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How Architectural Ruins Entice the Observers' Engagement: The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation

Rumiko Handa

During my recent trip to England, at a dinner at a friend's house, I met a violinmaker based in London. I mentioned that I had assigned my students to design a workshop and small performance space for a well-known American violinmaker, who at that time had a workshop in a small town in Nebraska, not far from where I teach. The London violinmaker told me he was organizing people to work on a museum dedicated to violin making. After telling us how he eventually will have a place to display and even to let visitors listen to some rare and old instruments, he turned to me and said, "Of course, the building is going to be astoundingly beautiful." There is certainly nothing wrong with an astoundingly beautiful building. However, this narrow focus on aesthetics, while having helped the profession gain elite status, has alienated the general public from architecture: Consider how small a portion of the world's built environment is being designed by architects. While it is frustrating that a cultivated person like this violinmaker failed to envision the museum building beyond as a beautiful container, architects have a moral responsibility to demonstrate the potential of architecture's physical and spatial attributes to contribute to the cultural and spiritual dimensions of human life. Because ruins are a case in which architecture directly engages visitors in profound experiences, I want to know what attributes and mechanisms, if any, are at work. Taking nineteenth-century Romanticism as the origin of the contemporary appreciation of ruins, I have examined selected works by two literary authors, William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott.

In Wordsworth's works, the architectural ruin is a recurring theme that relates to the loss of life. In "The Ruined Cottage" (1797) misfortune befalls a young couple, and the husband leaves home to join a troop of soldiers. The wife waits for his return in an increasingly wretched situation until she dies, and their cottage falls into ruin. The title character in "Michael" (1800) faces family misfortune and the loss of land, and decides to send his son Luke to the city so he will learn the merchant's trade and acquire sufficient wealth to regain the land. Before Luke's departure, Michael makes him lay the first stone of a sheep-hold as a covenant for his return. However, he disgraces himself in the city and disappears abroad. Michael dies of grief, and the incomplete...
building is left to decay. Wordsworth’s characterization of ruins – walls that are naked, broken, or overtaken by weeds and vines – reminds the reader of the human life that kept the building alive but which is now gone, and these ruins cause the poet and his reader to contemplate their infinitesimal existence within time’s continuum.

How we react to Wordsworth’s ruins supports Paul Ricoeur’s claim in “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in which the French philosopher rejects what had motivated Hans-Georg Gadamer to write *Truth and Method*; namely, the opposition between “alienating” distanciation and participatory belonging. For Ricoeur, distanciation is “positive and productive,” and an essential condition, not an obstacle, of interpretation. Distancing turns the interpretation from the act of obtaining original meaning hidden behind the text to the search of “the world of the text” in front, which “[the interpreter] could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities.” As such, the text is self-reflective of the interpreter. Architectural ruins promote “positive and productive” distanciation in at least three ways. First, like any other built objects, architectural ruins have autonomy from their original meaning. Second, the state of destruction and the growing vegetation signal to the viewer the distance of time without requiring any historical knowledge. Third, the fragmented remains of ornamentations and structural elements further emphasize the distance by giving a glimpse of their once-complete state, as in Scott’s historical novel, *Kenilworth: A Romance* (1821).

The story revolves around historical events in 1575 with three individuals: Queen Elizabeth; Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and the Queen’s favorite; and Amy Robsart, Dudley’s wife. Elizabeth visits Kenilworth Castle, where Dudley entertains her. Amy encounters the Queen but has to keep her marriage a secret so as not to impair her husband’s advancement at court. Dudley eventually orders Amy’s murder, suspecting her disloyalty to him. The novel had great...
Figure 2. Detail of figure 1.

Figure 4. Detail of figure 3.
appeal among general readers, popularized the Elizabethan age, and ushered in nationalism. Scott visited Kenilworth Castle in 1815. The Castle lay in a ruinous state after the slighting of the mid-seventeenth-century Civil Wars. Scott uses two modes of writing: that of a storyteller narrating the sixteenth-century events as though they currently are taking place, and that of an antiquarian historicizing the past from the nineteenth-century viewpoint. Alternating between these, Scott supplies the distance of time, sometimes restoring the building to the time of the events and other times depicting it in the state of ruin.

A number of ornamental and structural elements that remained in fragments engaged Scott in imagining the pristine state of the building. Describing the buildings surrounding the Castle’s inner court, Scott refers to “the armorial bearings” of those who occupied the castle before Leicester. He must have observed, on the wall above the entry opening immediately west of the Keep (figure 1), the remains of ornamental carvings, including a Tudor rose, a small pediment, and “70,” referring to the construction of 1570 (figure 2). Similarly, Scott mentions the “scutcheons,” of the Clintons from the time of Henry I and of Simon de Monfort from that of Henry III, on the outer wall. On the south-facing exterior wall of the State Apartment block (figure 3) is an abutment with dentils and other ornamental carvings (figure 4). Scott also describes the Great Hall as having a “highly-carved oaken roof.” While the roof completely had vanished by the nineteenth century (figure 5), large notches that had held hammer beams and some Gothic ornamentations remained on the topmost part of the surviving walls (figure 6), allowing Scott to imagine the splendid space magnificently decorated for the festivities.

This discussion has a wider application to architectural design that promotes visitors’ and inhabitants’ participation in culturally and spiritually fulfilling interpretation. While
Figure 5. Great Hall, Kenilworth Castle, John Britton, *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain*, 1835. Courtesy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.
the time-based distanciation is not available to the contemporaneous building-interpreter relationship, the architect still should design so that buildings' meaningfulness does not rely solely on the intended use, such as "the display of violinmaking." While the intentional destruction is harmful to the building and most often to the society, the architect should consider the positive roles of patina to encourage the visitors’ and inhabitants’ engagement without relying on their academic knowledge of the history. Finally, the synecdochic enticement of fragments needs more exploration as a possible way to engage the viewer in the interpretation of architecture.