

NOSTALGIA: RUINS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

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Abstract— Nostalgia addressed from its commercialization in postmodernity from memory and ruins by the mass media with the apparent intention of instilling fear of oblivion and amnesia. The method that seems to be implemented for such purposes is the promotion of a strong feeling of melancholy for a past whose idea-they promised a better future; bringing as a more probable consequence a present with an uncertain future and strong conflicts with memory, the temporality and the value of authenticity.

Keywords— Nostalgia, memory, forgetfulness, ruin, postmodernity.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article will develop as main theme the melancholic feeling for the past time typical of modernity and that has been inherited in postmodernity, which in many cases is accompanied by the conception that all past times were better, and has acquired a great relevance in the conception of Collective Memory in today's society and its impact in our relationship with the ruins.

As the basis for the whole essay, first will be analyzed some stances regarding building heritage and therefore regarding ruin from the perspective of Viollet-le-Duc Ruskin,

Camilo Boito, Venice and Nara Charters and the concept of *Permanence* of Rossi to later analyze some of Huyssen's positions regarding memory, nostalgia and ruin, " *The architectural ruin is an example of the indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires that trigger nostalgia. In the body of the ruin the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia.* " (Huyssen, *The Nostalgia for Ruins*, 2006) [1]. The intention is to be able to develop each of these topics in order to finally contrast them with the nowadays situation.



Image1. Temporalities.

II. DEVELOPMENT

A. Preservation

The stage taken in this essay as modernity is comprised from the second half of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, after the industrial revolution cities mutated significantly at the same time new urban problems appeared and subsequently the theoretical and practical solution for what is called in this text as the modernity of cities. Once the temporal starting point and context are clarified, it is precisely during modernity that the discussion about monuments, ruins, their authenticity and different proposals on how and when to intervene began.

In the early modernity came out the contrasting positions of Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin, about which approach should be taken into account to analyze and intervene Classical, Medieval and Renaissance buildings; on one side Viollet-le-Duc is strongly focused on the total restoration of buildings

erasing any trace of the passage of time, leaving the works as they were initially, *"Both the word and the thing are modern. To restore an edifice means neither to maintain it, nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to reestablish it in a finished state, which many in fact never have actually existed at any given time"* (Viollet-le-Duc, 1858) [2]; on the other hand there is Ruskin who criticizes the "constructive activity of his time, which irrationally turns to the past with nostalgia, nourishes in short the preconception of the decadence of modern art" Ruskin proposes *"to conserve the architecture of the past as the most precious inheritance. The preservation of ancient buildings does not mean, according to him, restoration. In clear polemic with the reconstructive restorations that since Viollet-le-Duc were being carried out in France, Ruskin declares that restoration is the worst form of construction...Take care of your monuments and it will not be*

necessary to restore them". (Fusco, 1976) [3].

In contrast to Le-Duc and Ruskin, Boito proposes maintenance and preservation as the keys: *"when the need to restore a building is demonstrated, it must be consolidated before being repaired and be repaired rather than restored, avoiding renovations and additions"* (Boito, in Rivera Blanco, 2001) [4].

In Boito can be understood the value of *palimpsests* *"in an old monument the added part must be conserved provided that it has artistic, archaeological or historical importance, although secondary, even at the cost of hiding something [...] Not always must the oldest part, even if it is the most venerable and most important one, prevail over the added part, which can have an intrinsic and absolute beauty. In that case beauty can overtake antiquity."* (Boito, 1893) [5], *Palimpsest* will be addressed in greater depth later.

Continuing in a similar vein during the 20th century, three charters were published on the subject. The Athens Charter (1931) states *"In the case of ruins, scrupulous conservation is necessary, and steps should be taken to reinstate any original fragments that may be recovered (anastylosis), whenever this is possible; the new materials used for this purpose should in all cases be recognizable."* [6] Giving a general but clear guideline about should be the approach to the ruins. The Venice Charter (1964) *"The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event."* [7] where the novelty lay in the understanding of the context and the role that monuments can play in cities. And during the postmodernity the Nara Document on Authenticity (1993) *"Authenticity, considered in this way and affirmed in the Charter of Venice, appears as the essential*

qualifying factor concerning values. The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories.” [8]

These statements are going will feed into the approach and actions that can be taken on the ruins,

excepting the idea that *“It is necessary to do the impossible, it is necessary to perform miracles to conserve the monument’s ancient artistic and picturesque aspect.”* (Boito, 1893) [9]. It is valid only when is avoided the promotion of unbridled restorations that only generate fake historic architecture and increase the feeling of melancholy for the architecture of the past, and goes against an adequate construction of memory.



Image 2. Collective Memory.

B. Memory

The way we face personal and collective memories, are inevitably influenced by the effects and outcomes developed via the postmodernity progress, also over the way we mainly communicate through the currently media technological developments and over the perception of temporality generated on us.

Once postmodernity began, was developed an obsession for the past, for all those ideals were born in modernity and that promised a better future. *"Our dissatisfaction arises rather from an overload of information and perception, combined with a cultural acceleration that neither our psyche nor our senses are prepared to face. The faster we are pushed towards an uncertain future that does not inspire confidence, the stronger the desire to slow down and the more we turn to memory for consolation"* (Huyssen, 2002) [10]. However, as Huyssen stated, although our

capacity to store more and more information in virtual databases has increased, on the other hand our capacity to generate "active memories" is almost nil. Both personal and collective memory mutate over time, affected by traumas, fears, by the persecution they suffer from oblivion.

When talking about memory, oblivion comes up immediately in the discussion. The position that oblivion has had in postmodernity is that of an opponent and incompatibility with memory. I think there is a desperation to keep memory intact and truthful, which generates repudiation and fear to forget. However, the relationship between memory and oblivion should not be based on an antagonism but rather on a theory of opposites that complement each other and are necessary for each's existence. *"Does not all memory inevitably depend on both distance and forgetting, the very factors that subvert its much-desired stability*

and reliability and at the same time are essential to the vitality of memory itself?" (Huyssen, 2002) [11].



Image 3. Ruin.

Therefore, what guarantees collective memory are not the monuments, nor the buildings, as such; but the rites and the relationship that people generate among themselves and with the city. *"The city itself is the collective memory of the people; and as memory is linked to facts and places, the city is the locus (relationship between a certain local situation and the constructions of the place) of collective memory"* (Rossi, 1982) [12] therefore the ruin can be understood under the concept of locus raised by Rossi based on Augé who says *"The ruins exist by the effect of the look that we direct to*

them (...) what is perceived in them is a kind of time outside history to which the individual who contemplates them is sensitive, (...) To contemplate ruins is not to make a journey in history but to live the experience of time, of pure time." (MarcAugé, 2003) [13].

Also, in Rossi can be identified two types of permanence of the urban artifacts: *"on the one hand, they can be considered as propelling elements; on the other, as pathological elements. Artifacts either enable us to understand the city in its totality, or they appear as a series of isolated elements that we can link only tenuously to an urban system. In large measure the pathological form is identifiable because of a particular context, since context itself can be seen either as the persistence of a function over time or as something isolated from the urban structure, that is, as something which stands outside of technological and social evolution."* In that order of ideas, the

ruins are can be urban artifacts with propelling or pathological permanences not only because of their form, but on the relation with of their form within the form of the city and the resulting values.

The type of permanence will determine whether an urban artifact may be susceptible to being preserved, restored or destroyed, however, despite a pathological permeance almost all of them are preserved due to the nostalgic obsession of modernity. Not necessarily an affectation made on ruin will bring a positive impact or

generate a propelling permanence on the collective memory of the city.



Image 4. Palimpsest.

C. The Ruins.

In order to approach the theme of nostalgia beyond the memory and the theoretical positions of early modernity, it is essential to have ruin as one of the central focuses of the issue, since ruins are the most tangible elements where nostalgia for early modernity is evidenced.

Within the discourse of the ruin an important element arises and it is the categorization of authenticity that is sought in a generalized way in contemporaneity and to which the ruin is no stranger; but is actually there an authentic ruin? This question is important because, the current tendency to be authentic, and to preserve authentic ruins is analogous to our desire to find in the ruins of the past a relief from our dissatisfaction with the present, only generating more inauthenticity and more nostalgia. *"Authentic ruins," as they still existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seem no longer to have a place in late capitalism's commodity and*

memory culture. As commodities, things in general don't age well. They become obsolete, are thrown out or recycled. Buildings are torn down or restored. The chance for things to age and to become ruin has diminished in the age of turbo capitalism, ironically in step with the continuing rise in the average age of the populace. The ruin of the twenty-first century is either detritus or restored age. In the latter case, real age has been eliminated by a reverse face-lifting. The new is made to look old rather than the old made to look young." (Huyssen, *The Nostalgia for Ruins*, 2006) [14].



Image 5. Memento Mori.

While this approach to ruins is now commonly accepted, it is a very new trend that began with modernity. *"Modernist architecture refuses the return of culture to nature. (...) The age of the "authentic ruin," at any rate, is over; its genealogy can be written, but it cannot be resurrected. The present is an age of preservation, restoration, and authentic remakes, all of which cancel out the idea of the authentic ruin that has itself become historical."* [15]

For Huyssen's *"Modernist architecture refuses the return of culture to nature."* It is very clear that the ruins under the concept of *Piranesi's Ruins* are death and It largely succeeds in synthesizing the criticism that this essay attempts to make to the mass media currently trends and of what he calls "turbo-capitalism", which have distorted the essence of the ruins using nostalgia as a *slogan*, taking advantage of the postmodern discontent with the present and with an unpromising

future, turning them into a product that can be sold, that is created in a false way and that tries to fill the "voids" of collective memory of society as a method of survival against oblivion. Nowadays, new things looking old seems to be socially accepted; it is a historical moment that does not have its own fashion, but rather the fashion is to recover those of the past, however, is not generated a palimpsest of the different temporalities that can be read on the ruins as documents that, although inevitably unstable, become part of the collective memory. The ruins are forced to show only the desired past time and not the real effects of time on them.

However, I differ with Huyseen since I think that although the Pirannesi Ruins are dead, in postmodernity there is room for a new interpretation of the ruins, which also opposes corporate neoliberalism but finds in urban acupuncture and in the Third Generation City an opportunity for

the construction of collective memory.

The ideas of Casagrande and his Ruin Academy about the third-generation city are a very good example of this approach. *“The 3G city is an organic matrix of nature mixed with human construction. The balance of dominating the no-man's land is ever changing. Local Knowledge knows this. It is light on the surface but with solid roots. A city sweating humanity and constantly wiping the sweat away. The architectural control is in a process of giving up in order to let nature to step in. So far it is not giving up - it is too lazy. Architectural control will be given up. Modernism is lost and the industrial machine will become organic.”* [16]

D. Memorialization

It is important not to overlook this topic in the discourse on nostalgia, collective memory and ruins, it will not be analyzed in great depth, but only some ideas and positions will be given in this regard.

The contemporary obsession of selling false ruins that has just been mentioned, what intends is to sell fear of amnesia and forgetting, and as a magic medicine it demands what Huyssen calls *memorialization* *"trauma is marketed to the same degree as amusement and not even for such different consumers. It is also easy to suggest that the specters of the past that haunt modern societies with, hitherto,*

unknown force, would actually be articulating, by displacement way, a growing fear to the future at a time when the own faith in modernity's progress is shaken" (Huyssen, 2002) [17]. This is reflected in the different mass media such as movies, television series, books, songs, etc.

In addition to the unbridled commodification of memory, there is an inadequate need to create museums to increasingly save a memory that, due to its levels of excess, could easily generate the opposite effect by producing greater amnesia. Bearing in mind that societies are required to guard memories that they never lived, that are not part of their local history.

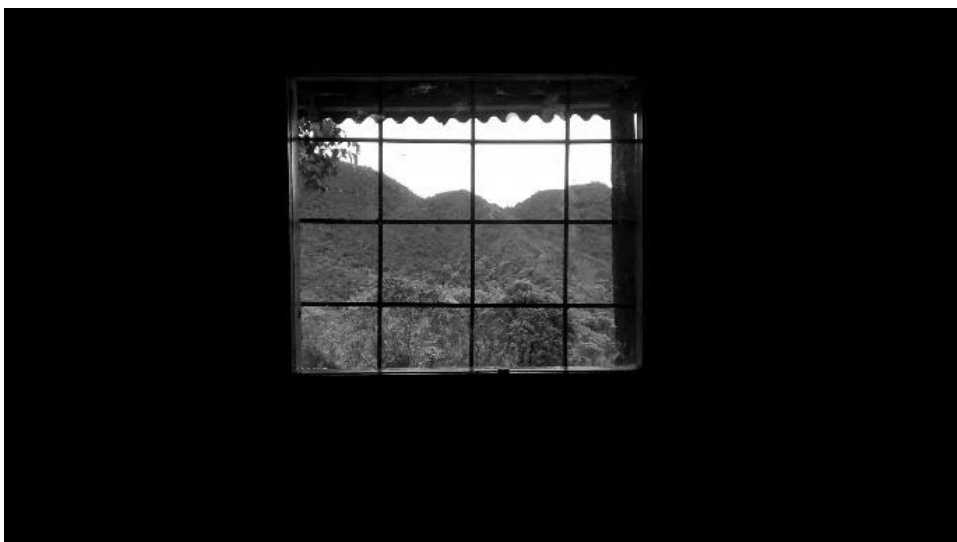


Image 6. The Past.

E. Palimpsests

The Zsámbek Church Ruins dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries, first damage during the Turkish wars and later by an earthquake. Restored by Istvan Müller in 1889 whom due to lack of money did not rebuild the church but used additions only to the extent that was statically necessary and spent most of the construction costs on strengthening the soil, i.e. on things that are not visible. After that another intervention was made *“A large brick addition was added to the ruin, mainly citing static reasons, also to wall up a snail shell that was avoided in its foundations (...) the designer's failure was caused by the fact that the architect did not recognize that the real monument in Zsámbék is not the church ruins, but the Müller restoration to another ruin.”* Román (2004) [18]

This situation allows us to introduce the new type of conception of the ruins, *the palimpsest ruins*, where the return to the nature of the ruins is

not only due to the abandonment to the external climatic conditions, but to action of the humankind participating in this process. The accumulation of interventions through time (*propelling permanence*) generated by local knowledge finds in the ruin the perfect canvas to generate collective memory. In this case, for postmodernity it should not be important the authenticity of the ruin itself, but the capacity of the ruin to generate authentic palimpsests.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This short essay, beyond generating determinations and thesis about the protection or restoration of monuments and ruins, in fact produces a series of interrogations about nostalgia and each of its sub-themes. Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight the main ideas that are exposed throughout the text with the intention to produce an extract and also to try to give some clues on how to revert or counteract this phenomenon of nostalgia.

As Boito proposes, the conservation of the existing as a premise of action, avoiding restorations that produce fake historical architecture, is the first point that must be made clear, so that memory can be managed as well as possible, without expecting from it a fidelity that it cannot offer and linking it in a healthy way with oblivion, with the intention of finding the most appropriate way to reverse the commodification of memory from virtualization and false ruins,

promoting the generation of "active memories".

I believe that the synthesis reached in addressing each of these issues is that we must demand the generation of a memory lived from the smallest environments of societies that really has an impact at the local level and later at the global scale; as opposed to the excessive fake memory sold to us by "turbo-capitalism", because it is not lived by the communities and is not part of their historical journey. The communities themselves need and are able to acquire the ability to identify what should be remembered and what should be forgotten.

"And perhaps it is time to remember the future instead of worrying only about the future of memory" (Huyssen, 2002). [19]

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