Authenticity in Ruins: Art Restoration, Architecture and Beautiful Decay

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In 1972, Laszlo Toth, an unemployed geologist, climbed onto Michelangelo's *Pietà*, grabbed a hammer from underneath his coat and smashed the sculpture 15 times. This attack left the Madonna without a nose and left arm, and with a chipped eyelid and veil. What were the Vatican Museums to do? Restore the statue as nearly as possible to its original appearance? Merely reattach the larger bits that fell off, leaving the Madonna irrevocably scarred? Or just sweep away the rubble, keeping the post-attack statue as is? Our answers to these questions tell us something important about our thoughts on authenticity in creative works and the best way to maintain it.

While concepts of authenticity are difficult to define regarding art, they become further complicated with works of architecture. If forced to choose, does a building's authenticity lie most in the architect's design or in the physical structure once erected, exposed to the world and changed over time? Our fascination with modern architectural ruins seems quite different from our aesthetic appreciation of the *Pietà*, throwing this question into sharp relief. "Ruin porn" is increasingly popular, but those ruins neither conform to the plans of the architect nor the final building once constructed. This leads us to the following question: Can the same concept of authenticity be applied to artworks, buildings and ruins? According to philosopher Mark Sagoff, there are two major theories about art restoration, which in turn inform different conceptions of authenticity (see "On Restoring and Reproducing Art," *The Journal of Philosophy*). The first is integral restoration, in which the restorer adheres to the sculptor's plan rather than the strict preservation of original materials. Those who favor integral restoration believe authenticity lies in the intent of the artist. The real work of art is what it "looks like" as soon as the artist lifts her brush/chisel/etc. Under integral restoration, the post-attack *Pietà* would be repaired to be visually identical to the pre-attack *Pietà*. The second is pure restoration, in which the restorationist

reattaches to the art any bits that may have fallen off and cleans off grime but does not add any nonoriginal materials. The pure restorationist believes that authenticity lies in the art's original materials, which exist throughout time, and that adding new materials papers over the object's history. A pure restoration would leave the *Pietà* partially fixed, but the sculpture would show its scars. (The Vatican Museums did restore the *Pietà*, and it is now virtually impossible to see the past damage with the naked eye. But in order to achieve this, the restorationists introduced materials that Michelangelo never touched, sacrificing a piece of the object's history.)

Applied to fine art, a restoration approach that prioritizes the original look of the art over its original materials may feel intuitive. Are art restoration practices and concepts also germane to architecture and its ruins, and modern ruins in particular?
In recent years, photographers, photojournalists and tourists have flocked to "modern" or "industrial" ruins, such as those in Detroit. The resulting photographs have been labeled "ruin porn," a moniker that describes both the allure of the decaying building and the moral repugnance of possible exploitation. One such ruin is the United Artist Theater, the once grand "movie palace" turned ruin porn darling. The puzzle ruins present—and modern ruins in particular—is that the structures seem more aesthetically valued in their ruinated state. This seems at odds with our intuitions about fine art, which tend toward a desire to preserve the art's original visual form.

With this in mind, the question remains: How would one "restore" a ruin? How might it differ from preserving other types of historic architecture, and what effect would restoration efforts have on a ruin's authenticity? I would suggest that an architectural ruin is a discrete object from its former life as a building. Consequently, for example, the United Artist Theater and the United Artist Theater–

Ruin are distinct objects. For the theater, it might be appropriate to employ integral restoration, focusing on upholding the architect's original intent for the design over the original materials. We want buildings to be functional; if a chandelier falls down, we might replace it with one that is identical in look but made from nonoriginal materials.

On the other hand, in the case of the United Artist Theater–Ruin, we are attracted not to its functionality as a theater but its beautiful decay as a ruin. We enjoy seeing nature encroach on the man-made; it reveals important insights about our culture and ourselves. As objects that are in the process of disintegration, ruins give us a window into the past, present and future. We reimagine their former glory, engage with the decay before us and project what the ruin will look like as time continues. Ruins provide us with powerful experiences of memento mori and the sublime; American modern ruins incite our worries about the flaws of capitalism and the impermanence of our exalted status in the world.

If we see decay as a defining characteristic of ruins, and we have good reasons to respect their aesthetic integrity, we ought to allow a ruin to ruinate. Paradoxically then, perhaps in order to "preserve" the special aesthetic value of a ruin and uphold its authenticity, we must allow it to continue to break down. Maybe the authenticity of ruins lies in neither integral nor pure restoration solutions, which stipulate action be taken, in varying degrees, to bring an object back to an earlier state. Rather, to preserve a ruin's authenticity, we might not be able to do anything, because to interrupt or stop the ongoing action of decay would be to destroy something central to the ruin itself.

I acknowledge that this may be unrealistic (and perhaps undesirable): city planners must balance aesthetic concerns with historic preservation, economic development and ethical concerns

that arise from tourism. Ruin appreciation (of the ancient sort) has been inextricably wed to tourism since the days of the grand tour. Similarly, Detroit's modern ruins have attracted photographers and photojournalists; as a consequence, unofficial and official ruin tours, which aim to provide opportunities for photographs, have become increasingly popular. Historic preservation has obvious implications for tourism. How, and when, do we limit access to the site to prevent damage? Should historic buildings be preserved as something static or as part of a living culture? As with historic buildings, incorporating ruins into landscape design and city planning is nothing new, from the use of follies in 18th-century English garden design to modern-day public spaces, such as Richard Haag's Gas Works Park in Seattle.

What can we take away from this brief discussion of art restoration, architecture and ruins? Perhaps that authenticity is not a static concept that can be applied universally to all objects but one that is bound to reflect the shifting practices of different creative disciplines.

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