“Simply Beautiful” and “Always Worth a Trip”? Some Thoughts on Modern Ruins and the Visualization of Heritage

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Abstract This paper provides an insight into some of my own recent reflections on two contemporary questions of historical culture: first, what challenges does the study of ruins from the last 100 years pose to history and cultural studies? My point is that recent material legacies challenge us with new ways of seeing and thinking *within* and *for* society. Second, what does it mean for the treatment of material heritage in research *and* in the public sphere when academics act as stereotypical history tourists? This includes questioning whether academics travel differently when traveling for professional reasons, and whether heritage today can be equated with photographed heritage.

Keywords Ruins, material legacy, concrete, cultural landscape, heritage, photography, history tourism, history of tourism, public history.

Modern ruins

“Ruins don’t age” claimed an article in the German daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* a few years ago (cf. Steinfeld 2015)[1]—but, one may add, a lot of 20th century buildings do. On the one hand, nothing seems to have aged more brutally than the large-scale urban concrete structures of the second half of the century, regardless of whether they date from the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s (see fig. 1). On the other hand, *bloq,* a magazine focusing on social and cultural issues in and around Mannheim, Heidelberg, and Ludwigshafen, dedicated its third edition to “concrete and its secrets” (3/2023, editorial), while a regional interior design magazine, *Freisberg,* explores “brutalist visions and visionaries who used creativity to create brutal beauty” in an edition titled “Truly Brutal” (55/2023, editorial), which likewise deals with colossal concrete landscapes.

1 This and all following translations from originally German texts by the author.

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Figure 1 Neckar Embankment Development North, Mannheim, south-west Germany, built between 1975 and 1984. © Cord Arendes 2022.

Ruins, like other sites, buildings, and material artifacts that contain or are suspected to contain traces of history, "exert an unbroken fascination in our time because of their historical substance, spatial configuration and historical significance, which is based on the historicity and uniqueness of urban spaces and, not least, the attribution of historical authenticity" (Bernhardt, Sabrow, and Saupe 2017, 9). Nothing seems to point more clearly to our—often long forgotten—pasts than ruins. But what exactly constitutes a ruin? The answer differs according to discipline. As the French classical archaeologist Alain Schnapp states, ancient ruins, in particular, have their own *poetics:* "poetics of the eternal, the reversibility of fate and the transformation of the world as a reflection on the passing of time and the decline of kingdoms and cities" (Schnapp 2014, 52). Here he describes a surplus that we will not find in our numerous suburbs or industrial areas.

The valorization of ruins was perhaps never greater than in the heyday of Romanticism. For the art historians Charlotte Schoell-Glass and Elizabeth Sears, the atmosphere of "vanitas" (i.e., the spirit of transience) could not find a better symbol than the ruin: "beyond the emotional sympathy with ruined things, their external characteristics, such as signs of corrosion and plant growth on stone, patina on metals, chipped paint on paintings, etc., were elevated to new aesthetic values and even artificially created" (Schoell-Glass and Sears 2009, 103). Building materials like concrete,

which are hostile to the making of ruins, had not yet been invented in the 18th century; and even in 1935 the Russo-German and—following his emigration—American art historian Horst W. Janson stated in a letter to his friend and colleague William S. Heckscher, that “America knows no ruins” (ibid., 97). Here Janson was referring to the seamless coexistence of old and new in American cities as he saw it from a European perspective (ibid., 101).

In 20th century Europe, philosophers like the German Hannes Böhringer argued that ruins gain a new aesthetic quality over time, no matter how boring or even ugly the buildings were in their original state: “precisely because the ruin in its form is unintentional, unpredictable and accidental [even in the case of abrupt destruction, the later form is not foreseeable; C.A.], it contains a formal complexity that could never be achieved through intention and composition” (Böhringer 1982, 373). And the cultural historian and museologist Anne Eriksen added that “not alone in art history ruins have become an autonomous aesthetic object and a topic of independent aesthetic reflection” (Eriksen 2014, 70).

Since my own research is tightly focused on public and contemporary history, for me, ruins are neither poetry, nor antiques from the age of Romanticism; nor do I consider them as works of art. Just the contrary—they are “real.” The ruins I deal with are mostly large building complexes erected between the late 19th and later 20th century. These modern ruins—not spectacular contemporary ruined buildings (cf. Matzig 2017)—include large structures from the 1960s to the 1980s that German architectural scholars have referred to as both “brutalism” and “recent cultural heritage” (Eckardt et al. 2017, 6). This material heritage is too similar to contemporary buildings for its heritage character to yet be clearly defined. Nevertheless, “the architectural features of the 1950s to the 1980s constitute a cultural heritage that unites Europe” (Meier 2017, 94) and can serve as a storeroom for our 20th century memory.

This memorial function has recently been discussed even in relation to Germany’s decommissioned nuclear power plants. The authors of an article in the German weekly newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* compared the historical relevance and the cultural value of nuclear power plants to former industrial areas such as the Zollverein Coal Mine Industrial Complex in Essen, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001. For König and Oswald securing an “afterlife” for such buildings would not only contribute to the “considered confrontation with a major social conflict” (König and Oswald 2024), it would also generate value for the tourism sector. Both aspects would contribute to the reuse of “a ruin that was no longer functional for its original purpose” (ibid.). As this example shows, any form of subsequent use entails the physical and material re-appropriation of buildings, structures, or artifacts—even in cases that have a dramatic history (though where the history is properly traumatic, subsequent use is impossible).

Not only nuclear power plants, but many other industrial ruins are frequently seen by those who live or work near them as visible expressions of failure rather than as forms of the past that have persisted into the present (and will continue to persist into the future). From such a point of view, we can still see—or at least sense—what they

once represented, yet at the same time they point towards transience and emphasize the fact that everything that exists will one day become a ruin. One of the many areas of special interest in the field of ruins are air-raid and other military shelters, many thousands of which can be found in Germany alone. Should these concrete giants be re-used or should they all be torn down or blown up? The former bunkers have found new lives as churches, clubs, exhibition spaces, room for start-ups, or even apartment blocks, not least on account of rising rents in Germany's larger cities (cf. Weissmüller 2016; Tillmann 2016). Reminders of the recent past—emphatically not "ancient history"—also include numerous material remains from dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, including National Socialism, all over Western and Eastern Europe. Most of them are considered examples of dissonant or difficult heritage (cf. Macdonald 2009). This group of architectural remnants comprises industrial buildings and plants, military facilities including bunkers as well as functional buildings such as administration buildings or "hybrids," i.e., mixed-use complexes.

As a contemporary and public historian, I am particularly interested in such buildings, their surroundings, and all the associated material remains of the past that reach into our present: one can "feel" these architectures even though they are often re-used for non-military purposes or have (recently) become regional tourist hotspots (cf. Arendes 2016). This is even true for large-scale National Socialist (infra)structures such as Tempelhof Airfield in Berlin, the KDF bathing resort of Prora on Rügen, the remains of the Army Research Center *(Heeresversuchsanstalt)* in Peenemünde (Usedom), the *Ordensburg Vogelsang* ex-training center in the Eifel region near the Belgian border, and the *Valentin* submarine pens on the Weser River in the village of Farge, near Bremen. In most cases, these buildings contain only indirect references to acts of violence committed by the Nazi regime, but they must nonetheless be regarded as places of perpetration. These facilities are not only symbolic of political and ideological training, the representation of the regime in architecture and mass marches, or the development of weapons technology. They also document the widespread use of forced laborers and prisoners from concentration camps—in both their construction and during their operation. That is anything *but* the poetry of ruins.

A few years ago, the contemporary historian Martin Sabrow introduced the term "shadow place" *(Schattenort).* He was primarily concerned with interpreting and categorizing the past from the perspective of our Western European present: "It is, above all, the current reception of the historical revelation and its place in the cultural memory of posterity that determine the shape and blackness of the shadow that lies over the sites, not the historical events themselves" (Sabrow 2017, 8). Sabrow intended the term not least to avoid having to talk about *dark places, dark heritage,* or *dark tourism:* "Shadow places differ from dark or 'evil' places insofar as their meaning is not reduced to acts of horror; they are *shadow places,* not *dark places,* because in them there is light as well as darkness, and continuity of civilization as well as rupture with civilization" (ibid., 10–11; emphasis in original). And all the architectural complexes mentioned above are ultimately (and to some extend also unfortunately) parts of our heritage. By thinking about the expectations that were associated with them

a few decades ago (including the history of the architecture of concrete locations), their spatial-landscape contexts, and the corresponding local, regional, and national narratives over many decades, we are enabling ourselves to undertake new ways of seeing and thinking *in* and *for* society—far beyond the mere interest of these places as tourist sites and their “misuse” as indicators of the presence of a past. However, we ought not to forget that, even as academics, we tend to think in visual terms. Ultimately it is not even necessary for these sites to be accessible to the public—whether in larger or smaller numbers—as numerous photographs exist of most of them: heritage in the early decades of the 21st century is primarily photographic and therefore visually documented. This has consequences for the structures and processes of *doing heritage;* it also raises questions concerning researchers’ own working routines.

Visualization of heritage

The way we deal with our heritage in general today is mostly subject to the mechanisms of tourist interest (see fig. 2), as a late summer view of the old town of Bern shows.[2] Here, tourism means the collection of destinations, or, more precisely, as many destinations or heritage sites as possible. But this behavior is not limited to holidaymakers. Even the behavior of “academic tourists” is not entirely free of these mechanisms. But does the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) of academics in this particular context differ significantly from the views and interests of ordinary tourists? Do researchers travel differently, for example, when they are traveling for professional reasons only?

Academic tourism is generally understood as journeys undertaken by academics, either to attend conferences and congresses or to stay in a place—usually one that is also of interest to tourists—for research purposes. Particularly in the humanities, where large archives are located in cities of cultural and historical importance, there is most likely a high correlation between research value (acquisition of data) and tourist value (relaxation in a pleasant environment). Conferences and congresses in “famous” cities are also becoming increasingly popular, which leads to the fusion of professional and private travel—including contact with heritage sites. The question “Why are they here?”, which is frequently asked in tourism research, often cannot be answered precisely in an academic context (cf. Johnson 2015)—as a variety of reasons may apply.

Like other travelers and tourists, researchers are always on the move. Does this *dual role* have a concrete impact on the cultural valorization of heritage? Both sides, researchers and tourists alike, actively drive processes of “inheritance” (Bendix 2018) by staying at historical sites, albeit with different priorities. Epistemologically and economically driven approaches to tourism in centers of material heritage have

2 Some of the following arguments have already been the subject of an earlier blog post (cf. Arendes 2023).

Figure 2 "Old Town" of Bern, Switzerland, UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1983. © Cord Arendes 2018.

more in common than they do have differences. The reflections of Marco d'Eramo and Valentin Groebner on selfies, tourism, and the role of history for authentic experiences have made a clear case for this (cf. D'Eramo 2018; Groebner 2018). In the creation of tourist-friendly city centers, sometimes nostalgically glorified, sometimes seemingly organically grown, material heritage has often degenerated into urban beautification (Shanken 2022, 180, 189, 199). Overall, we know very little about the perception of art in public spaces. Meaningful academic judgements about how people perceive monuments or heritage in their everyday lives and what meaning they may attach to them are of limited value in the absence of empirical reception studies (cf. Schult 2024, 10). There is a great need for future research in this area, although it is highly time-consuming and involves legal and ethical constraints (cf. Arendes 2022a, 2022b).

As the aforementioned close connection between heritage and tourism shows, the "value" of tourist hotspots and highlights depends to a large extent on whether they can be experienced first-hand and perceived as "authentic." Without wanting to repeat the discussions carried out in History and Cultural Studies in recent years, it should be briefly pointed out that the authenticity experienced by visitors to a site is primarily based on their own—not always rational—expectations. The increased awareness and thus the value the heritage has gained, especially in the last two decades, can be exemplified by its ubiquitous visual presence: we already know what

Figure 3 Eyjafjallajökull volcano, Iceland, UNESCO Geopark “Katla” since 2015. © Cord Arendes 2022.

a medieval monastery or a UNESCO Geopark (see fig. 3) should look like before a planned trip. And, if we lack this knowledge, it is very simple to use the visual memory of the internet to get a first visual impression of a material heritage site or to form a concrete image of it. Heritage is largely a photographed heritage and a heritage documented in audio-visual media.

Over the past decade, smartphones and their built-in digital cameras have contributed to an increase in the public significance of places. Though equipped with comparatively little photographic functionality, but easy and safe to use, the smartphone has played a major role in reassessing our view of the *here and now* and, thus, of the material and immaterial legacies of the past. If we look at the private practice of photography, various forms of cultural understanding of the self and of the other are condensed in the *selfie*, the digital photographic self-portrait that has spread worldwide (cf. Ullrich 2019; Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth 2018). And since the selfie is intended to be shared at least among friends and acquaintances, the time and place of the recording are always recognizable. This is true even where the complex structures of heritage are difficult for the public to understand or decipher at first glance—for example in public sites related to totalitarian systems like National Socialism.

The infinite possibilities offered by small, portable digital cameras have been a major factor in historians no longer only taking photographs for private reasons, as

Figure 4 "Centennial Hall" Wroclaw, Poland, UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2006. © Cord Arendes 2019.

they did in previous decades, and relying rather on official photographic material from newspapers or photo agencies for their research and teaching. In retrospect, this can be considered to have been a bad habit even in previous decades like the 1970s. Instead, they now produce a steadily growing number of photographs themselves, the content of which is sometimes more, sometimes less closely related to their profession, and is used correspondingly. Not least in terms of copyright, we stay on the safe side by using our own photographic material, especially when it comes to publishing. Historians therefore sometimes operate in a no man's land between history tourism and history of tourism. And in their work, they take on different roles, which, for the sake of simplicity, will be referred to here as *recreational* and *professional.* These are inextricably linked—ideally, the knowledge of academic theory complements the proximity to practice. By reflecting on their own position or point of view *behind the lens*—how they simultaneously produce and analyze the photographs—researchers can contribute to clarifying the constructed and processual nature of heritage.

The photos in this article illustrate that this can (and does) sometimes happen almost incidentally. They have all been taken since 2018 in a mixture of private (holiday) and professional contexts (lecture tour, conference participation, research project). The motives for taking the photos also differed: some were intended to record private memories, others were already serving documentary purposes at the time they were

taken—by visually documenting places as heritage, they are simultaneously valorized (see fig. 4). Our own academic engagement with heritage has thus led us to document heritage sites and other places that have a direct or even indirect connection to the subject area of “heritage” and to collect the photos for potential use in research and/or teaching.

Circling back to the start of our reflections: our common heritage is always worth the trip, especially when it has been processed by academic experts and didactically prepared. The transfer of knowledge often happens by means of photographs: a place to see is, or may be, a place to be. In many cases, even a short detour is enough to get a glimpse of it. However, for academics specializing in historical and cultural studies, this context can be defined even more narrowly: while traveling is not a professional obligation for them, it should at least always be associated with *keeping one’s eyes open,* on the one hand, and reflecting on one’s own position(s) in the negotiation and discussion of heritage, on the other.

In sum: it is fruitful to ask ourselves how our reality and the reality conveyed by images or photos overlap—or not. It should be noted that the photo alone cannot be equated with mediated perception. Rather it is the duplication in social media that ensures an afterlife and enriches even modern ruins with some kind of beauty.

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