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The Changing Modes and Manifestations of Ruination. Nostalgia for Classical Decay¹

Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the changing modes, forms, and manifestations of ruination. In classical cases, it was Nature ruining the artificial, i.e., human artifacts, like constructions. In our contemporary reality, however, we can see more and more warning signs that this “natural” and “classical” ruination is itself challenged and changing: what we have now could instead be described as the ruination of Nature by the artificial. While earlier we paid attention to a relic caused by the agency of Nature, now we will have to pay attention to the relic of Nature’s agency itself.

Keywords

Ruins, Ruination, Heritage, Sustainability, Nostalgia

Introduction

A beautiful old church in Normandy, France, is in danger. Of course, and unfortunately, this fact about the church is not too surprising, as we are accustomed to old buildings being exposed to perils, especially those from the ravages of time. However, the case is slightly more complex, so finding adequate and satisfactory solutions is also more complicated. In other words, despite the dramatic situation, it can be regarded as a tricky state of affairs that may serve as a precedent for other similar cases, mainly because —

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as we will soon see—it is an example that incorporates various aspects in the investigated issue. Such loss can be significant for a wide range of readers, including art historians, philosophers of art, archaeologists, heritage specialists, climate change researchers, environmental policymakers, cultural consultants of local municipalities, or even non-specialized or non-professional lovers of Impressionist painting.

Let us thus first see some of the basic details of the building in question that will serve as a case study from which to depart in our investigation. The Saint-Valery church in Varengeville-sur-Mer is in danger of disappearing, more precisely of falling into the sea, due to increased coastal erosion jeopardizing the cliffs on which the church is built. While erosion may seem to be a natural phenomenon affecting many coastal regions, its power has increased because of rising sea levels due to climate change and as a warning sign. Moreover, in order to have some actual numbers, an article by Georges Waser in *The Art Newspaper*, which reported on Varengeville-sur-Mer, also quoted a recent collapse in the neighboring town of Dieppe, where, in 2012, no less than 20,000 cubic meters of the cliff have fallen victim to erosion (Waser 2022).

The building originated in the 11th century and was later enlarged and modified. Georges Braque contributed significant aesthetic “added value” by designing a stained glass window that depicts the Tree of Jesse (Varengeville-sur-Mer 2023). Braque is buried in the churchyard, which is also in danger of ruin, together with the building. Several Impressionist artists could not resist the temptation of the charming location, as it is testified by, for example, Claude Monet’s work painted in 1882. Such paintings also have importance beyond their art historical value, as they report the levels and grades of erosion in the late 19th century.

From this summary of the art and environmental issues concerning the church, it becomes evident that we are observing diverse forms of ruination and decay, affecting both Nature and human constructions. This situation presents a special yet unfortunate case, which is theoretically complex, especially in terms of assessing and appreciating these different forms of degradation. Nevertheless, we can also see that all this is strongly connected to the broader concept of sustainability, offering a framework and critical concept within which I will investigate these questions further. Therefore, in the following discussion, sustainability will not only refer to finding responsible ways of further growth and avoiding the exhaustion of our natural resources but also to sustaining or maintaining, when possible, aspects of both the natural environment and material culture and their fascinating interaction.

Considering that interaction, what interests us the most here are the natural processes and classical manifestations of ruination. This intersection is often considered aesthetically valuable in the Western tradition, but we are aware of the different and equally legitimate and different approaches to these questions in other cultures (Somhegyi 2020, chapter 4).

1. Natural Ruination of the Building

First, we have the “normal” and natural ruination of the building itself. In this case, it does not matter that the church is on the cliff since this type of “classical” architectural dereliction can affect each building, which we can define as the interaction of Nature with human efforts. By the latter, the “interaction of Nature with human efforts,” I am also referring to such classical interpretations of ruins as, for example, Georg Simmel’s, from the beginning of the 20th century, who famously described architecture as a temporary balance between the “upward striving soul” and nature in its gravity. In his words:

This unique balance—between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward—breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature” (Simmel 1959, 259).

Cases of classical architectural ruination show the result of the power of Nature, more precisely, how it overpowers human agency (Ginsberg 2004; Trigg 2006). Such ruins can evoke nostalgic emotions, worrying thoughts, and aesthetic appreciation. When encountering a sublime amount of time, they can trigger feelings of “smallness” in front of the power of Nature. Alternatively, they can stimulate thoughts on the transience of all human efforts and the ephemerality of the results of our actions (Dillon 2014; Makarius 2004; Zucker 1961). We can also claim that without continuous maintenance efforts, nature destroys buildings, and for a while, we encounter the result of this natural destruction. I have to emphasize, however, that this is only temporal since, without conservation, even ruins get ruined. Since Nature’s change will not stop on its own, at a certain point, there are not even ruins anymore. Of course, the time frame of the existence of ruins depends on several factors, like weather conditions and the original building materials (Somhegyi 2020, see esp. chapter 1).

Triggering perceptions of and ruminations about some decaying ruins thus manifest the power and agency of Nature over human efforts. In some ways, assessing the classical forms and results of architectural decay may seem to perpetuate ideas about a rigid division between humans and nature. Contrarily, ruins have long been, and still are, among the most striking examples that challenge this anthropocentric approach. They illustrate how we witness and, in a sense, appreciate nature gradually reclaiming human-made artifacts. For the loss of the edifice, and as a paradox manifestation of the acceptance of defeat, we console ourselves with the aesthetic pleasure gained from the ruination.

2. “Normal” Erosion of the Cliff

Returning to the threatened church in France, we can briefly look at the second type of ruination, which we could label as “normal” erosion. Compared to the natural ruination of the building and some of its aesthetic implications mentioned above, here we have significantly less to say. In a way, what is described above is just a “normal” or “natural” activity by Nature. The main difference is that it does not affect the building itself, but its surroundings and “base”—the cliff under it. But as for ruination, this “original” or “natural” erosion results from natural processes against which we cannot do much. Unlike in the case of the building that we can repair, rebuild, conserve, etc., entropy is beyond human control. Therefore, it is still the same direction, the agency of Nature, with the difference that it is not directed towards a human artifact but against Nature itself—even if, naturally, with effect and implications on the artifact, too.

The only human effort we can make in such a case—and, in a way, regarding the church, the only “fault” we (as humans) made this time—is how to choose the place of buildings suitably. As Georges Waser described in the aforementioned brief report on the threatened church, another historical monument from the broader region that is comparable to Varengeville-sur-Mer when regarding, for example, its age, appearance, and touristic importance—the Mont Saint-Michel—is deteriorating notably less due to erosion (Waser 2022). All this is because of the difference in its material foundation: the leucogranite rock under Mont Saint-Michel is more resistant than Varengeville-sur-Mer’s chalk, sand, and clay base.

In any case, what we can see concerning this second aspect I labeled as “normal” erosion is that here, we still have the traditional agency of Nature, with its long-known effects and results.

3. Increased Erosion of the Complex

However, let us wait a minute and look at the latter trait of erosion in more detail. As you can guess, we cannot speak of “only” natural erosion here, but it has definitely increased in scale and power due to rising sea levels. Here, a natural dereliction is combined with the dereliction of Nature itself. In other words, earlier, we could contemplate the ruination of the artificial, that is, of manufactured constructions through the agency of Nature, but now we have to add to it the ruination of Nature itself by human agency, definitely going beyond the limits of sustainability. This perspective becomes curious because it is not simply a shift of focus and change of direction but has an exponentially increasing effect on the “classical” ruination process. Nature, being destroyed, can also be more efficient in destroying human artifacts.

However, it is worth observing the implications regarding both aesthetic questions and heritage management issues. Hence, what becomes essential is to see how the changing modes of ruination processes affect the possible management of ruins, architectural dereliction, and the assessment of natural decay.

When examining these issues, we can start with prevention and preservation. Here, we must again admit that we do not have many options. Unlike the reparation or maintenance of a singular construction that in many or most cases is still possible, and hence ruination is preventable if there is a will and the financial resources to do so, we cannot efficiently counteract, in the studied case and similar ones, the perils coming from the large-scale destruction caused by Nature’s increased powers, the strength of an increase in entropy.

Why not? For example, because there is the question of authenticity. Questions and debates around authenticity are not “limited” to the levels of the building itself. Now, as the threat increases in scale, its operation circle also enlarges and affects more than the construction *per se*. It will affect the actual site and also the “sitedness” (Shapshay 2022) of the building, or, we can say, the authenticity of its environmental context and surroundings.

To simplify the issue, we can say that, in a similar way as how we can replace some or practically all of the parts of a building—which will, naturally, have its aesthetic implications (Somhegyi 2022)—we can, at least theoretically, change the *location* of the building. It can, for example, be transported away. It is not as uncommon as it may sound since relocation can happen to constructions if they are in peril or brought away for their artistic, historical, and aesthetic value. For the historical aspect, we could quote the classic ex-

ample of the relocation of the Temple of Abu Simbel in 1968 and the Cloisters Museum in New York for the aesthetic. Nevertheless, how would and how does such a change affect the object of our care? What are the implications of such a drastic intervention in the sitedness of a construction?

Here, we can learn a bit from neighboring research, which has partly comparable results, regarding post-seismic reconstruction models of towns. As Matteo Clemente and Luca Salvati differentiated in their insightful article, we can have off-site and on-site interventions, where the former means building a new town in the vicinity of the destroyed one, and the latter refers to the approach of reconstructing the city “where it was, as it was” (Clemente, Salvati 2017). While Clemente and Salvati show more successful and less efficient examples for both, they conclude that ideally, it is better to avoid “the ‘new town model’ as much as possible” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 11). Their main claim is that maintaining some connection to the original place is essential in overcoming the trauma of the “interrupted landscape,” that is, a “drastic break in the individual stories attaching the people to their territory, as well as an abrupt alteration of the continuous process by which people attribute a sense to their own territory” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 1). In arguing for this keeping of attachment, they urge to limit the top-down government strategies of an overly imposed, command-and-control approach and to focus on providing maximum opportunity for the affected local community to shape their old-new environment, for example, by granting the responsibility of reconstruction to grassroots groups. Only this way, they claim, can we hope to maintain or re-create identity, a relationship to the place, and history: “Rebuilding an identity ‘ex abrupto’ without considering the gradual historical sedimentation in the social context, would lead to gentrification, fake identities as those typical of new towns, theme parks or outlet malls” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 9-10).

The memory of a place plays a key role here, the series of lived experiences contributing to the “sedimentation process.” As Forrest Clingerman, a researcher of environmental hermeneutics and environmental theology, reminds us:

[...] *memory connects the past of the place with its presence or presentness.* [...] The temporal dimensions of memory include both subject and object, self and place. In the pastness of memory, the self and place are like dance partners: moving together in step, responding to one another’s movements, creating meaning in a unique pairing of particular individuals and places (Clingerman 2011, 146, 148, italics in the original).

Naturally, we can observe this not merely on an individual level. This importance of the interconnection of personal attachment and growing out of it—the social relevance of the place in its becoming valuable even as heritage—is what was also highlighted by Lisa Giombini:

While a *place* is seen as the background of human action, the setting where social and personal dynamics take place, *heritage* reflects the societal perception of such dynamics, acting as both the producer and the product of collective and individual identity. Within this perspective, everyday significance and attachment are considered key elements on which to base effective reconstruction programs (Giombini 2020, italics in the original).

In a later article, she further emphasizes the role of the community in the creation of this meaning and significance:

[...] a historical site is never meaningful *in* or *by* itself. Its meaning derives, instead, from the role the object plays in 'constituting' something that is of value, that is, people's attachment to a particular place and culture. Meaning, thus, is not wholly inherent to the object but rather depends on the surrounding social context [...] (Giombini 2021, 105, italics in the original).

As mentioned, all the above considerations may help determine the optimal approach to dealing with the object in question and other buildings threatened by the increased destructive powers of Nature or the ones already ruined. Constructions, building complexes, or even entire villages or towns are embedded in and thus strongly connected to their original context. This strong connection and placement help us assess them qua ruins, or, as Peter Lamarque put it: "A key point is that the aesthetic appreciation of a ruin focuses on the ruin *as a ruin*. In effect, a ruin has become a new kind of object inviting a new kind of response, different from the response that the original building might have elicited" (Lamarque 2016, 297, italics in the original). As a consequence, because of their strong link to the original place, that is, their "sitedness," we can also raise Robert Ginsberg's claim: "The ruin is at home under the rain and wind" (Ginsberg 1988, 169). All this also explains that in the case of their reconstruction, saving, conservation, or when approaching them with care, they should be treated *in situ* to try to save the historical, cultural, and social sedimentation in the surroundings.

Just as a bitter curiosity, to all the above details of the survey of the theoretical implications of sitedness and relocation, we must add that it is often not even a real option. Sometimes, there is a lack of serious will. At the same time, in other cases, there are also physical obstacles or "mere" financial

burdens—to get an idea of this latter, according to Georges Waser’s (2022) article, in the case of Varengeville-sur-Mer, just the feasibility study for a potential relocation of the Saint-Valery church would cost somewhere between € 400,000 and € 600,000.

4. Accepting Decay?

So what exactly remains for us if, in the end, we cannot save something like—presumably—the Saint-Valery church, which is currently in limbo? We can find some considerations in the direction towards which, among other researchers, Erich Hatala Matthes points: accepting such cases as part of the story. Matthes quotes and agrees with the affirmation by Caitlin DeSilvey that “[i]t goes against the grain of human nature to step back and allow things to collapse, the urge to step in at the last minute to avert material disintegration is a powerful one” (DeSilvey 2017, 15; in Matthes 2020, 176). Hence, it is difficult to “resist the impulse to preserve.” Nevertheless, he proposes “alternative ways of thinking” (Matthes 2020, 176). What do these ideas entail? In some sense, they are a certain acceptance of the possibility of letting things go. As Matthes claims: “The tensions inherent in ruins, the ‘interplay’ of forces, thus also invite frank reflection on the false dichotomy of nature and culture” (Matthes 2020, 180). As my introduction argues, ruins are not about the division of nature and culture. Contrarily, they represent the often aesthetically pleasing manifestations of their interconnection. This idea aligns with and reinforces my initial claim. Furthermore, this discussion is intrinsically linked to questions of sustainability, emphasizing the need to find ways to sustain nature and the natural world and its harmonious interaction with our constructions. In Matthes’ text, we can find further clarifications regarding the approach:

We are now in a position to see that while climate change is presented (accurately) as the major environmental problem of our time, it is *also* part of our heritage. [...] Rising sea levels are not simply threatening our heritage, but they are also part of our environmental heritage—the inheritance of generations of industrial activity fueling anthropogenic climate change. We are endeavoring to save the coast from ourselves. [...] The ruins of coastal places operate as a devastating criticism of the capitalist-industrial forces that have driven anthropogenic climate change. But they also offer the promise of finding new meanings in these altered spaces—sites that might bring us together in opposition to the forces that engendered them, and inspire novel visions of a different future (Matthes 2020, 179, 181).

So, here we are again at the fundamental questions of meaning, interpretation, memory, and identity connected to the place. Again, in agreement with Caitlin DeSilvey:

[...] when protection can no longer be sustained at the levels we have become accustomed to, we will need new ways of making sense of the world and our relationship to it. [...] Objects generate meaning not just in their preservation and persistence but also in their destruction and disposal. [...] If we are to explore alternatives to the preservation paradigm, perhaps we need to develop modes of care that help us negotiate the transition between presence and absence (DeSilvey 2017, 16-17, 29, 179).

It might initially seem like a scarce consolation after the significant loss that we have already had and are inevitably going to have, but if all this incentivizes further reflection—and, connected to that and, more importantly, further action too—then it can bring some hope. This speculation will thus again be a mode that could meaningfully contribute to the discourse of sustainability, this time, however, in the sense of sustaining some memory of and maintaining the connection to places and spaces, even if they are or will be physically altered or will disappear.

One of the areas where such forms of loss will stimulate further reflection and discussion is ruination's novel modes and approaches to the concept of the sustainability of ruins. Since the classical forms of ruination could be interpreted as the contemplation of the aesthetically attractive manifestations of the agency of Nature over human constructions, aesthetic sustainability, in this case, would mean sustaining, or at least trying to sustain, these natural forms and processes of ruination, thus trying to keep ruins what they were and are, aesthetically pleasing relics caused by the agency of Nature. In this sense, then, we are aiming and attempting to maintain the natural (forms of) ruination of human constructions, that is, the process traditionally promising the "producing" of aesthetically valuable remnants—at least from a Western perspective—even if, naturally, their "afterlives" is not without further challenges (Somhegyi 2023).

It will also be the point when nostalgia turns into solastalgia. In classical cases, ruins are strongly connected to nostalgia, inviting the observer to sentimental thoughts of the past, longing for earlier periods and places from which we have either moved on or have not been. Solastalgia operates on other levels, as described by Glenn Albrecht, who coined the term:

It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. [...] In direct contrast to the dislocated spatial dimensions of traditionally defined nostalgia, solastalgia is the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment (Albrecht 2019, 38-39).

We can thus claim that our perception of ruins is evolving. Traditionally, ruins stimulated a sense of nostalgia. However, as we increasingly sense and perceive environmental degradation, this nostalgia becomes more profound. It is no longer just about an attachment to a place but also about a yearning for the traditional forms of decay primarily driven by natural forces. This evolving sense of nostalgia suggests a shift towards what might be termed “higher level” nostalgia. It is a nostalgia not just for places but for a time when ruination was a natural process, untouched by human-induced environmental change. As discussed earlier, this natural decay process led to the creation of classical ruins. In light of this, a developed understanding of aesthetic sustainability could guide our efforts to preserve these classical processes of ruination. Such an approach acknowledges the intrinsic value of decay as it occurred in the past, driven solely by natural forces. These forms of ruins are traditionally considered more “peaceful” and tranquil, emanating a sort of Winckelmannian “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” something that even fake ruins imitate, with more or less convincing results (Somhegyi 2021). However, recent ruination—that is, the decay of edifices of the recent past or older buildings but of which ruination has started and increased only in the near past—is rather worrying, or, as Oliver Broggini claimed, it can also be described as “incongruous,” “sinister,” and “disquieting” (Broggini 2009, 9). Here, we can also remember Jonathan Hill’s insightful considerations on the reasons for such worries. Hill claims that the uneasiness of recent ruination may come from the fact that such decaying constructions are too efficient in illustrating our inevitable death:

[...] modern ruins are disturbing for other reasons too, intensifying the analogy of a body to a building. In an ancient ruin, decay occurred in the distant past, stimulating general thoughts of degradation and renewal that allow us to contemplate our own life and believe that death is inevitable but reassuringly in the future. In a modern ruin, active decay occurs before our eyes, stimulating particularly disturbing thoughts of our imminent degeneration and demise (Hill 2019, 194).

In conclusion, we can claim that, while our nostalgia was stimulated by the ruin before, we will soon have nostalgia for the classically ruining though not-yet-ruined Nature. In other words, while earlier we paid attention to a relic made by the agency of Nature, now we will have to pay attention to the relic of Nature’s agency itself.

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