

SPIRIT IN RUIN: TOUCHED BY TIME

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THE WORLD RETREATS

Auguste Perret once said, "True architecture makes beautiful ruins."¹ And in the same breath, one could say that ruins make for beautiful architectural memories: those which are an internalised structure of experience, spaces of the imagination, reverie, silence and the ephemeral. Wonderment and a spiritual force reside within us, yet require close attention to our sensory perceptions of Self and the physical world in which we exist.

The spirit of place, or *genius loci*, refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere that exists in all places including those of dilapidation, ruination and decay. Sites such as the sacred locations of churches cut into cliff faces, recently deserted private houses, incomplete projects left idle in the landscape, and decommissioned public buildings and factories in industrialised cities all exude specific qualities of time and silence. In ruination the entropy, lack of predictability and gradual decline into disorder of the material world retreats from us, returning to states of being existing before Man's intrusion or exertion.



Figure 1. Antebellum house, Greensboro, Alabama, US.
Photograph: Ross T Smith, 2012.

Symbols of past experience and loss are revealed by the sense of a life lived and work done by others through the passage of time, be it near or remote history. Our physical intimacy with space leaves remnants of experiential traces. Touching surfaces, presenting our body to material conditions and entwining Self with nature is how we leave traces that exist beyond our presence. The hand, in particular, signifies our embodiment, our labour, creativity and love. Places of ruin present us with symbols as "ongoing processes of elemental transformation," according to Jane Rendell.² We experience the touch of the hand on places of work, religious interiors, the long lived-in family home, door handles, timber balustrades and scratchings of children's play on soft plaster walls. Those marks remain beyond us and reveal themselves in places of loss and dis-appearance. Juhani Pallasmaa adds: "Architecture's task to provide us with our domicile in space is recognised by most architects, but its second task – to mediate our relation with the frighteningly ephemeral dimensions of time – is usually disregarded."³

Architecture, if engaged with phenomenologically, is an assemblage of multi-dimensional sensory perceptions that

create the totality of place and experience. These are constructed through our body, the psychological nuance of intuition and personal experience, the objective realities of adumbrations, abstract revelations of the visible and the invisible, as well as those affective sensations such as pressure, temperature, and atmosphere.

TO SENSE IS TO TOUCH

In physical reality a building, as a living entity, tells us the story of its sensuous parts, its unexpected revelations and discoverable mysteries. "Buildings, over time, sustain multiple readings," observe Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow, due to the contingency of future actions, events and inhabitation.⁴ Phenomena are ageless but not timeless. Their revelation will forever contain the new and unadulterated, but will always be anterior to our present being. They are a truth, but as with all 'truths' the way in which they are interpreted depends upon the receiver or the observer as adumbrational perceptions – that is, the film-like sequencing of the parts of individual apprehensions into one whole experience of perception. Pallasmaa says: "A work of architecture is not experienced as a collection of isolated visual pictures, but in its fully embodied material and spiritual presence."⁵ As each truth is personal, phenomenologically speaking, we make of it our own story of a certain reality and *un certain regard*.

Inter-objectivity – the relationship between objects as a philosophical concept applied to architecture – brings us to realise that we are at all times in either vague or quite specific sensorial relationships with other things: fleshy creatures, physical objects and the subtleties of the ephemeral and atmospheric. Subsequent to this contact, we have influence over the substantial world and, in return, it does over us. Man is merely a witness to a world of gesture that affects him in varying degrees of positivity or negativity, depending on his perception of the occurrence.

Man, according to the Heideggerian phrase of "being-in-the-world," suggests that he is also an 'object' of the material world, yet one that exists in his own sphere of intentionality; that is, we as subjects extend ourselves towards the nature of objects. Whereas, as I suggest, if we change this phrase to "being-of-the world," then Man would exist as an interconnected cellular and energetic force in communication with the material world; and not as an egocentric being who makes stuff happen for him. We may be sentient beings, unlike rocks and chairs, yet the natural world has an energy that emanates from it in all directions, including our own.

We are 'touched' by all things: the physical touch of an object on our skin, the perpetual touch of our own body by itself, or the life force of that thing which transfers to us as something beyond the activation of a pressure point: the sun, for example. As Merleau-Ponty says, we are flesh of the world, and that flesh is the chiasm between the toucher and the touched: "a crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible."⁶ This act sets up inter-receptiveness as a circle of touching as transitivity from one to another, and its reversibility, which is touch returned.

Whereas objects existing in their own spatial realm, in the sun, wind and rain, they are also exposed to inter-objective association. Exposure, feasibly, is the best way to describe inter-objectivity: if one object is exposed to another, then there is a touching relationship, and with touching comes molecular interaction as a transfer of energetic potency. Man is not the centre of inanimate conditions. The blooming and decay, and the inter-objective interaction of material objects continues with or without Man's presence.

Philosopher Graham Harman speaks of vicarious cause, which is the contentious issue of inter-objectivity, the relationship between objects when there is non-intentional human interaction or when there is no human presence at all: "The most general problem is that if objects cannot touch each other, we need to know how they interact at all!"⁷ I would propose that the energetic emanation within space, which contributes to this aura, is due to the decayed reconfiguration of its material components. Contributing to this is a person's transference of personal memory or desire onto a place that has taken on its own sense of purpose through ruination. Decay towards death forces us to recognise a dynamic greater than ourselves, which could be considered 'spiritual' in some circumstances relating to nature, psychic states or public collectives.



Figure 2. Russian textile factory abandoned in 1960s. Kayseri, Turkey. Photograph: Ross T Smith, 2014.

SPACE IN BODIES

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes carnal phenomenology in terms of “carnation” that refers “to the vibration, color, frequency, and nuance of a place, of an event, of existence.”⁸ He continues: “The world is spacing, a tension of place, where bodies are not *in* space, but space *in* bodies.”⁹ We are captives of our own body. This pulpy thing, held together by mysterious threads, is the carnal being of our mortality. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, famous for his investigations of phenomenology and the body, asks of himself, and us, what is flesh? What is this “shadow packed with organs” in which we find our self? This is not only a question of the physical object—thing our mind drags around; not only the pulp held together by its tactile integument of smooth, rough, hairy, thick, thin, wrinkly, red, pallid, exposed, hidden skin; but the fragile layer of cellular separation that is the contact we have with the world. Yet, the existential question: how is it that we be? “We never get away from our life,”¹⁰ says Merleau-Ponty – and I would add, we never get away from our Self. We live in a carnal world, a world of pressing materiality.

Sensory perception is not noetic – that is, a construct of the intellect – but a physical, extremely subtle, sensible response that relates directly to our bodily apprehension of phenomena. Yet, in the extents of the metaphysical exists the perception of time, memory and loss. Loss is a dimension of absence and reveals the condition of longing. It makes us feel intuitively that something that ‘should’ be there is missing – a gnawing incompleteness. Memory, likewise, is a lingering sensation of “remembrance of things past.”¹¹

Discovery of the unexpected can reveal a new space experienced and utilised by others. Their presence exists not in themselves, but in the remnants of their activity and a sometimes temporary engagement with that interior. Our discovery can be exposed by pushing through tangled undergrowth or breaking in closed doors and looking through smashed windows to discover the hidden mystery of what lingers. We may discover rooms which have been inhabited by homeless people, used as drug dens, or as an outlet for disenchanting teenagers to ‘let loose’ with a spray can. Less dramatic can be the invasion of trees, vines and new growth, or the occasional dead bird. We are seduced by the revelation of lost interior spaces, which once existed with a life force of their own, but not in their original state, with a mixture of fear and expectation as we explore phenomena as material and ephemeral remnants.

We exist in a time of urgency and fragments. In architecture, space is definable, yet it exists as the presence of absence, as an extension of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the visible and invisible.¹² Absence can be regarded as the inverse of presence. Absence then is not nothingness or emptiness, but a place of portent, a space available for action, and a space which exists of and for itself. It is in these forgotten and abandoned spaces that we may allow our creative imagination to roam to construct possibilities for future uses of the space: fine apartments, artists’ studios or even a new school of architecture. Picard says: “In silence, therefore, man stands confronted once again by the original beginning of all things: everything can begin again, everything can be re-created.”¹³



Figure 3. Living spaces cut into soft rock. Cappadocia, Turkey, 4th-7th centuries AD. Photograph: Ross T Smith, 2015.

SILENCE RESTORES SECRETS

Silence is not termination, or the end result of all activity. Silence is liberation. "Silence is equated with arresting time," says Susan Sontag.¹⁴ It brings us to a point of stillness in which we may start again. Spaces of silence support our ability to fill that void with whatever we wish or desire; sensual memories can be summoned forth to explode, unfettered into this space – our space. In so doing, silence presents a neutral beginning, a point of departure, the edge of a precipice from which to plunge into imagination and memory. Silence restores the preservation of secrets beyond reality.

Forgotten interiors exude the shadowy mystery of decay, placing materiality in a faded light of obfuscation.¹⁵ The reduction in clarity dims the present mind to instigate a journey of reverie into shadows of the occult and otherness. We are 'plugged in' to such an extent these days that the presence of visual, aural and spiritual silence is almost impossible to inhabit. Silence reveals its presence, not as a passive nothingness, but as an active perception (physical or spiritual interaction) within a space of stillness; that which is tranquil but not void.

Architecture has the capacity to affect time and silence in this way. Profound architecture halts time; it puts us in a place of timelessness in which we are confronted with the silence of eternity. It is in these rare moments that we understand our connection to all things, that we no longer exist in isolation and separate from others, but we are likewise part of the atomic flow of eternal time. These architectural spaces, because of the intensity of silence, can also invoke fear and anxiety as we are confronted with our own mortality. There is spiritual beauty in death, not as a romantic notion, but death as the levelling condition of all natural things – which lingers in space and objects.¹⁶ Time has stopped and only silence and foreverness remains. There is architecture that can halt us so abruptly that we lose our breath, and our very being is confronted with the thorny, existential question: Who am I?

There is no formal conclusion to this article. Time and decay, space and silence, revelations of the visible and the invisible, the mystery of inter-objective communication, the spiritual dimension, creativity and imagination, and the turning of the world are unceasing processes – seemingly without end. Conclusions close down potential, expectation and mystery. We can never know all that exists or understand all that is presented, yet we engage our



Figure 4. Abandoned construction. Cappadocia, Turkey. Photograph: Ross T Smith, 2015.

body, mind and spirit with the phenomenal world as best we can in order to make sense of our own little part of it and time in it.

To express the prescience of spirit as a force existing in things and time, the last word must go to Merleau-Ponty: "The world is not what I think, but what I live. I am open to the world, I communicate indubitably with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible."¹⁷ We must remain open to the potential of revelation; it sustains the ecstasy and magic of life.

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Figure 5. Abandoned hospital, c1960s. Daugavpils, Latvia. Photograph: Ross T Smith, 2016..

- 1 Auguste Perret (French architect, 1874-1954.), cited in David Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 111.
- 2 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 96.
- 3 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Hapticity and Time: Notes on Fragile Architecture," in *Encounters*, ed. Peter MacKeith (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy, 2005 [2000]), 323.
- 4 Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 16.
- 5 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Academy, 2005 [1996]), 44.
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," in his *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.
- 7 Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2005), 90.
- 8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 17.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 84.
- 11 See Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way: Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966 [1913]).
- 12 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.
- 13 Max Picard, *World of Silence* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988 [1948]), 22.
- 14 Susan Sontag, "Aesthetics of Silence," in her *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 17.
- 15 Junichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1977 [1933]).
- 16 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, trans. Daniel Russell (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971 [1960]).
- 17 Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 64.