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a cura di Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino e Daniele Pisani

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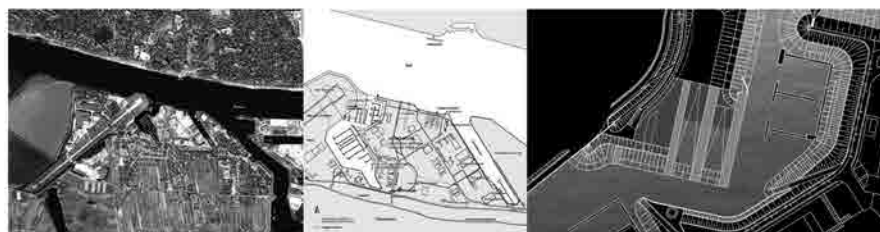
View to Finkenwerder*

Considerations on the contemporary aesthetics of ruins

Ludwig Seyfarth

One of the most beautiful views in Hamburg is that from the Jenisch Park in Klein-Flottbek towards the Elbe. The eye travels over the large grassy area below Jenisch House between groups of trees to the bank on the other side of the river. There, however, is an element that abruptly disturbs the atmospheric perspective like a landmark. It is the administrative building of the Deutsche Werft (German Dockyard) built in 1958 that dominates Fritz Hoeger's 1922 three-storey brick building located in front of it. Many are the park visitors who find it architecturally of little interest, because they do not feel confident with the functional Modernism of the post-war era and in this visually significant place they may wish that the building was torn down or at least brought into a form that fits in with the picturesque atmosphere of the view as a whole. In its state of partial destruction, it could create a similar accent to the artificial ruins erected in many landscaped gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Many Hamburgers did not know until recently that there is actually an impressive ruin close to this building that is now being made into a memorial. It is the remains of the submarine bunker Fink 2, built at the beginning of the 1940s, which was rediscovered in 2002 during the construction of the runway for the airbus. Do similar feelings and associations arise in relation to this ruin as in the Romantic landscape and park viewers 200 years ago? Then, the sight of ruins plainly stood for transience. It inspired one to philosophical meditation. An example is Diderot's remark from 1767: "Ruins awaken in me sublime ideas. Everything is destroyed, everything decays, everything passes. Only the world remains, only time continues". Ruins embody the cycle in which people and everything they wrest from nature are finally taken back by her. The art and architecture historian Robert Harbison writes in *The Built, the Unbuilt*



Aerial view of Finkenwerder near Hamburg. Superposition of the development of the area today and the situation in 1940. Kirsch + Bremer architects, General plan of the project.

and the Unbuildable, that it is “unusual to classify ruins according to whether they suddenly or gradually fell into their state, whereas man categorises death exactly. (If the dead remained on the earth’s surface, he would probably not.) It is rarely known how a building became a ruin, and so we see in it a single, ever-repeating process. It is surprising when one discovers that the torn corner of a house destroyed by a gas explosion turns out to be picturesque, as well as a visit to a village destroyed by an earthquake. In such cases the emptiness came overnight, whereas as a rule it is the outcome of a long process. Occasionally, hints of degradation are found in many tiny, almost imperceptible steps comparable to the human aging process”.

While Pompeii went down from one day to the next, ancient Rome has been slowly superimposed by the city’s other layers of history. Until the Renaissance most inhabitants had not been able to do much with the ruins. Instead of admiring and conserving them, they took their stones to construct new buildings. On a broad level the taste for ruins began during the 18th century. This interest was directed not only towards the relics of the past but also imaginatively towards the future. Diderot wrote in a salon gathering about a painting by Hubert Robert in 1767 that one must allow a palace to fall down to make it an object of interest. Hubert Robert appeared to emulate Diderot when he painted the Grande Galerie of the Louvre as his proposal for its reorganisation in 1796. He presented a counterpart to the painting showing the not-yet-built gallery as a future ruin. An engraving by Gustav Doré for a social report in 1872 that examined the plight of workers in the British capital during early industrialisation shows a “view after thousands of years” of the once thriving metropolis of London. What is an artistic vision of compelling poetic force on paper, as a real project acquires oppressive tensions: as when by the design of a monumental construction it is consecutively considered how it would look at the end of a thousand-year empire. This idea led the simultaneously best-known and most problematic future projection of ruins – Albert Speer’s theory of the value of ruins. Speer was above all inspired by the imposing relics of the former greatness of the Roman Empire. He could admire the Colosseum and other ancient buildings as he accompanied Hitler on a visit to Mussolini in Rome.



The submarine bunker Fink II during the war.

The builders of the submarine bunker, Fink 2, most certainly were not thinking that their building, constructed for purely pragmatic reasons, would one day be an imposing ruin. There is a certain historical irony in the “ruin value” of a military, functional building that today is a reminder of the ruins of the Third Reich, not even in Speer’s positive sense, while his high-flown plans for Germany, the capital of the new world empire, fortunately only emerged on paper.

Associations with ancient Rome that Hitler and Speer admired can arise even with the remains of the submarine bunker. Although only the fundament remains after the destruction and later removal of the original plant, the remaining walls appear similarly oversized and removed from human scale as the huge stone blocks of the foundations of Castel Sant’Angelo, which Giovanni Battista Piranesi depicted in his *Antichità Romane* (1756) as the high point of ancient Roman constructional and technical art. Could Piranesi’s poetic gift also ignite at the ruins of Fink 2? Due to the redevelopment of the area by Kirsch + Bremer, the monument now stands harsh and naked, and visible to us from many sides. Speer or Hitler would have found little to like in the fact that the bunker ruins have not even been raised in a physical way. Only the remains of the foundations, which separated the chambers from each other, are exposed as far as possible and “framed” as accents by oblique shingle areas. Would the melancholic view of the Romantics, who were caught by the jagged silhouettes of castle or monastery ruins, also be captured by the right-angled or the wall remnants diagonally projecting from water? The fascination for the bunker ruins probably touches on a sensibility that has first developed in the last decades. This is, on the one hand, characterised through the destruction of both world wars and other ones too, and on the other by the decline of heavy industry. Once thriving areas are turned into abandoned gravel deserts with vacant, crumbling buildings.

The land art artist Robert Smithson provides one of the most striking examples of this new sensibility. Describing a trip to the monuments of his native city, Passaic, New Jersey, in 1967 he wrote: “Along the Passaic River banks there are



The submarine bunker Fink II immediately after the war, destroyed by the British occupying forces; the ruins of the bunker today.

many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built [...]. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud". Smithson looks at industrial buildings and equipment as one looks at natural history testimonies from past millennia. Different temporal and observational levels telescope into each other. "Passaic appears to be full of 'holes'. Compared to New York, which is so crowded and massive, and these holes are in a sense the empty spaces that unintentionally retrace the trace memories of an abandoned future". These observations led Smithson to the concept of the "inverted ruin". It is the "opposite of the 'romantic ruin', for these buildings do not disintegrate into rubble but stand as rubble before they are built".

Smithson's considerations point the way to a contemporary aesthetics of ruins that no longer meditates, lost in thoughts of a distant past, before the rubble, but precisely questions their origins and their contemporary meaning. The conflict between these different ways of looking had already broken out when archeological excavation "cleaned", for historical accuracy, the picturesquely overgrown interior of the Colosseum, which was admired by many artists and writers.

Robert Harbison pragmatically introduced a de-romanticised view of ruins with an original interpretation of works by Romantic painters who have deeply influenced our idea of ruins to this day: "If Friedrich paints a ruin, he sets off a bomb in spirit beforehand: man and nature, both remain behind damaged, Gravestones and figures are in disarray, each corner is so abrupt as if the world's dialogue was stopped in mid-sentence". Harbison interprets Caspar David Friedrich's ruins as the ruins of war and thus refers to a direction that I would like to put up for discussion as an appropriate interpretation for today. Even the redesign of the Fink II ruin by Kirsch + Bremer can be understood in this current sense. The most famous ruins of recent years, the destroyed World



Two details of the ruins after the realization of the project.

Trade Centre towers, were the result of a sudden, war-like act of terrorism. In Southeast Asia there were suddenly numerous ruins at the end of the '90s that approach Smithson's "inverted ruins". They were not caused by physical acts of war, but were nevertheless the result of a sudden and unforeseen event. Numerous apartment blocks or office towers under construction, shopping centres or functionless, concrete pillars standing around on which highways or routes for commuter trains were to be built remained half-completed. The so-called Asian crisis had led many investors and whole states into bankruptcy overnight. There was no more money to build further, and so what was never even ready for use became functionless ruins.

But had not an act of war in a figurative sense taken place? It was no military intervention with thousands of dead, but a meltdown in the war of economic interests that was carried out in the most brutal manner in countries such as Thailand or Indonesia. It raises the question of whether seemingly different causes of ruins can also be read as traces of today's global conflicts whose victims are innocent people, at the mercy of attacks by terrorists or barely transparent stock market activity.

A very pragmatic view of ruins sees in them only the evidence that the protective function of architecture has failed. So that it can at least survive the small attacks of permanent "low-intensity wars", in Northern Ireland military security experts are used for more than thirty years for urban development projects, as Martin Pawley reports in his book *Terminal Architecture*. This applies to banking areas and other trouble spots in London. Downing Street, an officially public thoroughfare for centuries, has been cordoned off since 1986 and permanently monitored by video cameras. New buildings no longer have large glass facades. There are also attempts to make potential terrorist targets appear architecturally unremarkable. Car parks are not placed next to important buildings to minimise the danger from car bombs. The massive walls of the submarine bunker, whose remains are to be seen in Finkenwerder, refer to the protective function of architecture that is always in question and in this case is known to



One of the panels that explain the history of the area; the north basin with roof structures emerging from water

have failed. In the end, there were many dead and wounded to lament in connection with Fink 2. The monument and the plaques that provide information about the history of the bunker and the area are reminders of them.

On one hand, a memorial reduced to its essentials for historical memory has evolved. However, is the pictorial effect of high complexity. From different angles and heights provides different perspectives. Behind the exploration of the “perceptive horizon” of the area stand different reflections on the abstraction of the horizon that have run through Kirsch + Bremer’s work for years. Their work is essentially located between art and architecture, allowing neither side to clearly break through. They repeatedly explore unnoticed or overlooked places that they impart with new contours through their interventions. This is also the case with the redesign of the bunker area.

To make something visible also always means to make something else invisible and it is not always the same thing visible. In Finkenwerder the changing of the tides also changes the picture. The type design on the concrete plate on the slipway that comes obliquely out of the water in the direction of the ruins also plays with this. The words “Erinnerung / Zeit” (Memory / Time) and “Störung / Raum” (Disruption / Space) are temporarily under water and therefore not always fully legible. One could reflect here on ‘Only time continues’ in Diderot’s sense. Exactly this historically significant and loaded, but still forgotten, place offers an opportunity to think about not only the past but also the present and the future, as the numerous contemporary ruins from New York to Southeast Asia so compellingly do.

Award 1. Prize: Hamburg 2004

Realization: 2006

Customer: ReGe Hamburg

Architect / Artist: kirsch bremer artandarchitecture

Landscape architect: Jutta Wippermann, Darmstadt

Art historian: Ludwig Seyfarth, Hamburg / Berlin

Translation: Heather Allen; Photos: Klaus Frahm



The words “Erinnerung / Zeit” (Memory / Time) and “Störung / Raum” (Disruption / Space) engraved on the concrete floor.

Italian abstract

I lavori di prolungamento della pista di collaudo della fabbrica Airbus a Finkenwerder, vicino ad Amburgo, hanno portato alla luce i bunker sottomarini Fink II, realizzati all'inizio del 1940 per proteggere i sommergibili dai bombardamenti alleati. Le rovine delle strutture del bunker sono state rese visibili e reinterpretate con la progettazione artistica e la sistemazione architettonica dell'area. I cinque bunker, le cui fondazioni affiorano dalla superficie dell'acqua, sono esposti in modo che possano essere vissuti come una struttura scultorea. Con l'alta marea, il livello dell'acqua riempie i vecchi bacini. Il rudere è di per sé un monumento. Testi memoriali, incisi sulle lastre di cemento della struttura, raccontano la storia del luogo. L'acqua lascia liberi i caratteri e li nasconde di nuovo, rendendo le parole alternatamente visibili e invisibili. La riqualificazione dell'area le ha restituito la sua dimensione storica e ha offerto lo spunto per una nuova percezione.

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Raccolta della rivista di engramma del Centro studi classicA | luav, laboratorio di ricerche costituito da studiosi di diversa formazione e da giovani ricercatori, coordinato da Monica Centanni. Al centro delle ricerche della rivista è la tradizione classica nella cultura occidentale: persistenze, riprese, nuove interpretazioni di forme, temi e motivi dell'arte, dell'architettura e della letteratura antica, nell'età medievale, rinascimentale, moderna e contemporanea.