

Barasch, Dan. Ruin and Redemption in Architecture.

Phaidon Press. 2019.



Gunkanjima Island, Japan, Mitsubishi Corporation; completed 1890, abandoned 1974. Picture credit: depositphotos.

The steady decline of industry and the accelerating pace of urban renewal has had a profound affect on the development of cities, leading to a considerable increase in redundant buildings and infrastructure. As the culture of graffiti, urban exploration and parkour have redefined what these areas signify over the past twenty years, urban renewal programmes begin to look at these sites as opportunities, and with this comes the question of how to redevelop redundant urbanism. In ‘Ruin and Redemption in Architecture,’ Dan Barasch proposes that these sites exist in one of four distinct states, all relating to different realisations of potential paths to redevelopment; Lost, Forgotten, Reimagined or Transformed.

‘Ruin and Redemption...’ is the product of Barasch’s work on the New York ‘Low Line’ project, the reimagining of the abandoned Williamsburg Bridge Trolley Terminal into an underground park using a unique solution for “deliver(ing) natural light below ground using advanced optical technology.” The project is a reaction not

Glenwood Power Plant, Yonkers, NY, USA, Reed and Stern; completed 1907, abandoned 1968. Picture credit: Courtesy of Lela Goren Group.



Lowline, Raad Studio, New York, NY, USA; reimagined 2011. Picture credit: Andrew Einhorn.

only to the discovery of a compelling piece of abandoned infrastructure, but also to the high-profile New York High Line, the 2009 redevelopment of an abandoned elevated railway line into a public park. The author’s devotion to the Low Line project really shines through, along with his passion for abandoned buildings as repositories for both cultural memory and conjectural future. The introduction explains that the book “aims to summon up the magic and allure of abandoned buildings” but hopes to move beyond the social media infused interest in ‘ruin porn’ by “exploring the broader societal implications that arise” in the redevelopment of such sites.

The book is divided into four chapters based on the potential routes to redevelopment. Lost, covering buildings that are “destroyed or demolished, despite...holding significant architectural or cultural relevance.” Forgotten, examining “abandoned buildings...which remain haunted vulnerable shells.” Reimagined, “offering an optimistic if uncertain view of (unrealised) proposals.” And finally Transformed, examining successfully implemented projects. After a brief introduction to each chapter – whereby Barasch explains his overarching philosophical approach – the book outlines a broad selection of projects exemplifying each aspect. Overall, the volume is beautifully presented; from the two-tone gold and exposed carboard cover to the fine array of photographs, drawings and computer renderings of each building or project. This, however, is potentially the book’s downfall.

‘Ruin and Redemption...’ presents the author’s thoughts on a subject in which he is deeply involved and is an attempt to commodify this considerable body of research. It is presented in a gazetteer format which lacks the exhaustive nature of

Phaidon’s other ‘Atlases.’ I can’t help but feel it could have been more compelling to present it as a notebook or set of sketches exposing the practitioner’s process; something closer to Jan Kattein’s 2014 ‘The Architecture Chronicle’ as opposed to a reference book. One cannot help but feel that in presenting these thoughts in the style of a coffee table book the publisher has fallen foul of the ‘ruin’ or ‘design porn’ the introduction warns us against.

Despite this criticism, Ruin and Redemption is a valuable foray into one of the key concerns of this current stage of urbanism, and one which is particularly pertinent to the Northern Irish context. Twenty-one years after the Good Friday Agreement we are still having debates about meaning when it comes to the redevelopment of abandoned sites. From Libeskind’s Maze Long Kesh ‘peace centre’ to the Girdwood barracks site, a clear understanding of the options we have for these sites is more important than ever. The demolition of such sites is an act of intentional forgetting, whereas their retention and reimagining could either create a space of political contention or Barasch’s concept of redemption. These ideas deserve our scrutiny. ○

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Cement factory, Sant Just Desvern, Spain; completed 1921, abandoned 1968. Picture credit: Ricardo Bofill Taller De Arquitectura.

