships with the built environment.

Viney does not address architecture’s natalism to the same degree as the other texts, but identifies the complications that arise when buildings fail to function. He describes buildings as being burdened by the future, and that “A tension of objectives loads them with expectations, all of which require the building to be projected towards a future in which goals are achieved” (2014: 131). The vulnerability of buildings to ruin, and lose function is influenced by its potential to “metonymically represent the human endeavor” (Viney 2014: 135). This framing of architecture as natalist and optimistic begs the question of our complicity in ruination simply by means of erecting buildings in the first place. This allows us to consider the idea that

architecture, even in full form, can be a ruin-in-waiting. This impression is often overlooked by the discourse of ruins—in almost the opposite fashion of architecture; the discourse of ruination is primarily occupied with end results.

## Conclusion

The current fascination with ruins is bound to generate nuanced approaches to the discourse of ruination. While the interdisciplinary applicability of the subject matter is of great benefit to the discourse, it has also held it back. Academic work on ruins, until recently, featured as case studies isolated within larger, single-discipline texts, or as poetic fragments in topically ambiguous grand works. As we compile the existing literature and establish a genealogy of ‘ruinous thinking’, the same ruin tropes continue to feature prominently in new works. This is not a critique of these recent texts per se, but rather a point of consideration as to where the discourse currently stands.

This review investigates the current discourse of ruins through three recent texts focusing on the built environment. These texts demonstrate how a discourse of ruins is a productive lens to evaluate our relationship to ideology, material culture and the built environment. Douglas Murphy’s *The Architecture of Failure* (2012), of all three texts, avoids the tropes of ruin discourse most—in doing so, the text reads as a fresh work, but lacks the theoretical rigor of the other two. The second half of the book is unfortunate. Having introduced an entirely overlooked case study of how iron and glass buildings avoid becoming classical ruins, Murphy makes a significant contribution in regards to nuanced thinking within the discourse, but fails in his attempt to connect this argument to his discussion about contemporary architecture in the second half of the text. But together, these three texts support each other incredibly. Cairns and Jacobs’s *Buildings Must Die* provides a view of architecture that questions the profession’s aversion to thinking about ruins. While it touches on similar points as *The Architecture of Failure* (Murphy 2012) it makes more complete the case as to why architecture’s natalism fails the profession, and more generally, how this affects the ways we interact with ruins. Both texts assert that ruination is a means for radical thinking—ruination is a process that makes room for reconsiderations and reevaluations about how we relate to our built environment. This is a particularly pragmatic approach to a discourse that tends to philosophize ruins into ontology. While Viney aims to trace a philosophy of things through the lens of waste, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (2014) falls into this later, less pragmatic category that is more typical of ruin studies. The greatest success of the text is his construction of the idea of waste-time, as it provides a means for thinking about aspects of the built environment as ruins in spite of lacking the typical semiotic code of rust, decrepitude, and decay. This concern with loss of utility, rather than loss of form is particularly important when we consider that the speed of late modernity renders things useless before ruinous. In this sense, Viney’s work is particularly useful in reconstituting the ruin’s relationship to temporality.

Our initial ruin-lust of the 18th century has been established, referenced and explored to death. Out of it, we are just now starting to see new thinking that addresses the mutated ruin in light of an increasingly unstable modernity. Most of this new thought has not yet been the subject of monographs, but lays fragmented and dispersed in anthologies and across disciplines. The growth of the discourse has perhaps been limited by the conditions of its subject matter itself—like ruins, the discourse that concerns them seeks to constitute its future through an incessant connection to the past. While each of the explored texts reviewed spent a great deal of space accounting for the significance of ruins through allusions to classic literature, paintings and philosophy, (the tropes of the discourse of ruins), they still manage to assert a fresh approach to thinking about ruins in light of contemporary conditions. Moving forward, the discourse is bound to consistently question how we define the ruin—this was visible in each of the texts we explored. However, one point of future exploration that these texts just barely touch on is the framing of architecture as a form of media, and the mediation of ruins. Two of the three texts - *Buildings Must Die* (Cairns and Jacobs, 2014) and *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (Viney 2014), make passing references to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), where the archdeacon holds up a book to the cathedral and declares, "This will kill that." Although ruins are defined by their vanishing materiality, the visual archive of ruination is growing. I suspect that the discourse, in consideration of our heavily mediated existence in the current moment, will begin to question how media, in their tendency to deterritorialize, fragmentize and disperse, can be seen as complicit in the creation of ruins.

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## Notes

1. Though, in some sense, a certain "pleasure in ruins" had existed since the renaissance, the popularity of ruins, in their classic form, was best known to be a feature of the 17th through 19th centuries (Macaulay 1953).
2. See, for instance, Daryl Martin's "Introduction: Towards a Political Understanding of New Ruins" (2014) that qualifies the articles within the Debates and Development section as "ruinology".

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