Article

At The Stage of Their Fate: Salvaging the Urban Obsolete in Sydney

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Abstract: Chronicling the interiors and exteriors of selected abandoned buildings in Sydney, this article examines the problem of memory in spaces that are not only isolated and devalued, but often have played no role in the life of the casual visitor or observer. How can the ruins of someone else's past be made to speak, and how might contemporary ruinscapes reveal a different way of engaging with the past in urban space, particularly in one of the "youngest" cities in the world - a city not defined by decline; constantly undergoing redevelopment; and known more for contemporary architecture than contemporary ruin? Through describing personal encounters with each site, this paper adopts the attitude of Benjamin's collector who encounters old books in a way that does not consider their use-value but instead sees them as fated objects, encountered as ephemeral remnants of the past. Like the salvaged but outmoded book, the modern ruin is just as much a site in which history is played out as any house of parliament or mainstream newsroom. Further, history need not be the dominion of those things and people that speak loudly and clearly—it is equally constituted by boundless, amorphous, liminal, discarded, rejected, silent things—in this case, ruined buildings of a recent, remembered and accessible past.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; urban ruins; modern ruins; urban decay; urban explorations; Sydney; Berlin

In memory of the Edwin Davey Flour Mill ruins 1996-2013

1. Introduction

In the Paris arcades of 1920's and 1930's, Walter Benjamin recognised the traces of a recent past, quickly obliterated by destructive forgetting. For the visitor in Benjamin's time, the Parisian arcades presented a collection of neglected shop-fronts and quaint stores, housed in the once opulent forerunners to modern shopping malls. The various musings that grew out of Benjamin's fascination with these semi-derelict spaces of early consumer culture provided the foundation for *The Arcades Project* [1].

What was it that Benjamin was looking for in the arcades, and what was it that he ultimately found there? The collective history Benjamin sought was not his own – those recollections were reserved for his writing on Berlin, the city of his childhood. As portals crossing the threshold between the now and the what-has-been, the arcades in a state of decay proved to be fertile ground for Benjamin's ideas. In them he found the origins – the wish images and dreamworlds – of his own era. If the abandoned arcades proved to be of use (not despite, but because of their decay and obsolescence), what purpose can modern ruins serve for researchers investigating contemporary urban space?

There are already a number of texts which discuss modern, urban ruins at length - the practice of urbex, the growing interest in images of ruin, and the aesthetics of urban and industrial decay are considered particularly by Tim Edensor [2], Dylan Trigg [3], David Pinder [4], and within the collection *Ruins of Modernity* edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle [5]. Tim Edensor and Caitlin DeSilvey summarise the growing body of literature on ruins in *Reckoning with Ruins* [6], which offers an extensive summary of relevant literature and key thinking to date. I recently contributed to the field with an article about my experiences in Pripyat (Chernobyl), New York, Detroit, and Berlin in the context of a tactical engagement with liminal urban spaces and material decay [7]. Rather than revisiting these approaches, or reviewing the core theory around urban ruins and decay, this article describes my attempts to adapt the method behind two of Benjamin's most well-known undertakings – the voluminous and fragmentary account of the surviving ephemera of the Nineteenth Century contained in *The Arcades Project*, and the equally fragmentary writings about Berlin that Benjamin compiled while in exile during the 1930s, *Berlin Chronicle* [8] and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* [9]

Chronicling personal experience of the interiors and exteriors of selected abandoned buildings in Sydney – via constellated photographs and vignettes, through the lens of Benjamin's personal experiences and writings - this article examines the complexity of memory in spaces that are not only isolated and devalued, but often have played no role in the life of the casual visitor or observer. How can the ruins of someone else's past be made to speak, and how might contemporary ruinscapes reveal a different way of engaging with the past in urban space, particularly in one of the "youngest" cities in the world - a city that is not defined by decline, but is constantly undergoing redevelopment and known more for contemporary architecture than contemporary ruin?

2. Sydney's Ghosts

Ghost towns are spaces haunted by the possibility of what was, and what could be. Ghost relics, in an otherwise active urban space, haunt the urban fabric itself, at once present and absent from the surrounding landscape. Avery Gordon states that "haunting describes how that which appears to be not

there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities" while it is the ghost itself – the fleeting sense of something missing, yet palpable, "that tells you a haunting is taking place" [10] p.8)

In 1992, the inner-city districts of Pyrmont, Ultimo, Blackwattle Bay, White Bay, and parts of Rozelle were in a state of dereliction. Previously industrial hubs once filled with abattoirs, factories, wool stores and silos, power stations and the cottages and public houses of their workers, had transformed into a landscape of obsolescence – abject ruins surrounded by an increasingly corporate urban heart, and gentrifying suburbs. Such a landscape might today have been described as a Drosscape [11], or *Terrain Vague* [12] perhaps a liminal landscape [13], overtaken by HI-TOADs (high impact temporarily obsolete abandoned derelict) [14] and heritage listed industrial architecture awaiting redevelopment – but it took decades for Pyrmont to be seen as anything other than an eye-sore. One particular ruin, the Pyrmont Incinerator, designed by Walter Burley Griffin (designer of the nation's capital city, Canberra), was intended as a monumental piece of industrial architecture, but fell to demolition by neglect. The loss of the incinerator was the salvation of many other industrial wrecks in the area, quickly stabilised following its demise, but its ghost still haunts the suburb, lingering in the minds of those who remember its starkly tiled chimneys, which stood for many years as both a symbol of urban decay, and as icons of Pyrmont's industrial past – beautiful its own right, the vanished incinerator continues to inspire web sites, artworks and exhibitions, depicting its various stages of function and decay in loving detail, its absence keenly felt.

As of 2013, Ultimo and Pyrmont are almost completely redeveloped, with warehouses and factories converted into museums, galleries, apartments and offices, a green business park (Workplace6), and a casino. Nearby sections of foreshore in Blackwattle bay and Rozelle are also undergoing the final stages of redevelopment.

As a case study, Sydney as an unfinished city is an interesting counter to cities like Detroit (in rapid and ongoing decline), or New York and Manchester's uneven redevelopment-in-progress over many decades. Sydney shares some affinities with cities like Berlin which are also "unfinished" and constantly undergoing large-scale development (if for very different reasons). However, unlike many other cities, most of Sydney's industrial wastelands have undergone demolition, renewal or redevelopment, and those that stand are very particular exceptions, reduced in number year by year.

This article presents a small section of a much larger chronicle of Sydney's ruins which goes back to 2007 and includes a considerable collection of images and notes on personal encounters with decay in the inner city. In the intervening years, many of ruins I have frequented are no longer ruined – the only major ruin that still stands as such is a factory abandoned after its roof was damaged in a hail storm. The site is filled with asbestos, rendering it useless even for redevelopment without major remedial works. Other ruins that I visited as recently as August 2012 are now covered in hoardings, demolished, or completely incorporated into new developments.

12   **Figure 1.** Abandoned factory (2007).

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15   The following accounts of Sydney's ruins are intended to both memorialise a small selection of
16 now-lost places, and to evoke the process of salvage which has been a central part of my ongoing
17 engagement with urban decay and ruins.

18 *2.1 Glebe*

19   My earliest experiences in the ruins of Sydney took place in my home suburb of Glebe, then
20 undergoing the final transition of its foreshore from a scruffy industrial bay to a well-maintained
21 recreational space, and simultaneously enjoying an extended period of gentrification. The ruins I came
22 to know – a handful of abandoned Victorian mansions (Bellevue and Reussdale); a boarded up church,
23 and a rambling and damp tram shed – have all been renovated, although small pockets of industrial
24 ruin survive in neighboring suburbs, reflecting the now-lost industrial landscape which once existed
25 around a lone incinerator (salvaged because its towering Pyrmont cousin was lost, both designed by
26 the same architect, but built on vastly different scales). The incinerator sits uncomfortably in the
27 landscape, unloved in renovation, just as in ruin, while the rust-tinged chimneys of the White Bay
28 Power station seem ready to topple at any moment, just across the water.
29   In the introduction to *Berlin Childhood Around 1900,* Benjamin refers to "the irretrievability—not
30 the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past" ([9] p.344) which he
31 encounters in writing what is simultaneously personal recollection, and an account of a time which
32 cannot occur again, because the necessary conditions could never, realistically, be reconfigured.
33 However, an encounter with this past in some form is not discounted by Benjamin. Rather, he seeks to
34 conjure that time through a series of vignettes; almost static, dream-like images which, collected or
35 separated, render fragments of that experience accessible to the reader.

36   Taking Benjamin's approach to his own childhood recollections – replicated in his writings on
37 Marseilles and Naples, One Way Street, and elsewhere – the two vignettes below represent a conscious
38 attempt to constellate both personal and collective experience and to explore both the fascination of
39 material ruins, and the landscapes of industrial decay that are literally threatened, and no longer extant.

40   **Figure 2.** Reussdale (2007) and **Figure 3**. Whitebay Power Station (2007).

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43   In mid-2012, I visited the tram sheds in Glebe for what would be the last time, arriving just as
44 contractors began a process of renovation. Somewhere I had visited regularly since 2007, this ruin was
45 one of the few industrial relics to persist near the waters of Blackwattle Bay. The following extract is
46 taken from my account of this visit:
47   "I walked past the back of a derelict tram workshop near my home, a transitionary space which was
48 the result of both decay and urban renewal. Construction workers had begun the regeneration
49 (demolition) of a rambling and iconic industrial site and sports ground. Peering through the mesh-
50 covered fence, I was struck by two things. The first was the familiarity of the smell of decay that
51 transported me, abruptly, to places I had been before - the smell of the tram sheds in a state of decay
52 was the smell of the interior of every dank, damp building I had ever set foot in, and in that moment,
53 every unloved and mouldering place I'd entered hovered for a moment in my mind. The second thing
54 which struck me was that over all the years I had lived nearby, walking past the overgrown palms and
55 unchecked ivy that had established a wild garden around the sheds, it had seemed such a static thing—
56 though decaying, quite solid. I could (and would) wander in whenever the fence was conveniently
57 open, keeping a directionless lists of things that were the same (the smell, the green growth on the
58 walls, the trams up on blocks) and things that had changed (the graffiti, the half-patched holes in the
59 roof, the random ephemera scattered about). There were always new things I noticed (reflections in
60 puddles after rain and the precarious lean of the tall corrugated doors, large enough to admit the now-
61 rusting trams that had come in on rails, but would leave on trucks—obsolete now that the tracks had all
62 been torn up or covered over in their wake). Each time there were things I had forgotten (the inevitable
63 mud and the least obtrusive entry point). In my repeated visits to this ruin, there had been a sense of
64 permanence, even in the precariousness that defined the entire place. To walk past and see that
65 someone, in less than a week (maybe even in a day) had torn up vast sections of the garden—a garden

so established that it very-nearly hid the rambling building from sight—and left a dirt-covered mess that provided no clues as to what had just been, was unsettling."

Figure 4. Rozelle Tram Depot (Glebe, 2008).

"What was also unsettling was that once the dirt piles wholly take over, I probably won't care very deeply for this place. The erasure of the physical remnants was also the erasure of the material link to that location—and the obliteration of a point of interest for me (in this case, an accessible and familiar urban ruin; a locally significant landmark; an impromptu and uncared-for tram-sanctuary; a whole history evident in tell-tale ruins that exposed decades of neglect and illustrated something vital about our investment in constant development). Around the corner, the rest of the site already failed to keep my attention. Weeks before, I had paused, fascinated, to take inadequate pictures with my camera phone, chronicling the violent semi-demolition of a paceway and its spectator stands, which looked as if some great monster had torn them in two, raggedly chopped at one end, still-functional on the other. All I saw now was a pit-to-be, a mountain of dirt, and some passingly interesting debris piled beyond the reach or myself or my camera."

Figure 5. Rubble from demolitions, Sydney (2012).

2.2. Pyrmont and The Mill

The bearing that city-space might have on collective and private memory and experience can be isolated in the city of Berlin at the beginning of the 20th that Benjamin recollects, which is tainted by his knowledge of how it appeared to him later. Considering the childhood space of the Zoological Garden:

"And before the economic crisis had so depopulated these resorts that they seemed more ancient than Roman spas, this dead corner of the Zoological Garden was an image of what was to come, a prophesying place. It must be considered certain that there are such places; indeed, just as there are plants that primitive peoples claim confer the power of clairvoyance, so there are places endowed with such power: they may be deserted promenades, or treetops, particularly in towns, seen against walls, railway crossings and above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town." ([8] p.610).

Benjamin's approach opens up the possibility for an understanding of city spaces as highly porous sites of recollection, with ruins, fragments and remnants appearing as fractured or dislocated portents of multiplicitous pasts, and unknown futures. A reworked section from *Berlin Childhood* (which mentions the same spring, Bad Pyrmont, that the suburb of Pyrmont was named after, as if emphasising the relationship between multiplicitous moments, spaces and eras) reverses this seer's vision and directs its gaze at the past:

"At that point, the avenue which welcomed the visitor resembled, with the white globes of its lampposts, an abandoned promenade at Eilsen or Bad Pyrmont; and long before those places lay so desolate as to seem more ancient than the baths of Rome, this corner of the Zoological Garden bore traces of what was to come. It was a prophetic corner. For just as there are plants that are said to confer the power to see into the future, so there are places that possess such a virtue. For the most part, they

208 are deserted places—treetops that lean against walls, blind alleys or front gardens where no one ever
209 stops. In such places, it seems as if all that lies in store for us has become the past." ([15] p.365)

210   In these two passages, Benjamin not only imbues deserted or rejected miscellania with a power, but
211 also a virtue – gazed upon, the neglected spaces of the city become prophesying places which are
212 simultaneously dead and transformative for the viewer. Blind alleys, deserted promenades, railway
213 tracks - these are thresholds, they divide the everyday world from an almost magical world of stasis
214 and transformation. The remaining ruins of Pyrmont are similarly transformative – the seers gaze is
215 directed toward the past, but also the inevitability of what is to come, and suddenly the urban
216 landscape (and memory) takes on a new form.

217   There is such site in Pyrmont that I have always called "The Mill", but which was long known as
218 the Edwin Davey Flour Mill (operational until 1996) and, more recently, Harbourmill (a pending
219 residential development on the site).

220   The Mill had been standing as a ruin for more than 10 years when I first came across it – spied from
221 a tram stop below and pursued through a series of winding streets, just beyond reach until I gained the
222 crest of a hill. Standing alongside the spring after which the suburb of Pyrmont was ultimately named,
223 I spied the Mill perched on its promontory just a block away – with a gaping hole in the fence as if
224 somehow my arrival had been anticipated.

225   In 2007, one of my earliest extended records of Sydney's ruins, I wrote of the Mill:

226   "My favourite place in the city is not really a "place" anymore, just three bare walls, an enormous
227 wrought iron gate, and a few scattered concrete platforms with remnants of machinery attached. From
228 its empty windows an observer can see the city skyline, Anzac Bridge, Wentworth Park, Blackwattle
229 Bay, the old Sydney Depot (and Ultimo quarry) and a light-rail stop directly below. Within the walls is
230 a field of high grass partly smothered by discarded household appliances and broken glass. The roof is
231 open to the sky, admitting sun and rain and giving the impression of being both sheltered and exposed.
232 The walls are held up by criss-crossing scaffolding, which arches above, casting curious shadows.
233 Everyone I have ever taken here has been astonished by this strange, silent place."

234   "Standing or crouching in one of its empty windows, I can see the city sprawled around me. At one
235 time, I imagine I would have seen the stacks of White Bay across the water, but the view is now
236 obscured by a block of flats - already greying around the edges, its garish terracotta colour scheme dull
237 and dirty. With the long brown grass stirring around me I imagine I can see the harbour in the distance,
238 or look out across the park to see the globes on top of the old Grace Brothers building – once
239 abandoned and semi derelict itself. If I stand on the very edge of the overhang and cling to the fence, I
240 can see the UTS tower framed perfectly through one of the windows."
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Figure 6. Edwin Davey Flour Mill (2007).

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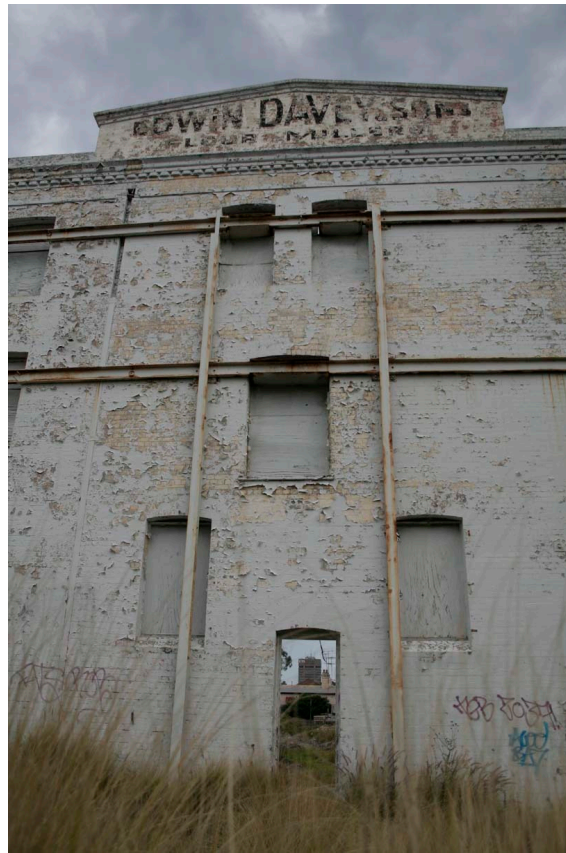
245   "Though there are continual reminders of the world outside – empty spray-paint cans, a torn and

246 mildewed armchair, the occasional whirring of the light rail below – it is easy to disengage; to revel

247 only in the immediate surroundings. There is a feeling of suspension, of crossing borders, as if this

248 space is slightly misaligned with what goes on beyond its walls - detached from the everyday existence

249 which continues its frenetic pace, while I stand captivated by something just beyond its grasp."

250   I was, and still am, haunted by The Mill, drawn towards the experience of the space as if called by a

251 distant spectre, which is forever stranded just beyond the explicable, recountable experience of the

252 ruin. Gordon's conceptualisation of ghosts and haunting describes the sensation of haunting as one that

253 transforms our understanding of the world, despite being amorphous, incomplete or ill defined

254 (perhaps, even, because of this transience): "The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very

255 particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively,

256 sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we

257 come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition". ([10] p.8) Gordon is

258 particularly concerned with sociological absences that haunt us despite not being overtly present, but

259 her description of this ontological way of knowing echoes my experience in ruins – both as a physical

260 encounter and as a research topic which is often overlooked *and* deals with disappearing places.

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Figure 7. Edwin Davey Flour Mill and UTS tower (2007).

Though it was in pieces, the remnant of the Mill suggested its former completion and spoke of the largely industrial history of the suburb of Pyrmont, now mostly obliterated from the landscape, irretrievably lost to demolition and development. Benjamin's list of deserted places, blind alleys, out-of-place treetops, and quiet corners is what I am adding to in my pursuit of ruins – the places in which traces of past and present coalesce. That I seek abstract traces in actual ruins may seem to be a quite literal, even blunt reading of Benjamin's work. However, the power of the fragment to evoke considerable detail was of great significance to Benjamin, particularly as a tool for remembrance in urban space, where progress is so often materially destructive, and where material traces are a trigger for remembrance – both collective and biographical. As Benjamin suggests, forgotten and neglected places (like the junk in an attic) can be of significant value:

"If I chance today to pass through the streets of the neighbourhood, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. And in truth, this dead district with its tall apartment houses is today the junkroom of the West End bourgeoisie". ([16] p.606)

Benjamin's junkrooms are sites of perpetual movement, in which aspects of a collective past remain. Benjamin also located the past in the physical traces of the nineteenth century that persisted in the arcades; he identified books, old toys, rags – discarded objects as keys to the past. Why not spaces? And if we are to speak of spaces, why not the collective and biographical urban experience of a city's past - a past that haunts us through its ruins?

3. Reading Ruins

To employ Benjamin's theory and criticism in urban spaces, and to revert the figurative representation of the city *as* a ruin to ruins *of* the city is precisely the method of *The Arcades Project* itself – the constant negotiation between physical fragments and remnants and the model of modernity as fracturing and dislocating experience. In the unfinished notes that make up his *Paralipomena to On the Concept of History* [17], Benjamin intimated that history is rightfully a text, one which is ever in the process of being deciphered, and perpetually written and rewritten, enacted, personal, never universal, and constantly shifting [18]. Enigmatically, he concludes that "to grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience" ([18] p.405)

Benjamin considers progress as a force that generates literal and figurative ruins, destroying the past on which such progress is founded. His *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* [19] in particular attests to this, as do the attempts he makes to salvage a vanishing past in *One Way Street* [20] and *Central Park* [21]*,* as well as *Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood*. In another way, the city itself, as a site of consumption and obsolescence, as the space in which commodity culture most definitively manifests, is a haven for the neglected, forgotten and discarded remnants of that culture. The (unfinished) *Arcades Project* is, in subject and form, a testament to the notion that the past resides in the outmoded, dusty and fragmenting sites that persist in contrast to the perceptions of the city in terms of newness and wholeness, progress and renewal. Together, the abstract notion of history as rubble or refuse and the city as a repository for objects and sites that hold the "secret index" ([18] p.390) to the past by virtue of their persistence against that process of ruination, provides the possibility to at once redeem the past through the investigation of the rejected and lost, and to redeem modern ruins as

604 important sites of urban experience. It is a perpetual practice of redemption through which teleological
605 histories, materialist emphases, and reductive urban planning assessments can be reconsidered through
606 the re-evaluation of what constitutes both a ruin and urban experience.

607 To explore Sydney with Benjamin's words in mind generates echoes, reflections, translations and,
608 importantly, experiences of a particular type; experiences which superimpose several pasts upon one
609 moment, and several places upon a specific site. Recollections which are not my own can reverberate
610 across a contested urban topography, doing away with any singular perception in favour of an
611 encounter which includes not only the image before me, but a multiplicity of moments and
612 recollections, constellating on a single site.

613 This approach allows Benjamin's writing to undergo its own transformation; to be introduced to the
614 new city, to wander the fragmenting ruins of a new century, and to impose itself upon a haunted
615 landscape; to be found again in old sites, and their reconstructions. His writing is able to impress and
616 affect a changing city, in recognising the affinity of the present space with its many pasts.

617 Urban space as a repository for multiple happening is summarised by Benjamin in considering:

618 "…the Place du Maroc in Belleville: that desolate heap of stones with its rows of tenements became
619 for me, when I happened on it one Sunday afternoon, not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the
620 same time, a monument of colonial imperialism; topographic vision entwined with allegorical meaning
621 in this square. Yet not for an instant did it lose its place in the heart of Belleville". ([1] p.518)

622 Here, Benjamin emphasises the "interpenetration of images", a sense of the past that imbues a
623 site—particularly a ruined or desolate site—with the impression of multiple temporalities, moments, or
624 events. This is especially relevant in the context of urban space and development, where a newer
625 topography overlays (or is overlaid) by earlier histories, so that one place or space can encompass
626 more than a single "topographic vision" at a time, and may even (as with the Zoo) embody entirely
627 distant and unrelated moments and temporalities—even the possibilities of the future.

628 Throughout *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym relies heavily on Benjamin's work to express
629 the idea that in an experiential urban archaeology lies the possibility to confront the inequality of a
630 history that signposts sites of perceived heritage with a view to the future, while the past is left behind
631 in ruins. Boym refers to Benjamin's work on Naples (particularly its "dilapidated ruins") to consider
632 the ways in which we "can discover the urban past", by exploring the ruined and marginal sites of the
633 city, and is critical of the empty gestures of "memorial plaques", which cannot, in their attempt to
634 acknowledge heritage, express the "elusive and uncanny" past ([22] p.76-77). Boym's
635 conceptualisation offers a mode of including marginalia in historical perception by anticipating
636 alternatives and possibilities presented by "hybrids of past and present" ([22] p.31) (a reading that
637 admits the unresolved tensions and of an era to a space of multiple temporalities that are vital to an
638 experience of the past embodied in material remnants ([22] p.258) and the porosity of history, time and
639 space in the city ([22] p.77).

640 In the familiar space of Sydney, where my habitual engagement with a known environment often
641 desensitises – a concept suggested by Benjamin in his work on the Flaneur and Hashish in particular
642 (See convolute M of *The Arcades Project*; and the Tara Forrest's writings on Benjamin and
643 Hashish [23]) - modern ruins offer aesthetic and experiential contrasts to a homogenised everyday
644 city. Rather than the sparkling waters of the harbor, or the architectural wonders of the Harbour Bridge
645 and the Opera House; rather than George Street, Victoria Road or Broadway, these remnants of

Sydney's industrial past reveal an interpenetration of the past and present, and the real impacts of urban renewal projects that remove traces of the recent past, (particularly industrial traces) as if they are a source of shame or sign of failure.

Benjamin identified a destructive momentum in our obsession with the new and devaluation of the recently outmoded. To oppose this force of progress that leaves rejected ephemera and epic history as the predominant remains of the past Benjamin indulged in an experimental configuration of remnants – forgotten literary and art works, as well as material fragments – as images or concepts that he assembled at the point of their oblivion "where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest" ([1] p.475). Dialectically, transient material remnants hold the promise of the new and the truth of decline. As an example, Benjamin notes that the "Arcades are such monuments of being-no-more. And the energy that works in them is dialectics." ([1] p.833) Here, he suggests that at the point of disappearance, one finds the potential for a reversal in which "the moment of their ceasing to be" ([1] p.833) distills the essence of both the structure and the epoch, and revolutionises the site.[1]

Graeme Gilloch directly attests to this, in relation to the concept of the dialectical image:

"The arcades became the perfect object of the dialectical image, that method concerned specifically with the pause between life and death. The dialectical image captures the last fleeting moments of the afterlife of the object, the precise instant of the demise in which illusion withers and truth becomes manifest. On the brink of oblivion, the crumbling arcade reveals itself as the locus of dreaming. The dialectical image is the redemptive 'at last sight' of the ruined phantasmagoria of modernity". ([24] p.127).

On the brink of oblivion – a real threat in a city gripped by constant renewal - the ruins of Sydney, like the crumbling arcades, offer the possibility for redemption and salvage of many versions of the recent past, threatened by the pace of change, and ever-renewing modernity. The ruins I have written of are now mostly lost – this chronicle attempts to grasp the afterlife of theses spaces, the rejected ephemera of Sydney which are also inhabitable images of transience, suspended between life and death, accessible as never before on the point of disappearance, offering a transformative potential on the moment of oblivion.

4. The Urban Obsolete

Like Kafka's Odradek [25], an unwanted remnant, unrecognisable and worthless (whose shapeless, spindled form remains ambiguous to the observer), the ruin is a broken and dislocated relic that momentarily haunts the present as it intercedes on any moment: "Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. " ([16] p.811). Benjamin sees this discarded and distorted object, on the point of oblivion, as both signifying the guilt of forgetting, but also the (collective) historical perception which relegates things to the realm of the forgotten, and the possibility presented by oblivion for bringing the object back to light: "Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses toward the light". ([16] p.810).

Bringing Odradek back from oblivion is one of many redemptive images Benjamin borrows from the German literary cannon. As a "guilt ridden" object, rejected and forgotten, the Odradek calls us to account for all of our forgotten pasts – as well as calling up the echoes of vanishing pre-history. Of the

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[1] See especially convolutes D°4, D°6 of the *Arcades Project*

Odradek's favoured haunts, Benjamin notes "Attics are the places of discarded, forgotten objects." He goes on to isolate these objects as things that we avoid, encounters we "would like to put off […] til the end of time", for fear of having to face the residual guilt, the weight of forgetting ([16] p.811). Fundamentally, Benjamin wishes to isolate things in motion, things that are passing from the world, and freeze them in a moment. Crucially, that moment must come when such a thing is in transition – that is, holds within it past, present and future possibilities – pressing toward the light, coming into view from the darkness or rejection, deviance and defeat.

Similarly, ruins are a final product of the events that slide and mingle and happen or are forgotten, of forces and practices and intentions – the sort of things which, step by step or perhaps with a crash, create the ruin space. It is as if the whole story of the place is gathered up at this point of its existence and can be intuited within the immediate experience of that space. It is not a history, in the conventional sense, because there are details which may not be known (may be unknowable); however, the essential qualities of its being, becoming and ceasing to be are all caught up in the abstract and concrete impressions of places which have been abandoned to obsolescence.

Ruins offer an experience in a world generally devoid of (and/or after) animated living – this is the possibility Benjamin identified in the arcades. It is also the possibility identified by others who investigate such spaces – just like Kathleen Stewarts exploration of the "ordinary affects" that can be detected in forgotten, mundane or transient things, this exploration encompasses circuits and flows, shocks, undertows and constructions, "things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too." ([26] p.3) A contemporary space of decay and ruin conjures a simultaneity: the moment of demise, the moment of intrusion; a collection of impressions and artifacts, senses, smells and sounds which will reverberate within the spectator as experience (later, as recollection), and as an echo of the past released under the pressure of an active human presence. History is thus tied to ruins which are tangible, and persistent, "they haunt. They become not a symbol of loss, but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself; the ruined place itself remembers and grows lonely." ([26] p.3)

5. Salvage

Benjamin's reflections on the collector seem apt here. Though he speaks specifically of the book collector and of the collector in general, as the "physiognomists of the world of objects", spaces in a state of neglect and abandonment take on the same fascination for me as objects might to another collector - one who becomes an "interpreter of fate", who is enthralled and fascinated by the history of their chosen object, but also by its future, its potential in itself and to them. ([27] pp.59-67)

The collector has, Benjamin writes,

"a relationship to objects which does not emphasise their functional utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them." ([27] p.60)

Though Benjamin was expressly referring to the collector of books, this sentiment of salvaging artifacts from an uncertain fate bears a close relation to the collection here – taken from a jumble of ruined spaces, and sorted into an approximate order, inspired by both the "profound enchantment" and love described by Benjamin above.

Even the images of these ruins are stranded refuse, media which, for whatever reason, does not qualify for particular uses. Rather than curated exhibits, they are snapshots, mental triggers for an experience, condensed reminders of each of these sites—often blurred, too dark, washed out, too filled with light and contrast, useful only to me—to be made sense of, most, by one who was there. These images are a vital part of my collector-salvation of the ruins, half-useless themselves.

I don't want to relegate these already abandoned places to a space of further uncertainty—not the usual fate of photographs to become dusty and dull in a hidden corner, which could have been fitting— but the more contemporary damnation of digital neglect—so many numbered images in a folder within a folder marked "photos" and "ruins to sort", respectively.

They are grand versions of the abandoned trinkets in second-hand stores, dust covered, damaged, with no clear function upon first inspection. Like obscure and neglected books piled in a crate in some forgotten corner, to emerge mildewed and crumbling for the eager perusal of someone who sees something more to them – more to their fate – than simply that of unwanted rubbish.

If I could pick up such ruins and fold them into my hand, I would keep them close by to be unfolded and inspected, studied, revealing every secret to me so that I could hold them even closer. Observing each little sign of deterioration, letting others view them so that they too could feel themselves weave into the ruin, taking something of it away with them and leaving something of themselves wandering within.

My personal experiences in these ruins exemplify the merit of an approach that perceives a destructive energy in perpetual growth and engages with the interpenetration of historical content in the material world, constellating multiple temporalities and states in one moment. Thus an encounter in modern, urban ruins is the experience not simply of hopeless decay or tragic social breakdown so much as a redemptive historical perception that sees the moment of collapse stilled and inhabitable, rather than spaces that have been rejected and are expected to fade from the world, unremarked.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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