

DESIGN

The Need For Ruins

ALASTAIR GORDON

"To delight in the aspects of sentient ruin might appear a heartless pastime, and the pleasure, I confess, shows a note of perversity."

Henry James, "Italian Hours"

Throughout history people have been touched by ruin-lust. Whether at the ramparts of an ancient ruined fortress, the crumbling masonry of an abandoned villa, or the artificial "ruins" of an 18th century English garden folly, men and women have paused to gaze on the melancholy scenes of decay. Ruins afford us the opportunity to wander in imaginary realms. Breaking up the linear pattern of thought that we spend most of our lives locked into, they take us out of time, into a state of historical limbo that is loose and flowing with memories and dust.

An early case of ruin-lust can be discerned in the Anglo-Saxon elegy of a seventh-century poet who lovingly catalogued the imagery of a city after it was sacked by an invading army: "Wonder holds these walls. Under destiny destruction / Castles have split apart; gigantic battlements are crumbling. / Roofs sunk in ruin, riven towers fallen, / Gates and turrets lost, hoar-frost for mortar, / Rain-bastions beaten, cleft, pierced, perished, / Eaten away by time. Earth's fist and grasp / holds mason and man, all decayed, departed. . . . And so these halls are wastes, / The once purple gates, and the bricks and wood are lying / Scattered with the smashed roofs. Death crushed that place, / Struck it flat to the hill. . . ." ("The Ruin," translated from the Anglo-Saxon by Eward Morgan, 1949)

Fake Ruin

Eleven centuries later, Joseph Healey (barely able to contain the fever of his own ruin-lust) gives us his description of the mock-ruined castle at Hagley Park in England: "One cannot resist an involuntary pause. . . . The mind naturally falls into reflections. . . . and I make no doubt that an antiquarian. . . would sigh to know in what era it was founded and by whom—what sieges it had sustained—what blood had been spilt upon its walls. . . . In reality it is nothing but a deception, designed and raised here by the late noble possessor. . . . The massy stones which have tumbled from the ruinous walls are suffered to lie about. . . . in the most neglected confusion: this agreeably preserves its intention as a ruin, and the climbing ivy which already begins to embrace the walls with its gloomy arms will soon throw a deeper solemnity over the whole, and make it carry the strongest face of antiquity." ("The Beauties of Hagley and the Leasowes," 1777)

In our own 20th century, ravaged structures in both Berlin and Hiroshima were chosen to be monuments to World War Two. Now surrounded by shiny new architecture, these ruins make a dramatic contrast to the modern prosperity around them and serve as effective reminders of the brutal past. Still more recently, the modern ruin-image of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis being blown up in 1972 has been hailed by contemporary critics as a monument to the failure of modernism.

Back To Nature

The battered walls of a ruin become allegories for our own disjointed thoughts—preconceived ideas deconstruct themselves as the aging mortar and stone themselves are decomposed by the elements. We prefer to imagine the buildings we inhabit the way an architect draws them onto paper, with straight edges and smooth surfaces, but no matter how hard we may wish it to be otherwise, those buildings are not drawings. They are as prone to the effects of time as our own bodies, and the erosive effects of rain, weeds, and gravity (or war) all help to bring the pristine building of our ideals back into harmony with the random order of nature.

Ruins distort our everyday sense of perception. The transitional state of an abandoned building in a state of ruin allows us to see it purely as an object. The building is no longer the house where the Joneses live, nor is it the factory where shoes are made (nor are they animated by everything that ongoing domestic or commercial activities would imply), but rather the abandoned structure becomes a pure material fact of fractured timbers and rusted girders. The true nature of physical matter is revealed in all its transitory inadequacy: Wood will rot, concrete will crack, steel will rust. Gravity eventually has its way.

Secret Longings

We may contemplate ruins which spark secret longings for catastrophe. There lurks in many of us a desire to see things fall apart. There is only so much holding back we can manage—

only so many times in a year we can mow our lawns, trim our hedges, re-shingle our roofs, and plaster our ceilings—only so many times we can contain the natural impulse to see it all go to seed and decay.

Ruins allow us to contemplate such impulses, as the ruins of Corinth, once inspiring awe, "sank into men's imaginations and consciousness, sank into the dark chasms of the mind and soul where catastrophic desires gape, un-easily and greedily, for fulfillment." (Rose Macaulay, "Pleasure of Ruins," 1953)

How often we find one stubbornly derelict building which continues to crumble in the midst of a renovated neighborhood, seeming to negate much of the "newness" of the surrounding structures. The character of a place begins to change when the pressure of real estate development grips the land. Soon there is no longer room for non-essentials. Developers put the basest value on any potential property, lowering the land and everything on it into one grand tag sale. The landscape is reduced to another set of consumer items while the multi-faceted character of the community is lost, and we soon reach the point where nothing unprofitable is allowed to endure simply for the sake of endurance. Landmarks of decay can serve as effective counterpoints to the relentless indulgence of such marketing, reminding us that it is sometimes all right to just leave things as they are.

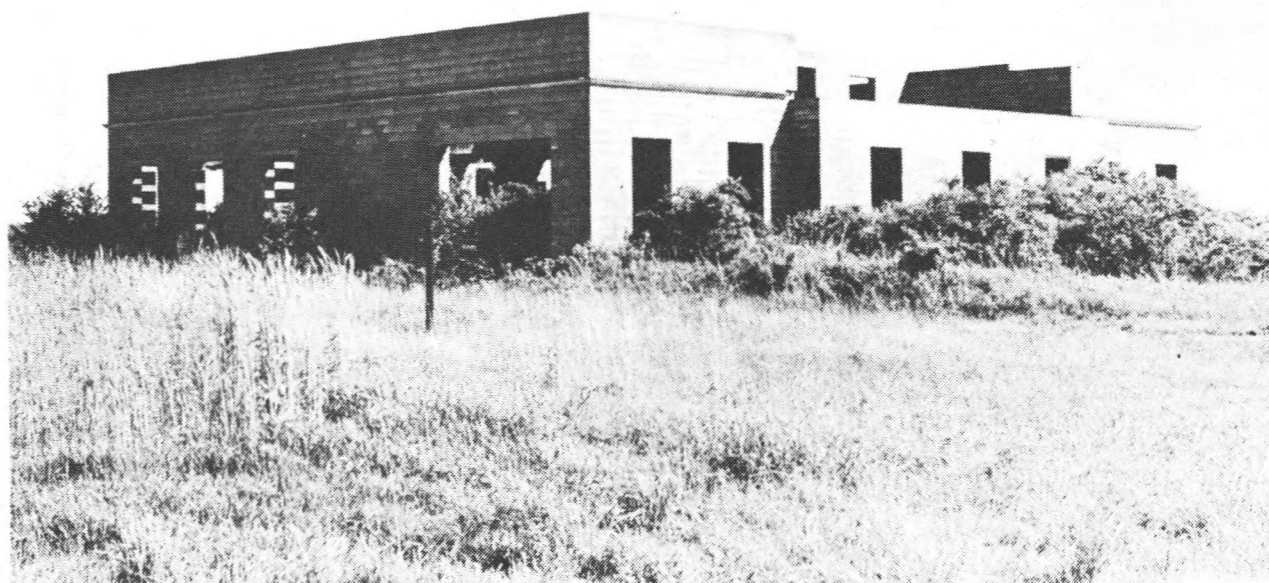
On The South Fork

In the case of the South Fork, the handful of such landmarks that do remain only remind us of how tightly restricted our sense of place has become. Space begins to be perceived only in terms of its dollar value and such familiar landmarks as the radio towers at Napeague or the Promised Land fish factory are doomed for demolition simply because of the fact that they are functionally obsolete.

Montauk enjoys a few such transitional structures. Carl Fisher's buildings from his 1920s resort development come first to mind. While never full-blown ruins, the Manor and the Fisher tower stood for years as ghostly testaments to Montauk's past. Both of the buildings are back-in business now and can therefore no longer be considered as objects worthy of ruin-contemplation. (The tower has been turned into condominiums, while the Manor is still in the process of being converted toward a similar end.)

The Jackson Estate

By far the most evocative building in Montauk that can qualify for ruin-contemplation is the Jackson Estate. Perched high on a hill not far from where the Manor lies, this crumbling pile of stucco, stone, and tile makes



THE STEWART HOUSE, unfinished and overlooking Sagg Pond in Sagaponack, is called "contemporary Pompeian" by its owner.



A Rustic Cabin at the Jackson Estate

Alastair Gordon Photos

the most romantic kind of ruin setting. Like some misplaced Angkor Wat the Spanish/Moorish-style building has become virtually hidden by a dense overgrowth. A tangled nest of twisted vines wraps around the foundation stones.

Entering the grounds of the Estate is like entering a forgotten world, far from the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary Montauk. Everything is still—waiting, growing, eroding—a secret jungle hideaway. Besides the large main house there are several long greenhouse sheds and rustic cabins. There are plans to subdivide this property in the near future.

Napeague And Sagaponack

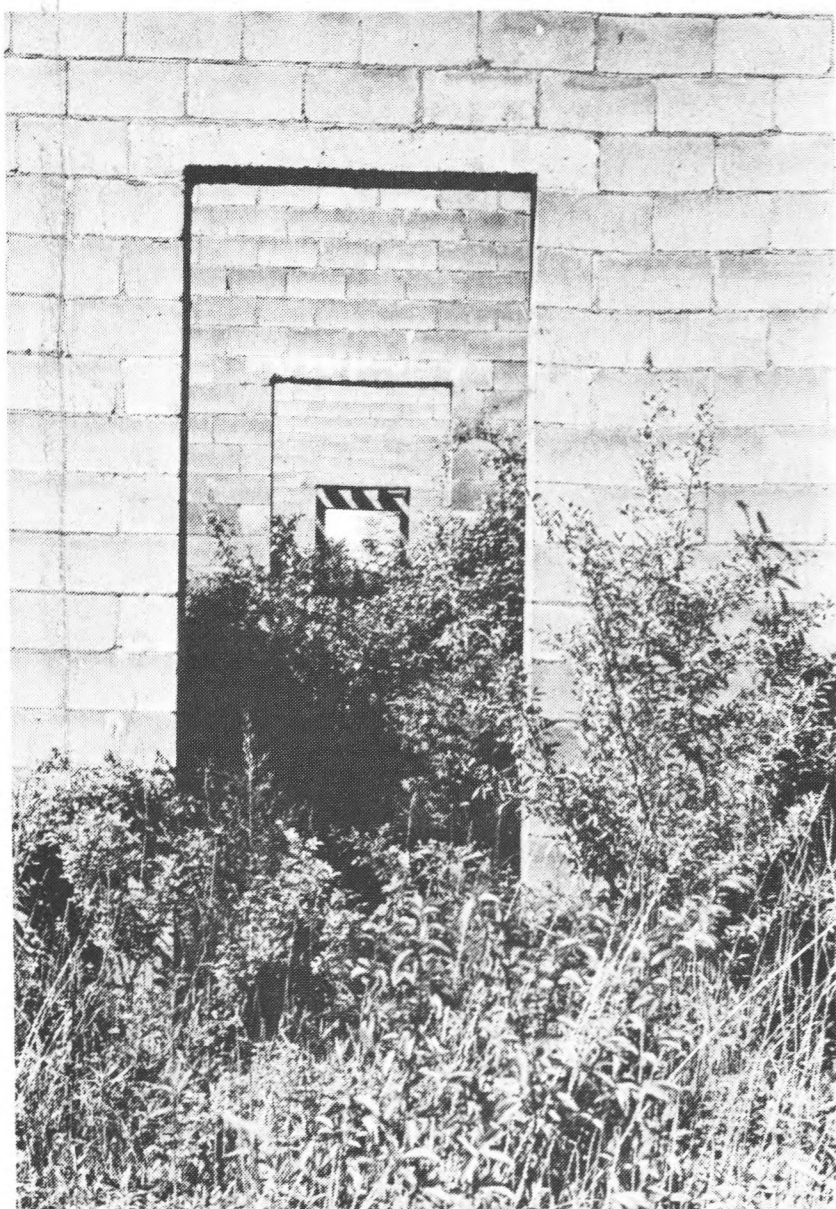
The twin radio towers at Napeague

are industrial relics that have to be considered as ruins now that the westernmost tower lies crumpled in the marsh grass, a spindly metal invalid. The familiar red light that once blinked through the night—warding off airplanes—is now smashed into the mud. The easternmost tower still stands.

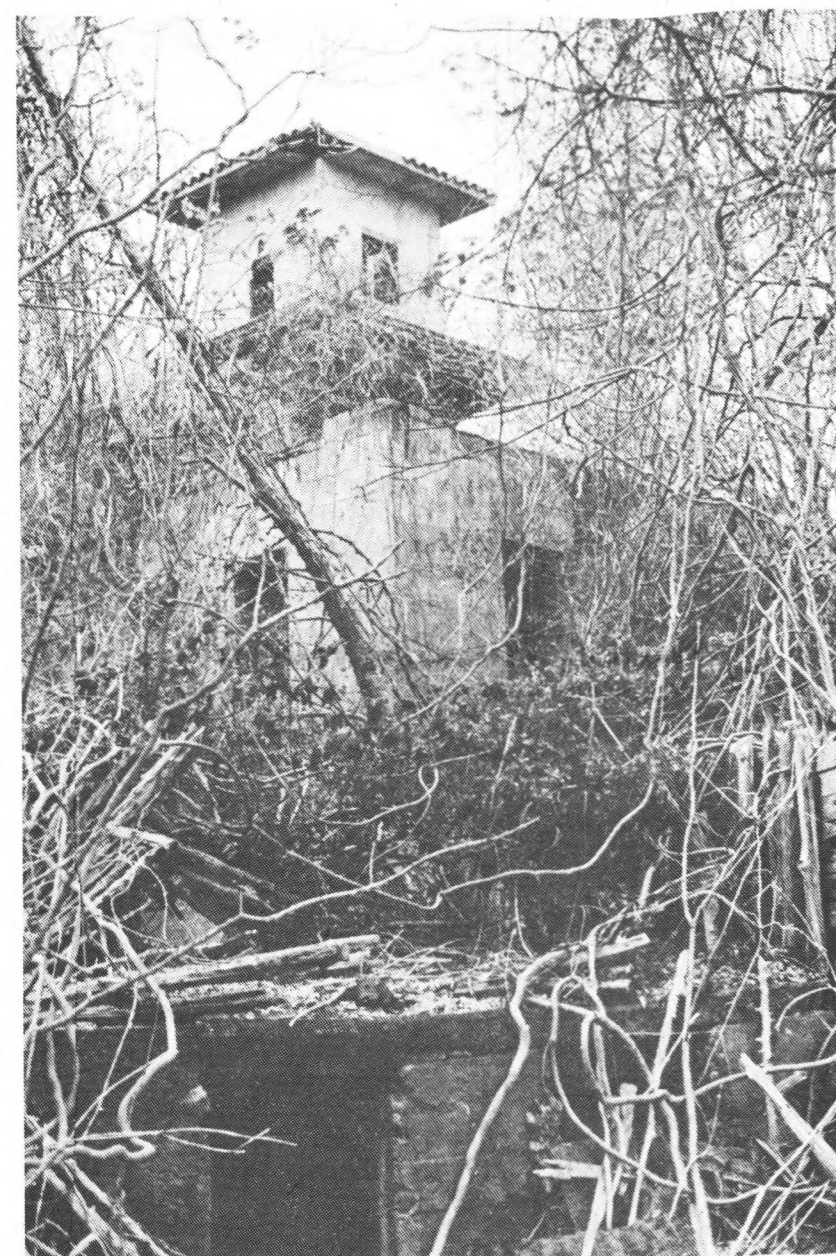
The large, concrete-block house that Margo Stewart designed for herself in Sagaponack makes a most satisfying ruin. Begun in 1967, the house was never finished, and it has sat open to the elements all this time. Ornamental cornice sections that were specially made from Indiana limestone are still lying in piles to one side of the house—still waiting to be affixed to the upper

walls. "I was influenced more by travel than any architects I knew," said Mrs. Stewart in a recent telephone interview. "I would call it contemporary Pompeian in style." Like a temple to some forgotten god, the house sits overlooking Sagg Pond, overgrown with weeds both inside and out.

An unexpected calm may surround us if we only stop to consider the argument for backward progress that some neglected piles of wood and stone continue to make in the face of upscale development.



Overgrown Inside and Out: The Stewart House



The Romantic Decay of the Jackson Estate in Montauk



THE WESTERNMOST ITT radio tower bites the dust.

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