

BLF/NFB Conference, Greenwich, Friday 14th September 2007

How to treat ruins?

Tuija Lind, architect,
Governing Body of Suomenlinna, Helsinki, Finland



Pompeii. Waterpainting. Tuija Lind.

Intro

This presentation is based on practical experiences on the restoration works of the 18th century maritime fortress of Suomenlinna, which is also a World Heritage site and on my personal post-graduate studies on ruins and their restoration. I am an architect by profession, planning structural repair of mainly granite and brick structures in Suomenlinna, archaeology is my hobby and ruins have become some kind of a passion.

I will first present the technical process of a building falling into ruins. I will then discuss four different categories of ruins and I will propose a definition of the aims of their restoration. Finally I'll try to show with examples how important it is to know what is wanted from a ruin restoration project and how difficult it is to find a good balance between different kinds of objectives.

The pictures are from all over Europe, not only from Suomenlinna as this first one.

The technical process of a building becoming a ruin

When a building is abandoned and nobody takes care of it, the decline begins. Vegetation starts growing on the roof and hinders rainwater from going where it should. Little by little the plaster becomes permanently wet as well as the wooden structures that are in contact with the masonry structures. One day the roof becomes too heavy, the structure collapses and we can start talking about ruins because the building will soon be out of repair.

The outer walls are normally made more resistant than the inside walls. But since the roof has fallen there is only outer space even inside the house and from now on also the thin dividing walls and horizontal structures have to stand rain and wind.

If nothing is done to avoid water from getting into the walls, the mortar transforms to sand and stones lose their hold and start falling. One day the amount of fallen

structures is as high as the remaining wall and of what once used to be a standing building, there is only a small hill left. An interesting point is that, at this stage, the fallen parts start to protect the still standing structures by covering them. Here you can see an example from Burgundy, where a medieval structure has been dug up, and it looks brand-new because if it has been protected by the fallen debris. But often even the fallen stones are collected and afterwards there are not even ruins left: only traces for archaeologists.

The time needed for a ruination process varies according to the structural strength of the original building. A wall made out of carefully cut stones with very little mortar resist meanwhile masonry from small stones disappears fast. Here you have an example of a Romanesque church that has been without a roof since the French revolution and a wall from Pompeii that is about to fall.

The main question, within a ruin restoration project, is not only how to stop the process of *ruination*, but also what for, in other words why the ruination should be stopped. While answering this latter question, we can notice that depending on the ruins character the reasons are different.

Four different categories of ruins

At the beginning of the 19th century, Chateaubriand, the French writer and diplomat, wrote that there are two kinds of ruins. One is caused by time and the other by man. At that time there were, however, already two other types of ruins in existence: on one hand those dug up by archaeologists and, on the other, the fake ruins, built for English landscape gardens.

Romantic ruin

The ruins caused by time are those called romantic ruins. They follow the process I just presented, but their structural strength is so strong that they resist for ages. In the 19th century, the word ruin was used only to mean the remaining structures of some important public buildings. A French scholar (Christian Dupavillon) says "in order to become a real ruin the reason why the building was abandoned or destroyed must be forgotten". What comes to England and Wales after the 16th century reforms, the stones of the churches were sold and expensive lead was taken down from roofs – and quoting Michael Welman Thompson from his book '*Ruins their preservation and display*' he says: this gave rise to the most dramatic creation of ruins in English history ... a veritable orgy of ruin-making". But as we know these demolished and abandoned structures were later discovered and protected for their picturesque and sublime values. In case of a romantic ruin, the conservation of the monument does not only concern the stones and mortar between them, but also the beauty they have gained within a long period of time.

Man-made ruin

When the reason why a building is a ruin has not yet been forgotten - which is still the case of damage caused by the Second World War – we are dealing with the other category mentioned by Chateaubriand, which are the ruins created by man. If a ruin of that kind is preserved as such, its role will be to remind us of the historic event that created the ruin. An example of this type of memorial is a small French village, Oradour-sur-Glane, which was burnt, along with its inhabitants, during the last days of the Second World War. Right after the war, it was decided that the ruins were to be preserved untouched, so that the calamity would not be forgotten by future generations. Fifty years later, the structures started to suffer from weathering and some ten years ago the ruined village was restored in order to maintain the memory.

To be able to preserve the specific moment of the destruction, the masonry structures have been consolidated as if they were most valuable peaces of art, and, in addition, the entire movable has been treated with anti-corrosive products.

Archaeological ruins

The third category of ruins is formed by structures that archaeologists have dug up, mainly since the end of 19th century when the big archaeological campaigns fully started. The main difference between romantic ruins and archaeological remains is that the latter ones are usually much more fragile and the preservation of the structures should be planned before the excavation. This has been the topic of many seminars and publications, but what is mentioned less often is the fact that archaeological remains need frequent interventions of restoration. That means that the problem of how to conserve the material and how to deal with the lacking parts has to be solved very often.

Pompeii serves as an example. At Pompeii, where the ruins have an enormous historical value being at the same time most vulnerable, all standing structures have gone through several restorations. When you look at these structures, you can notice that almost every generation has made clear that this is not the original material, this is restoration. The result is disastrous for the unity and does not facilitate the future interventions either. Finding a way to distinguish additions without breaking the unity is not an easy task.

A false ruin

The fourth type of ruin is a false ruin, a garden fabric. Naturally this kind of a ruin does not have a true historical value, only esthetical. An interesting point is that fake ruins don't really like ageing. Patina does not suit them. They look more real if the plaster is freshly painted. That means that the false ruins should be maintained like public buildings, having a housekeeper nearby all the time.

A definition of restoration is that it should aim at strength, grace and narrability

The examples show that there are different reasons to restore and conserve different kind of ruins, but since almost all ruins are made out of stones and mortar, there is, indeed, a way to define general aims for their restoration.

To define good architecture Vitruvius uses the qualities of 'strength', 'utility' and 'grace'. The quality of 'utility' does not really work with ruins, but instead of being useful in a traditional sense, ruins have many things to tell us. That's why I've replaced 'utility' with narrability, the capacity of ruins telling about their history.

The restoration of ruins should first aim to the structural consolidation, because otherwise the structures disappear. Secondly, to a beautiful result because nobody wants to take care of ugly ruins, and thirdly, restoration should help us to understand the missing parts, because stones are interesting because of their history, not because they are building material.

Since the three objectives, strength, beauty and narrability are often contradictory in practice, a good balance between them ought to be found.

Strength

Ruins are vulnerable and ought to be protected from weathering. If the only objective of the restoration was the structural strength, one would build up a roof on a top of

some ruined walls. However, this would bring a big change in the landscape: the silhouette makes ruins fascinating and if you cover them, the tensed atmosphere it creates would disappear, the mysterious outline facing the sky would be replaced by a monotonous line of a common roofing. In the worst case, the ruin would disappear from the scenery altogether.

Wall capping is another solution against weathering, but it must be a difficult task because it seems so many walls become boring after their surfaces have been protected. Actually the crest of the wall is the most crucial part of the ruin: it is the point where the structure ends and the imagination starts. If the only aim or the treatment of this part is structural strength, which means that this fragile surface is treated only in order to get water out of it, instead of being the place where starts the imagination, it becomes the point where the interest towards the monument ends. Nevertheless, it is easier to protect higher than lower walls in an esthetical way.

Beauty

A good example of a restoration case, where the aim of beauty has been highly estimated, is an enormous garden fabric near Paris at Maintenon. The original construction, planned by Vauban in the 17th century, was supposed to become an aqueduct bringing water to the park of Versailles. Due to a lack of money, the already advanced work was interrupted. Since that date, the vegetation has taken over this 'useless giant' and caused damage so that, some time ago, a restoration campaign was necessary. But, since vegetation had always had such an important role in the scenery, it was decided to plant it back after consolidation of the masonry. Today one can see an old forest on a top of solid stonework. The scale of this example is enormous, but it shows how important beauty can be.

Narrability

Even a small detail on a wall or just a trace of rendering can tell us a lot about the original building. If the details are not studied, they can easily vanish during the restoration. Then there is no memory left either. Another problem is that many ruins are not easy to understand. They don't speak at all. This is mainly the case with flat archaeological areas. Maybe there is a need to rebuild some corners every now and then to give some bases for the imagination.

Conclusion

Some years ago English Heritage had a training centre at Fort Brockhurst near Portsmouth. On a few days course we were told, that the planners should clearly define what kind of a results they want out of a ruin restoration, otherwise it is impossible for the mason to do so. Stone and mortar is definitely the domain of craftsmen and women. So, whatever the philosophy behind the conservation project is, the result depends on their competence and qualities.

As an answer to the question "how to treat ruins?" I would say:
By combining a good theory and a good practice.