
By Krissy Moore

Ruin Memories is the final product of a large cross-disciplinary collaborative project investigating modern ruins and our (academic, heritage, personal) responses to them. As a collection of ideas and arguments, it is extremely dense – 24 chapters addressing the latest theoretical developments in the archaeology of the contemporary past, exploring the “return to things” as it relates to ruin landscapes, while challenging definitions of ruination, abandonment, and heritage, and exploring the relationship between ruins, humans and memory/remembrance. As a “thing”, it is similarly dense – a beautifully bound and well-illustrated book of almost 500 pages.

As a newcomer to the theory and methods of the archaeology of the contemporary past, I found Ruin Memories both intimidating and inspiring. It is a fascinating collection of diverse papers, some of which were completely beyond me due to unfamiliarity with the philosophical concepts they explored, but which will undoubtedly reward rereading. Due to a sudden illness in my family, I completed most of the reading for this review of modern ruin research in a selection of super-modern places: airport lounges, hotels, and the waiting room of a specialist cardiac hospital’s intensive care unit. I found these places to be a suitable and evocative backdrop for the collected papers’ explorations of absence, loss, remembrance, forgetting, ruination, and the discomfort modern ruins can engender in us.

In their introductory essay, the editors note that the papers stand on their own, at times contradicting or disagreeing with each other. The remaining 23 papers are grouped under six themes: Things, ethics and heritage; Material memory; Ruins, art, attraction; Abandonment; and, Archaeologies of the recent past. These themes capture the essence of the contributions well but I found that ideas resonated between individual papers in different sections. A shared concern between all contributions was exploring the meanings of ruins/ruination and abandonment – as a concept, a beginning or an ending, a single event or an ongoing process, unidirectional or reversible – and thereby challenging archaeological and cultural assumptions about ruination as a negative outcome. Also recurring through multiple papers was a deep consideration of the implications of Heidegger’s concepts of zuhanden (ready-to-hand) and vorhanden (present-to-hand), and of gelassenheit (releasement or letting-be). This strong emphasis on encountering ruins and things as objects in their own right, independent of an anthropocentric focus on “use value” or “means” requires a reassessment of one’s research priorities as an archaeologist and shows the way to a new archaeological approach to ruins.

Chapter 1 reviews contemporary modern ruin studies and indicates the influence of a “return to things” in material culture archaeology – the passivity and silence of broken and abandoned things as provocation for us to experience things in their own right or for their own sake. In Things, ethics and heritage, Chapter 2 reviews philosophical approaches to things from Heidegger, Ruskin, Kant, and others, exploring the reciprocally influential relationships between people and things, in search of a “language of things”. Chapter 3 questions the ethicality of engaging with objects in an anthropocentric way and argues ultimately for a passive, valueless engagement with things. As a novice in all things
philosophical, I admit to really struggling with these chapters. Fortunately the three remaining chapters in the section served as case studies demonstrating these concepts. Chapter 4 rejects anthropocentrism wholly by investigating an abandoned open-pit mine through the cultural lens of migratory geese, and arguing for consideration of how the material produces the social. Chapter 5 reviews the outcome of a policy of non-intervention at a former atomic research facility, cleverly challenging the definition of heritage and ruin, and presenting the idea of heritage and presentation as a threat to the “negative monuments” of these naturally decaying structures. Chapter 6 follows similar lines, investigating the eventual destruction of decommissioned limekilns and noting that “industrial heritage” may be seen as an oxymoron. The three case study papers explore the definitions of heritage, the many meanings and types of ruination, as a state, a process, a beginning and an ending.

The conflict between “ruin” and “heritage” is continued in the following section, Material memory. Chapter 8 seems to connect more closely with the themes explored by in Chapters 5 and 6 in the previous section investigating the discourse of “ruin” versus “heritage” and differential levels of ruination and abandonment in a hacienda earmarked for heritage tourism (re)development. The other three papers are smaller in scale though no less ambitious and thought-provoking. In Chapter 7, My Father’s Things, the author encounters his late father’s possessions, considering them in a new light as independent of his father’s uses for them. Read after a particularly bad afternoon in the hospital, this thoughtful and poignant photo essay reminded me of the strong emotional connection we build through engaging with things – such a large part of why archaeology and ruins arouse such public interest yet so often omitted from academic writings on the subject. Similarly intimate, Chapter 9 develops the theme of objects as memory and excavation as recollection through investigating caches left by Estonians fleeing Soviet occupation in 1944. Chapter 10 expands on a more “conventional” archaeological recording of a WWII prison camp site to investigate the ambiguous, contradictory, anonymous, intimate, durable and eloquent memory of things. While rejecting re-enactment, the authors highlight the additional insight into life at Sverholl provided by a direct physical and archaeological engagement with the place and its artefacts.

This personal engagement with abandoned or ruined places takes centre stage in the following section Ruins, art, attraction. Chapters 11 and 13 demonstrate the creative, subversive, dangerous and inspirational potential of abandoned and liminal spaces for children and adults as a respite from and challenge to the more ordered and purposeful spaces of the “primary city”. These two papers complement each other well: Chapter 11 reviews the contemporary economic ruin while Chapter 13 reviews the catastrophic ruin of the bombsite; both establish urban ruins as a flourishing ecological niche for human and non-human transformation. The three remaining papers engage with the concept of ruin and abandonment directly and creatively. Chapter 12 explores the selective valorisation of ruins in Balkan (pre)history through mixed media collage; Chapter 14 presents 8 photographs capturing a brief moment of what I think is a closing deck on a container ship in Trondheim Harbour, Norway. Chapter 15 is a collaborative piece, a selection of poems paired with images of abandoned farmhouses in Iceland. I lack sufficient knowledge of Balkan history and nocturnal harbour practice to assess the success of Chapters 12 and 14 in getting their point across, but I found the images to be striking and interesting. The juxtaposed images in verse in Chapter 15 certainly evoked more of the atmosphere and resonances of these abandoned farmhouses than a built environment recording form could.

The four papers in Abandonment look at diverse site types to investigate the meaning and nature of abandonment and to give another type of definition of ruin as a concept. Chapter 16 takes a personal phenomenological approach to defining a forgotten and ultimately undefinable place – in acknowledging that this particular place cannot be defined it must be encountered in the now and on its own terms, this contribution reiterates the book’s recurring theme, that things must be encountered on their own terms, without recourse to ideas of value or use, and scales this up to landscape size or place as artefact. Chapter 17 also engages with abandoned things at different scales – a single artefact, a single (living) person, and a single farmhouse – and thereby argues for a new archaeological approach to ruins, asking not “what was once here?” but “where did everything go?”. The concept of ruins as points of intersection and entanglement is very interesting. Such intersections, in political and cultural terms, are explored in Chapter 18. Comparing the politicised and deliberate ruination of the politically-controversial Long Kesh/Maze prison and the surprising
The final section, *Archaeologies of the recent past* presents five archaeological assessments of sites from the Spanish Civil war to present day. Chapter 20 uses a personal, phenomenological travelogue of two siege sites of the Spanish Civil War to manifest the two important roles of archaeology: witnessing and remembrance or archaeological anagnorisis – recognition is fundamental to contemporary archaeology – the peculiar intimacy achieved when seeing a past life stripped bare, and thus reminds us of the emotional importance and ethical responsibilities of our work as witnesses to the past. Chapter 21 similarly uses personal experience and exploration as a mechanism for picking up the minutiae of the lives of border guards along the Iron Curtain, this physical manifestation of a metaphor for the ideological divides represented by a national border. Chapter 22 is a more conventionally-archaeological investigation of a historic militarised landscape, acknowledging the influence of climate, people and things on the shape of Greenland’s WW2, and notes that “the most significant importance of the three investigated localities may not be in their ability to shed new light on past historical events, but their very unique and tangible presence in the landscape” (p. 433). In Chapter 23, the author uses a community excavation of a former WW2 refugee camp reused as a sporting arena, to explore the concept of materiality and the influence of material culture on peoples’ lives and objects as part of social relationships – she describes the archaeological project as a process of materialising, where the project is the arena for the encounter between people and material culture – so that the archaeology of the recent past is more than just the investigation of materiality but actively making the recent past materialise through investigation (p. 437). The final chapter, Chapter 24, works through the 2003 recording of a “proximate ruin” – a temporarily abandoned building – to develop an ontology of ruins and appropriate object-oriented metrology (units of measurement) for manifesting them based on the concepts of weight, kinetics, mess, and durability.

*Ruin Memories* covers so much ground that it seems a shame to quibble over content. If I had to nitpick, I would note that the papers concentrate on European examples; I would be interested to read perspectives on modern ruins from non-European cultural contexts, perhaps from the booming economies of East and South Asia. Also, I found the creative chapters to be fascinating but limited by black and white print and the constraints of 2D printing. As the *Ruin Memories* project also has a website I feel that the potential for video or audio contributions, which could have been hosted there and referenced in the book, was overlooked. In addition – and this is a matter of personal preference – some of the very theoretically dense papers might have been improved by diagrams of the complex relationships and concepts being addressed, particularly Chapters 2, 3 and 24.

In sum, *Ruin Memories* was an absorbing and exhaustive look at the current state of archaeological investigations of modern ruins and strongly establishes the foundation for specifically archaeological theories and philosophies of ruination and abandonment as dynamic and ongoing processes. The papers therein have completely changed the way I think about ruins and “things”, and I will certainly revisit certain chapters as I develop as an archaeologist and academic. I understand that the editors are now involved in a new project, *Object Matters: Archaeology and Heritage in the 21st Century*, and I look forward to reading the edited volume in due course.