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“Ruin Porn” and the Change in Function of Ruined Architecture: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I describe the ruins of Detroit, Michigan and the aesthetic activities (sometimes called “ruin porn”) they have inspired. I point out that Detroit’s ruins, and the surge of interest accompanying them, fit within the longstanding tradition of interest in ruins in general, and I present two perspectives—one supportive, one critical—on this development in the city’s landscape. Then I attempt to resolve these conflicting perspectives by exploring how ruins like these can acquire new value, and, subsequently, what we should do about the structures themselves.

I argue that our understanding of ruins like Detroit’s can be productively influenced by knowledge about the functions of these sites and the way those functions can shift. I enlist the work of philosophers, especially Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons, in making these claims. Ultimately, I maintain that when the function of a site changes, possibilities for aesthetic gratification and exploration creep in along with the ruination (and perhaps this has always been true). Users of ruins may themselves occasion a change in a ruin’s function. Aesthetic activity prompted by this change of circumstances may not be as ethically problematic as the “ruin porn” term implies. But the new function a structure acquires as a result of its ruination must be measured against other associations the structure retains, and our interest in such ruins, and the photos we take of them, are “pornographic” if they underscore pleasure in the causes of devastation. However, if a structure does acquire new status as a culturally or aesthetically significant ruin, this change effectively generates a new value, and may justify a new life, for the damaged building.

Detroit, Michigan has become notorious in recent decades for its ruins. The city has faced a number of political, social, and financial difficulties over the past century and declared bankruptcy in 2013. Among its problems: over 70,000 ruined or derelict structures requiring either renovation or demolition. These have included houses, schools, onetime busi-

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nesses, and two of the now most-famous ruins in the world, former auto-manufacturing site the Packard Plant (at around 35 acres, one of the largest ruined sites in North America) and defunct train station Michigan Central [FIGURE 1]. Over the years, these buildings have attracted artists and photographers, and are now featured in books such as Camilo José Vergara’s *American Ruins*, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s *The Ruins of Detroit*, Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, and Julia Reyes Taubman’s *Detroit: 138 Square Miles*.



FIGURE 1. Tanya Whitehouse, *Michigan Central, Detroit, Michigan*.

These sites and their images reflect and generate different interests, including aesthetic interest, but many observers, including residents of Detroit, find these interests appalling or irritating, calling some of the video and photographic evidence of decay “ruin porn.”

What are these ruins, and which interpretation of this built environment is best, at least at this point in time? What life do these buildings

currently have? Are images of the ruined sites pornographic? What function, if any, does a ruined building have? Should these ruined buildings be repurposed, if they can be?

I explore questions like these in this paper. I focus on Detroit's ruins in particular because they are among our most well-known contemporary urban ruins in North America, and because they prompt conflicting ethical and aesthetic responses I hope to reconcile. Much of what I say can apply to other, similarly ruined sites. In Part I, I recount some of the probably timeless human reactions to ruined structures and briefly note that responses to ruined sections of Detroit's landscape fit within this tradition. Then I explain the critical reaction to this interest and the genesis of the "ruin porn" charge. I point out there is a broadly "aesthetic" conception of the ruins, and a broadly "ethical" conception, and the two conflict with one another. In Part II, I advance a possible solution to this conflict. First, I explain aspects of the selected-effects theory of function developed in Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson's *Functional Beauty*. I evaluate some details of their discussion of the built environment, including their account of ruins. Parsons and Carlson argue that buildings can take on new functions over time, due to the way they are used. I point out ruins do this as well, taking on new functions, often aesthetic functions, as people visit them, make use of them in new and creative ways, and create art based on them. Ruination can lead to aesthetic engagement so considerable that it constitutes a new function or phase in the life of a ruined structure. I claim that if this new "ruin function" is of sufficient aesthetic interest, it can confer a new value on the sites that have it, and I offer a pro tanto principle (following Berys Gaut's) to defend this idea. This, too, is a process that is probably as old as aesthetic interest in ruins; it is why, in my view, we now value the formerly functioning Roman Colosseum in its ruined state. However, I point out our interest in either ruins or creative work based on them is arguably problematic if it is motivated solely by pleasure in the causes of destruction itself. Finally, I note that the new value ruins may gain can justify their preservation or re-use, though I do not suggest what form this preservation or re-use might take.

I begin with a look at what Rose Macaulay called "this strange human reaction to decay" (1966, p. xv).

I.

As is well-known, interest in ruins is not new, though there is disagreement about when it may have started.¹ People have enjoyed the prospect of crumbling buildings and have made them the subject of their art for at least several hundred years. As early as 1491, according to Paul Zucker, someone anonymously completed a drawing of the Forum of Nerva (1968, p. 25). The twentieth century bears the dubious distinction of creating "more ruins than ever before," according to Tim Edensor (2005, p. 17).² But much of the environment that we celebrate, and include in our cultural heritage, is ruined; as Robert Ginsberg notes, a tidied-up version of Angkor Wat appears on the Cambodian flag (2004, p. 120).

There are numerous ways of understanding this fascination. I will indicate just a few common ways of understanding ruined sites, including

¹ Neither is interest in visiting the scenes of devastation, or what is now called "dark" or "disaster" tourism. "Ruin porn" is not the only term for the ethically contested practice of photographing certain places that have sustained damage or experienced tragedy or conflict. Others include "disaster porn" and "war porn." To take one example: the many photographs (taken for many different reasons) of Berlin's ruination in the aftermath of World War II.

² See also Elyse A. Gonzales:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, nations around the world have been plagued by terrorist acts, economic chaos, ecological distress, and political instability, among other problems... Literal ruins seem to have sprung up overnight in the United States and Europe, as repeatedly reported in the *New York Times*, with whole neighborhoods and housing developments left abandoned. (In Ireland these vacated sites are commonly known by the evocative name of "ghost estates.") They have either been foreclosed upon or homeowners have simply walked away from them, unable to make mortgage payments. New, never-sold (or even completed) residences, for which the financial backing fell through or the buyers never appeared, are yet another reason for these ghostly communities (2013, pp. 18-19).

the ways that ruins can inspire thought and creative activity, as well as how they can be used, once ruined. Ruins may be appreciated for their formal or aesthetic attributes as well as for the activities they make possible. First, though, I will say what I mean by "ruins." For the purposes of this paper, I use the term very broadly, to refer to structures that have been abandoned and have sustained some degree of damage or neglect, and are no longer being used for their intended purposes.³



FIGURE 2. Tanya Whitehouse, *Mill City Museum*,
Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Ruins mark the passage of time or empire; they are remnants of the past or *memento mori*. They evoke decay, impermanence, and memory, humanity's achievements as well as its hubris, and what is now gone. Yet they also signal endurance and point toward the future, for they can outlast their communities and the people who originally constructed and used them. Ruined structures can survive indefinitely and, in their ruination, they can

³ Obviously there is much more to say about what makes a structure a ruin and how the various ruin types differ from one another (for example, Tim Edensor [2005] and Dora Apel [2015] provide reasons to think contemporary industrial ruins differ significantly from the ruins of the ancient world), though I do not explore these issues here.

suggest regeneration or new future uses. (That future may appear hopeful or horrifying, and ruins can reflect this, too.) They can memorialize the sites of important incidents or call attention to the cause of their own ruination, as St. Boniface Cathedral in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Mill City Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota make us consider the fires that were responsible, not so long ago, for the current shapes of their shells [FIGURE 2]. Ruins prompt imaginative efforts, including the effort to imagine what a structure looked like when whole. They can be intriguing, frightening, distressing, or energizing; either sublime, beautiful, or picturesque by turn; they can be paradoxical, attractive and repellent at the same time, a juxtaposition reflected in titles of works that discuss them: *Irresistible Decay* (borrowed from Walter Benjamin [1998, p. 178]), *Ruin Lust, Beautiful Terrible Ruins*. Notably, they can make us think of the connection between nature and the built environment, and the ways the two coexist, or the way one may encroach on the other. Without human activity, ruination arguably does not exist. Russell A. Berman claims "Nature and time generate ruins only where human activity is involved... Ruin is a result of culture, not of nature" (2010, pp. 105-106). And as Robert Ginsberg says, ruination can open up space for the appreciation of purely formal qualities:

The death of function in the ruin spells the life of form. Forms, when freed, spring forth in attention. Windows soar as shapes in former walls. They no longer take panes to demarcate the interior from the exterior. Indifferent to purpose, the window pursues its archness, accentuated by absence of glazing and frame. The sky fulfills its shape... The ruin is a purifier of form (2004, p. 15).

Zucker notes this as well, writing "Functional values which the ruin might have possessed originally are of even less value in its aesthetic interpretation" (1968, p. 2).

Dora Apel points out attention to ruins may be influenced by our anxieties about decline, claiming this anxiety "feeds an enormous appetite for ruin imagery" (2015, p. 9). Some ruins acquire their power just because they were not supposed to be, and the very accident of their existence gives them interest. Oddly, ruins can also call to mind a comparison that can be drawn between buildings and human beings, for the characteristics of one can loosely be said to apply to the other. Our built structures house and

influence human beings, and are shaped by them in turn. Ruins can occasion self-identification, as in this example from W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*: "I felt that the decrepit state of these once magnificent buildings, with their broken gutters, walls blackened by rainwater, crumbling plaster revealing the coarse masonry beneath it, windows boarded up or clad with corrugated iron, precisely reflected my own state of mind" (quoted in Dillon, 2014, p. 27). They have been both subject and inspiration for scholarly activity as well as art spanning various media. And they famously caused people to deliberately construct their own sham ruins, such as the follies of the eighteenth century.

Second, ruins can generate new uses of the built environment. "When purpose has fled," Ginsberg writes, "anarchy marches in" (2004, p. 33). Ruins give us a chance to engage with our environments in ways we ordinarily do not. Our daily experience of the built environment can be highly constrained by conventions related to the purposes of the structures around us, so when the chance arises to use them in especially non-functional ways, we may find this an interesting respite from mundane activities. A formerly occupied, busy, purposeful place can be compelling in its abandonment. A ruined or abandoned site is no longer the scene of any prescribed activity and may invite in those otherwise forbidden to enter. Some people wish to visit places they are not supposed to go, to do things they do not usually do. (This is reflected in the subheading of the "Abandoned Berlin" website: "If it's verboten it's got to be fun." And consider what we might do if given the run of a completely deserted airport and its runways, or an abandoned interstate no longer cluttered with cars.) New possibilities for a structure's use can be exciting and intriguing. Abandoned or ruined sites invite exploration and adventure (as well as mischief); they have been the backdrop for concerts, raves, photography, art-making, and serve as secret meeting-places. Of being in a ruin, Denis Diderot writes, "I'm freer, more alone, more myself, closer to myself. It's there that I call out to my friend... it's there that we'd enjoy ourselves without anxiety, without witnesses, without intruders, without those jealous of us. It's there that I probe my own heart; it's there that I interrogate hers, that I take alarm and reassure myself" (quoted in Hell

& Schönle, 2010, p. 8).⁴ Ruins are frequently mentioned in discussions of urban exploration or "urbex" movements. (The connection is apparent in the Japanese term "*haikyo*," which denotes both ruins and urban exploration.) Ruins also invite travel. Thousands of people trek to Rome and Athens, to the Gila Cliff Dwellings and Mesa Verde. Such sites are no longer what they were. They are not functional as we usually think of that attribute of the built environment. The possibilities for a site idling in the absence of active use are captured in Robert Ginsberg's remark: "The ruin is an invitation to an adventure in aesthetics" (2004, p. xx).

Thus, when a ruin's function has been suspended, our ways of using the structure may change in ways that can be categorized as creative (or illegal). I will explore the philosophical implications of this shift, below.

Ruins invite their own questions and standards for evaluation, too. Are ruins more valuable as ruins, or aesthetic objects, if they occur naturally, or are artificial ruins just as valuable? Can ruins be created in an instant, or must a certain amount of time transpire before they are really ruined? Are the reasons for ruination relevant to our appreciation? How much, if anything, do we have to know about the genesis or uses of the ruined structures to appraise them? How much, if any, of their functions do they maintain? Aside from their aesthetic properties, in what ways do contemporary industrial ruins differ from classical ruins, if they do? Should we clean ruins—removing the plants that sprout through them—or stabilize them, so they can endure?⁵ Some of them are in a transitional state; they could be repaired or re-used, or they could head further into the gloaming. Should we repurpose them, or preserve them as ruins? Or should they crumble without our interference? And once they crumble past a certain point, are they even ruins anymore?

Finally, ruins are also unique among our human creations in that damage or abandonment of the built environment does not necessarily destroy opportunities for aesthetic experience. Instead, it can create them. Shattered sculptures from many epochs are an established part of our heritage (and can be understood as ruins themselves), but it is the shattered

⁴ Diderot also says a ruin "delivers us up to our inclinations."

⁵ Macaulay recounts the range of unhappy reactions to the scouring the Colosseum received, including concern that the removal of plants further damaged the ruin as well as artists' inspirations (1966, pp. 201-203).

or abandoned fragments of the built environment that have reliably resulted in aesthetic engagement. Structures can become more interesting or appealing in their ruination, and this is not usually the case for other types of art or aesthetic objects. Both Macaulay and Ginsberg cite Charles Dickens's reaction to the Colosseum: "Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Colosseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one heart as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. God be thanked: a ruin" (Macaulay, 1966, p. 200; Ginsberg, 2004, p. 117). Elizabeth Scarbrough says of the Hudson River's Bannerman Castle:

Many visitors believe the castle is more beautiful in its ruined form than it was when it was completed. This is evidenced by the amount and type of tourism the castle now serves. Several companies run "artistic" tours of Pollepel Island (where the castle is located), providing opportunities to take photographs at dusk and dawn to maximize the effect. Bannerman Castle has appeared in nearly every book about American ruins and has inspired countless professional photographers, painters, advertisers (who have used the structure in high fashion shoots), and movies (for example, Michael Bay's *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*).

Bannerman Castle shows us that something can be seen as more valuable, or at least more aesthetically valuable, in its ruined form. This implies that, at least sometimes, what we are valuing is not the original architectural structure but rather something that emerges once that structure is lost. This is partially evidenced by the fact that the ruined structure has spurred much more artistic production than the architectural structure (2014, p. 447).

Yet this is puzzling, for ruins are usually created by devastating or undesirable circumstances—fires, natural disasters, acts of war, anarchic self-expression or vandalism, or simple neglect and lack of resources. How is it that often disastrous damage to our surroundings prompts us to reconfigure these sites in often essentially positive aesthetic ways? There is no easy answer to this question, but the fact remains that many of our reactions to ruins can be described as aesthetic as well as positive, even though the incident that created the ruin might be neither. In many of these responses to ruins, one can discern an interest in the environment as such,

and this use or outlook can be focused on the present or future as much as the past.

Attention to the ruins of Detroit is certainly in keeping with many of these common responses to ruins. This is apparent in some of the works that figure in discussions of "ruin porn" of the city. For example, Vergara's work calls attention to the passage of time. Detroit's buildings can prompt reflection about the passing of empires (if one wishes to go that far—Vergara does), Fordism, industrial decline, and the uncertainty on the horizon for cities like Detroit—"your town tomorrow," as its one-time mayor Coleman Young reminds us in his autobiography, *Hard Stuff*.⁶ For some viewers, the ruins embody our ideas of a dystopian future. Some of the photos in *The Ruins of Detroit* and *Detroit Disassembled* can also invoke shock and consternation at the extent of the damage to a once-prosperous major North American city. They call to mind the meaning of the word "ruin" itself—falling—and the reasons the city fell into decline.

Moore's photographs invoke regeneration and the connection between ruins and nature. He cites the peculiarly apt motto of the often-burning city, *Speramus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus* ("We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes"). He sees "Janus-faced nature" at work in the "disassembly" of the built environment, describing the literal embodiment of this in one of his photographs, in which trees sprout from a pile of abandoned books: "Amid a dense matting of decayed and burned books, a grove of birch trees grows from richly rotting words" (2010, p. 119). He also notes the tourism resulting from the ruins: "it's not surprising that the same people who originally settled Detroit have now returned to gaze in awe upon it. As Americans have gone to Europe for generations to visit its castles and coliseums, it is now the Europeans who come to Detroit to tour our ruins" (*ibid.*). Mark Binelli, a native of the city, notes he has encountered visitors from France and Germany at the Packard Plant, including a German college student who told him "I came to see the end of the world!" (2012, p. 281)⁷

⁶ Apel uses this phrase as the heading to the conclusion of her book. In the conclusion, she writes: "Detroit has become only the most extreme example of what is happening in the nation's declining cities" (2015, p. 154).

⁷ A couple of pages later, Binelli alludes to the unfortunate provenance of the German term "ruinenwert," which, he says, comes to us courtesy of Albert Speer, planner of future

Not just European visitors (though Binelli notes many are interested in Detroit), but people from various different countries.⁸ Tourism to the ruins may have increased following the city's bankruptcy filing.⁹ Locals such as Jesse Welter offer tours of the sites, and Binelli muses, "If the Packard, Michigan Central, and a few other iconic structures were stabilized enough for safety purposes, official guided tours would immediately become one of the most popular tourist activities in the city" (2012, p. 280).

And people have certainly used Detroit's ruins in a manner that reflects the suspension of their functions. In buildings once intended for something else, people have married, set up fashion shoots and art installations, and filmed music videos and documentaries. As the Packard Plant and Michigan Central slid further into ruination toward the close of the last century, they were photographed innumerable times; they were tagged with the graffiti that so often appears around often unoccupied sites; and the Packard Plant was the site of a number of near-dark raves in the 1990s. In August of 2015, a photographer brought a tiger to the Packard, to widespread amusement as well as annoyance, and later that year, an authorized tour of the plant sold out in minutes, demonstrating what tour guide Kari Smith called "intense interest" in the site (Reindl, 2015). Julia Reyes Taubman notes, "When I first saw the Packard plant, I couldn't understand why everyone wasn't talking about it every minute of every day" (Paumgarten, 2011). (Though the Packard Plant has just as often been the site of illegal activity: crime, fire, tourists to the ruins robbed of their cameras, and scrappers making off with sections of the property.)

Some artists have made the move to Detroit specifically because of the attractions of its unusual ruined buildings. Banksy and Matthew Barney have done work in the city, and others make art that either takes advantage of the ruination or alludes to it in some way.

ruins and executor of various Nazi architectural projects.

⁸ Binelli says this interest seems especially keen among those "from Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands." "Every Detroiter I know who has ever photographed an abandoned building and possesses any kind of Web presence has been contacted by strangers from Copenhagen, Rotterdam, Paris, or Berlin, asking about the best way to sneak into the old train station or offering to pay for a local tour" (2012, p. 274).

⁹ See Alana Semuels (2013), 'Detroit's abandoned buildings draw tourists instead of developers', *The Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-detroit-ruin-tours-20131226-story.html>

The ruins have also raised questions about what should be done with them, and in Detroit, these suggestions have varied widely. Many of the blighted buildings are being razed, but it is unclear what the future holds for some structures, such as Michigan Central. Some argue for their destruction; others hope at last some of the buildings can be revitalized; and a few observers, including Vergara and Taubman, have said some of the ruins should stay the way they are, or crumble without our interference. Vergara (1995) suggested the downtown skyscrapers become a ruins park—an American Acropolis (an idea met with outrage from some Detroiters). Taubman, who took 35,000 photos of the city, said in *Vogue* of her own work: "If the book is 'about' anything it's about these buildings as monuments. No one should tear these buildings down, but no one should rehabilitate them, either," and tells Elmore Leonard and Nick Paumgarten of her plans to write "Rust in Peace" in copies of her book distributed at an art opening (Paumgarten, 2011; Loos, 2011; Apel, 2015, p. 92).

But a number of Detroit's residents scoff at these developments. Some of them see the structures as symbols of Detroit's problems. Macaulay notes that residents of Rome hardly marveled at the ruined husks of buildings surrounding them, claiming they "hated the very word ruin" (1966, p. 166). Some residents of Detroit view their structures in the same way and are dismissive of efforts to recontextualize or view these places as anything other than what they are—blighted, burned, or neglected real estate. The ruins exist for a number of unfortunate reasons, in a city that has struggled with racism, poverty, inadequate public services, and has, in one way or another, often been tough on its structures. Dora Apel writes:

In 2007 nearly one hundred homes were foreclosed upon every day, with an estimated two thousand people moving out of the city each month. Crowds grew unruly when they could not get into overcrowded Cobo Hall job fairs, and ten thousand people lined up on the first day when one of the city's casinos advertised for new workers. For decades, more buildings have been demolished than built in Detroit, a practice of "unbuilding" that has become the city's primary form of architectural activity. The average price of homes dropped from \$97,900 in 2003 to \$12,400 in 2009. The banks are also responsible for "zombie" properties, affecting thousands of people in Detroit and some three hundred thousand nationwide. These are

created when banks start foreclosure proceedings but then decide not to finish the foreclosure process, walking away from vacant homes whose owners they have forced out... In 2014 the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force found that 84,641 homes and buildings across Detroit, 30 percent of the total stock, are dilapidated or heading that way, with 114,000 vacant lots and 559 big empty industrial buildings (2015, p. 40).¹⁰

Detroit also has one of the highest fire rates in the United States, and has been known as much for arson and Devil's Night as its ruins. Detroit Fire Department arson investigator Lieutenant Joe Crandall said of the arson, "Nothing burns like Detroit" (Kurth, 2015). Binelli reports that "Highland Park and Detroit get so many fires, of such spectacular variety, that firefighters from around the country—Boston, Compton, Washington, D.C.—make pilgrimages here" (2012, p. 191). Though Devil's Night has been reconceived as Angel's Night, with community patrols meant to curb the conflagrations, the city's overall number of fires is still astonishingly high. The "unbuilding," and the fires, have led to massive gaps in neighborhood blocks.

Finally, the structures pose various hazards, including fire hazards, to their visitors. In Brian Kaufman's documentary *Packard: The Last Shift*, Dan McNamara of the Detroit Fire Fighters Association says of the site: "You know, I know that people throughout the world think that this is really incredible, and it's art, and we can appreciate that, but people also have to understand that it's an immediate and imminent threat to public safety" (Kaufman, 2014).

To some who closely consider what has been happening for decades in Detroit, the photos of its beleaguered buildings are so much "ruin porn."

Just as interest in Detroit's ruins reflects, in my view, a longstanding interest in ruins in general, so the photographs of Detroit's landscape reflect a longstanding tendency to photograph them. "Almost as soon as there was photography," Dillon writes, "there were photographs of ruins" (2014, p. 28).¹¹ But the name given to at least some of the photographs

¹⁰ Apel describes this task force: "established by the Obama administration following the city's bankruptcy, [it] is the most elaborate survey of the city, performed neighborhood by neighborhood" (2015, p. 40).

¹¹ See also Charles Merewether's discussion of photography in "Traces of Loss" in *Ir-*

of Detroit reflects the idea that taking pictures of these places is, in some way, wrong.

The term "ruin porn" may have been used first by James Griffioen in an interview with *Vice*. Griffioen, a resident of Detroit who has photographed the structures himself, brought it up while describing his frustrations with visiting journalists and photographers:

"At first, you're really flattered by it, like, 'Whoa, these professional guys are interested in what I have to say and show them.' But you get worn down trying to show them all the different sides of the city, then watching them go back and write the same story as everyone else. The photographers are the worst. Basically the only thing they're interested in shooting is ruin porn" (Morton, 2009).¹²

In "Detroitism," John Patrick Leary identifies central characteristics of ruin porn: "the exuberant connoisseurship of dereliction; the unembarrassed rejoicing at the 'excitement' of it all, hastily balanced by the liberal posturing of sympathy for a 'man-made Katrina'; and most importantly, the absence of people" (2011) in the works that focus on the city's ruined landscape. He describes an encounter a friend had with a customer in his bookstore:

"Do you have any books with pictures of abandoned buildings?" demanded a customer of a bookseller friend of mine at Leopold's Books in Detroit. The man marched to the cash register and abruptly blurted out his question, looking, perhaps, for one of the recent pair of books on Detroit's industrial ruins and its abandoned homes [the works by Moore and Marchand and Meffre]... Ruin photography, in particular, has been criticized for its "pornographic" sensationalism, and my bookseller friend won't sell much of it for that reason (*ibid.*).

Binelli assesses judgments about whose work exemplifies the genre, writing

resistible Decay (1997, pp. 25-40). Merewether writes "Photography's ability to document ruin seemed to function as a compensation for the experience of losing the past" (p. 26).

¹² In the article, author Thomas Morton says of Michigan Central: "For a derelict structure, it's kind of a happening spot. Each time I passed by I saw another group of kids with camera bags scoping out the gate."

In Detroit, you can't talk aesthetics without talking ruin porn, a term that had recently begun circulating in the city... Ruin porn was generally assessed the same way as the other kind, with you-know-it-when-you-see-it subjectivity. Everyone seemed to agree that Camilo Vergara's work was not ruin pornography, though he'd arguably been the Hefner of the genre. Likewise, the local artist Lowell Boileau, who, around the same time Vergara proposed his American Acropolis, began posting his own photographs on a website called the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit, also received a pass, perhaps because he approached his subject from a native's perspective, and with unabashed nostalgia. Photojournalists, on the other hand, were almost universally considered creeps pandering to a sticky-fingered Internet slideshow demographic (2012, pp. 272-273).

So some of the photography is acceptable, some is not; some observers argue works like Moore's and Marchand and Meffre's are ruin porn; others disagree. Though there are probably numerous ways of explicating the term, "ruin porn" can be understood as connoting pleasure in a context where pleasure should not be taken. Below, I will isolate the case in which pleasure in the ruins seems objectionable (though I will not hazard any judgments about whose work qualifies as "pornographic" in this sense, if anyone's does).

To sum up, in my view, parts of Detroit qualify as genuinely ruined environments, and interest in the city's ruins, as well as photography documenting them, can be said to fit within the tradition of interest in ruins and ruin photography in general. There are also two broad categories of response to Detroit's ruins. One sees value or interest, often aesthetic interest, in the ruins and the various activities they inspire, including photography called "ruin porn." The other does not, characterizing this interest as perverse and claiming it ignores both the troubling reasons for the ruination (and the problems the ruins can create) as well as other aspects of life in Detroit.¹³ An example of the first view can be found in these remarks of Francis Grunow of the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, who told Binelli:

¹³ Within both groups, one can also find people who claim insiders are best able to assess these matters, and those who claim outsiders can provide a legitimate perspective on what has happened.

"I don't see the ruins as a negative. I've never been to Rome or Athens. But the only thing I know about Rome is the Forum and the Colosseum and the only thing I know about Athens is the Acropolis. Could some of the buildings in Detroit become sculptural—say, lit at night? But it's a tough argument here" (2012, p. 281).

On the other hand, Binelli also quotes University of Michigan professor Angela Dillard, whose comments reflect the second point of view:

"When people come to town, I won't do the ruins tour anymore. I'm an advocate for tearing that stuff down. That old Packard building? That could come down in an afternoon. I think they ought to mail the train station to some Scandinavian country, if they love it so much" (*ibid.*).

The first view can be characterized as an often generally aesthetic endorsement of Detroit's ruins and at least some of the photographic work they have generated. The second is an ethical view, finding moral fault and misplaced perspective in this interest.¹⁴

And perhaps both outlooks are right. One may feel inclined to adopt the first view on one occasion, and the second on another. Both account for the ways we are inclined to understand these structures.¹⁵ Both also affect our views about what to do with ruined buildings that might invite re-use or reconstruction. But both views also underscore that in the last few decades, in architectural terms, Detroit's landscape has been one of the most interesting—both terrible and attractive—in the United States.

II.

But the interesting, as Karsten Harries reminds us, is often short-lived (1997, p. 8), and ruins like these pose the question of what we should do

¹⁴ It is possible that the first view is more often concerned with the ruins themselves; the second, the *cause* of the ruination.

¹⁵ Knowledge can play a role in these perspectives. One may admire pictures of decay if they are presented with no additional identifying or contextual information, as photographs of ruins sometimes are, but the more one thinks or learns about the reasons for this ruination in Detroit, the more sobering (and perhaps less aesthetically gratifying) the photographs become.

with them. It is worthwhile to consider comments made by Detroit residents Beatrice Lollar and Sharon Gipson in *Packard: The Last Shift*. Lollar says she is "just disgusted" by daily site of the ruined plant. And Gipson, surveying part of the structure, says "right now, the building as it is, it represents the future, and it's nothing" and then adds, "so we need somebody to turn our nothing into something" (Kaufman, 2014).

Should the Packard, and other sites like it, be turned into something? If ruins like Detroit's have no value, it is not clear that we should save them or protect them in any way. But if they are valuable, perhaps they should be preserved or repurposed as something else. Is there any reason to suppose at least some of the ruins of Detroit, and other structures like them, are better understood as aesthetically or culturally interesting sites, rather than meaningless and depressing blight? And if so, should the ruins be preserved or stabilized—at the very least, not deliberately destroyed?

In this section, I provide an account of the aesthetic or cultural value some ruins acquire over time, as a result of the new uses made of them, and the bearing that value may have on their futures. I provide support for my view by drawing on claims made by Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson in *Functional Beauty*.¹⁶ I use aspects of their discussion of the built environment to demonstrate that ruins retain at least some capacity for function, though their functions can change, and the new functions they may acquire over time can be important in our assessment of their value. While various factors may influence our decisions about what to do with ruined structures—the architectural significance of the buildings in question; the costs associated with either destroying or maintaining such structures; and environmental and practical concerns—I will not directly explore these issues. However, they are clearly important and may intersect with the aesthetic or cultural value I will outline.

Architecture is unique among the major creative endeavors in that it is functional; Immanuel Kant and many others have made this point. As Parsons and Carlson note, "the built environment is first and foremost a functional one" (2008, p. 137).

Yet the notion of architectural function has been criticized as philo-

¹⁶ I focus on major claims they make about the built environment, including ruins, but do not discuss their selected-effects theory in detail.

sophically obscure or unhelpful.¹⁷ It is also unstable, since shifts in a building's function or associations can occur, though it may be easier for some buildings to change than others.¹⁸ As Parsons and Carlson point out, "there seems to be a bewildering array of candidates for 'the function' of any given building" (2008, p. 143). Roger Scruton says,

the idea of "the function" of a building is far from clear, nor is it clear how any particular "function" is to be translated into architectural "form." All we can say—failing some more adequate aesthetic theory—is that buildings have uses, and should not be understood as though they did not (1979, p. 40).

However, Parsons and Carlson think we can still productively make use of the concept, and present what they call "a richer notion of function, one that is grounded in people's real lived experience of buildings" (2008, p. 145). Functions cannot be stipulated or fixed in advance by architects, but instead result, they say, from "the mass use of similar structures over time" (2008, p. 146). (Earlier in their book, they cite an illustrative example of Beth Preston's [1998], pointing out that pipe cleaners were manufactured to clean pipes, but now their primary function is their use in children's "crafts.") Their definition of proper function emphasizes this use over time:

X has a *proper function* F if and only if Xs currently exist because, in the recent past, ancestors of X were successful in meeting some need or want in the marketplace because they performed F, leading to manufacture and distribution, or preservation, of X (2008, p. 148).

¹⁷ For example, we confront problems about whose intentions constitute the function of a building—its architect, or its users? Those who use it initially, or those who may use it many generations later? Just who is the architect or builder (e.g., for some of the Gothic cathedrals, there wasn't just one)? There are also numerous ways to understand a structure with a relatively stable function. One building can exhibit markedly different characteristics from phase to phase, depending on how it is used and cared for. (One could say the same for towns or cities themselves, for that matter.)

¹⁸ It may be difficult to truly change some U.S. gas stations, for example. See James Lileks (2015), 'Old gas stations live on in new guises: Old gas stations frequently find new uses, but you can always tell what they once were', *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, <http://www.startribune.com/old-gas-stations-live-on-in-new-guises/299337711/\#1>.

They take as an example one discussed by Edward Winters, the Plaza Major of Madrid, which has served various purposes over the centuries. Edward Winters writes

What is its function? On Tuesdays it is a market, on Saints' days it is a fairground, on Sundays townspeople gather to parade in their finery. It was, at one time, the venue for bullfights. During the Inquisition it was used for show trials and ritual executions. It now houses offices and a range of cheap to expensive hotel accommodation. That is, the life of its design—the range of activities made available by it—has outstripped any restrictive conception of the function for which it was designed (2013, p. 634).

Parsons and Carlson maintain that its success in fulfilling the function of "community gathering-area" accounts for the Plaza Major's continuing use for this purpose, though that was not why the square was created.

Parsons and Carlson also dispute the view, expressed by Zucker and Donald Crawford, among others, that ruins have no function. Zucker observes "Functional values, of course, do not count with ruins which by their very nature cannot have any practical use" (1961, p. 128), and Crawford, as Parsons and Carlson note, claims "often the partial disintegration brings with it the severance of the functioning of the original. A Roman forum is no longer a forum; a Cistercian abbey is no longer an abbey" (1983, p. 53).

Against Crawford, they argue

surely a ruined forum *is* still a forum, albeit a ruined one, and not merely a heap of stones. This is shown in the fact that we would appreciate a ruined Roman forum and a heap of stones that fortuitously resembled it exactly in very different ways... Crawford's first sentence does express a sound point, which is that a ruin is a structure that is no longer *able to function*, but, when we are dealing with proper functions, this is logically distinct from the claim that the ruin no longer *has a function* (2008, p. 163, n. 40).

They also point out that buildings can look "unfit" for the functions they do have and can thereby exhibit negative aesthetic qualities. They acknowledge that ruins in particular can look unfit, but we admire them aesthetically anyway. Why is this? They write

It is probably safe to say that today ruins are no longer as enthusiastically aesthetically appreciated as they once were, and perhaps are admired more as historical curiosities. Nonetheless, it must also be said that they are not generally viewed as aesthetically poor, or ugly, due to their looking unfit for their functions... ruins, by definition, would seem to look unfit for their function. Missing roofs, punctured or crumbling walls, toppled supports: all bespeak a failure to perform basic architectural functions, such as housing inhabitants from the elements. If they look unfit, why do ruins seem to display no evidence of this negative aesthetic quality? (2008, p. 162)

They attribute our tendency to overlook this problem to what they call the expressiveness of ruins, aligning expressiveness with our notions of romanticism, the sublime, and the passage of time. So, "in looking unfit, ruins *do* possess a negative aesthetic quality, although this quality is not readily apparent because it coexists with an aesthetically positive quality of expressiveness" (2008, p. 164). If our experiences of ruins lacked this experience of expressiveness, we would just find the structures unfit, they claim, defending this idea with a thought experiment about just-ruined structures that do not have the expressiveness they think we typically associate with ruins. If an earthquake caused the ruination of modern-day buildings that happened to look just like ancient Greek ones, we would not, Parsons and Carlson say, have the same reaction to these as we do to what they call "genuine" ruins, even if they looked just like actual Greek ruins: we would be fully aware of their negative aesthetic attributes.

This is not an entirely convincing account of expressiveness, for the expressiveness of ruins arguably involves more than just our notions of the romantic or sublime, and expressiveness itself does not necessarily depend on the passage of time.¹⁹ It is also likely that our interest in ruined structures' aesthetic attributes may not be adequately explained by expressiveness. And ruins, at least in some form, are more than a historical curiosity for us. The increase in publications, the proliferation of online images, and recent museum exhibitions dedicated to "ruin lust" suggest we may be in the midst of a resurgence in this interest, a resurgence that may be influenced at least in part by the increasing number of ruined structures

¹⁹ Neither, in my view, does the creation of a ruin.

in our landscapes.

More importantly, Parsons and Carlson's notion of proper function could be expanded or refined. For one thing, it has been criticized by Robert Stecker for its stress on the idea that selected buildings have ancestors (2011, p. 440); as Stecker notes, in some cases, buildings exhibit Parsons and Carlson's conception of proper function though they have no such lineage. Also, while the way people use sites over time is crucial, and may be most important to our understanding of a building, some account of the circumstances surrounding a building's creation is, too. Ultimately, we must expand our understanding of buildings' functions and the way they can overlap or supersede one another. Buildings can be said to have various *proper* functions of the kind Parsons and Carlson describe, but they also have what I will call below *original* functions. These refer to the reasons for, or circumstances surrounding, their creation.²⁰ Finally, while some buildings may be preserved because of their fitness for their new uses, some of them are no doubt preserved and used for various purposes for no good reason at all.

But though I think their accounts of expressiveness and function require modification, I agree with Parsons and Carlson that ruins are structures that have not lost their functions, though they may not be able to function, and that we appreciate them aesthetically at the same time we are aware of this functional lapse. Ruins should be understood as structures that retain traces of their past uses, albeit in often shadowy form, but may not currently exhibit other proper functions. Their functions have often ceased or been suspended; they are purposeful, but they do not fulfill any obvious purpose. This very fact can make these places exciting—as noted in Part I above—and can cause new or unconventional uses of these spaces. Michigan Central fits this description. It is a ruined train station, not just a jumble of matter, but it is no longer fulfilling its function as a transportation center. And I do think ruins obviously prompt ambivalent reactions, and at times our appreciation for ruins can override attention to their actual structural drawbacks.

²⁰ Of course this further distinction may not comport with Parsons and Carlson's theory of selected effects, and, in some cases, perhaps the proper functions with which Parsons and Carlson are concerned are the ones that will be most dominant or important for most long-lasting structures.

Also, while attention should be paid to original functions, Parsons and Carlson's emphasis on the use and understanding of buildings over time is critically important. Architecture is not only unique among our great creative endeavors because buildings, unlike some of the other arts, have specific utilitarian purposes, and our analyses of them requires understanding this. It is also unique because its proper analysis may involve a commitment to seeing structures over the long term, and weighing the significance (at any given time) of the associations or functions they may have. Functions do change over time, just as Parsons and Carlson have described. (But I am skeptical that they ever change entirely, or that a powerful original or proper function is ever completely eradicated. Buildings' meanings and uses are as layered as those of the towns in which we find them, and some structures have original functions with great staying power.) We have to weigh all of its various functions against each other to truly appraise a building; for example, we must decide how much of Hagia Sophia's identity is constituted by its time as a church, its time as a mosque, and its time as a museum, and which episodes in the life of this building most define it. Should Michigan Central become something else in the future, it will still bear traces of its original function as a train station. Any new proper functions it acquires after that will depend on the mass use of the structure over time, as Parsons and Carlson have described.

Now, the problem posed by some of the ruins of Detroit (and many other buildings, ruined and non-ruined) is the problem that arises when a building has an unethical original or proper function, strong unethical associations of some kind, or its ruination is associated with horror or tragedy. This is recognized by proponents of the second, ethical point of view described in Part I, above. One could also view the structures as simply worthless, no different than trash. Those who see Detroit's ruined structures as evidence of the city's industrial unmooring or ugly blight they have to endure every day might justifiably think they should just be eliminated, and, of course, that is what city officials have been doing, and plan to continue doing, to many of them.

Numerous examples from the history of the built environment can be adduced to support this point of view. Andrew Ballantyne notes of the gas chambers at Auschwitz that they "had organizational rationality and compositional skill to recommend them, but to dwell on their aesthetic

achievements in the presence of their utterly abhorrent reason for being is to fail as a human being" (2011, p. 47). Jeanette Bicknell points to Abu Ghraib: "Even if Abu Ghraib were an architectural jewel, one would probably understand the position of those who wanted to pull it down, however much one might disagree with them. The need to remember the victims and their suffering has to be weighed against the desirability of maintaining a structure where great evil has been perpetrated" (2014, p. 440). The unease that appreciation of ruined buildings incites can come in degrees, too; as Michael S. Roth writes, "It is one thing to aestheticize the gradual decay of monumental buildings, another to aestheticize the effects of disaster" (1997, p. 7).

We usually cannot avoid negatively judging those structures that have ghastly functions or associations, no matter how compelling or interesting their other attributes may be. We can be struck by these impressions when we reflect on just how many parts of our built environment have murky histories, or when we consider repurposing such spaces for new uses. For example, we may find it exciting to convert factories and breweries to loft housing. But we are squeamish about converting just any site. How many of us would be interested in moving into garment factories that have been on fire and caused loss of life? Wouldn't we hesitate, no matter how fine the building's architectural features might be? It could be argued that the only person who can genuinely aesthetically enjoy such places is one who does not know what they are or what they represent. And those who do know what they are often feel the impulse, perhaps ethically justifiable in some cases, to smash them. While buildings can be used for different purposes, some of their functions or associations never entirely disappear, and when these are truly ethically suspect, perhaps our new uses or preservation of these sites should be, too.

I contend that we can resolve these issues in a way that supports the appreciation and perhaps preservation of some ruined sites. The key to our judgments about these matters is provided by the function (or, as it seems, the lack of function) and value such structures can take on *after* they are ruined.

Parsons and Carlson have said the mass use of structures over time can bestow a new proper function upon a site, and this new function may be very different from the site's other proper functions or its original func-

tions. I would argue that this has happened in some ruined areas of Detroit. A significant number of people have reacted to the ruination of parts of the environment with creative activity, including photography, painting, filmmaking, and art installations; exploration; historical or cultural interest; and the development of ideas. As they have visited and appreciated ruins like Detroit's, and created works centered around them (including some of the works called "ruin porn"), they have, in effect, generated a new understanding, a new meaning, of these spaces. Just as plazas take on new uses for which they were not created, ruins can take on new uses for which they were not created. This has probably been the case for as long as human beings have been interested in ruins. If a structure is ruined, but enough people engage with the ruin for the kinds of aesthetic, cultural, and historical reasons outlined in Part I above, a new, proper function for the space may emerge—a ruin "function."

This "function" is conferred by no one person in particular. It can be all the more powerful because unintended, arising from use and a gap in other proper functions. It accords with a remark Scruton makes about architecture itself: "It is a natural extension of common human activities, obeying no forced constraints" (1979, p. 17). Its existence is a matter for debate, and although in some cases it may emerge swiftly, in others it will take at least some time. But it often signals a creatively inclined focus on the environment as such; the creative activities and behaviors surrounding certain sites would not occur if these places retained their conventional proper functions. It is "grounded in people's real lived experience of buildings," as Parsons and Carlson say. And just as aesthetic activities are caused by the shift or lapse in a building's function, they in turn can also cause continuing changes or refinements in function. As noted above, buildings both shape and are shaped by their users, and the built environment can have a profound impact (positive or negative) on the people within it. If this new ruin "function" emerges, and if it is sufficiently powerful to outweigh the site's other functions or associations, then the ruin function confers new value on a space, a value that makes the structure worth preserving or repurposing.

Borrowing Parsons and Carlson's terminology, we can say:

X has a *proper function of ruination* F if and only if X is a ruined site

that is successful in meeting its users' significant creative needs or wants, and this success should lead to preservation of X.

But this proper function can be offset or influenced by the other functions a ruin has. It must be measured against other relevant considerations we bring to bear when assessing ruined sites. Not all ruined structures take on such powerful new associations.²¹ Some of them are not significant or compelling enough in their ruination. Some of them may be simply horrible,

²¹ Relatively ordinary structures often do not, unless there is something especially interesting about the form or process of their ruination. The entry "Ruine" in the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* underscores the notion, still with us, that not just any place deserves the title of ruin, and provides examples of the sorts of places that merit the name. The entry, which is primarily concerned with the appearance of ruins in the visual arts, reads:

Ruin is a term in painting for the depiction of almost entirely ruined buildings: "beautiful ruins." The name "ruin" is applied to a picture representing such ruins. "Ruin" pertains only to palaces, elaborate tombs, or public monuments. One should not talk of "ruin" in connection with a rustic or bourgeois dwelling; one should then say, "ruined buildings" (*Encyclopédie*, vol. XIV (1765), article *Ruine*; quoted in Macunias, 2004, p. 81).

It is instructive to consider the examples provided of *real* "ruins": "palaces, elaborate tombs, or public monuments," not "rustic" or "bourgeois" places. We continue to assign, through our use, the proper function of "ruination" to buildings of a certain size or grandeur, exhibiting (at least at one point) a public, general, or industrial function (see FIGURES 3 AND 4 for examples). For one thing, these sites may lend themselves better to



FIGURES 3 AND 4. Tanya Whitehouse, *Abandoned ammunition-factory structures, UMore Park, Rosemount, Minnesota.*

either because they have negative proper or original functions, or because, as ruined sites, they have been used in primarily negative ways—as places in which people commit or conceal crimes, for example. Other sites may be compelling as ruins, but their ruination may not defeat other, unfavorable associations or functions that weigh just as heavily in our estimations of them.

How, then, can we decide which ruins are valuable as ruins, and which are not? In addition to noting the new status a ruin can acquire, we can formulate a *pro tanto* principle (along the lines of the *pro tanto* principle Berys Gaut developed to defend ethicism) for use in assessing ruined structures and the new functions that emerge for them over time.²²

This principle can be expressed as follows:

A ruined structure may acquire value *insofar as* it manifests a new, aesthetically or culturally significant, proper function of ruination. (This proper function often reflects interest in the ruined environment as such.) Manifesting this new proper function *counts toward* the value of the ruined site, and failing to manifest this new proper function may *count against* its value, or have no impact on its value.

At least some of Detroit's ruins have acquired this status. Michigan Central and the Packard Plant seem to have done so.

aesthetic gratification. For example, Michigan Central's formerly shattered windows would not have looked nearly so menacing if not gaping from within its hulking frame. Most of our greatest ruins are not run-of-the-mill houses, and when houses do count as significant ruins, they often do so *en masse*, as villages or towns. Individual houses often lack the scale to go to ruin in a way that matters to us. Moreover, it is probably as difficult for houses to change their proper function as gas stations. Their function as domicile, and their connection with intimacy and private space, can make the associations homes acquire all the more difficult to overcome, and this is true even if they are successively inhabited by people who significantly modify the structures over time. While obviously many places can be haunted, and have served as sinister backdrops in films and other forms of art, it is perhaps no accident that we readily think of the haunted house, not the haunted auto plant.

²² Gaut's claim is: "The ethicist principle is a *pro tanto* one: it holds that a work is aesthetically meritorious (or defective) *insofar as* it manifests ethically admirable (or reprehensible) attitudes. (The claim could also be put like this: manifesting ethically admirable attitudes *counts toward* the aesthetic merit of a work, and manifesting ethically reprehensible attitudes *counts against* its aesthetic merit.)" (1998, p. 182)

Though this account of function and value will not apply to all ruins, it can explain our tendency to use and appreciate certain ruined structures in new ways. Moreover, this accurately describes our revised and continuing appreciation of some of the most famous ruined sites in the world, including the ruins of Rome, and other places we travel so far to see that are not functioning as they once did. (It is an open question whether this process will happen in some cases.²³) It also explains why our uses of certain spaces *can* soften their negative associations—why we do not always think of the Inquisition when we think of the Plaza Major, for example, or gladiatorial contests when ruminating over the Colosseum of Rome.

We can see this by assessing some remarks Ballantyne makes about the Colosseum. Ballantyne observes that the life of a building can pass, using the Colosseum as an example. He writes:

The occasions when we can securely make aesthetic judgments about buildings in the absence of "life" are when the building's life has long vanished. Therefore, for example, the ancient Colosseum in Rome seems impressive without feeling morally dangerous, because the barbaric activities that it supported have long vanished... the building itself will not in any foreseeable future be a support for gladiatorial bloodshed. It is now a place from where horse-drawn carriage rides begin and where ice creams are sold. The ethos of the modern life that surrounds it is driven by benign leisure pursuits, an idea of cultural prestige, and the desire to maximize tourist revenue, not by bloodlust (2011, p. 47).

In keeping with my remarks above, I would amend the first statement to suggest that when a building's life vanishes, opportunities for aesthetic and other kinds of experience, and other functions, emerge. Sometimes these are so significant they effectively generate a new understanding of a site. I am not convinced we only make secure aesthetic judgments about a building when its life is gone, and in any case, even if time and architecture move forward, our judgments of a structure (both ethical and aesthetic) cannot

²³ For example, can we reconceive of the extant pieces of the Berlin Wall as aesthetically interesting ruins? Why, now, are some people lamenting the Wall's disappearance (or even calling for its reconstruction), when, not so long ago, its dismantling was joyously celebrated all over the world?

always supplant those made during a building's use. (The carriage rides, the ice cream; what would the crowds of the Colosseum's heyday make of these developments? Even if we are ambivalent about the auto industry for various reasons, wouldn't a judgment made of the Packard Plant during the height of Packard production compete mightily with our often contradictory current impressions of the place—confusing, inspiring, incredible, anarchic all at once?)

Instead, the Colosseum qualifies as an example of a ruin that acquired enormous historical, cultural, and aesthetic importance, of a new kind, in the centuries after its active use. (Perceptions of its value and how to treat it varied within those centuries, too; it was mined for its materials just as the Packard has been in recent years.) And even if we may wince when we think of what transpired within its beautiful walls, it hardly seems like a good idea to destroy it now. The weight of the intervening centuries and myriad judgments and aesthetic inspirations have shifted the former functions of this site.²⁴

Likewise, though Michigan Central and the Packard Plant may never approach the significance of the Roman ruins, they have acquired new meanings after their active uses as train station and auto plant. They are more than what they were; their time as ruins are important chapters in their histories. Just as we may think it a tragedy to destroy the many ruins that have become an inestimably important part of our cultural heritage, it may be regrettable to destroy them now. Our aesthetic, historical, or cultural interests often provide the strongest reasons we have for retaining ruined structures with sometimes ethically troubling functions or histories. The Colosseum, and some of the ruins of Detroit, among other buildings, are cases in point.

But it is noteworthy that this new ruin function is acquired *after* the event that led to the ruination, not because of it. It emerges from *use* or perception that develops in the wake of ruination. It is not something that can be established by the process of devastation itself, or enjoyment of the devastation, in my view. If either creative work or interest in a ruin revels in the reasons for ruination, or in any negative proper functions of a space, then it is arguably ethically problematic. For example, if, like some

²⁴ Though in my view they have not entirely erased them.

of the Romans, what we really enjoy about the Colosseum is thoughts of the spectacles it housed (or, if possible, photographs of those spectacles), we, like them, could be criticized for our bloodlust, not our ruin lust.

These considerations can help us decide how to assess what is called "ruin porn." If photographic work likewise demonstrates pleasure in destruction or self-destruction itself, or if it celebrates the ethically questionable proper functions some sites possess or the reasons the ruins developed in Detroit, then it may be perverse. (I leave aside the question of which works seem to do this, if any.)

In summary, and amending Ballantyne's observations a second time, I claim that the occasions when we can recognize that a new ruin-function has emerged are when the building's cause of devastation has passed, the ruin remains, and its visitors make new, creative, and positive use of the space—in effect, creating a new ruin function. In keeping with Parsons and Carlson's account of proper function, this new function arises from use over time and can result in new value. It seems worthwhile to preserve the buildings that acquire this value, rather than destroy them or let them crumble. Yet the value caused by reaction to ruination is compromised if it reflects pleasurable preoccupation with the cause of devastation, or a site's troubling proper functions, rather than interest in the ruined environment as such. And ruin porn merits its name when it, too, focuses "lewdly" on these factors, not on their often interesting aftermath—the ruin itself. We must measure the strength of the value ruination creates in each case and against various other considerations. In this way, we can try to thoughtfully bridge the distance between the two perspectives, described above, on Detroit's ruins.

What, then, should become of structures that do acquire this value?

It seems worthwhile to follow Sharon Gipson's suggestion and turn valuable ruins into something. I will not suggest what they could become, though a number of interesting possibilities present themselves and have been discussed at length—some explored in projects included in the exhibition "The Architectural Imagination," which features Detroit, at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale.²⁵ Such ruins could be stabilized, and

²⁵ In remarks that emphasize the kind of human interaction that causes the change in function I describe above, Cynthia Davidson, co-curator of "The Architectural Imagination" exhibition and editor of the journal *Log*, remarked, "I really believe that when

perhaps manicured like some sites in Scotland and Rome. They could be converted into new businesses, parks, or housing, or fenced and classified as historical sites (like the Archibald Mill in Dundas, Minnesota [FIGURE 5]). Its episode of ruination could become an essential part of what makes Detroit creatively unique (perhaps this has already happened). In recent years, Fernando Palazuelo bought the Packard Plant and has started to renovate the site, and Manuel Moroun, owner of Michigan Central, has installed new windows in the giant structure. These seem like favorable, rather than regrettable, developments.



FIGURE 5. Tanya Whitehouse, *Archibald Mill, Dundas, Minnesota*.

At any rate, the ruins should probably not be left as they are, for the sake of those residents who do find them disquieting or, as Lowell said, disgusting. We cannot celebrate blight for blight's sake, or genuinely enjoy the reasons for these ruins in Detroit. Nor is there any good reason to create any more of them, or to let the ruination continue unchecked. Decisions about what

architecture captures the public imagination, that's when change occurs. It's not the architecture itself that causes the change, but how people react to it; *they* cause the change" (2016).

to do with the ruins should ideally reflect respect for their neighbors. But I hope I have offered some reasons to think at least some of them are worth maintaining, in one form or another. For the ruin is not only an invitation to an adventure in aesthetics. It is also an invitation to consider the way forward, and the way in which our ideas will both reflect and influence our architectural surroundings.

I have claimed that our reactions to ruins may convey often positive aesthetic attention to the environment. It is curious that the structures within perhaps our most functional aesthetic category, architecture, can become objects for aesthetic engagement and appreciation once they do not fulfill their purposes—sometimes *because* they do not fulfill their purposes. Aesthetic interest does not generally intensify over an object that has been ruined or rendered purposeless, but in the case of the built environment, it can. This is unusual; it presents one of the few cases in human life in which neglect or destruction launches significant aesthetic or cultural activity that can temper the negative functions or associations such environments can also have. It is also something to protect or preserve, and to view as a catalyst for change, when necessary. Out of the wreckage or the purgatory of the built environment, something life-affirming can emerge—something better can come from the ashes, indeed.

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