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The Dance of Dead Things

Abstract: One of the most pressing concerns for our twenty first century society is the challenge of the huge stock of existing buildings that have outlived the function for which they were built. Their worth is well recognised, and the importance of retaining them has been long debated, but if they are to be saved, what is to be done with these redundant buildings? Whether these are edifices of character and worth, or ordinary straightforward structures that have simply outlived their purpose; demolition and rebuild is no longer seen as the obvious solution to the continuous use of the specific site. It is now a commonplace architectural approach to re-use, adapt and add-to, rather than the building being razed and a new structure erected in its place. This does present the problem of what to do with these buildings, too often it seems that the only possible solution is another gallery, however, a society can only support so many museums

Introduction:

C-Mine Cultural Centre, Genk, Belgium, by Architects 51N4E

Genk is situated in the heart of Belgium's Kempen coalfield, and is part of an enormous coal deposit that stretches to the Ruhr Valley. The area was exploited at an industrial scale for almost the whole of the twentieth century and over this period Genk grew from an agricultural village to become one of Belgium's most important industrial centres. Winterslag is a suburb of Genk; it was specifically constructed by the mining company to house their workers, and the homes and other buildings were situated around the pit-head. The mine itself extends over a vast area, with shafts up to a kilometre deep. The landscape is littered with the massive accumulated debris of the process of coal extraction; from the great slagheaps that tower over the horizontal countryside, to the forests of specially planted trees, a particular species of pine that groans under excessive compressive load, so warning those underground of imminent collapse. The Winterslag pit closed in 1988; it was the last of the great mines within this important coalfield.

The post-industrial western society has the common problem of what to do with the obsolete landscapes and the buildings of production. The character and identity of each individual industrial development was predicated upon the technical principles necessary for the optimum output and efficiency and so each is different as it contains a direct connection to both the land and the process of production. A palpable anxiety has been created in the wake of the economic void of such massive and whole-scale closures. These post-industrial landscapes contain historical and cultural heritage and if they are to have a sustainable and viable future, and, if their particular character is to be protected and retained, great care must be taken to ensure that their redevelopment is managed in a sympathetic manner.

It is well recognised that the heritage industry is extremely productive, and these almost forgotten areas of production have proved to be a very popular source of entertainment. The C-Mine Cultural Centre is an attempt to replace the obsolete industry of heavy production of the area with the light industry of heritage tourism. This project, which was completed in 2010, reworks the heavy-duty structures into a cultural complex containing: two differently scaled multipurpose auditoria, meeting rooms and spaces for flexible cultural programming, and accommodation for technical support and administration.

The masterplan for the brownfield site sets the series of buildings around a formal square, which is dominated by the pit-head machinery itself. The approach that the designers took was not to fight against, but to work with the scale and character of the buildings and structures. The former machine hall was adapted to become the cultural hub of the redevelopment. The ground-floor is used as the foyer from which to access all other spaces; it acts as a huge field that holds the collection of fragments and detritus of the industrial processes. These are interrupted with a small number of carefully placed interventions which serve to facilitate the needs of the new users, and thus the space has a consciously cluttered feel in which the contrast between the old and the new is deliberately highlighted. The first floor is much more serene and contains a feeling of completeness; the checkerboard terracotta floor which extends all the way across the immense space has been repaired, the obsolete machinery is carefully preserved and fenced-off and natural light which falls through the vast open-structured glazed roof, is allowed to stream across the whole space. It is from this elevated hall that the visitor can access the Mine Experience, the Café and the new roof terrace, with a unique view of the mine's slagheap!

Fig. 1

This situation does beg the question: What is the point of protecting these buildings? They are obsolete, their useful life is finished and the need for these buildings has long past. Why is it important to keep this industrial heritage? Undoubtedly, if it wasn't for the fact that the structures are legally protected they would long ago have been demolished. It could be argued that it has also become clear that it is one thing to cherish heritage and historic buildings, but another to hold value in structures that are in disuse and falling apart, despite that ruin's embodiment of the past and the area's identity. The buildings have become museums to themselves; they celebrate their own obsolete past. They are preserved for no other purpose than to exhibit the lost industry of the area. The quality of the conservation is laudable; Viollet-le-Duc would be impressed with the manner in which they have been preserved; to almost a state that is more pristine that could ever have really existed (Brooker and Stone 2013). They are too clean, too immaculate, far too sanitised to really show what the working conditions were really like. It is quiet, the air is clean, the buildings are scrubbed and it is empty, devoid of workers and atmosphere. The museum doesn't attempt to conjure the feeling of the time of production, but offers a romantic presentable, palatable version of the past. There is a nostalgic perception of this as a golden period of certainty, of full employment and of great social comradeship.

Post-Modern Attitudes towards Obsolete Buildings

One of the fundamental characteristics of our post-modern society is the rise of individualism. Advances in communications, information and transport technologies have facilitated a revolution in the global flow of objects, information and people. This has led to a pluralism of world-view, an expansion of individual choice and a liberation of lifestyle (Gallent and Robinson 2013). This suggests that the global diffusion of culture and identity is incompatible with the traditional structures of the post-war period, which has inevitably led to a more diverse and separated patterns of sociability. This has prompted a questioning of traditional forms of authority, and conventional ideas of citizenship, social contact and allegiance.

The past has traditionally been seen as highly structured and highly political. A definite hierarchical system existed, one which reinforced conventional patterns of behaviour. J B Jackson describes how the present was once a continuation of

this past, that is, the re-enactment of the past modified by intervening events. (Jackson 1980) The population of a community would be constantly reminded of its original identity and its ancient pledges. This relationship was given visual form with monuments and temporal form in a series of days of commemoration. The emphasis was on the continuity of history. A traditional monument is a reminder of something important: a great event, public figure or declaration. It is a persistent reminder of something specific within the hierarchy of the past. Thus through this dual process of tangible and intangible reminders, a population was continually reminded of their position within the organisation of that community, and so the monument had the double function of an aide de memoir, but also a guide to behaviour and attitude in the future, in that its presence determined the actions of forthcoming generations.

Many of these social conventions began to crumble with the fall of modernism and rise in the importance of the workingman and working-woman. The established metanarratives were no longer acceptable, and coinciding with the rise in economic prosperity of the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, was the emergence of the individual point of view. The pluralistic reading of society ensured that history was no longer seen from the privileged view of those in power. This meant that the customary frameworks of organisation that presuppose the privileging of various centres were no longer seen as the primary frameworks. These include traditional points of view such as: Anglo-centric, Euro-centric, gender-centric, ethno-centric etc., and has led to an attitude of general incredulity that challenges many historical narratives and has led to a new way of celebrating past events.

All histories are now seen as important and all narratives are viable and relevant; the basis of historical existence is no longer seen as a sequence of political events. All history is positional; it is dependent upon the position of the narrator of that history. History can therefore be regarded as a discourse; it contains facts, interpretations, bias, and empathy. It can be argued that anyone viewing material from the past however well informed will only be able to understand it from his or her own position. Historical analysis is an act of translation; the historian (whether architectural, cultural, scientific, feminist, activist, or any other of a myriad of other focuses) will not be able to view the material through any other lens than that of their own culture. Thus any history contains many different readings and interpretations.

Postmodernism has exacerbated this; society is now post-industrial, post-Marxist, post-western etc. Lyotard's definition of the way that we live now describes this well: "a social formation where under the impact of secularising, democratising, computerising and consumerising pressures, the maps and status of knowledge are being re-drawn and re-described" (Jenkins 1991). Thus the old centres have been almost completely destroyed and so those without power and with little property are anxious to commemorate their own achievements. This reaction to the traditional hierarchy has had a profound affect upon the character of architecture. It is no coincidence that public buildings have begun to lose their monumental character and a huge number of museums are being created to celebrate many different aspects of society. One of the first examples of this pluralist attitude to the past is the monument to the unknown soldier, which again celebrates a different past, not the past that history books describe, but an acknowledgement of the ordinary person.

Nostalgia

This idea of history as a chronicle of everyday existence describes a vernacular past, a golden age where there are no dates or names, just a sense of the way it used to be. Kerstin Barndt describes how... “the slippage between the historical saturation of the postindustrial landscape on the one hand and its embeddedness in geological time is highly suggestive and speaks of our postmodern condition, in which playful, individual appropriation ostensibly trumps the discarded master narratives of history, the nation, the collective.” (Barndt 2010)

This new ways of celebrating past events could be described as containing a certain sentimentality for the past or nostalgia. Nostalgia is a longing typically for a period or place with happy personal associations and is derived from the Greek *nóstos*, meaning homecoming and *álgos*, meaning pain. It is thought to have been first used to describe the anxieties shown by Seventeenth century Swizz mercenaries fighting away from home. It is interesting that it has also come to mean a yearning for a golden age, it could be described as a time which begins precisely where the active memory ends. (Jackson 1980) A golden age is an idyllic, often imaginary time in the past, of peace, prosperity and happiness, when society had an innocence and a simplicity that has since lost, and importantly it is a time without significant events. This sentimentalising over an obscure part of the ill-defined past has created a romantic idea of an industrial society; one which contained certainty, jobs for life and a real sense of community spirit. Whether this time actually existed is irrelevant, it is the yearning for the half-forgotten past that is fuelling the nostalgia.

It is interesting to observe that nostalgia always contains a sense of a break with the past, a period of neglect or forgetting. A discontinuity has to occur before reconciliation can be made. This interval of forgetting allows society to rediscover the past. A great example of this need to forget is the Hacienda club in Manchester, UK, which was once described as the most famous nightclub in the world. It thrived in the steamy, crazy atmosphere of the late 1980's Manchester, but was actually constructed some years before this. The club was designed by Ben Kelly and constructed within a remodelled yacht showroom (In the middle of Manchester!). The interior had the almost cartoon quality of a warehouse; a huge pigeon blue space with black and yellow hazard warning stripes. This somewhat ironic interior was initially not well received; Anthony H Wilson, the Granada Reports presenter and owner of Factory Records described it as a middleclass conceit, a playing out romanticism about the industrial and post-industrial city, and in the beginning many questioned why they would want to visit a nightclub that looked like the places that they worked in every day: How little they knew! (Stone 2014) The design was too early, it was only after the warehouses had closed, after all the factories had disappeared that the sense of nostalgia came in effect and the club became a place of pilgrimage.

This period of neglect and discontinuity and the subsequent return of history is of great significance for the post-modern society, as is the need to acknowledge a personal history in a time of individualism. One of the most important things that the ordinary every person has to offer in the way of remembering is work. A reflection of this is the extraordinary rise in the number of industrial museums; that is museums dedicated to the industrial work that once consumed the whole of the western world. These are a contemporary celebration of the past as a remote, ill-defined period or environment when a golden age prevailed.

The official Basel website describes the city thus: “With over 40 museums in an area of just 37 km², Basel is a city of art and culture par excellence and a must-see destination for any trip to Switzerland”: I counted 43 on the official website for

the city: 43 museums! The majority of the museums are situated within existing buildings: the Museum of Paper set within the walls of a “fascinating mediaeval mill”, the Museum of Cartoons - from the caricature to the comic, the Historisches Museum Basel in a converted church, Switzerland's largest collection of musical instruments in the historic Lohnhof building, the Museum of Horse-Power-coaches and sleighs of the 19th and 20th centuries in a converted barn, the Museum for the Traditional House is one of Switzerland's principal museums of domestic life and is situated within the converted home of a Basel silk ribbon manufacturer, the Museum of the Flour Mill in a mill, 2,500 teddy bears in the Spielzeug Welten Museum and another Toy Museum is housed in the 17th-century Wettsteinhaus, the unique collection of items from funerary objects at the Sammlung Hörnli Museum and even a Shipping Museum (in Basel??). Basel, a city with a population of barely 160,000, even the wider area of the canton is less than 200,000 people, contains 43 museums. The need of the individual to understand his or her own heritage and to acknowledge that their past has great worth has fuelled a massive tourist industry. Buildings of the nostalgic past are being indiscriminately saved with little thought as to their new programme or those occupiers. A society can only support so many museums and so consideration needs to be made as to what else they can be used for. Is the preservation and restoration movement little more than a means of promoting tourism? Could these buildings have been changed into anything other than a museum?

Ruins-Lust

The concerns of the population of the twenty-first century population are radically different to those of previous ages and a particular concern is the need for everything to be useful; the idea that it is possible for everything to make a contribution to society, for it to be productive. All things are considered to have some worth, and if they are not, then some useful purpose has to be devised. There is a need for nothing to be considered as completely obsolete, it can be adapted, recycled, upcycled. The twenty-first century mantra Reduce, Reuse, Recycle is highly appropriate to the remodelling of outmoded existing buildings. It is displeasing to observe an empty building, to see a structure that is no longer in use, not so much because it is sad to see that it is obsolete, but because it is no longer making a contribution. It is offering nothing to the society, to culture, and to the environment. It is taking up room for no reason and giving nothing back. It requires support to prevent extreme decay and possible damage, but what is it giving in return?

But the problem with this approach is that sometimes the most specific buildings, that is those with the most character are those that were designed so specifically for their purpose that it is almost impossible to transform them into anything else. It seems that the only solution to the need to find a productive use for these extremely particular buildings is a museum, but is there another way, could these building be allowed to just decay? A Modernist building that has become a celebrated ruin is the St Peter's Seminary, which designed by the Glasgow practice Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, was consecrated in 1966 as a training college for Roman Catholic priests. It is a powerfully Modern cast concrete or béton brut building set within the wild countryside of southern Scotland. It contains the traditional elements of religious buildings – cloister, chapel, refectory, cells – all of which are organised around an open court. These essential components are reordered over multiple levels in an unexpected manner, alternately engaging with or hiding the user from the surrounding landscape. The long residential block has an extraordinary stepped section, which allows internal balcony corridors to look down on the continuous space of the refectory and chapel below, and the

dramatic cantilever of the classroom block reinforces the expressive character of the building. The beauty and character of building was commended; it won the RIBA royal gold medal for architecture, however just half a century later, the buildings are now registered as one of the World Monuments Fund's most endangered cultural landmarks.

It's construction was somewhat misguided, by the time it was completed the Second Vatican Council had decided to train priests in parishes and small houses among their congregations, rather than in isolated communities, and so even when it brand new there were insufficient trainee priests to fill the building. In 1980, the Catholic Church closed St Peter's down, and the building was used as a drug rehabilitation centre for a few years. Since 1987 the building has lain empty and has been allowed to become derelict.

The building was very exact, it responded completely to the needs of the users, so acutely that it has proven impossible to convert it into anything else. Most buildings have resilience, in that they are sufficiently robust to allow a remodelling to occur. An uncomplicated building may have a number of distinct lives, it may undergo many quite simple transformations, for example an English Georgian Townhouse is a basically a collection of large rooms, with a front door at ground level and a back door at the rear, and so it can accommodate many different activities; it is often said that almost 90% of all human activity can take place within it.

St Peter's Seminary is far from simple; it is a complex collection of incredibly precise interrelated volumes, which are so specific, so exactly designed for their purpose, that attempts to provide the building with a new use have proven futile. Schemes to convert the buildings include proposals for a hotel and for domestic accommodation, but the inconvenience of the site, the cost of the proposals, and the very specificity of the building itself defeated these. It seems that the programme for the seminary was so exact, and the relationship with the site so acute, that it is impossible to convert it into anything else.

This begs the questions, is this a problem? Does the building have to be restored? Is it necessary for it to once again become productive? Could the seminary, in the rich tradition of pastoral landscaping, become a romantic and ruinous folly? Artists have appropriated the building, it is becoming a situation for graffiti and installations, and rock bands have used the evocative environment as backdrop for their promotional movies. This Brutalist masterpiece is a place of pilgrimage for architects, who stare in wonder at the exposed structure. Louis Kahn once described how a building only reveals its true spirit when it becomes a ruin; when it is being constructed it is too busy with the process of becoming to reveal anything, and when it is being used, it is too busy serving those who occupy it to notice, but when it is empty, when it has fallen into disrepair, when it has nothing but itself to show, then the very nature of the building is exposed and the true character of its existence is revealed.

A ruin could be regarded as an acknowledgement of the force of history, of nature, climate and culture. It is a sign of an obsolete society, a monument to a distant time of different priorities and values. The preservation of a building in a ruinous state recognises this. The seminary has become a memorial to a long lost culture of isolated education, but also, because it has been appropriated by young artists hoping to escape from the restrictive atmosphere of the well ordered city and enjoy the freedom that the shell of the Modernist masterpiece can offer, it has also become symbol of the resilience and resourcefulness of a

contemporary society. Walter Benjamin takes this idea further when he claimed the connection between the ruin and the allegory, meaning that each concretises historical change. The allegory within art and architecture is conscious, self-conscious really about the prospect of its own ruination. The intrinsic beauty of the art or the architectural object is always subject to the attrition that time brings, and this is highlighted when it transgresses the limits that history has set for it. Thus the allegory and the ruin communicate the inevitable obsolescence of the presence. (Benjamin 1998)

Ruins are romantic. Throughout history they have been perceived as objective and subjective assemblages in that a ruin provides a physical connection between man and nature. The mass of the ruin provides a degree of shelter combined with a relative transparency. It allows the viewer to both engage and disengage their imagination through the connection with the ruin and the disconnection with the intact structure. Pallasmaa regards this silent air as vital in generating remembrance: silence focuses our attention instead of on our own existence, it makes us aware of our fundamental solitude. (Pallasmaa, 2005) Romanticism of the 18th and 19th centuries enjoyed ruins-gazing. There was a growing disenchantment with an over-materialist society and the inevitable victory of nature over all things was something to be celebrated. W G Sebald recognised this in his description of northern Europe after WW2: "At the end of the war, some of the bomb sites in Cologne had already been transformed by the dense green vegetation growing over them – the roads made their way through this new landscape like 'peaceful country lanes'. In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature's ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms." (Sebald 2003)

Sainte-Croix

So this brings the discussion onto the disused, deconsecrated church of Sainte-Croix in Liege. The foundation of a church on this particular site dates back to the 11th century. It was one of seven collegiate churches to be constructed in this period and ensured that Liege was one of the most important cities of the Holy Roman Empire. The Sainte-Croix, of the Church of the Holy Cross occupies a natural promontory on the western periphery of Liege, originally close to both the river Sauveniere and the Legia, although both rivers were diverted in the 19th century. The building itself has undergone a number of transformations; it was rebuilt in the 8th and 9th centuries, again in the 14th and the present incarnation is mostly from the 18th century, although a substantial fragment of the structure was lost in the 19th century, and an even greater section of the collection of structures, all of the attached houses to the north, was lost to the city-centre highway in the 1960's. And so the church is now in a somewhat isolated position, although one street to the east does connect the church to the choir and to the south a row of 19th century almshouses recollects the shape of the original cloister.

The building could be described as gothic in style with a late Romanesque octagonal tower. It contains an impressive central nave which is flanked by side aisles. The soaring internal space, which is still smiled upon by the statues of saints, is both majestic and serene. The rigour of the warm stone structure is emphasised by the regular diagonal of the terracotta floor tiles while the dust and cobwebs climbing over decaying decorated screens lend an uncanny quality to the place. The condition of the building is poor; decay, leakages and damage are all highly visible, so it is a challenge to find some useful occupation for the building.

Fig. 2

There are many examples of the adaptation of a church building for a new use: cinema, apartments, shops, art gallery, museum, library, archive, hotel, even a skate-board park. Obviously it is possible to install many different types of function – but does it have to be so? This church is just one of many buildings that can no longer support their original programme, and given the immediate context around the structure it is proving to be almost possible for a new use to be found. Why not let the building fall into ruin? Let it naturally decay; let nature absorb the very building bricks of its structure. John Ruskin regarded restoration, and by extension adaptation as a false description of the thing destroyed, he argued that it destroyed the spirit of the previous age and was merely a false description of the thing that was replaced. He called for care and maintenance, arguing that the “buildings belong partly to the generation that constructed it and partly to those who have subsequently occupied them, but the present generation has no right to tear it down or damage it, just care for it.” (Brooker and Stone 2013)

Conclusion

This begs the questions, is the fact that the building remains in its ruinous state a problem? Does the building have to be restored? Is it necessary for it to once again become productive? Could the church in the rich tradition of pastoral landscaping, become a romantic and ruinous folly?

A ruin could be regarded as an acknowledgement of the force of history, of nature, climate and culture. It is a sign of an obsolete society, a monument to a distant time of different priorities and values. The preservation of a building in a ruinous state recognises this. The seminary has become a memorial to a long lost culture of isolated education, but also, because it has been appropriated by young artists hoping to escape from the restrictive atmosphere of the well ordered city and enjoy the freedom that the shell of the Modernist masterpiece can offer, it has also become symbol of the resilience and resourcefulness of the twenty-first century.

Things are often admired not so much for their beauty, but for their association with a phase of our past; a retrieval from the original ideal condition. Over a century ago, Alois Riegl argued that all monuments have historical value since they represent a particular stage in the development of a culture and that everything that once was forms an irreplaceable and inextricable link in a chain of development: “We call historical all things that once were and are no longer”. (Riegl 1903) Some 60 years later (1987), Jorge Sivetti develops this when he speaks of the relevance and importance of our historic buildings. “At the risk of sounding too partisan and biased, I would say that even in historic times documents were not always available, and buildings (monuments, vernacular constructions, and public works) are themselves important texts, often providing the first and most lasting impression of a culture.” (Silvetti 1996)

Unburdened by notions of architectural importance, the building can reveal its actual significance as a monumental example of a widespread condition: that of abandoned religious space at the heart of a mature western city being given a new and romantic role.

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