

The Cape Romano Dome Home: Urban Exploration and the aesthetic allure of abandoned places

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I/ INTRODUCTION

In this case study I will discuss the aesthetic allure of abandoned places, specifically what I'll call ‘doomed’ architecture (or buildings that will not be repaired). This shouldn't seem unfamiliar to us: urban exploration (UE) is a popular pastime. Urban explorers often choose abandoned man-made structures to climb, spelunk, cave, or otherwise traverse. Popular UE sites include abandoned malls, disused subway tunnels, old zoos (e.g., Griffith Park Zoo in Los Angeles), and closed amusement parks (e.g., Six Flags New Orleans). Unlike other types of tourism, UE is dangerous - both legally and physically. Urban exploration often involves trespassing, courting legal troubles. Additionally, these structures are often unstable, leading to injury and in some cases death. The purpose of these explorations is twofold: the enjoyment of the trek and/or the capturing of the trek/structure on video or film. Both of these purposes are pursued - in part - for their aesthetic qualities.

In this paper, I will focus on one such abandoned place, the Cape Romano Dome House in South Florida. The Dome House's aesthetic has been described as something out of Star Wars, resembling a “giant jellyfish” or looking like the “scrubbing bubbles from the toilet cleaning commercial” (Mott 2013). Rising out of the Gulf of Mexico, it's perched 300 feet off the shore of Cape Romano Island, just south of Marco Island, Florida (part of what are referred to as the “Ten Thousand Islands”). This quirky bubble-like vacation home was designed and erected by oil magnate Bob Lee. Abandoned only a few years after its construction, it was sold several times in hopes that it would be repaired, only to have the state claim the property in 2017. When built, it was considered a cutting-edge eco-friendly design. The Dome House was designed to withstand hurricane-force winds but proved overly susceptible to island erosion. While the walls survived numerous hurricanes, the ground was taken beneath its feet. The Dome House has not been habitable for quite some time and the island cannot be docked, making it a difficult (and therefore alluring) place to visit.

In what follows I'll provide a brief history of the site before turning to a variety of topics on why we find these sites so alluring: their architecture, historical value, genuineness, and the proprioceptive experience of the journey. I will then turn to a discussion of the site as a contemporary ruin, focusing on the aesthetic importance of ruination.

II/ HISTORY OF THE DOME

In 1980, Bob Lee began constructing the Dome House based on a full-scale model he erected at his home in Tennessee. Comprising 2,400 square feet of living space, the Dome House boasts three bedrooms and three bathrooms. Lee knew it was a gamble to build a house on an island in a hurricane-prone part of the world. Round roofs were designed to help with wind resistance. The house was designed to be self-sustaining, running off solar power and using a water run-off system for all non-potable water in the house. An impressive 23,000-gallon cistern sits under the

center dome to capture run-off water. Between the solar panels and water system, the house was self-sustaining with several backup generators employed for rare cloudy days (Lusk 2016).

Lee sold the house only two years after its completion (1984) but repossessed it in 1987 to use as his family's primary residence. Hurricane Andrew hit in 1992 and while it did not damage the integrity of the structure, the high winds blew out the windows, causing considerable water damage inside the house. The property was abandoned later that same year.

The bubble walls of the domes remained standing but, by 2004, saltwater had eroded the concrete pillars that held up the entire structure. Sold again in 2005, the new owner – Jon Tosto – was advised to build a seawall to avoid erosion. Instead, Tosto chose to move the house to higher ground. But a few months after Tosto purchased the dome, Hurricane Wilma struck, destabilizing the foundation. In 2007 the Collier County Code Enforcement Board deemed the structure unsafe and ordered it demolished. Tosto resisted and was fined \$187,000 for not tearing it down. By 2013, the house was not only abandoned but sitting in 6 feet of water. In 2017, Hurricane Irma decimated the westernmost dome. Tosto finally had enough and asked the state to sink the house to turn it into an artificial reef. But this drew backlash from locals, who consider the Dome House a local landmark. The campaign to turn it into a reef failed to reach its goal of raising \$2.2 million dollars. By 2018, the Dome House was transferred to the state. They have yet to sink the domes.

The Dome House is now a popular tourist site. Local fishing and wildlife tours advertise that you can see the bizarre structure on their tours. People still attempt to traverse the un-dockable island, as evidenced by the graffiti on the site (and videos posted on the internet).

III/ WHY THE DOME IS A GOOD CASE STUDY

Why do I think this makes such a compelling case study? First, it's a quirky, interesting-looking home. Even in its architectural prime, it would have attracted attention. Unconventional architecture is always a draw. The Dome House has multiple architectural values. Aesthetic engagement based on architectural value is not solely visual. In her seminal essay "On Being Moved by Architecture," Jenifer Robinson says, "We need to look at a work of architecture, of course, but we also have to move through the building, hear how it reverberates, smell its atmosphere, touch and maybe even taste its surfaces" (Robinson 2012: 337). Appreciating architecture is a multisensory experience. We touch the sides of the building, listen to the acoustics, and smell the air. The Dome House invites us to do exactly all of this. We want to touch its curved sides and listen to the waves lapping against the walls, smell the sea air wafting in the windows. Pictures only get us so far - they may help us imagine this experience - but there is nothing like being there.

Most sites urban explorers visit have architectural value, especially those buildings that might have been taken for granted in the architectural prime. Think about the exploration and pictures of abandoned American malls from the 1980s. Speaking as someone who visited these structures in the 1980s, when they first opened, they appeared magnificently large or (sometimes) horribly tacky; most were just boringly generic enough to be part of the wallpaper of our lives. Now, seeing them in their current state, their emptiness reveals grandeur, and the decay reminds us of their previous shininess. The hustle and bustle of the food court is replaced with an eerie calm.

An oil magnate's opulent second home was replaced with the scurrying of lizards and the stench of rotting sea creatures. Seeing these sites devoid of people helps us focus on the architectural beauty we might have missed when they were in use. Their new context reveals intriguing aesthetic features that were always there but overlooked.

Besides architectural value, we might think the Dome House has historical value. Not to be confused with historical importance: an artifact can be valued for its history without being historically important. For the Dome House, we might value the particular history the structure has, without thinking it is historically important. Here it is significant that the structure is being overtaken by the sea - its history is one of futile resistance against this powerful force. Its history also involves the fact that it was made by a man who believed he could best nature - he could create a home precariously perched in the middle of the ocean that could withstand high winds and battering water. You might ask, what does historic value have to do with my aesthetic experience? Can't I appreciate a site's history without thinking that history impacts my aesthetic experience?

In her book *Things: In Touch with The Past*, Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that historic value adds a positive aesthetic valence. The connection she makes is with the value of genuineness. Genuineness, she believes, is (in principle) unperceivable yet impacts our perception of the object. When we stand on the ground of real places or touch real things, we are part of a temporal causal chain that includes those who created the object, or those who lived with it in the past. Korsmeyer calls this 'The Transitivity of Touch.' Reaching through time she believes that, 'the phenomenal character of such encounters is...a shiver, a thrill, a poignant acknowledgment, a small dose of awe in the presence of the real thing' (Korsmeyer 2019: 28). You might ask, why should I care if I'm in the "real place" where an oil magnate built a bizarre summer home? An object need not be especially historically important or culturally significant for genuineness to matter. It matters to us that this site is real and has a particular history throughout time. Take a counterfactual example: Urban exploration of a fake mall ruin seems...well, really sad. We wouldn't spend our time to trek out somewhere, risking legal and physical danger, for a site that had been recreated especially for our exploration. Being in the presence of the real thing matters.

This sense of genuineness adds something to the aesthetic experience of the trek. We are on a mission to go somewhere with historic value - a real place. If all we cared about was graffiti on some building or having a perilous boating trip, we could do this anywhere. It matters that we negotiate the sea *here*, to land on this little island with this particular bizarre structure. Some of the allure of venturing to the Dome House is its peril and difficulty. The danger may heighten our senses or make us extra aware of our surroundings. The trek also adds to the multisensory nature of the experience, namely the importance not only of being there but of proprioception.

Proprioception is the sense of our bodies moving in space; it tells us where our limbs are at any given moment. In trekking to these sites, we move our bodies in unusual, difficult, or out-of-the-ordinary ways all the while still enjoying the other feasts for the senses that the trek provides. When we're on a trek we move our body through space in new ways. Some of these ways may be perilous - paddling through the choppy water while keeping our eyes on the horizon of domes ahead of us - or swimming out to the site looking and feeling for purchase onto the shore. In her article "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense" Barbara Montero argues,

“Proprioception...enables one to perceive aesthetic qualities of one’s own bodily movements” (Montero 2006: 240). So UE is not only about the site but how our body feels while going there. Not all aesthetic experiences can boast this connection to proprioceptive awareness - arguably going to a museum to see 2-D artworks lacks this dimension, and so do many (seated) concerts. Our engagement with architecture certainly includes proprioceptive awareness, but UE adds dimensions to this experience, engaging this “sixth sense.”

It isn’t just our trek to the destination that provides us with opportunities to move our bodies but the destination itself. When engaging with contemporary ruins, a term I will use for the Cape Romano Dome House, the site itself - being unstable - provides us with interesting opportunities to exercise our sense of proprioception.

IV/ RUINLUST

So far, I have discussed how our engagement with the Dome House importantly involves proprioception, genuineness, historical value, and architectural value. I’d now like to turn to the topic of contemporary ruins. Why might I frame this experience under the lens of ruins? For one, the term for UE in Japan is *haikyo* (廃墟) or literally “ruins.” Ruins are curious objects of aesthetic appreciation. Ruins can be valued for historical reasons, archeological value, cultural value, and for their special aesthetic value. Importantly, I don’t think ruins (perhaps especially contemporary ruins) need to be historically, archaeologically, or culturally important to be aesthetically rich. One of the reasons ruins are such captivating objects of aesthetic attention is because they have a tripartite focus with one foot in the past, one in the present, and one in the future. Let’s apply this tripartite focus to our case at hand.

Ruins have a foot in the past. First, we might reconstruct the site in our mind, imagine what it once looked like in its architectural prime. But in imaging the ruin in the past, we think of both the architectural structure and the site. Seeing some vestiges of man on this island might recall other forays to this place. Cape Romano was named for British surveyor Bernand Roman, who sailed by the island in 1775.ⁱ The Ten Thousand Islands are known as a place where indigenous Americans encountered Spanish vessels. “Cape Romano has stood sandy sentinel to a sundry parade of people,” says Naples *Florida Weekly* (Mott 2013). The Calusa Indians, Spanish conquistadors, Cuban fishermen, pirates, and Bob Lee all occupied the land. Many of us as tourists visit sites we have antecedently very little interest in. Once being in the presence of “the real thing” we might then get interested in the history being presented. “Being there” generates interest in history; I might not be that interested if I had read it in a book or had seen a recreation in a museum. Perhaps we don’t travel to the Dome House for its history, but once we are in the presence of the ruin, our mind ruminates on its past.

If we think of contemporary ruins, we think of factories in Michigan, grain silos in the Midwest, shopping malls in suburbia - all structures that were no longer financially viable under late-stage capitalism. They’re seen as useless, left to decay. In this decay, the patina of age appears and this is something we find attractive. Aged-looking artifacts have a certain aesthetic resonance. This “age-value” is distinct from the historical value we discussed earlier. Famed art historian Alois Riegl distinguishes between age value and historical value: “Age value manifests itself immediately through visual perceptions and appeals directly to our emotions” (Riegl 1982: 33). Age value is worn on the sleeve or face of the object in question and requires no background

knowledge. Riegl believes that age value is inseparable from the affective impact that an object has on the viewer - it is immediate.

Besides spurring an interest in the actual history of the site, and the immediate aesthetic appeal of age-value, ruins decay may invoke a sense of mystery. Ruins are spooky sites where fantastic (often apocryphal) stories are told. The daughter of Bob Lee reminisces, “I can remember one time, we went to the drug store on Marco and some people in the row behind me were saying, ‘Have you been by those dome houses?’ And the other one said, ‘Yeah, but I hear they guard that with machine guns!’ Somehow it got a reputation of being a scary place” (Palmer 2021). Urban explorers often go places that boast of ghosts - adding to the mystique of a decaying mansion on the water. Just like the trek and potential perils heighten our senses, so do these false histories.

Ruins have one foot in the present. UE explores what is there - and what is often treacherous. The multisensory pleasure of architecture is heightened in a ruin since the ruins are only partially composed of the architectural artifact. In a ruin, we have a hybrid object, one where the artifactual (architectural element) and natural collide. This commingling of the natural and artifactual is a particularly interesting aesthetic focus - leading us to look closely at the ways Mother Nature has impacted man’s contribution to the environment. In this case, we see where the saltwater has eroded the foundation, causing some of the domes to crash into the sea. When we walk around the island, our bodies are aware that the ground beneath us is uneven and unfriendly. The clash between nature and man results in perilous terrain - and this is part of the fun. The danger of the trek is also part of the pleasure. With the Dome House, we have an additional element of the water. We literally must traverse land and sea to experience all the domes have to offer - under and over water. When urban explorers or bloggers write of the domes, their tales always come with warnings. One such warning: “Author’s note: In case [my blog] entices anyone to snorkel or dive this beautiful site, beware of strong currents, tangles of fishing line wrapped around pilings and giant stingrays buried in the sand” (Mott 2013). With the Dome House, the perils of the architectural site are heightened by the perils of the water.

Ruins have one foot in the future. When we look at a ruin, we know it is an object in transition. Ruins are in time - they’re in the process of decay. When we look at them, we see not only the past and the present but also the future. Just as we might reimagine what the site and the house looked like in the past, it is natural to think what it will look like in the future. The Dome House is all but certain to succumb to the sea. And this is one reason people feel the pull of this - and other - ruins. As objects in transition, we are made aware of the fact that landscapes change; all artifacts will die. Many contemporary American ruins were once grand places that are now at the end of their lifespan. It would have been difficult to imagine the ruination of grand palaces, huge mega-malls and large industrial factories after they were first made. They were bustling centers, filled with people and life. Today they may still team with life, but humans have been replaced with flora and fauna. This cycle of mother nature taking over the hand of man, the realization of puniness of one’s own existence, is aesthetically powerful. This has been called the Ozymandias Effect, after the Percy Bysshe Shelley poem of the same name (“Ozymandias”):

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

All artifacts will ultimately be bested by Mother Nature, no matter how grand they once were. With the Dome House, we had a wealthy and powerful man with a forward-looking hurricane “proof” design who saw his construction turned into ruins mere years after its erection. It is natural to engage with a ruin by imagining its future. Where will it be? Where will I be? This can be a powerful *memento mori* - a reminder of your inevitable death. Like you, the ruins will cease to exist - making the urgency of seeing them more profound. And, since ruins are objects in the process of decay - objects in transition - every time you visit them you’re bound to see/hear/smell something different. Just like human bodies, no matter how many restorations or facelifts, their aesthetics change with the seasons.

V/ CONCLUSIONS

I hope I have given you some reasons to believe that abandoned sites are places of rich aesthetic exploration. Using our example of the Dome House, I argued that the structure provides us with architectural aesthetic value. Additionally, its historic value, undergirded by its genuineness, gives us the aesthetic thrill of “being there.” Further, the trek to these sites provides us with opportunities to exercise our “sixth sense,” proprioception. The fact that these sites are dangerous to visit might heighten these aesthetic experiences. These ruins provide multiple avenues for aesthetic exploration by allowing us to imagine the past, engage in multisensory experiences in the present, and engross us by asking us to imagine the future. In imagining the future of the site, we imagine our own future. We might imagine the future of ourselves, but also of our culture or society. What does it mean that so many great buildings have fallen, not to be rebuilt in one of the richest countries in the world? What will be lost to future generations? We visit these sites because we want to bear witness to their strangeness and their beauty, and perhaps because we want to reflect on our own strange beauty. I hope this short article has inspired some ruinlust in you - keep exploring!

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ⁱ Before Roman, historians believe Juan Ponce de Leon visited the island in 1513 and have evidence the island was mapped by Freducci in 1515.