

# The Contemporary Ruin - Material Frictions in Times of Flux

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## Wet Walls

As fortunate as he was to work together with the grand master of modernism, Chilean painter Roberto Matta could not help but disagree with the principles of Le Corbusier. Working as a draftsman in Le Corbusier's office, Matta rejected his idea of modern architecture as a fusion of the aspirations of classical renaissance architecture with the qualities of accelerating new technologies at the time. In the article of the surrealist magazine *Minotaure*<sup>1</sup> he describes his contrasting ideals as “walls ‘like wet sheets that change shape to fit our psychological fears’, furnished with biomorphic couches that appear in his illustrations to mould to and at the same time threaten to swallow the human body”<sup>2</sup>. Matta describes his ideas of space as a flexible coat, almost fluid and imperceptible in its alignment with the human body. He portrays a synchronised relationship; two entities moving, intersecting, merging. An architecture rids itself from its material character, the essential “stuff it is made off” as opposed to the monumental and rigid qualities of Corbusier's renaissance references. An architecture that shows no restraint in adjusting to the needs of its user producing the agility of different modes of usage.

Increasing shifts in the modes of usage of the built

environment are a symptom of the continuous forward-facing motion of accelerating progress in our time. Socio-political and economic dynamics in society in the context of greater independence through digital connectivity fuel migrational movements around the globe. Yet, as bodies move at an increased rate, the spaces that they inhabit and leave behind accumulate in contrast to Matta's scenario where they dematerialise and do not leave a trace<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the accelerated state of mind and body clash with the perceived ‘slowness’ of material which ultimately culminates in desertion and abandonment of buildings. In precisely this moment, the phenomenon of the contemporary ruin reveals itself. Our surrounding built environment expires much sooner<sup>4</sup>. It is continuously demolished, transformed, improved and readjusted, dressing the urban landscape in scaffolding. These disruptions tear the urban fabric and its interconnected social life that cannot be patched up as easily as it is dismantled. As these motions of building and removal accelerate, the term ‘ruin’ could receive new meanings: Can architecture only work or not work? Or could it actually be successful in its dysfunctionality? Put another way, could the ruin become productive?

This essay speculates on our relation to the contem-

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3 - 4 The notion of a tendency towards dematerialisation manifests itself in the continuous digitalisation of major parts of our lives, such as money through contactless payment, social interactions through digital networks, etc. yet hits firm limitations in the built environment. Our struggle with these limitation reveals itself on different levels such as the nomadic lifestyle being celebrated and articulated in the success of Airbnb, the home wherever you come to be, or the emergence of workspaces harnessing the creative, entrepreneurial industries all over the world. Furthermore, the need of

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1 ‘Mathématique sensible—Architecture du temps’, *Minotaure*, Paris, no.11, May 1938

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2 Attlee, James (2007). *Towards Anarchitecture: Gordon Matta-Clark and Le Corbusier*.

space limited in time reveals itself in the extended application of cutting-edge technology such as large scale 3D-printing from bio-based materials such as the exhibition pavilions and cabins by DUS Architects such as the “Tiny [Bau]haus” stationed temporarily at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The “Tiny [Bau]haus” is a cabin constructed from 3D-printed elements from bio-based plastics, creating a space that can easily be disposed of after travelling Europe for a year.

4 The term ‘expiry’ returns several times throughout the essay. What is meant by expiry is, that the building stops being used in the way or loses the context that it was initially planned for. Buildings today expire in their original purpose after around 20 to 30 years as described in OMA’s masterplan for La Défense that is discussed further along. (See OMA (2018). Mission Grand Axe. Retrieved from <https://oma.eu/projects/missiongrandaxeladefense>) Furthermore, the research of architect Jenny Bevan has shown that this estimated time until buildings generally expire continuously shortens. Each decade, we can expect the buildings that are being newly built to have a life span ten years shorter than the previous decade. (See Bevan TED Talk on “Our Disposable Architecture” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OLslvyFi8&t=60s&frags=pl%2Cwn>) A curious thought, what will

happen when the life span of a building in this sense moves into the negative from 2030 on.

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5 Wajcman, Judy & Dodd, Nigel (2017) *The Sociology of Speed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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6 Jones, Charlie R. (2015). Inside *The Age of Earthquakes*.

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7 Gómez Moya, Cristián (2011)

8 OMA (2018). Mission Grand Axe.

9 OMA (2018).

10 Easterling, Keller (2014) *Critical Practice 4, Subtraction*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

porary ruin in the context of the accelerated times we find ourselves in. From the perspective of its static material presence in the fluid terrain of continuous progress it explores the productive potential and societal relevance of the friction that it carries.

These accelerated times are what Hartmut Rosa identifies as conditions of ‘dynamic stabilisation’ through which we attempt to navigate the waves of progress. To achieve temporary stabilisation we feel required to push for constant growth, innovation and cultural reproduction of a status quo<sup>5</sup>. Upsurge of production and social change are the result. We experience these conditions as a feeling of accelerated time. This notion is vividly summarised by Douglas Coupland, co-author of *The Age of Earthquakes*: “The future for me, growing up, was always something that was ahead. In the distance—then it started to get closer. Then it was there, and now suddenly, right now actually is the future. What we’re inhabiting is no longer in the distance anymore but in this state of very, very profoundly accelerating flux.”<sup>6</sup> With times in flux and progress inevitable, lifespans seem to become a questionable measurement, leaving the ruin in an ambiguous position.

Elaborating on the term ‘ruin’ words like “vestige”, “remnants”, “trace”, or “relic” come to mind, describing the idea of loss manifesting itself in the decaying traces of a failed utopia. The mere word, ‘ruin’, triggers nostalgia instantly and provokes the unquestioned response of preservation. Walter Benjamin’s definition of the ruin aligns with this notion in the sense that it is an object-trace capturing ‘nature in a petrified state to nature in a permanent state of transition’<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, Benjamin limits the value of the ruin to its documenting, capturing capacity and implies a need for maintaining this ‘petrified state’ to secure its meaning. This makes Benjamin’s ruin inaccessible as we have to keep a secure distance. By extension, it leads to the problematics of preservation—as we cannot sustain everything, what is worth keeping and who decides such matters?

Ending Point: System

Dutch architectural firm OMA thematises the problematics of preservation in their masterplan for La Défense in Paris. La Défense is one of the main business areas in Paris, that was bound to be expanded in 1991. As a proposal for this undertaking, OMA produced a scheme, causing a stir at the time, that rather than imposing another superstructure onto the dense area to focus on what lies beneath<sup>8</sup>. From the point of view of statistics, most of the current buildings would reach the end of their life span within the coming 20 to 30 years which would bring to light very naturally a tabula rasa, a blank slate, free of contextual conditioning. In anticipation of this emergence, OMA planned for the continuous revealing of an underlying grid that is the basis for not only the existing but also the extended areal of La Défense. In their proposal, they criticise that in Europe as “the Old World, the ‘continent of history’, there is an unspoken assumption that all its substance—even the most mediocre—is historic, and therefore has the right to eternal life.”<sup>9</sup> “Mediocre substance” is what OMA’s masterplan categorises as recently erected buildings, doomed to imminent expiration and demolition or in other words—the contemporary ruin to be.

La Défense is a celebrated example of city planning. The role of the architect: patience. The elegant removal or “unbuilding”, is what Keller Easterling calls ‘perhaps the only subtraction project in recent memory that is prominent enough to be awarded a Pritzker equivalent for building removal’<sup>10</sup>. What her evaluation alludes to is that the existing buildings are acknowledged in their life cycles. Progress is registered as the driving force behind expiry and translated into a system bringing forward the new. Nonetheless, this system maintains the ruin clearly as an ending point. It restricts its potential to removal in order to unlock the possibility of a fresh start hidden underneath.

While Benjamin sees the value of the ruin in its preservation and OMA in its removal, an alternative that mediates between the two becomes very interesting, as both options are questionable in the face of global resource shortage and current carbon footprint of the building industry. So, how can we not merely cope with but take advantage of the material qualities of the ruin? How could the friction between the physicality of the expired building and our mind be a fruitful one? Svetlana Boym provides an insightful view of possible scenarios in her analysis of ruins. In her opinion, ruins do not only portray “a romanticising notion of the past layered with a contemporary reflection of our inner landscapes” but prove to be “sites for a new exploration and production of meanings”<sup>11</sup>. Boym lifts the heavy layer of dust. Interaction becomes possible and in this case crucial.

#### Ending Point: Community

A project that makes use of building removal beyond the recovery of a blank slate, is *A Way, Away* [Listen While I Say]. The project taking place over several months in 2017 in St. Louis, Missouri, centred around the activation of an empty land plot and an adjoining building that would be demolished in the course of the project. Chicago-based artists Amanda Williams and Andres Hernandez choreographed the process of taking down the building as a community process in five phases of “Marking”, “Subtracting”, “Translating”, “Shaping”, and “Healing”<sup>12</sup>. The process was initiated by painting the complete building with golden paint to articulate the focus of the conversation. Throughout the documentation and retrieval of building materials from the demolition, the community made proposals and guided their use in the transformation into a green space for the city.

*A Way, Away* demonstrates how the ruin, given the time, can be opened up to a civic process to evaluate and formulate collective adaptation in a bottom-up manner when progress triggers urban transitioning and calls for new schemes. In engaging of the community through-

out the process, Williams and Hernandez cultivated reflection and assessment of the life cycle of the urban landscape. However, in this case the developed conclusions were left without major impact on the previously planned park that eventually replaced the demolished building. The insights articulated meanwhile could not be channeled back into the planning process as the new plans had already been finalised.

Even though *A Way, Away* shows the potential of a ruin still in relation to its removal, it yields another insight. As a building is abandoned, it is removed from the market and the original financial envelope it initially emerged from. The ruin, as it has moved beyond the gaze of the market, does not have to function within its system of regulations anymore. In minimal periods of time, expired buildings can outline what is needed. Spaces are adjusted radically and rudimentarily to find quick solutions for temporary adjustments. In this sense, architecture takes the shape of a practice or performance as opposed to a scripted scheme. What seemingly lies in decay can become a 1:1 testing ground for conclusions such as the ones outlined by the community in St. Louis. This practice reminds of Matta’s image of ‘walls like wet sheets’ changing and morphing to the body’s motion. With life re-entering into its deserted spaces, the ruin can be seen in a different light, posing the question: Could the ruin be reevaluated to be not seen as an ending point but become an actual starting point?

#### Ending Point: Ruin

Sans Souci Community Cinema in Soweto, South Africa shows what this notion could look like. In 1995, the Sans Souci Community Cinema was destroyed in a fire. In 2002, Lindsay Bremner and 26’10 South initiated its reconstruction through concept development from the spatiality of the ruin itself. Instead of speculating on the potential of the ruin, its capability to sustain a variety of functions was rendered tangible through open-air screenings, installations, performances, workshops and

11 Boym, Svetlana (2011). *Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins*. Retrieved from <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciationofruins-svetlanaboym.html>

12 Fleischmann Brewer, Kristin (2017). *Between Precarity and Possibility*. Retrieved from <https://www.awayaway.site/blog/betweenprecarityand-possibility>

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13 Spatial Agency (-). Sans Souci Cinema. Retrieved from <http://www.spatialagency.net/database/sans-souci.cinema>

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14 Easterling, Keller (2014) *Critical Practice 4, Subtraction*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

festivals<sup>13</sup>. This way the transformation was envisioned on-site, anchoring the future building at the heart of its community. Furthermore, the programme helped promote and raise a budget for reconstruction. Following a very successful campaign and further developments in the realisation of the generated proposal, heavy rainfalls led to the partial collapse of the remains of the building.

Nonetheless, the project is a strong case study for the ruin activated as a testing ground. In this sense, Sans Souci Cinema shows that the ruin today can exceed the role of “new exploration and production of meaning” (Boym) which remains on the theoretical level. It has the capacity to metamorph from an ending point of a life cycle into a starting point for the transformation of urban texture within specific local contexts.

#### Ruin As Navigation

OMA’s scheme for La Défense stopped at defining that buildings have shortening lifespans and applying this notion as a system. The project of *A Way, Away* shows how a community can be a driving force in the development of the built environment and foster a culture of engagement and initiative. Deconstruction becoming a civic process. Sans Souci Cinema develops this aspect further as the ruin then is transformed into a 1:1 testing ground to help reflect on past concepts to develop new ones. The ruin itself becomes a process. In this way, less defined areas in the regulated pattern of the urban landscape provide a fertile ground to become a thermometer of the relation between progress and inherent social change, emerging needs and necessary actions. Seeing the connections with buildings and how and why they do or do not work can let them have an influence and shape established architectural practices.

Now progress can be observed manifested on all scales throughout our daily paths and destinations. We see “with half-closed eyes, an accelerated time-lapse within which large swaths of building and landscape seem to be simultaneously cultivated and harvested or built and

unbuilt”<sup>14</sup>, Keller Easterling describes. Yet buildings carry with them much more than the bare weight of their compiled building materials and are much harder to remove in concept as in practice. They do not decompose without a trace. They do not only answer to a grid that is drawn by an urban planner but also to the much more organic grid of appropriation by use of its community. Buildings, from their inception to their removal carry the stories that render the social tissue that holds and makes the built environment habitable.

The picture of ‘walls like wet sheets’ that Matta paints, seems to come very close to Easterling’s suggestion of ephemerality. Yet, the fluidity that he describes is of a different kind. It describes space that registers and is aware of the human being, is connected almost physically, lets itself be shaped and helps shape through productive friction. This fluidity asks for interaction, engagement and active shaping. From this perspective, the ruin moves beyond a mere milestone or an anchor point to navigate and position yourself against. The ruin is reconfigured from an endpoint into many possible new beginnings. As such, it can provide a fertile ground for cyclic motions of iteration, testing and evaluation on an urban scale. It can help form fluid, spatial narratives centered around an evolving ‘social architecture’ as opposed to the remoteness and perceived slowness of conservative planning and construction practices. Positioned as such, the ruin gains a key role in the critical approach to, and navigation of continuous waves of progress in the extreme present.

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