

ACT VIII: RUINATION





Fig. a. PREVIOUS FACING PAGE:
Site Plan Variation II. Self. April 2018.

This axonometric drawing illustrates the second variation of design, the ruination. The existing fabric of the buildings have decayed, leaving only the concrete piers as ruins. Because the building was the form for the concrete, it preserves the shapes of the buildings.

Fig. b. PREVIOUS PAGE:
Site Plan Variations I, II, III. Self. April 2018.

This axonometric drawing illustrates the Girdwood Section House as it appears in all of the design variations.

The rock cores accelerated the pace of decomposition within the buildings. Because the USGS did not condition the buildings, the temperature and moisture fluctuations of the seasons took their toll, and caused most of the damage. Whatever the cause, the USGS decided to vacate the buildings after a score of years. They sponsored environmental cleanup that removed dry-wells and oil tanks from the site, as well as identified harmful substances like lead and asbestos. Through all this, the buildings succumbed to the elements as their bodies turned into corruption. The foundations settled, the buildings sagged, and ruination occurred quickly.

As the wood decays, the concrete preservesⁱ the form of the Wireless Station. The piers retain the stories and sounds of the historic buildings as well as those of the restored uses. The buildings

become ruins, but remain part of the journey to the site. Their concrete shells signify the past and memorialize the history.

Ruination occurs after decay, when only the memory of the building remains. Marking the end of a life, the process involves the transformation of the body into corruption. Buildings deserve long deaths, ones of humility and grace. Decay allows the sounds in the buildings to transfer to the firmament of the site, converting into place spirits. Taking decades, if not centuries, nature consumes the elements of the building slowly, and reabsorbs their memories into the site. Humans may have been the only constructors of the building, but nature and humans aid in ruination;ⁱⁱ Oftentimes, nature takes the vanguard. As it decays, the building shapes the nature. Patterns of growth retain the shapes and edges of the buildings, and depressions in the soil specify the footprint. For wooden buildings, the rotten wood detritus along the perimeter becomes rich soil for growth, and trees will rise from the remains in regular geometric orientations.

Conflagration is a suitable method of death because it releases the retained sounds from the elements of the building.ⁱⁱⁱ Fire separates material into carbon and energy. While the carbon blankets the site, and enriches the soil, the embodied energy escapes into the world. Retained sounds and spirits are part of that energy, because energy, like sound, is a memory of former events. The spirits remain at the site as the sounds and other forms

of energy leave. Whatever remains of the building, either its foundation, or a metal door, retains the spirits of the place.

Deconstruction carries certain problems as well, because it preserves the materials of the buildings. Many promote it as a sustainable practice for the construction industry, as it decreases the toll on virgin resources. However, materials still carry the sounds from the buildings, and the spirits of the place and users. Reuse of these materials increases the longevity of these memories, and adds significance to their new use.^{iv} However, these memories are specific to a particular site, and transplanting them is destabilizing to the spirits at the site, and those within the materials. Additionally, some memories deserve to pass on into spirits, and for the physical matter to release them through decay or fire. This criticism is not dissuasion, but a warning; more than production of commodity, deconstruction should be about reuse and renewal, and the preservation of spirits and memory.

In opposition to demolition and deconstruction, ruination is a slow and natural process of death. Organic materials decompose and nature takes hold of the site once more. This represents a gradual death and a transition from a site of occupation to one of memory.

Remnants of buildings, either decayed or burnt, are more than just vessels for spirits and recorders of sound. They are also mementos of the buildings for passerby. Elders who remember the

site before its decay use the remnants to educate subsequent generations. Their stories recreate the site, and each stone and plank of wood returns to its former place in the imaginations of the audience. Whoever remembers the site will journey there in order to remember, or recreate the actions it once contained. Like the grave of an ancestor, the site becomes a sacred place for care, memory, and history. Subsequent generations, years separating them from the building, continue the visits out of habit and desire to remember the past. Remnants of buildings that were reliquaries of memory become relics themselves, and the descendants of their users cherish them, if only the bones that remain. So fearful are these people of losing their heritage, which they believe resides in the physical buildings, that they raise the significance of them to unsustainable levels. Eventually a generation dismisses this practice as nostalgic, and casts away the significance the buildings. Remnants become another manifestation of nature and become “neutral historical objects”,^v or disappear from memory.

A hundred and a thousand years causes the memories to fade, and the living no longer remember the significance of a site, or the purpose of the remnant. Instead of being a trigger of memory, the remnant becomes a source of study and curiosity. Archaeologists are familiar with reconstructing human occupation from remaining artifacts. Analyzing the nature of resources, noting their material composition, and reconstructing the site are processes of the science. However, this process is inaccessible to the untrained, and hides,^{vi} or obfuscates history. Non-archaeologists or non-preservationists are able to follow the same

i. Reference: *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. Grimer, ed. 2017. p. 2. The definition of “preservation” is: “the act or process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property. Work, including preliminary measures to protect and stabilize the property, generally focuses upon the ongoing maintenance and repair of historic materials and features rather than extensive replacement and new construction. The limited and sensitive upgrading of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems and other code-required work to make properties functional is appropriate within a preservation project. However, new exterior additions are not within the scope of this treatment.”

ii. Reference: *Once Upon a Time*. Mollner. 2015.

iii. Note: This is similar to the belief of many cultures, including the Dena'ina, that cremation releases the spirit.

iv. Note: The early versions of LEED gave more points to a project for material reuse over building reuse. In one sense, this incentivised deconstruction of historic buildings, instead of reusing them.

Fig. c. PREVIOUS FACING PAGE:
Station 9. Self. April 2018.
This watercolor shows the ninth of twelve stations on the journey to the Wireless Station, when it first comes in view.

Fig. d. CURRENT PAGE, ABOVE:
Pantheon. Self. June 2015.
The Pantheon in Rome shows the passage of time in its aesthetics and materials. This photo is of the entrance portico.

Fig. e. CURRENT PAGE, BELOW:
Pantheon Detail. Self. June 2015.
This detail image shows the layers of concrete, brick, and marble on the Pantheon, which looters have stripped away.

Fig. f. FACING PAGE, ABOVE:
Residence in Cappadokia. Self. May 2015.
Seeing this residence in a cave in Cappadokia highlights some differences in practice, and sensibility between cultures regarding ruins. This cave has gone through centuries of occupation and abandonment, resulting in layers of history and memory. Additionally, the additions made to it a reflecting technology of communication.

Fig. g. FACING PAGE, BELOW:
Gas Works Park. Harper, Rachel. May 2018.
Gas Works Park in Seattle provides an example of contemporary preservation methods of ruins, in the United States.



processes, but theirs occurs in the imagination. Children are particularly successful in inventing uses of queer objects in nature, from rotted stumps to collapsed fence posts. Their skill does not come from simplicity or ignorance, however, but from the universal ability of humans to create fictions from scraps of reality. When passing a lone chimney in the woods or a ring of stones in a field, the preservationist may say “that is...” while the non-specialized person, not bound to the rigor of the scientific will ask, “what was...” Piles of stones and wood, remnants of buildings, achieve a new significance independent of their original use. They simply are elements of the environment, no different from the living trees and rocks. Eventually, all evidence of the former disappears and even memory fades. Place spirits, however, remain at the site, and retain its significance.

The remaining elements do not enclose spaces, but become objects in a field. Nevertheless, these memorialize the former use of the site. Their arrangement, scale, and articulation preserve a sense of occupation. Even a scattering of remnants is significant for its spontaneity. They tell stories of their demise and show the scars of decay and corruption. Chan writes, “These relics seem to embody the function of the place better than any map or interpretive diagram could.”^{vii} Although looting is particularly scary to archaeologists, its selective removal of objects is significant. Values for different objects, from curiosity to monetary, change over time. Like a crime scene, excavations leave clues of what remains and does not remain, and where those objects are on the site. Forensic specialists recreate the scene and determine what the looter valued and removed.

Apart from the crime of the theft, however, is a story of human interaction with the site. Retrieval is a use just like any other, and becomes an event the site remembers, sounds it retains. Including these retroactive uses in the history acknowledges the messiness of human existence, and the role of humans in the ruination process. Encouraging vandalism, littering, and arson to a site of significance is extreme, but at least it avoids nostalgic idealization, and recognizes that these are human actions at the sites of human histories.

For example, the tale of the Pantheon in Rome is particularly useful. White travertine marble once clad its exterior surfaces, and would have appeared like the other temples of the Empire. However, as the empire crumbled, the building fell into disuse. Floods frequently passed through the low-lying site, and looters stole the artifacts from inside. They also took the marble from the walls to use in their own homes, or new temples. After its conversion to a Christian church and then its subsequent abandonment, it again fell victim to looting, by both residents and pilgrims. Protected from such vandalism today, preservationists did not reclad the building with new marble, or seek out the original marble to return to the building. The building retains the stories of its use, and disuse, of its occupation, and abandon, of its celebrating and spoiling. The treatment of the Pantheon illustrates an acceptance of changing attitudes toward buildings and sites. It acknowledges the effects of both human construction and destruction.



v. Reference: "What Roles for Ruins?" Chan. 2009. p. 22.

vi. Reference: "What Roles for Ruins?" Chan. 2009. p. 22.

vii. Reference: "What Roles for Ruins?" Chan. 2009. p. 28.

Fig. h. FACING PAGE:
Site Plan, Variation II.
Self. April 2018.

This is the 1:100 site plan of the second Variation. It shows the ruined remains of the three buildings at the Wireless Station Site, as well as the Hall of the Descendants and Section House. The drawing also illustrates how the trail continues to course through the area, although plants have grown up among the ruins. North is to the right.

Too often, ruins are subjects of fantasy and mysticism. This practice is nothing new, as generations of artists and gentry have romanticized ruins. Elisabeth Chan highlights that representations and touristic treatment appear to reflect more of the current views.^{viii} She explains that impressions of ruins has changed over time, from one of wonderment to ignobility, from celebration to disregard.

What occurs at contemporary ruins, such as Gasworks Park in Seattle, is better than romanticization, but still promotes an idealized history. The small island in Seattle is a public park, and has some of the best views of the city. The rusted tanks and tubes of the gasworks occupy with an impression of randomness and an air of abandonment. However, fences separate the structures from the rest of the site, and they are spectacles instead of features in the landscape. While the park is a nice community amenity, and appropriate reuse of the site, the treatment of the ruins is troublesome. Like follies, the gasworks seem out-of-place and contrived because of their cleanliness and isolation. Instead of celebrated, they are displayed.^{ix}

Alternatively, the region of Cappadocia in Turkey offers an interesting juxtaposition. The area is a national park, but there are villages and residents who still live in the hills and valleys. It is a space for living, not a space for memory. The caves and unique conical stone towers are part of the villages. Some are still in use as residences, and several are inns and restaurants. Others are vacant in property either not owned, or abandoned,

and the small roads and walkways pass among them. The inhabitants of the region have a different mindset regarding the ruins than American preservationists, probably because their families lived in the caves into the Twentieth Century. After a destructive earthquake hit the region, the Turkish government extended the parkland to include these residences, and made it extremely difficult for the families to return to their homes. To the residents, the caves and carvings are not relics of the past, or objects of curiosity or romanticization. They are simply parts of the landscape, natural and unabashed in their ruination.

WIRELESS STATION REMAINS

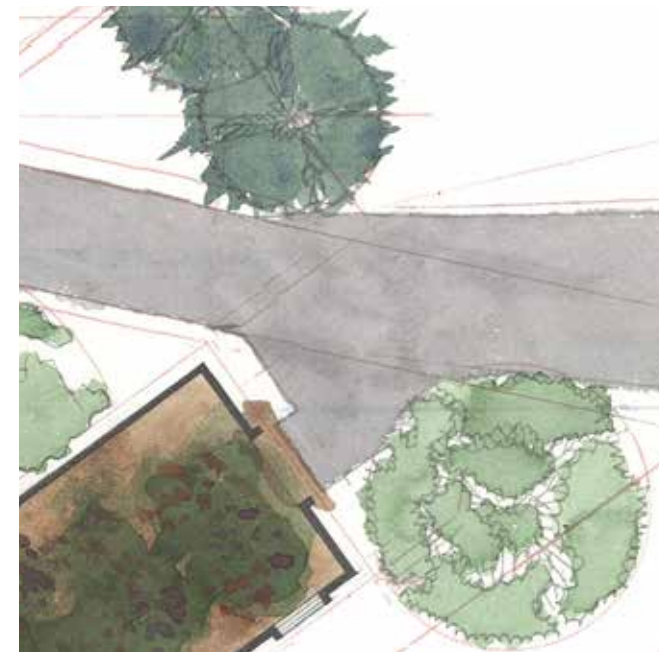
In Variation II at the Wireless Station, the three buildings have decayed and left only the piers in their absence. The concrete of Variation I would not preserve the building fabric forever. More importantly, the concrete freed the buildings from their responsibilities as shelters, and allowed them to decompose. As the walls and roofs rotted away, the concrete absorbed the sounds and spirits of the buildings, and retained their memories.

Because the buildings were the formwork for the concrete, the blocks retain the shapes of the rooms and the impression of the buildings. This manner of preservation is similar to the strategy of the sunken garden in that it shows the spaces of the buildings, instead of their outlines.^x [Insert note about Rachel Whiting]. Preserving the form of the interior spaces of the building reifies the uses of those rooms. How the buildings appeared becomes secondary to manner in which Visitors and Residents occupied them. Variation



Fig. i. CURRENT PAGE:
*Snapshots from Site Plan:
Variation II. Self. April
2018.*

Here are four snapshots of the previous drawing. These show the ruins of the original 28' square building, Building #2, the trail passing between the sunken garden and the cavernous basement of the south addition to the Wireless Station, and the northern trail entrance to the site, with the thin ruined walls of the T-Shaped Building. North is to the right.



I restored the use of the rooms, and Variation II preserves those uses, and the spaces in which they occurred.

The long summers of Alaska cause rapid plant growth to overtake abandoned buildings and property. After the roofs collapse, the first plants to grow are grasses and fireweed, covering the bare earth of the crawlspaces within the first several years. The flowering fireweed gives a pleasant splash of color against the gray concrete and brown earth. Woody plants begin growing within five years, the first being willow bushes and cottonwood trees. Birch and spruce trees soon follow, growing in the shade of the fast-growing pervasive cottonwoods, and eventually overtake them. Within a generation, the bare earth boasts a healthy, vibrant ecosystem. More than a century after a similar forest gave way to the construction of the machine of communication, the wilderness reclaims the land.

EXPERIENCIAL NARRATIVE

Returning after years away from Anchorage, the Traveler takes the busy asphalt trail from Ship Creek and makes the journey to Government Hill. Taking the familiar turns and hearing the familiar sounds is comforting, and the Traveler remarks on how little the path has changed. New trees grow from the stumps of others, grasses encroach on the pavement, and some trails are new while others have grown over.

News of the ruin at the Wireless Station site had reached the Traveler Outside, and curiosity had caused the return. However, the descriptions did not provide details on what remained, or who still used the area. Walking along the alley, the Traveler notes some new additions on some houses, but most look the as they did before. The most apparent change is the increased traffic of other Travelers along the path, either heading in the same direction of the Traveler or coming the other way, back to Downtown.

Crossing Anderson Street, the Traveler sees a cluster of trees beyond the first three houses. A lone scraggly birch grows from atop the viewing platform that was below the cupola, its young branches gnarled from the elements, and the Traveler laughs at its appropriateness. The tree replaces the cupola as a wayfinding device,^{xi} and seems to defy reality by growing from the platform, not the Earth.

viii. Reference: "What Roles for Ruins?" Chan. 2009. p. 27.

ix. Reference: "What Roles for Ruins?" Chan. 2009. p. 27.

Elisabeth Chan writes that nostalgia blinds. "The aesthetic pleasure of ruins overwhelms the authenticity of historical accounts."

x. Note:

Critics have mentioned several times the similarities with Rachel Whiteread and Variations I and II. Notwithstanding ignorance of her work, not familiar with her name, her work is an art installation. Although it may involve similar polemics as this Thesis, hers are spectacular objects in a field, not retainers of memory.

xi. Note:

This is a reference to the historic use of the Cupola for navigation of ships in the harbor (Bobbie Bianchi Oral History). Presently, the cupola is a point of reference for the neighborhood.

The Visitor finds the Wireless Station much changed. Once smooth and colored a soft gray, the concrete forms have cracks and pocks in their dark surfaces. Moss and grasses grow at their tops, while in the sunken foundations long grasses and fireweed poke through the dogwoods and mushrooms. The chasm of the Animatory shocks the Visitor, looking down into its darkness, and the concrete floor is bare, save some windblown piles of leaves. The grasses creep ever deeper in the Ascentory, but the darkness of the subterranean space prevents much growth. Bits of the foundations show through the low plants, but all the building sites have the appearance that the sunken garden once did. Glancing right, at the garden, it seems weeded and tended. Trees are few in the buildings themselves, but those that were outside their walls have spread their seed and engendered small groves. Bushes grow between the concrete piers, cranberries, raspberries, and willow, and looking towards Building #2, the Visitor sees another Visitor picking berries her children.

The trail remains constant. The asphalt is new, and free of cracks, and the bollards have fresh varnish. Commuting Travelers pass by the site, almost without seeing the ruins, while those recreational Travelers, continuing northward do slow down as they turn between the ruins. There are no signs of vandalism or squatters, but there are few Visitors, as there are fewer things to do. Moving past the garden, the Visitor spots one Visitor, obviously a tourist, reading a brochure while his wife takes photographs. The site is not particularly spectacular however, and this strikes the Visitor as odd.

As the Visitor enters the former Comminatory, charred bits of wood and rings of stone appear through the low grass. These are not evidence of homeless encampments, but decades of gatherings between the old forms. Looking at the uncharred ends of some pieces, the Visitor notices they are dimensional lumber, obviously collected on the site. Some uncollected pieces of wood remain among the concrete, and bushes obscure longer boards. The Comminatory obviously sees life, although less frequently than before. The Visitor sees another Visitor reading in the shade of a birch tree at the edge of former T-Shaped Building, and two more sharing a picnic nearer the road.

Looking into former original building, the Visitor sees the niches in the concrete that supported benches. The stepped forms from each former window have a curious way of framing the interiors without perspective depth, almost transporting the Visitor through their openings. The ruin shows features of the buildings the Visitor never thought to notice. The inconsistent thickness of the walls, the different dimensions of the doors and windows, and the heights of the spaces are now all apparent. Additionally, each door appears as not the portal it was, but an interruption of the concrete forms.

Knowing the concrete retained the sounds from the buildings, the Visitor touches one pier with an hand. Through the coolness, the Visitor perceives a thrumming feeling akin to that experience of leaning against the walls of the Transitory, only fainter. This rhythm relates the resonance of the sounds inside, and the Visitor can feel

the concrete respond to these former stories and the current sounds of the site. The breeze whistles through the willows and brushes the hairs of the Visitor's arm, like a caress, and the Visitor becomes aware of a feel in the air, and energy in the site that is flowing through the air, Earth, and concrete. The Visitor realizes this chorus of pressures forms a monotonous and constant tone too low for auditory perception, but it stirs the spirit of the Visitor; these are the presences of the place spirits.

Removing the hand from the concrete reduces this perception slightly. The Visitor moves onward between the buildings and passes through the former Anteresonatory, now strangely still. However, seeing the Section House through the stand of spruce trees on the left and cottonwoods on the right distracts the Visitor from perceiving the rhythm in the next node, between the trees and the remnants of Building #2 and the T-Shaped Building that would have revealed the new location of the Anteresonatory, and Resonatory below.

Sounds of conversations break through the trees as the Visitor crosses the threshold into the Hall of the Descendants, full of liveliness. Other Visitors shout across the square to one another, and in the middle a Visitor is directing a speech at some friends gathered on the ramps. Travelers course around, slowing as they pass the mob. Cars bring more Visitors, who smile and wave at their friends already there.

As the Visitor moves around the Hall, listening to the conversations, the voices reverberates from the trees and buildings, and traveler down the roads. This resonance fills the air not with singular sounds, but the sounds of sounds. Hearing these does not transport the Visitor to another place or time, but grounds the Visitor to the place. Because the Visitor is observing the scene, and not participating, the Visitor has a sense of walking through a wall and being aware of the actions on both sides. The Visitor can feel how the auditory space forms a real space, and the power of sound, of stories, built an architecture from it. The Ancestors smiles down from their Hall through the auditory threshold between them and reality, seeing the construction of a community in progress. Instead of wood or concrete, the material is sound, and its assemblages are stories.

Passing through the two pines in front of the Section House, the Visitor wonders at how little the building has changed. New white and green paint gleams in the setting sun, and in the growing darkness, the lights from the caretakers' unit above the garage turn on. In the Comminatory below, Residents gather chairs and benches as Visitors set up blankets on the well-kept grass. The Visitor sits on a bench, not looking at anything in particular, but listens to the sounds of conversation resonating from the Hall of the Descendants. The Wireless Station has a new significance now, and the memories of the Residents preserves its story, as much as the concrete retains its sounds. As the Visitors walks towards the Comminatory, the Residents travel the other way, back towards the relics it is their duty to preserve.

Fig. j. FACING PAGE:
Government Hill Wireless Station. Self. December 2017.

The Resident walks with several others around the emptying Hall of the Descendants. They notice some groups of Visitors lower down in the Hall, texting on their phones and laughing. The devices connect the youth with others through the miracle of wireless technology, and the Residents smile at how banal the technology seems to the adolescent Visitors. What is the Hall of the Descendants, after all but a forum for conversation, whatever the medium? Feeling the eyes of the Residents, the Visitors look up and see their elders looking down. They turn back to each other and talk and text, communicating with those that share the same realm, and another.

The Residents reach the groves of trees and hear the voices of other Residents, and some Visitors, coming through the site, as though from the piers themselves. Accompanying the voices are the crackling sounds of burning wood, and the rich smell soon fills the nose of the Resident. They turn at the stem of the T-Shaped Building and enter the Comminatory. Four other Residents already surround a small fire, and the arriving Residents join the small group. The fire burns on a pile of ash within an informal ring of stone and bits of concrete. The sound and light of the flames is mesmerizing, and while the others laugh and joke, the Resident looks into the fire. The pattern of the pop and hiss of the wood matches the intonations and dynamics of the voices until they form one sound. Transported to a different realm, the Resident feels the spirits leaving the wood and entering the Hall of the Ancestors. The fire liberates the spirits so that they may ambulate once more. Once free, they transfer the responsibility of remembering the site to the Resident. Escaping

the trance, the Resident joins the jocular conversation of the others. The sounds resonate from the piers looming in the darkness. The Comminatory causes them to lose their individuality, and joins them into one entity, one voice, and one memory.

CONCLUSION

Concrete is a memory of its form, and like memory itself, is much better at preserving things than other methods. Preservation methods try to stop the progression of time, and decay of materials, and the erosion of significance seeking nostalgic ruins. However, such methods lose the nuances that decomposition brings to a site. The traces and remnants left over time, the concrete masses of the Wireless Station, become mementos of the past and gain a significance and wonder of their own. As the sounds escape the building matter, they become place spirits that remain at the site, even as collective significance fades and the memories disappear. The stories and place spirits themselves assume the role of preservation as the physical remnants disappear.



