



My Life is in Ruins

The Limitations of Stabilization as a Presentation Technique

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Ruins are emotional and deeply evocative components of our concept of the past. Western society's awareness of the achievements of past civilizations is intimately tied to an appreciation of the ruins those civilizations left behind and to attempts to identify those ruins with specific historical references going back to classical times. Long before archaeology emerged as a discipline and as a means of systematically discovering and analysing ruins, tours of areas rich in visible reminders of lost empires and societies formed an essential part of the education of all who would lay claim to being cultured.

The attraction ruins held inevitably found expression in a concern that they not be allowed to vanish because of natural decay or because of human intervention. For if ruins stood as priceless reminders of the past for some, for others they were impediments to ploughing or represented a rich source of construction material or valuable

artifacts—to be quarried like any naturally occurring deposit. The scrupulous recording of ancient monuments by officially appointed antiquaries (beginning as early as the 15th century in England) documented the destruction and loss of sites and heightened awareness that here were things worth preserving.

The all-pervading, inescapable evidence of ruins from past civilizations in Europe and the Middle East enabled society to establish direct links with the medieval and classical past familiar to readers of the history and literature from those times. Some monuments, indeed, survived functionally, if somewhat modified, throughout the centuries, particularly the great cathedrals, chateaux, and fortresses. Others, such as Stonehenge, passively endured and acquired patinas of age and mystery.

The famous archaeological expeditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries revealed to the world the buried but largely intact splendors of Knossos, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, as well as the tombs of the Pharaohs and the remains of Mycenae.

Small wonder, then, that the stabilization and presentation of such ruins for the benefit of future generations became essential to an educated appreciation of the past. Nevertheless, for stabilization to succeed as a technique for interpreting history, several important and interconnected conditions have to be met.

First, to state the obvious, there have to be ruins sufficiently extensive and coherent to merit stabilizing. We may debate what exactly constitutes a ruin, since we may

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Stabilized ruins of La Grande Maison and the bakery (foreground) at Forges du Saint-Maurice NHS in 1973: major intervention, minimal presentation.



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envisage a continuum with a decrepit but functional structure at one end and barely visible mounds decipherable only to the experienced archaeologist at the other. Ruins must, at least in popular perception, retain enough of their original form as to provide readily grasped indicators of what they were originally: an abbey, a castle, a house, or a factory. Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, such evidence is most readily apparent in masonry structures, and indeed the very word "ruins" surely conjures up images of jagged masonry segments, partially collapsed walls, and massive columns, some upright, some prone. The original form and function of works built from wood or earth are much more elusive and difficult to visualize.

Secondly, the original structures, if they are to survive substantially intact, have to exist in an environment that will ensure that survival, or at least delay disintegration. Through no coincidence, the earliest ruins to be recognized and appreciated were in the temperate Mediterranean and European areas, where masonry was not rapidly shattered and heaved by frost on the one hand, nor overwhelmed by jungle on the other. But change the environment, and monuments that have withstood centuries are suddenly in peril: the Acropolis because of atmospheric pollution arising from modern Athens; the Sphinx from a drastic change in the water table.

The third condition lies with the technology of stabilization itself and is directly related to both environment and materials. Unfortunately, the very characteristics that make the most readily understood ruins are those that make them the most vulnerable to disintegration in North America: the freeze-thaw cycle so familiar to much of the continent has devastating effects on unprotected masonry. This in turn means that for stabilization to succeed, it must be massive and intrusive; underpinnings must go below the frostline, drainage must be extensive, and the old mortars replaced with modern, stronger mixes if the ruins are to remain exposed to the elements. The results more often than not are affronts to both aesthetics and authenticity: what remains of the original is barely discernable, suspended in a frozen sea of modern cement, tidied up to assume an appearance it never had when functioning as an intact structure.

Finally, there is the question of presentation, or interpretation. The degree to which this is essential is in inverse proportion to the condition of the ruin: the more intact it is, the less needs to be explained about original form and function. It follows that if all that has survived is a few courses of masonry uncovered by archaeologists, to stabilize these ruins and leave them as objects of curiosity in an open field will achieve little. Ruins have to be explained so that the visitor may form a complete picture of what was there originally, both structurally and socially. The somewhat literal and direct approach, pioneered by the French architect Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century at such fortresses as Carcassonne and Pierrefonds, found its ultimate expression in the work at Williamsburg in the 1930s or at the Fortress of Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, in the 1960s. If such approaches are intellectually out of favour these days, they nevertheless provided a comprehensive and readily appreciated

model of what the original was thought to have looked like.

Stabilization alone cannot replace this; ruins have to be placed in an overall context and a convincing image of the original conveyed. Rather than subject them to the indignity and assault of a total "life-support" system designed to enable them to continue, as stabilized ruins, to withstand the rigours of the climate, new approaches might be more promising. Beneath the *parvis* of Notre-Dame de Paris, a subterranean exhibit enables visitors to examine the archaeologically exposed but fully protected ruins of many centuries and compare them to scale models of the city. At the national historic site of the Forges du Saint-Maurice, Quebec, a similar technique enables visitors to see a realistic model of the original industrial site alongside the remains of blast furnaces and forges, protected from the elements by modern structures.

Mute stones may indeed speak, but if they speak only to an initiated few, then we as custodians of the past have failed.

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