

Modell *und* Ruine



English Supplement

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Modernist Architecture and Ruins On Ruins as a Minus, Neoclassicism and the Uncanny

*Man must constantly destroy himself
in order to construct himself all over again.*
Theo van Doesburg, 1918

During the formative period of modernist architecture at the beginning of the 20th century, this architecture declared itself as utterly modern. Modernity here meant mainly a forceful declaration of the “break” with the vocabulary of classical architecture, with its roots traditionally stemming from the ancient world of Roman architecture. To be modern meant to be different from previous times, to build something completely new.

One of the possible angles to contest this apparent “break” of modernist architecture with the tradition are ruins. Namely, ruins, which stepped onto the scene in the formative period of modernist architecture, known as Neoclassicism during the Enlightenment. This period of the 18th century presented one of the first extensive appearances of ruinophilia¹ with the discovery of ruins of former Greek and Roman civilizations, which significantly shaped the architecture of the time. The possible encounter of modernist architecture with ruins could be seen in two moments: one is the influence of ruins during Neoclassicism, the other is the impact of ruins on some modernist architects.

Ruin and the minus

Before we venture on this historical and theoretical journey, let me firstly outline the borders of the meaning of the term “ruins”; or more precisely, ruin. The Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar suggested this definition:

“The ruin is an object which is a rest of an object. It’s by definition a partial object, part of an object, a damaged object. [...] A ruin is obviously an architectural object, we speak of ruins when referring to buildings, architectural sites, edifices of one kind or another, other uses of the word are metaphorical. [...] If architecture, in one of its essential traits, is also closely connected to an exhibition of power – quite apart from its functionality and its aesthetic value there is a display of power that imbues it, power over nature, glory of gods and deities, power of the monarch or the ruler, power of the state, power of capital – then ruin testifies about the vagaries and vicissitudes of power. The ruin also says: there was a power that erected this, but it met with decline and downfall. A ruin is the testimony of the minus inscribed in every power – kings, states, money, they all exhibit their power by building things destined to be ruined. Ruins are memorial sites, they embody memory. Ruin is a curtailed object in which the minus is counteracted by a plus, by the addition of memory.”²

For Dolar, a ruin is an architectural object, however a very specific one, defined by its missing parts. The ruin is also a distinctive witness of time and former social relations. Dolar’s definition of the term “ruin” is as follows: “A ruin is

a curtailed, condensed object, where the minus is always present.” The entry point to understanding a “ruin as a minus” will be inscribed in the forthcoming analysis of neoclassical and modernist architecture.

Ruins reshaping Architecture in Neoclassicism

The Enlightenment period of the 18th century was a specific formative period in architecture, when the essential requirements of architecture were being re-defined. During this time, the style of architecture was emerging as Neoclassicism, and the essence of architecture was thoroughly reconsidered.

The Enlightenment’s slogan “Sapere aude! – Dare to know!” reflects the core of this cultural process, which seized the whole of Europe and was intended for an autonomous, free subject of the new era. The Enlightenment of the 18th century was not only the period of the philosophical affirmation of Immanuel Kant, it was not only the culmination of all those ideas at the social level with the French Revolution; it was also an ambitious and multifaceted cultural process that extended beyond simple and one-conceptual foundations, identified as liberation, progress, reason, freedom. This was an ambiguous process for at least two reasons, as Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas have written. On the one hand, it involved the whole of mankind and its inherent tendency to develop, but on the other, with its “Mehr Licht!”, it advocated a subjective maxim that imposed on the individual the duty to use his or her own reason, instead of leaning on a higher postulate or an external authority. In this new society, instead of the sacred, the authority, the absolute, or if you want God/King the unlimited rule of reason entered the victorious march of science; the subject just had to dare to use reason. In this time, the old customs and myths failed, the previous constellation of the subject broke, and the new period began as open and indefinite. The Enlightenment is the first period in history that would name, and thus legitimize itself. Reason, and within it abstraction as its main tool, brought into the world an all-encompassing rationalization, which should make the world understandable, so that it would no longer be a source of anxiety. Science as the embodiment of this rationalization got a complete primacy over the (religious) truth.

The previous unity provided by the Absolute, which had its correlate in the homogeneous and lasting practice of classical architecture that had lasted for centuries, decayed into several tensions and cracks that transformed not just the concept of space and place, but architecture as well. With the dominance of the bourgeois society, the first obvious break occurred between the public and the private in space and society. The space of the Enlightenment is characterized by sharp differences between order and chaos, between regularity and irregularity. After the long supremacy of classical architecture, the crisis of architectural form was opened up: those cracks were going to leave their traces all the way to modernity.

The influential Italian architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri wrote precisely on the topic of the cracks and contradictions that happened in architecture during this time. His work underlines the Enlightenment as a formative, constitutive period for modernity and for modern architecture as a whole:

“It is significant that systematic research of the Enlightenment architecture has been able to identify, on a purely ideological level, a great many of the contradictions that in diverse forms accompany the course of contemporary art.”³

Aside the excessive and imposing breaks within society, which would transform it into a society of reason and bourgeois rule, what was it that shaped the contradictions of architecture during the Enlightenment period? One of the decisive events that shaped the discourse and knowledge of architecture was the encounter with ruins. It might be argued that the ruin as a “curtailed, condensed object, where the minus is always present”, stepped into this discourse with two encounters and showed architecture its own missing, decisive part. The first of those two encounters was the discovery of ruins from Greek and Roman antiquity, which produced a forceful “Greek Revival.”⁴ The other is an imaginative ruin, the notorious “primitive hut”, proposed by the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier. Both of these encounters gave 18th century architecture a distinctive minus that triggered the search for a new style, which would develop and later be known as Neoclassicism. Both of those ruins, the one physically on the ground and the imaginative one, the primitive hut, changed the understanding of architecture and its form.

What are the sources of the “Greek Revival”? It happened during a time, when a vast expansion of archaeology occurred during the 18th century, known as one of the major events of ruinophilia, with the discovery of the ruins of former Greek and Roman civilizations. It was with those ruins that Greek architecture stepped into the limelight of architectural knowledge for the first time, as it had been hidden and inaccessible to European scholars for centuries due to different historical and political reasons, one of them being the inaccessibility of the Ottoman Empire, a part of which was Greece. The ruins of Greek architecture stepped intensely into the discourse and knowledge of the architecture of the time, which was concerned mainly with the standardization of classical architecture and the theme of taste.

In the first half of the 18th century, scholars began to study in detail Roman excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii as well as ruins of Greek architecture in southern Italy (Paestum, Sicily) and Greece. Numerous visits and measurements of those ruins were made. Those detailed studies opened unknown horizons in the understanding of classical architecture. Initially, two Englishmen, James Stuart and Nicolas Revett, set out on a difficult journey to Athens in 1751, where they measured Greek buildings in detail and subsequently published a book on their findings in 1762. The Frenchman Le Roy prepared an outline of Greek temples in 1758. Numerous other scholars wrote on the subject as well. The German art historian and one of the founders of modern archaeology, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, initially found inconsistency between the proportions, listed by Vitruvius, and the ruins of the temples in Paestum and Agrigento during his journeys of 1757. Winckelmann wrote two articles on the subject, one being *Remarks on the Architecture of the Old Temples at Agrigento in Sicily*,⁵ where he analysed in detail the columns and proportions of Greek temples, in order to conclude that Greek architecture had until then received “superficial treatment.”

With those books, firstly in England and later throughout Europe and the United States, a resilient interest in ancient Greece happened in architectural discourse and practice and lasted for approximately 30 years. The “Greek Revival” became known as an architectural movement of the late

18th and early 19th centuries and is commonly referred to as being one of the last phases in the development of neoclassical architecture. In each country it touched, the style was looked on as the expression of local nationalism and civic virtue.

Although this phase of Neoclassicism is sometimes described by architectural historians as a “dead end” of architecture, it is possible to trace its impact on forthcoming architecture. The designs of Thomas Hope had influenced a number of decorative styles known variously as Neoclassical, Empire, Russian Empire, and Regency architecture in Britain. In Germany, the architecture of the “Greek Revival” is predominantly found in Berlin and Munich. One of its earliest buildings was the Brandenburg Gate (1788–91) by Carl Gotthard Langhans, who modelled it on the basis of the Propylaea of the Acropolis. Karl Friedrich Schinkel was in a position to stamp his mark on Berlin after the French occupation ended in 1813; his work on what is now the *Altes Museum*, *Schauspielhaus*, and the *Neue Wache* transformed the city, in a Greek Doric style.

It could be noted that the discovered ruins turned architecture to a re-questioning of its beginning and of its purpose, as it opened undiscovered horizons of the vocabulary of classical architecture. It also brought into discourse and into the space/place in the changing era of the Enlightenment the crack of a past “unity”, past “homogeneity” that seemed to be present in the Greek civilization. The ruins were not just a memorial site of past events, they were also a monument of past social structures. The “Greek Revival” shaped the image of many European cities, and through some of its main actors, like Indigo Jones and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, also influenced a variety of modernist architects. But what should certainly be underlined is the lack, are the missing parts that those ruins introduced into the predominant architectural discourse of the time. It seems that it was exactly those ruins in Paestum and the Acropolis that for the first time presented a powerful backside of the official architectural discourse. Doing that, those ruins were working as a minus, which reshaped the vocabulary of classical architecture and showed the need to present in a new form of architecture for the new society.

The other influx of ruins in the architectural discourse and practice came from France. I am not going to venture in all those discourses, but would like to stop only at abbés Jean-Louis de Cordemoy and Marc-Antoine Laugier; the latter was denominated by the English architectural historian John Summerson as the first modern architectural philosopher. They questioned the very essence of architecture at the systematic level, as they were inquiring the omnipotence of column orders. Architecture had at the time the difficult task of exiting the classical architecture and presenting a fresh expressive language that would fit into the new social system of bourgeois rulers. Those modifications of architectural expression first happened in theory and only later in practice. Cordemoy praised the complete abolishment of ornaments on the columns, or what is more summed up by the term “architecture of relief”. As Cordemoy’s main concern was geometric purity and the elimination of any unnecessary ornaments, he is known to be the first opponent of ornamentation in architecture; something that would later on become popular in modernist architecture. His pupil, the abbé Laugier, made a revolutionary move fifty years later. Laugier’s texts cut the discourse of architecture on two levels: first by questioning the authority of column orders, and second by offering an alternative based on a rationalization, on an “imaginative ruin”, and predicting with it functionalism.

Laugier visualized for the first time the source of architecture: he proposed the shape of a “primitive hut”, where four tree trunks support the rustic stylized roof. He thought that there is no need to deal with columns, nor with other forms of formal classical articulation. By doing so, for the first time in history, the French abbé offered a functional, rational prototype for the use of columns in architecture, which was diametrically opposed to the then established doctrine. Moreover, he went so far as to suggest the withdrawal of all walls.

The style of Neoclassicism, which was an explicit realization of the ideas of the Enlightenment with the emphasis on the rationalization of the authentic and the primary use of column orders, relied theoretically on Cordemoy and Laugier and ruins. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that John Summerson defines Neoclassicism with the intense impact of ruins (and archaeology) on the whole architectural movement and combines it with reason. I will use a paraphrase of his definition in an equation that goes: Neoclassicism = Reason + Archaeology.⁶ These two elements separate this style from the Baroque and set guidelines for its broad domination in the 19th century. But before it moved to the streets of the European cities of the 19th century, Neoclassicism was primarily the main style of the revolutionary period. After the revolution, neoclassical buildings gave shelter to the newly established institutions of bourgeois society, as the style was primarily used to house different administrative buildings. As such, the new architectural style responded to the newly established states in the form of a republic. Neoclassicism also played a significant role in shaping the bourgeois imperial style.⁷ In architectural theory, there is a general consensus that one of the largest Neoclassical emblems ever built was the Parisian Pantheon. This rational layout, representing the columns in a most authentic way, was designed by Jacques-Germain Soufflot as a church and was transformed after the French Revolution into a tomb of the revolutionary movement and the scholars of the Enlightenment, with Voltaire and Rousseau buried there. The façade of this building is cleared of every application of “architecture in relief” and if the building would not have been built up laterally due to static problems, the columns would melt even more strongly: with this, the “sense of loss of gravity” (the term is used by Summerson) was still so much more explicit.

It is certainly required to acknowledge also the strong impact of designs that were made during Neoclassicism by the French revolutionary architects, who anticipated in many ways modernist architecture with its purity and rationality, but were never built at the time. Such noticeable plans were made by Étienne-Louis Boullée with his famous cenotaph for Isaac Newton and by Claude-Nicholas Ledoux with numerous designs, among which the most prominent is the plan for the ideal city of Chaux. However, these revolutionary images of possible rational, abstract buildings with clean, pure geometrics could not be realized in the era, for they lacked the technological support needed to build these kinds of constructions.

Tafuri and numerous architectural historians and theoreticians date the spring of modernist architecture in the era of the Enlightenment. Tafuri’s key point states that the disruptive role of 18th and 19th century architecture stems from the fact that the architecture of the time did not yet have the availability of such production techniques that would enable it to finally fulfil the conditions of the bourgeois ideology. These conditions arose only after the final formation of modernist architecture at the beginning of the 20th century, which is also characterized by a precisely

modified constellation of technological possibilities. Due to this lack of technical support during the Enlightenment, according to Tafuri, some architects found themselves in an “imaginary” world. Tafuri stressed that the Enlightenment also brought an important change in architecture, namely that it was increasingly transforming into a “technique of organization of different materials and techniques”. Therefore, these experimental models had, among other things, brought a new set, a new design method, where huge volumes and geometric purity are present and where architectural primitivism is evident (as using the simplest principles). Thus, this experimental work, made by Boullée and Ledoux, for Tafuri established a new ideological role for architecture, which could be realized only at the time of modernist architecture.

Modernist Architecture and the Uncanny

Modernist architecture transformed the language of classical architecture that had already begun to develop during the Enlightenment, as it had the technical means to realize those changes. Emphasising the abstraction, transparency and technology, which could be summarised as the three paradigms of the architecture of the first half of the 20th century, this architecture influentially advocated for a “break” with classical architecture.

What I would like to underline here is the negative, backside of modernist architecture, which has been discussed by many since the appearance of this technology, transparency and abstraction within the former art of building. It concerns the imposed inability to settle in modernist architecture, a concept that was discussed by contemporary philosophers and theoreticians, among which were Georg Simmel, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Alienation, estrangement, homelessness, anxiety – all these are topics largely discussed in connection with modernity. Some also proposed an umbrella term that would cover these negative concepts, a specific kind of anxiety, known as the uncanny or in German *das Unheimliche*. The uncanny could be seen as a specific “bourgeois kind of fear”, appearing from the context of the late 18th and 19th century and developing its full presence during the era of modernity in the 20th century. It is important to stress that the uncanny is an anxiety, a domesticated terror, characteristic of modernity, which works as a negative, elusive feeling that could also be interpreted as the backside or the lack, the unwanted minus. It was argued by some, that in modernity, the missing, absent elements are the sublime, the Absolute, the sacred, which were eradicated after the full dominance of the paradigms of the Enlightenment. The uncanny has also been proposed in recent years as a specific contextualization of modernist architecture, among others by Anthony Vidler. Vidler, stressing the importance of the term also used by Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger as one of the key terms in interpreting modernity, wrote on the topic:

“As a frame of reference that confronts the desire for a home and the struggle for domestic security with its apparent opposite, intellectual and actual homelessness, at the same time as revealing the fundamental complicity between the two, *das Unheimliche* captures the difficult conditions of the theoretical practice of architecture in modern times.”⁸

The impossibility to fully grasp the negativity of *das Unheimliche* remains one of its main characteristics. *Das Unheimliche* is also a point where two extremely different thinkers had come together, namely Martin Heidegger and

Sigmund Freud. Freud and Heidegger attempted to define das Unheimliche despite its evasiveness and point out its specific unhomely and terrifying quality, the mysterious that is present in space, which provokes anxiety precisely because it originates from the homely and familiar. In his essay *Das Unheimliche*, Freud was most interested in this particular sort of terrifying. He almost entirely bypassed discussing the spatial level of das Unheimliche: it seems that to him homeliness and unhomeliness have an inherent spatial connotation per se. Following Freud's explanation of the search for the means of escaping various terrifying situations, particularly those that are associated with space, das Unheimliche reveals itself as an existing negativity, a remainder that cannot be broken down to the postulates of science nor can it be mastered. Within Heidegger's writing, das Unheimliche occupies a different position: the concepts of understanding home, homeliness, unhomeliness, anxiety, fear and homelessness lie close to what das Unheimliche is. Unhomeliness is a basic feature of human modern existence, wrote Heidegger. His definition of das Unheimliche is nearly identical to that of Freud: *unheimlich* is the unhomely within the homely. The works of Heidegger and Freud on the subject converge in a point that recapitulates a viewpoint from which the entire anxious feeling of the 20th century can be considered. Thus, a new platform appears that represents the grounds for the consideration of modernist architecture and its range in terms of contemporary dwelling. In the words of Jacques Lacan: each home of the modern age is inevitably built with this unhomeliness, each *Heim* is constituted with its *Unheim*.⁹

If we narrow down das Unheimliche to a spatial level, it might be argued that it manifests itself in the unified, bright, clean and hygienic space of simple lines, which is invaded by the dark side of the Enlightenment project, i.e. the terrifying, unfamiliar, the hidden which has come to light. It emerges between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the public and the private, the hidden and the revealed. It seems that the principles of technology, transparency and abstraction, which in architecture realized the main postulates of the Enlightenment, brought also an uneasiness, an anxious feeling within those buildings. When the decorative, the traditional, the styles of the classical architecture were removed from dwellings of modern people, an uncanny feeling might have stepped into those modern homes and buildings, as there was nothing more to grasp within them except the science-driven claims of the Enlightenment.

As such, it seems that with the technological, transparent and abstract cores of modernistic architecture emerged a minus, present in this inability to dwell within this architecture, which shows itself in its uncanny character. It might be argued, thus, that das Unheimliche as this negativity inhabits modernity as a minus. A minus that is characteristically spatial and is present in an abandoned parking lot, in a decaying modernist apartment block, in all infinite repetitions of modernist architecture as housing projects, and also on the location of a ruin (from any period before modernity). How then, in this conclusive part, could we understand the relationship between a ruin and modern architecture?

There are scarce direct mentions of the impact of ruins from the classical period on modernist architects. Among them, one of the most renowned is the encounter of Le Corbusier with ruins. When Le Corbusier was climbing the Acropolis for three weeks in 1911 to find the source of standardization in the Parthenon,¹⁰ he also found a ghost, as this temple would haunt him for years to come. What

is crucial in Le Corbusier's analysis of the Parthenon is the imprint that it left in his opus. To his understanding, the modernist architecture of his time despite all efforts had never achieved such a level of standardization as the Greek architecture has had. Le Corbusier's encounter with the Acropolis has been called extraordinary and transcendental by some,¹¹ while most authors consider it to be (at least) a breaking point that would profoundly influence his architecture. The classical architectural elements that Le Corbusier recognized in the Acropolis, such as the application of a mathematical ideal, the power of an architectural archetype and canon, mutual relations of masses, remained present in his later works. This ruin specifically – he visited many during his "journey to the east" – made a forceful impact on his search for a standard for modernist architecture. It is not a coincidence, then, that in his work he always fought for a standardization of modernist architecture (the 5 points of architecture, for example), which would give it a solid base and grandeur.

Beside the well-known influential impression of neoclassicism on modernist architecture, the imprint of ruins of different sources on other prominent architects of the modernist movement is not widely represented in literature. Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius admired Karl Friedrich Schinkel, thus, it might be possible to trace a long line of influences from the "Greek Revival" to the Bauhaus masters. But it seems that these influences were mainly mediated within a vast historical context. Other relationships of this kind are usually difficult to trace. Maybe one could try to understand this lack as a specific symptom, an expression of the "break" with the traditional, classical architecture this movement was advocating for.

Ruins, in the case of Le Corbusier, but also on a general level, display a minus, because they open up forms of prior rule, of former times. Looking at ruins from a modern perspective, it opens the image of the Absolute and "homogeneity"; as it releases the retroactive projection that this everlasting homogeneity reigned before the Enlightenment. We might say then that ruins open up moments of the uncanny, which is also a presentation of the (failed encounter of the) missing Absolute, of the sacred; in other words the backside of the missing sublime. And although ruins made such a decisive impact on Neoclassicism, which inflected greatly modernist architecture, when its presence was mediated as an embodiment in the new forthcoming style, ruins were included in modernist architecture on a more distant level. Ruins, explicitly in the time of modernity, were already a memorial site, an embodied memory of the past, a witness of destruction. Ruins in modernity were a potent representation of the gap between past and present; they were already the vivid embodiment of a minus, which for the first time in history came close to our own, contemporary sensation of a ruin as a crack and a remainder (of the world before the rule of technology).

- 1 Some say also the 21st century exhibits "a strange ruinophilia". See Svetlana Boym, *Tatlin, or, Ruinophilia* in this publication, pp.17–20.
- 2 Mladen Dolar, *Power and the Architectural Unconscious, a lecture presented on the symposium On Power in Architecture*, Ljubljana, 2017.
- 3 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalistic Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 3.
- 4 The term was first used by Charles Robert Cockerell in 1842.
- 5 *Johann Joachim Winckelmann on Art, Architecture, and Archaeology*, trans. David Carter (Boydell & Brewer, 2013).
- 6 "Reason and archaeology are the two complementary elements which make neo-classicism and which differentiate it from the Baroque." John Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), p.93.
- 7 More on this topic in: Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), pp.14–17.

- 8 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomely* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1992), p.12.
- 9 Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X, 1st Edition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).
- 10 Cf. Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, trans. Ivan Žaknić (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006).
- 11 More on this topic: Julio Bermudez, *Transcending Architecture. Contemporary Views on Sacred Space* (Washington DC: The CUA Press, 2015).