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2013
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Reclaiming Ruins The New York State Inebriate Asylum and Other "Abandonedscapes" by A.D. Wheeler

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Binghamton University Art Museum



Yin and Yang
2013
Infused aluminum



The Reclaiming
2013
Infused aluminum

RECLAIMING RUINS

"I am fond of ruins and old buildings in general, not alone for their picturesque beauty, but for the various trains of thought they excite in the mind. Every ruin has its thousand histories; and, could the walls but speak, what tales would they not tell of those antique times to which age has given an airy interest, like the misty softness with which distance robes every far object!"

George Payne Rainsford James, *The Desultory Man* (1836), 43.¹

When the hero of G.P.R. James's novel *The Desultory Man* stumbles upon the medieval Château d'Arques during a journey through Normandy, he participates in a practice of ruin-gazing that was, by then, millennia old. Ancient travelogues document travelers' encounters with ruins and their similarly melodramatic responses. Since those early accounts, it has become a common trope for such sites to inspire reverie, offering viewers a chance to look backwards into a comfortingly vague, non-historical "past" and send their thoughts outwards in imaginative flight. These moments are chances for the mind to experience a kind of incorporeal freedom, to roam unfettered by the banal concerns of day-to-day life. As James's narrator says, "when I can let my imagination soar without restraint, I try to separate myself, as it were, from her, and view her, as I would a lark, rising and singing in the sky, and enjoy her very wanderings" (189).

This practice of looking backwards gained particular significance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moving contrapuntally with the rapid modernization of the built environment. As the taste for all things sublime and picturesque grew voracious, the act of ruin-gazing rapidly moved from an occasional amusement to a focused hobby. "Ruinophiles" passionately pursued the most famous ruined structures, often traveling great distances to stage encounters like the one described above. Some even constructed simulated ruins at their own homes, conveniently situated but no less exotic for that fact. Ruins, it seemed, offered more than just the opportunity for flights of fancy; more importantly, they offered an imaginative escape route from the present, and a romanticizing alternative to the troublingly new landscape of modernity.

"A heavy, black storm came sweeping upon the wind, and for a minute or two involved everything in mist and darkness, and then passed away, leaving behind a rich rainbow, and Nature more beautiful for her tears, and the sun shining out on the grey ruin, seeming to smile at the decay of man's fabrics, while the works of heaven remain unchanged and ever new."

James, *The Desultory Man*, 46.

But this romanticism was not so much anti-modern as it was concurrent with the project of modernity itself. And while the rhetoric of such flights of fancy may seem quaint, our age is not so different, with its lust for ruination and collapse in any form. On the small screen, news channels produce a steady and selective image stream of global disasters – the more cataclysmic, the better for ratings. On the big screen, southern California finally falls to the shifting of the San Andreas Fault, and the highrises of downtown Los Angeles topple majestically to the ground. Our appetite for patina, even if manufactured, is equally insatiable: in stores, consumers can buy "distressed" jeans and newly crafted "vintage" furniture, and studies show that the leisure activity of antiquing has recently enjoyed a boom among twenty-somethings in many countries, including the United States, China, and Japan. And, of course, we love our ruined buildings. Adherents of the newly trendy pursuit of urban exploration (or "urbex") seek out abandoned or crumbling structures as curiosities containing some sort of ancient wisdom. Like Keats's urn or James's château, what stories would they tell, could only they speak? Often, the specific story is not the point. Instead, the goal is scopophilia disguised as history. Rather than beauty, it is age and decay that claim to proffer truth.

"A ruin ought always to be separate from other buildings. Its beauties are not those which gain by contrast. The proximity of human habitations takes from its grandeur. It seems as if it leant on them for support in its age. But when it stands by itself in silence and in solitude, there is a dignity in its loneliness, and a majesty even in its decay."

James, *The Desultory Man*, 43.

Commonly known as the Castle on the Hill, or simply the Castle, the New York State Inebriate Asylum seems to afford just such an opportunity for this contemporary mode of ruin-gazing. Designed by the New York architect Isaac Perry (who was also responsible for many other commissions in downtown Binghamton, including the cast-iron "Perry Building," the Centenary Methodist Church, and the Phelps Mansion), it was completed in 1864 and opened as the first institution to treat alcoholism as a mental illness rather than as a social or moral disease. The building was the product of a zeal for reform that also proliferated asylums, poor houses, penitentiaries, and sanatoria. These structures, born of the fanaticism of the Enlightenment to identify and humanely eradicate the problems of human life, were also disciplinary mechanisms designed to track and isolate the disorderly units of society.²

The Castle is sited on a sprawling, 200-acre hilltop above the city of Binghamton, and it is no surprise that Perry chose the Gothic style for this highly visible building. In the 1860s, the Gothic Revival was very much en vogue, and the grandeur of medieval buildings seemed consistent with the solemn mission of these new public institutions.³ While tenancy in the Inebriate Asylum was usually voluntary, this

was not the case after 1881, when the building was renovated after a disastrous fire and reopened as the Binghamton Asylum for the Chronic Insane, later renamed the Binghamton State Hospital. During this phase of its life, Perry's building became notorious for the inhumane treatments performed on inmates, ranging from experimental lobotomies to a nineteenth-century form of waterboarding.⁴ Recent efforts have been made to excavate and document the lives of patients of the State Hospital and to look more closely at the history behind the building's magnificent façade.

"A few more years, and the Chateau d'Arques will be nothing. It is, however, still an interesting sight, and so many remembrances hang by it, that one is forced to dream. Memory is like the ivy, which clothes the old ruin with a verdure not its own."

James, *The Desultory Man*, 44.

A.D. Wheeler's evocative photographs of the Castle should be counted among those endeavors that look beyond the atmospheric air of memory that attends such sites to the particular histories that background them. Wheeler's larger project, a series he calls "abandon-scapes," is at once documentary and poetic, intended to draw attention to the circumstances of the collapse of these historic sites. His landscapes are usually devoid of human figures, yet teem with human presence. In one image of the Castle, an open toilet sits alone in a crumbling bathroom, a solitary stand-in for its past users enveloped in the almost celestial light filtering through the stained glass window behind it. In another, the fluid curve of a banister sweeps through the composition, but the eye is arrested by a punitive grid of chain link, inserted into the stairwell to guard against accidents after the building closed in 1993. Continually, Wheeler draws attention to the disciplinary elements found within these dazzling architectural settings.

Wheeler's approach to photographing abandoned sites has changed over time. When he began his work in 2009, he would often happen upon an interesting site by accident and shoot it quickly. Other times, the shoot would be planned, but without the knowledge of the property owner. In these cases, efficiency was crucial, lest he be caught by an irate landlord. One of his frequent props was a dog leash, so that he could claim to be searching for an errant pet. These days, he works with the cooperation of the owner of the site, thus allowing him to spend up to several days on location and to immerse himself more fully in the visual experience of the landscape. To listen to him describe his process is to enter a space where time stands still, or rather, is made to stand still, by way of the possibilities of photography. Wheeler uses High Dynamic Range photography (known as HDR), which combines multiple shots taken at several exposures into one composite image. This technology allows him to make the most of the very low levels of available light in many of the environments he shoots, but it also grants these images a feeling of repleteness. In Wheeler's photographs, the multiple temporalities that have characterized encounters with ruins for centuries are hauntingly captured at the level of technique.

"...the Government has, on more than one occasion, sanctioned this gradual sort of destruction. What remains of it has, I believe, been either sold or granted to some one in the town; but, however, a gate has been placed, and some other precautions taken, to prevent its further dilapidation."

James, *The Desultory Man*, 44.

Though Wheeler is often classified as an urban explorer, he resists this label—and with good reason. Urbexers frequently describe their mode of encounter as "infiltration" or sometimes "hacking," terms that suggest the violence of their interventions. Furthermore, they leave their mark, in a quite literal sense. Graffiti or other artistic installations (light shows and performances) are common in the urbex community. In contrast, Wheeler takes care not to disturb these environments, but to document them as found. He argues that while his photographs "spark your imagination," they also have a specific intention behind them, which is to advocate for the preservation and responsible use of historic sites.⁵ His method and technique are consciously romantic in their exploration of the aesthetics of decay and their desire to create a space for the activities of imagination, but he insists on rooting these structures in time and space. He views his practice as a form of activism, a ruin gaze that does not look backwards, but rather trains attention on the here and now.

JULIA WALKER, Assistant Professor of Art History

¹ George Payne Rainsford James, *The Desultory Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836).

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

³ For more on the relationship between Gothic Revival architecture and disciplinary regimes, see Anna Verner Andrzejewski, *Building Power: Architecture and Surveillance in Victorian America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008).

⁴ Michelle York, "Rescuing 'The Castle' from Some Dark Days, Architecturally and Medically," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2008, accessed August 11, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/nyregion/29castle.html?_r=0.

⁵ A.D. Wheeler, interview in *f11* (April 2013), 56.