

The Modest Ruin and Hope

Traditionally, the end of a building's life is ruin; the final stage of decay and the transformation of its use mark the moment an building becomes an object. But, what if the cycle was to be reversed, and the origin of architecture's life begun in ruin, only to build itself up by people who hoped to improve their surroundings and through that, their life. Ruin has been a part of all cultures throughout history, and it is usually the monumental ruin that ascertains historical value; but there are others, if not as monumental in size, definitely equal in importance that describe the manners in which people who have been oppressed and silenced emerge from conditions of ruin and devastation through acts of hope expressed in their architecture.

As with many developing countries, Mexico is a clear example of a society divided in its economic power, leaving thousands of people in poverty; but through these terrible situations, the people of Mexico have developed a unique ideology based on hard work, patience, and above all, hope. The scenery of the poor sectors of Mexico City are condensed by hundreds of square miles of brick

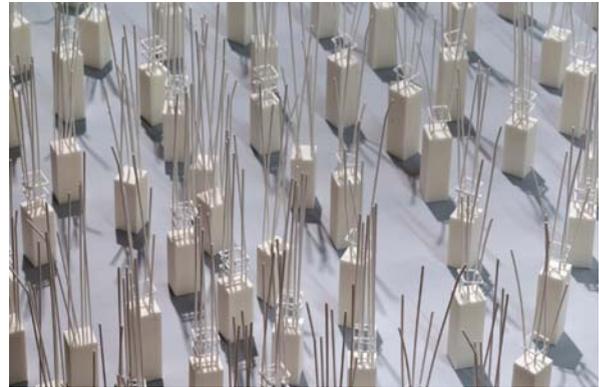
block shack constructions that seem to blur the line between ruin and “in progress” architecture. It is in these places, where a new urban typology came to be, the Varillas de Esperanza “Rebar of Hope” which is unfinished or abandoned construction columns. These columns have a poetic and witty reasoning behind them, where a family will build a first floor of a house and leave the exposed columns above in the hopes that there will be money in the future to build a second floor. However, the money for this addition to the house never seems to arrive and the columns are left, truncated and rusting as an eerie reminder of their daily circumstance; while at the same time it represents their desire for a better future. More often than not, these rods become an extension for a clothes line, or the poles for a makeshift volleyball net, the original function for the rods is put on hold and adapted for a new use. The second floor of the house becomes a ruin; it has lost all of its intended function and meaning in the present “but retains an unstable and semantic problem” (Hell 2010), it both ruin and progress.



Aerial view of a poor neighborhood in Mexico City

This tradition is represented all throughout Latin America and it is a clear example of the manners in which the people of these countries strive to claim a small piece of space for themselves. This idea of space driven by hope is so embedded into the cultural practice that it has too been represented in the art of its people. Manuela Ribandeneira, is an Ecuadorian artist whose work studies the rituals of appropriation of space. Through her work she aims to represent the idea that to plant rods and columns on the roof is a way of declaring a piece of the sky, therefore, literally conquering space (Ribandeneira 2013). The crucial aspect of this is that the gesture

of the action remains, even after the columns become ruins. She has gone to produce many series of sculptures, paintings and films centered solely on these questions: is this typology a construction in ruin? Or, ruins of construction? The dreams of these people might not become realized, as Claude Levi-Strauss said when he visited Sao Paulo in the 30's “here everything looks like it's under construction, but it's really in ruins” (Levi-Strauss 1994), but the hope remains.



Manuela Ribandeneira “Varillas de Esperanza” sculptures and stencils

The history of the favelas describes the same ideal of hoping for a better future through its architecture, yet the favelas do it at a much larger scale; it clusters a community of people within a single object “the favelas”, and exposes the overarching desire to no longer be within it. The origin of the Brazilian favelas dates back to the 1800's when soldiers returning to Rio de Janeiro from a war with the Canudos didn't have a place to live and were settled in the hills of the area and created a series of makeshift shacks. The area didn't really attract any attention until the time when the cities began to urbanize, and a flow of immigrants moved to the city in search of jobs; but having no money, they settled within the favelas. The rapid expansion of highly densified poverty became a cause for concern in the 1950's when the declining economic outlook prospect that thousands of people in Rio would fall into poverty and the favelas would begin to overtake a larger area than the city itself. The favelas were void of any services both sanitary and social, and the extreme living circumstance led to the favelas attaining a reputation for crime, disorder and disease. The people of the favelas lived in an ever increasing social and physical state of ruin, one that

state of ruin, one that had no precedent or history; instead, the hyper positioning of more ruin on top of ruin merged all of the small parts of the favelas into one single monumental object.



Panoramic view of the Favelas

The social and political circumstances of Rio have made it nearly impossible for the people within the favelas to escape the area since there is a heavy stigma about living in them, but the isolation of these people has reiterated their willingness to survive and their hope for a better life in the fact that the favelas have never stopped growing. Even though there have been many attempts to gentrify or destroy the areas, the people who are displaced bring the favelas along with them to the new settlements. Their social or economic circumstances may not have changed, but today, the people of the favelas are one of the most iconic representations of the culture. The favelas have been portrayed in music, art, film and photography around the world. The favelas might be an object of ruin, but the people within it have survived and continue to hope that maybe one day the favelas will not be the ruin of them and their surroundings, but rather just a past history.

The relationship between identity and ruin lives in a gradient of positive effects and oppression. Where one ruin can erase hope, another can be the cause of it. This is the basis of the architecture of free slaves in Jamaica and the American South. The scholar, Louis P. Nelson writes in his essay “The Architectures of Black Identity” (Nelson 2017) about the life of a black woman in Jamaica who

operates a bar and restaurant of the highway in a brightly colored and repurposed shipping container. This highly personalized container includes a kitchen for the restaurant, small dining area and a private bedroom; she bought the container directly from the supplier and is only one of hundred who do so. This living style allows her to move her entire home from land to land when the rent becomes too much, giving her a freedom rare to people in poverty. She found stability through unconventional versatility



Lanti Mito's "Food Fa Life" restaurant and home

In this essay, Nelson argues that this typology is the architectural counterpoint to architectural choices made two hundred years ago by the freed slaves; the board houses. During the 1800's, a very small minority of the population were free slaves, and their architecture is representation of that time and place, but it is also the means through which these people would use architecture to express themselves in a society that prohibited and oppressed their voices. The board houses were a perfect example of the creative appropriation and reuse of the limited available materials and technology. The early board houses adapted the English box-framing to solve pragmatic problems; since the free slaves were not allowed to own land, they made use of technique's ability to separate the house from its foundations, making it portable and transferable to different plots of land. The need for a small house created one of the first examples of indoor/outdoor homes where the public space would be defined by the outdoors (i.e. A tree's shade would become the living room) while the interior would be reserved for the private programs only.

As another example of their resourcefulness, the houses would be erected by scavenging for discarded or recycled materials on the land, such as fallen trees, or old aluminum sheet.



Adolphe Duperly "Falmouth Jamaica taken from the Church Tower"

These pragmatic and creative construction methods are resourceful solutions to very real economic, social, racial, and climatic problems. The free slaves had to maneuver through an environment marked by ruin -the ruin of their people, their culture, and their own lives- and their architecture an example in resilience of human hope and spirit to resist the oppression; from ruin, they built a whole culture once more.



Rear elevation of a Board House in Falmouth, Jamaica 2007

Ruin has a bipolar relationship to humanity; it is both the damaging action and the enactor of change. The ruin of architecture is depicted throughout history and in all cultures; it shows us the greatness of cultures past, but it is sometimes the modest ruins that tell us most about our history. For these modest ruins, this architecture describes a beginning, where there are only better circumstances to come; ruin is a motive to keep working to survive and hope for better things.

A symbol as simple as rebar can be the strongest representation of hope for thousands of people; while at the same time, the accumulation of ruin in the favelas could be the protesting voice that bring about betterment. Even the subtle gestures of calling a place yours, can detonate change for millions of enslaved people. In this essay I've outlined the lives of people who have lived in ruin, but who strived despite, and because of it, through strength of will and hope. They remind us to reach out and help others in worst circumstances than ours. A ruin is not an effect or a result of acts of aggression and decay; rather, ruin is the starting point. This is because ruin is a mode of change, not an end, and it is up to us and our society to ensure that the changes brought about by it lift each other up; at least, one can hope.

Work Cited

- Hell, Juila. *Ruins of Modernity*. Michigan: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Saudades do Brasil*. Paris: Plon, 1994.
- Nelson, Louis P. *The Architecture of Black Identity Buildings, Slavery, and Freedom in the Caribbean and the American South*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Ribadeneira, Manuela. *Varillas de Esperanza*. Casa Triangulo, New York.
- University, Brown. «Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Past and Present.» 2015. <https://library.brown.edu/create/fivecenturiesofchange/chapters/chapter-9/favelas-in-rio-de-janeiro-past-and-present/>.