

THIS SOLID MASS OF CONCRETE, THIS USELESS OBJECT...*

BY MIGUEL LEAL

In every building, there is the anticipation of the construction's eventual ruin. Inscribed in each project there is also the memory of a future ruin. Our cities – especially the dense and heterogeneous spaces they have become in the last two centuries – have served as laboratories for such an expectation, even more so from the moment in which the idea of architecture was seized by the voraciousness of consumerism and where the lifespan of a building, in purely economic terms, is presently estimated at about 25 years, with this end inaugurating a spiral of demolition-construction in which the cycles come one after the other in a syncopated rhythm. The economic dynamics of cities – or more precisely, the urban conglomerations that we still refer to by that name – is relentless. The life cycles of buildings coincide with the economic cycles that reconfigure the urban space, the industries, and the flow of people and goods. Contemporary ruins are the instant ruins of demolition**, and no longer the slow and idealized ruins of Romanticism, sculpted by time, but rather the lightning-quick ruin of fast-building.

At the same time, there is an aversion to the emptiness in cities and in those gestures which we associate with their construction. On par with other forgotten spaces, ruins, in their obsolescence and lack of usefulness, are the void that a certain idea of a city seeks to combat. Ruins are grey or dark blotches on the city map, zones that the jargon of economics says it wishes to renew, requalify and bring back into the market. Ideally, following the logic of the “instant ruins” made by demolition, such ruins would not be much more than a brief transit point between “the before” and “the after”.

But even so, and for a variety of reasons, there are always ways to escape from the whirlpool of fast-building, at times via the radical form in which it is not simply a building that is being abandoned but instead an entire neighbourhood or even an entire city. Without any new economic cycles on the horizon, or given how it is easier and cheaper to occupy new territories, ruins may come to represent, paradoxically speaking, a form of resistance to the capitalist logic of mercantilism, thus functioning as places that are out of place, useless spaces of resistance, and ones cast adrift.

Thus it is that these ruins, shortly after they have departed the world of the living – and enough time for them to become a forgotten asset, a ghostly space – take on a new dimension and are often occupied and re-appropriated as the territories of others in the mainstream, becoming transfigured themselves at the hands of whoever inhabits along the fringes. In their obsolescence, the ruins reveal themselves as a type of silent memory, one from a more or less recent past, mausoleums that are vacant, of no good use, or transformed into a “no man's land”, spaces whose time, for now, has expired, and with it, laws and place.

In the case of the photographs of Jiôn Kiim and Artur Leão, we speak of heavy ruins made of cement and iron, memories of a modern architecture that was aspiring to a certain functionality and efficacy of construction which has now been transformed into silent monuments, into solid masses of concrete, into useless objects. Pillaged, disembowelled and cleaned out of anything that might have immediate economic value, traversed by sections and tunnels that lead us to secret places, overrun by vegetation that has claimed a place for itself, modelled by the light which stubbornly pierces through the gaps – these are ruins that have put up resistance to the tempests of economic cycles, and at the same time, are testaments of them. Aided by the crisis afflicting an entire region, they defy the notion of having fallen suddenly into ruin and withstand utilitarianism's horror of the emptiness to which all buildings are condemned. These ruins are an oasis of freedom in the midst of the regulation of spaces and property. They are territories that, for the moment, have neither owner nor function, as they wait to be re-appropriated. They offer a glimpse of a time gone by, of another place, like those paths that take a bit of effort to climb, those without any specific destination or goal, along the fringes that the city offers within its very heart.

* Cf. Paul Virilio, em *Bunker archeology* (Paris, Galilée, 2008, p. 15): “[...] ce massif de béton incliné, cette chose sans valeur qui n'avait su m'intéresser jusqu'alors autrement que comme un vestige de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, autrement que comme l'illustration d'une histoire, celle de la guerre totale.” De facto há nesta história das ruínas uma marca indelével da guerra, de uma guerra que se faz por muitos meios.

** Cf. Dan Graham, “Gordon Matta Clark”, in, *Gordon Matta Clark*, Valencia, IVAM, 1993, pp. 211-215.