Fragments from the Past: Parks and Landscapes with Ruins

Multiple Locations, UK

Photographs by Alan Ward 1997-2016

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

There has been an enchantment with ruins in the landscape since the sixteenth century in Britain. Writers and poets set the stage intellectually for ruins to be incorporated into landscape designs. One of the most compelling reasons for the appeal of ruins was the return to classical ideals in this retrospective era. Humanists viewed ruins as symbols of the break between their lives and the Greek and Roman historical period. Edmund Spenser's *The Ruines of Time*, published in 1591, interprets these fragments as a device to recall and honor the past, to contemplate time, impermanence, and history. The cultural embrace of ruins appealed to aesthetic sensibilities. Painters depicted melancholy scenes of the countryside populated with the remains of classical temples; some included mythical creations with fragments of architecture. At an emotional level, Edmund Burke described the potential for sublime beauty that could be experienced in landscapes with ruins, which was a shift from the traditional thoughts of beauty based on the harmony of a design, instead, to embrace the disquietude of decaying remnants in ruins overtaken by nature.

History was approached with more intellectual rigor in the seventeenth century in Britain, relying on material evidence, rather than religious traditions. According to this view, the past is past and what we write about the past is history - and ruins are primary sources. While ruins are factual evidence, they also can connote meanings when experienced in landscapes. Hadrian's Wall in northern England illustrates how a ruin can be both a fact and an expressive symbol (1-4). The wall marks the northern limit of the Roman Empire, the actual boundary of imperial control. The wall also stands for the expansiveness of the Roman Empire, representing its extent and ambition, however, its meaning has evolved as Hadrian's Wall is now recognized as a significant recreational asset, a National Trail covering seventy-three miles from coast to coast across northern England. Ruins are both factual and metaphorical; they are evidence of the past, while also potentially signifying a changing set of values over time.

The taste for ruins was realized in the landscape garden by incorporating views of the remains of abbeys, priories, and castles, or by creating new faux ruins. The Rievaulx Terrace garden in North Yorkshire was designed in the 1750s on a site overlooking the remains of Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire (5-9). The owner, Thomas Duncombe II, initiated the design of a landscape terrace with temples overlooking the abbey, after travels to Rome as part of his education in the classics. [1] The fascination with ruins continued to flourish in the nineteenth century, when Edward Hussey III reimagined the site of Scotney Castle in Kent, a fourteenth-century structure with later additions, mostly in ruins. Beginning in 1837, Hussey elected to build a new residence and create a picturesque garden that retained the

1. *Rievaulx Abbey: Community, Architecture, Memory* by Peter Ferguson and Stuart Harrison, 1999

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existing topography and integrated the remains of the castle in the design to make a verdant landscape with water and ruins, that resembled landscape paintings (10-13). Christopher Hussey, who authored books on English country houses, Edwin Lutyens, and the Picturesque Garden, inherited the property in 1952, leaving the site to The National Trust in 1970.

Wenlock Priory was founded in the seventh century as a Cluniac Monastery in Shropshire. It prospered until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1540, after which the site fell into ruins, while the residential building was used as a farmhouse. The property was purchased in 1856 by James Milnes Gaskell, who renovated buildings and installed topiary gardens with a set of amusing figurative animals adjacent to the remains of the Monastery (14-16).

There are much smaller sites in London with remains of the past that are incorporated into parks, gardens, and green spaces. Roman walls are integrated into small green spaces around what is now the City of London (17). There were originally almost three miles of walls forming a rectangle, built by Romans around 200 AD, that formed the boundary of London for over one thousand years.[2] Small gardens and parks, merged with the ruins of churches in London, are on sites where buildings were destroyed or damaged by German bombing during the Second World War (18-21). The garden on the site of Christchurch Greyfriars reiterates the floor plan of the Christopher Wren designed church, with planting beds aligned where pews were located, and wooden trellises marking the location of former stone columns (20-21).

The small park on the site of St. Dunstan in-the-East Church is embedded in a dense urban area of the City of London, surrounded by much larger buildings (22-32). A church was built on this site around 1100, and was expanded in 1391. It barely survived the Great Fire of 1666, after which architect Christopher Wren added the steeple and tower. The church was again damaged during the Blitz of 1941 with only the steeple, tower, and the walls on each side of the church left standing. These remains of the church were retained in the transformation of the site into a small public park, that evokes memories of the past in a series of new human-scale landscape spaces that are an oasis in the commercial heart of London. The planting of small trees, vines, and perennials is interwoven within the historical fragments, so that that there is an unexpected sense of ambiguity when passing through former doorways into another exterior space laid out like a garden (31-32). The design of this small park captures the spirit of memory, melancholy, and an expression of the effects of time in the landscape, that characterized the embrace of ruins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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2. *London in the Roman World* by Dominic Perring, 2022

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