

If, according to Aquinas' oft-repeated definition, beauty is "that which being seen pleases," is it perverse to take aesthetic delight in ruins and decay? Or, is beauty merely *anything* that pleases, regardless of the virtue in the eyes that see—and therefore merely a matter of taste, something trivial to be dismissed by serious philosophers and theologians? The question of "beauty in ugliness" is perhaps the aesthetic equivalent of the "problem of evil," and to some degree, the questions are related. We do, in fact, sense that there is a moral dimension to aesthetics—and this suspicion perhaps underlies the recently coined phrase, "ruin porn," which is sometimes applied to urban explorers<sup>1</sup> and photographers of urban decay. However, I maintain that there *is* beauty to be found among ruins and decay, and that to be able to discern beauty in such sites is important to Christian spirituality.

My hometown of Detroit is full of examples of such modern ruins, which have for several decades been drawing artists to the city. Their artworks introduce another layer of complexity to the above questions, but they also provide an interpretive key. To be sure, there is ugliness in ruins. My claim is neither that they are *only* beautiful nor that they are (always and to everyone) *evidently* beautiful. Rather, the work of the artist brings to light that which is beautiful in the ruins. To use Jacques Maritain's distinction, the *artist* (maker of a work) reveals in the work what he or she as a *poet* has perceived in the ruins. Artworks such as photographs of modern ruins can reveal beauty in the ruins, but not necessarily by merely documenting what is there. The poetic intuition of the artist, if revealed in their work, both reveals beauty in the artist's

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<sup>1</sup> Urban exploration or "urbex" is the term for the activity of trespassing in abandoned buildings and other ruined urban sites for purposes of exploration, photography and other arts, or other activities.

subject (by showing us what and how the artist sees) and adds to the beauty of the subject by creating something new.

### Poetic intuition: A way of knowing

This paper is about photography of modern ruins, and yet I have titled it, “The *Poet Among Ruins*.” This is to emphasize Jacques Maritain’s distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘art,’<sup>2</sup> where ‘poetry’ represents a process of creative intuition whereby, in this case, a photographer comes to *know* his or her subject connaturally, and ‘art’ represents his or her craft and skill in producing a work to express his or her insight. Maritain thus provides language that can distinguish between photographs that seek to communicate (or better, commune) with the viewer and those that merely document their subject—or worse, those that are voyeuristic, sensational, or exploitative. Documentary photography certainly calls for a great deal of skill on the part of the artist, and it is an important kind of work. It has the potential to present us with the beauty of its subject at least as far as that beauty would be encountered in the subject itself. But what we might call ‘poetic photography’ has a greater potential: it has the possibility of interpreting the beauty of photographic subject to a viewer through the insight of the artist, and to invite the viewer into conversation.

In his classic text, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Jacques Maritain brings Scholastic terms and concepts to bear on the creative act. Most significantly, he considers the process of creative (or poetic) intuition that takes place in the artist prior (philosophically if not actually prior) to the act of making a work. For Maritain, poetic intuition grasps a particular

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<sup>2</sup> Maritain makes this distinction for the purpose of analysis, but does not seem to be willing to freeze the two terms into only this particular meaning.

thing—a “singular existent which resounds in the subjectivity of the poet”—*as a sign*, that is, “in its infinite openness to the richness of being.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, poetic intuition works in the realm of the concrete and particular rather than in philosophical abstractions. The concrete and particular speaks to the universal, because “[t]hings are not only what they are. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have ... because being superabounds...”<sup>4</sup> Particular existents have the dynamic and relational character of a sign. Furthermore, poetic intuition draws upon the whole human person and not just the intellect’s discursive reasoning:

[P]oetry is born in [the] root life where the powers of the soul are active in common.... Poetry is the fruit neither of the intellect alone, nor of imagination alone. Nay, more, it proceeds from the totality of man, sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood spirit together. And the first obligation of the poet is to consent to be brought back to the hidden place, near the center of the soul, where this totality exists in the state of a creative source.<sup>5</sup>

So the photographer who would be a poet in Maritain’s sense of the word must go beyond technique and theory. He or she must bring his or her whole humanity to the photographic subject, and make space in him or her self for the subject to speak, to resound, to search the poet for resonances with its own concreteness. I use this somewhat awkward and anthropomorphic language intentionally to emphasize the passivity, humility, and vulnerability with which the poet must first approach his or her subject before imposing him or her self on it. “The soul is known in the experience of the world and the world is known in the experience of the soul,” says Maritain, “through a knowledge which does not know itself.” This informs the creative act: “For

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*. (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1953), 91-92.

<sup>4</sup> Maritain, 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

such a knowledge knows, not in order to know, but in order to produce. It is toward creation that it tends.”<sup>6</sup>

### Beauty among ruins

*It will rise from the ashes; we hope for better things.* —Detroit city motto<sup>7</sup>

Before we go sifting through the rubble looking for beauty dressed up in decay, we ought to be clear about what we mean by “beauty.” Beauty is sometimes, but not always, counted among the transcendentals—properties of being (goodness, truth, unity or oneness) that transcend all categories and can be attributed in greater or lesser degrees to all existents. Calling beauty a transcendental does not mean that everyone will agree on what is beautiful (any more than everyone agrees on what is good or true), but it does mean that beauty is something more than taste and certainly something more than the contemporary fascination with whatever is new and shiny and expensive. However, much more can be said about what beauty is.

In his book, *The Garden of God*, Alejandro García-Rivera offers an unusual “theological” definition of beauty: “Beauty is the sign of life abundant known only by being enjoyed.” This definition enriches the classical definition, “that which being seen pleases,” since it suggests a standard (abundant life) by which to judge any pleasure taken in the object deemed beautiful.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 89. Compare with Elaine Scarry’s assertion that beauty is generative: it “prompts a copy of itself” both by inspiring imitation and art, and by producing in us a desire to share it, and she identifies this as the “basic impulse underlying education.” Elaine Scarry. *On Beauty and Being Just*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999), 4-8.

<sup>7</sup> “*Speramus meliori, resurgit cineribus*” is the official city motto, a quote from the Jesuit Fr. Gabriel Richard of Ste. Anne de Détroit Church following the 1805 fire that destroyed the city.

“Beauty,” García-Rivera continues, “like all signs, must be interpreted.”<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere, García-Rivera has cited another classical definition of beauty: unity-in-variety.<sup>9</sup> He has also described beauty as “that which moves the human heart.”<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these various definitions provide a multi-faceted approach to beauty that accomplishes several important tasks: they connect beauty, whether in nature or in art, to “the mystery of our own creatureliness;”<sup>11</sup> they foreground the communal aspect of beauty;<sup>12</sup> they highlight the fact that beauty, along with all creation, has the character of a gift;<sup>13</sup> and they squarely address the problem of human suffering.<sup>14</sup>

García-Rivera suggests that one of the main tasks facing theological aesthetics is to learn how to see the dignity of the human being, particularly in the context of suffering. As theologians, but also as human beings culturally defined as consumers, we have “forgotten how to look and see”—to see beauty all around us, often veiled by suffering, death, and decay. As a *theological* discipline, theological aesthetics “ought to bring insight into the human condition, rather than philosophical clarity as to the nature of art.”<sup>15</sup> In discovering this insight, theological aesthetics can also help theology relearn “how to ‘see’ again the dignity of the human person.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alejandro García-Rivera. *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 100.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> García-Rivera. *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 11. See also Alejandro García-Rivera. *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> García-Rivera. *The Garden of God*, 77, 132.

<sup>14</sup> García-Rivera. *A Wounded Innocence*, xi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Seeing the dignity of the human person in the midst of suffering, death, and decay is dramatic: it involves stories, from personal, communal, and regional histories to the grand story of creation and redemption. García-Rivera speaks of a “wounded innocence” in light of the Christian doctrines of creation, Incarnation, and eschatology, because, following Irenaeus, he sees innocence as a virtue to be gained *through* the process of living, with whatever suffering, mistakes, and vulnerabilities that living entails. Our experience of vulnerability—helplessness in the face of evil, but also redemptive openness to God and others—constitutes what the American philosopher Josiah Royce calls “religious insight”: seeing both the need for and the way of salvation.<sup>17</sup>

If beauty is a sign of abundant life—a sign that needs to be interpreted—then, given our ordinary experience of abundant life as “already and not yet,” and admixed with suffering, death, and decay, we need to place the sign of beauty in conversation with our experience of its negation. García-Rivera writes,

[T]he experience of Beauty, that is, the beautiful, is a complex, intrinsically communal experience that cannot be easily categorized. The beautiful has to do with what moves the heart and thus the grotesque and unattractive can also manifest beauty.... But to see the beauty in the grotesque and unattractive, one must engage the communal dimension of beauty.<sup>18</sup>

Measured against the (theological) standard of abundant life, an aesthetic that finds beauty in decay will not necessarily indicate a perverse sensibility,

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<sup>17</sup> García-Rivera. *A Wounded Innocence*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

For theology can discern the beautiful in the agonized face of a crucified man not as a sadistic exercise or as an expression of deep despair but because theology recognizes that Beauty shines through the suffering in this world through its communal dimension. Theology discerns the beautiful in the face of a crucified man through the lens of the community that gathers around the foot of his cross.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of urban ruins, that community may simply be the residents of the city, or those who have memories tied up with the building(s) and site(s) now abandoned, or preservationists. The Michigan Central Station in Detroit<sup>20</sup>, for example, inspires a great deal of preservation efforts that have ranged from court battles to the simple act of planting flowers on the site. García-Rivera would, I believe, locate beauty both in these preservationist communities themselves, and in the rich tapestries of meaning to which they point, as well as in the ruins themselves, which both signify and are signified by these gathered communities.

### What can the ruins reveal?

The question of seeing beauty in photographs of modern ruins is twofold. It is a question about the photographs, but more basically, it is about their subjects, the ruins. If a photographer is to make a beautiful photograph, he or she must find beauty in the subject, in some form or another. In Maritainian terms, poetic intuition must precede the art. As we have seen, poetic intuition involves an encounter between the artist and his or her subject in which, as it were, the poet and subject recognize something of themselves in the other. It would be impossible to make

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Built in 1918 just outside the downtown area, the MCS combined a Beaux-Arts train station with 18 stories of office space (the top two floors of which were never finished inside) intended to be the focus of a secondary city center. This never happened, due to the Great Depression and the increasing use of automobiles. The station was closed in 1988, but remains standing in a ruined state, even though it is privately owned.

an exhaustive list of what resonances with him or her self an artist might find in a ruined structure, but I wish to explore some themes and indicate some possibilities.

*Embodiment and Place: Particularity and History*

Whatever else we can say about modern urban ruins, they are buildings. As works of architecture, they are already art works, however derelict, and they reflect human culture. TJ Gorringer passes along an observation by Heinrich Rombach that “a style of building reveals more of the basic philosophy of a period, than the carefully smoothed-out texts of the school philosophy of that time.”<sup>21</sup> But even more fundamental than architectural styles, philosophies, and methods is the fact that buildings are made to house human bodies and activities. There is an intentional relationship between human beings and architecture, and the architecture we inhabit in turn not only reflects but also affects us. As Philip Sheldrake notes (in treating *place* more generally), “place has a determining influence on the way people behave, the way they think, the rhythm of their lives and their relationships.”<sup>22</sup> In his classic work, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes this through the image of the childhood home: “[O]ver and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. ... The successive houses in which we have lived have no doubt made our gestures commonplace.”<sup>23</sup> We internalize architecture into our *bodies*: the height of a stair, the positioning of light switches, door knobs, sinks, and counters, the locations of doorways,

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in TJ Gorringer. *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Sheldrake. *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [La poetique de l'espace], trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 14-15.

windows, and electrical outlets. No building we enter, even in a ruined state, is entirely foreign to us, and neither is it altogether unintelligible. Bachelard continues, “the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the houses are but variations on a fundamental theme.”<sup>24</sup> And because we know what it means to dwell, we know, before entering any building, that it will have features amenable to dwelling: level floors, windows at eye level, bathrooms, doors, rooms, hallways, and adequate space for maneuvering. In his poetic way, Bachelard also says that our habits of daydreaming are acquired in our first home.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, our embodied familiarity with buildings is not simply a matter of muscle-memory, but lives in our psyche as well. And I would add that this embodied familiarity with buildings connects us with other humans who share similar spaces. A common theme in Bachelard’s book is that of intimacy, the intimacy found in a house, a place of refuge. Not only are co-inhabitants of a building (whether home, workplace, worship space, or other building) contained within the same physical space: they are in the same *place*. They share the same familiarity with *that* building. And this intimacy is in some way—imagined, desired, constructed, remembered—shared with previous and future occupants as well. For example, I and the previous occupants of my current apartment share a physical awareness of the height of my bathroom sink.

Related to this is the theme of *place*. In the modern world, we are accustomed to thinking in terms of *space*, whether square footage in a room or a grid layout of suburban sprawl. Space, like time, is conceived as a blank canvas on which individuals and objects and buildings are somewhat arbitrarily situated. However, as Sheldrake writes, “The most fundamental fact of

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<sup>24</sup> Bachelard, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

human existence is that because people are embodied they are always ‘somewhere.’”<sup>26</sup> In addition, “[t]he concept of place refers not simply to geographical location but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative. Place is space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious.”<sup>27</sup> Places are replete with overlapping meanings and are interpreted differently by different people and groups of people, and yet place is more than the sum of its parts. Place matters, says Sheldrake, because it provides for our very basic needs for a *home* (1) where we can fulfill our potential throughout life’s stages; (2) where we can belong to a community; (3) where we can experience a situated relationship with nature in its elements and seasons; and (4) where we can connect with the sacred.<sup>28</sup> Of course, we experience “home” in a fragmented fashion. Gorringer suggests that Bachelard’s use of the house as an image was a product of lingering nineteenth-century romanticizing of domesticity, and critiques it against the backdrop of the biblical story of Israel’s wanderings and exiles and the houselessness of Israel’s God. His warning against limiting the discussion of place to an idealized home comes at the beginning of his project to construct a “theology of the built environment” that is concerned with justice and redemption. He remarks, “Haddon Willmer puts the question of redemption squarely by asking what sort of humanity is encouraged by different types of city.”<sup>29</sup> We would do well to ask this question of every aspect of the built environment, from the large scale of cities down to individual buildings and into each room and furnishing. The Maritainian “poet” wandering through modern ruins will likely wonder, consciously or not: What sort of human being was encouraged in this building? Who lived or worked here? Why do

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<sup>26</sup> Sheldrake, 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Gorringer, 146.

they no longer live or work here? And what might this building's story tell us about our present and future building projects? If our history has led us to discard buildings, has it also led us to discard people? What does the presence of ruins in a city do to—or for—the civic project of human flourishing? These questions will be posed not only by the poet's intellect, but by the poet's body as she or he moves through the ruins. I would suggest that the more nuanced answers the poet intuits to these questions, the richer the resulting art will be—and the less likely to be disinterested photojournalism or voyeuristic “ruin porn.”

### *Impermanence*

When Christ was born, Simeon told his mother, “A sword shall pierce your heart.” He was speaking of Christ's death. I think it is fruitful to consider how the occasion of God made flesh—the appearance of the true image of the invisible God, the archetype of all iconography—was inscribed with death right from the beginning. On one level, it speaks to his full humanity: as the funeral liturgy reminds us, “You only are immortal, the creator and maker of mankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. *For so did you ordain when you created me, saying, ‘You are dust, and to dust you shall return.’*”<sup>30</sup> Christians believe that this inscription of Christ's death at his birth points to the significance of that particular death, which destroys all death and brings Resurrection. Without eliding the very real loss and pain implicit in decay, one can point to the natural cycles through which life emerges even from death (both literal and metaphoric), and beyond these to the promises of faith.

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<sup>30</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*. (New York: Seabury Press), 499. Emphasis added.

Nevertheless, impermanence is a natural feature of all material objects, including marble and stone buildings intended to last. We often miss this point when observing or studying individual works of architecture, since on the one hand, textbook studies focus on buildings in their pristine condition, and on the other hand, because most buildings we inhabit and move through are tended to, maintained, cleaned, preserved. Building engineers, builders, and architects, if they are not incompetent, do consider the materiality of their structures and plan for the building's endurance over time. And, as Stewart Brand demonstrates in his book, *How Buildings Learn*,<sup>31</sup> all buildings undergo constant revision as well as natural processes of change. Similarly, Howard Caygill argues that the destruction or passing out of existence of artworks is "closer to their creation than has been fully appreciated by modern aesthetics."<sup>32</sup> He relates the two in processes of care and conservation, as well as intentional destruction or alteration of one work of art in the production of another (e.g., Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning* drawing). All artwork, like everything else that exists in time and space, is impermanent; any work's continued existence is due to human care. And because we, too, are impermanent, and constantly undergoing change and decay, we recognize something of ourselves in the cracked paint of a well-cared for but old painting, in the worn steps at the post office, in the dust that collects on the window sill at home, but also in the tragic instance of a modern ruin.

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<sup>31</sup> Stewart Brand. *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built*. (London: Phoenix Illustrated, 1994). Brand's work encourages reflections on the organic quality of the built environment, as he demonstrates through case studies how buildings—domestic, commercial, and institutional—are modified by occupants to better serve evolving human needs.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Caygill. "The Destruction of Art." In *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon. (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 163.

### *Usefulness of ruins*

At first glance, run-down abandoned buildings appear only as waste, deprived of all human care. Because our current economic system normally does not tolerate the waste of high-value real estate, the presence of ruins in a city suggest economic depression at the very least. A visitor to a city like Detroit might see the prevalence of abandoned buildings and assume the city itself is abandoned, that nobody lives there anymore and nothing is happening there. Such an assumption would, in turn, signal to a Detroiter that the visitor simply didn't know where to look, or didn't know what he or she was looking at. The parallels between these attitudes toward abandoned ruins and human beings deemed no longer valuable are not difficult to draw.

Tim Edensor, a scholar, photographer, and urban explorer in Britain, has written specifically about the aesthetic experience of ruins, though not from a theological standpoint. He analyzes industrial ruins as spaces of hybridity that allow for certain activities polite society generally tries to hide. Early in his book, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*, he catalogs a number of uses these ruins actually serve: plundering, home-making, adventurous play, mundane leisure spaces, exemplary sites, and art spaces.<sup>33</sup> First, urban ruin sites are plundered by the building's owners, who take away fixtures and other items of value to be re-used elsewhere or sold; next, opportunistic plunderers take away any remaining items of value, from fixtures to copper wires and piping; finally, visitors such as urban explorers and artists take away souvenirs and materials to be used artistically. As for home-making, ruined sites provide houseless persons with private space where they can set up camp, and, since the site itself is in

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Edensor. *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 21ff.

ruins, garbage can be left behind. Adventurous play includes urban exploration, but also (even) more illicit activities such as drug use, sexual encounters, and sites for dumping, stripping, and sorting through stolen goods (from automobiles to purses). As mundane leisure spaces, ruin sites may serve as short-cuts (depending on their location and relative degree of safety) through an urban area, or neighbors may use the land for gardening. Local children frequently set up play spaces in abandoned sites (from a vacant lot in their neighborhood to the parking lot of a factory or other building). As exemplary sites, ruins may be locations for holding protests, such as the occupation of Alcatraz by Native Americans between 1969 and 1971 (forcibly ended by the US government), or the Heidelberg Project in Detroit (which is also an art space, but which was partially destroyed by the city in 1999).<sup>34</sup> As art space, ruin sites are used by graffiti artists practicing their craft, by performance artists, or as performance sites (e.g., locations for video shoots, filming, or concert venues and raves). Visitors also frequently make ad-hoc art, by stacking found objects into sculpture for example.<sup>35</sup> Other artists, such as photographers, painters, and poets, take industrial ruins as their subjects.

Edensor also points to the way ruins disrupt the ordering of cities. Modern cities tend to divide space—and therefore people and their activities—according to uses. Business districts are kept separate from living quarters and industrial space. In Detroit, the natural division of work space (noisy, dirty factories) from bedroom communities within city limits is a contributing

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<sup>34</sup> The Heidelberg Project, located on Heidelberg Street in Detroit's East Side, is an extensive project by artist Tyree Guyton who grew up on that street (and who also has work in the permanent collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts). It is both an outdoor art project and his statement about destruction and abandonment in Detroit neighborhoods. One of his themes is polka dots, and both he and fans of his have painted polka dots on abandoned structures throughout the city. See [www.heidelberg.org](http://www.heidelberg.org).

<sup>35</sup> Edensor, 34.

factor to the city's large spaces of vacant land today, as factories closed and nothing replaced them. Thomas Sugrue has argued persuasively that the unnatural division of people according to race in the post-war era—segregation in both housing laws and hiring practices—was the primary underlying factor leading to the city's mid-century decline.<sup>36</sup> Edensor also suggests that ruins serve as nature preserves of a sort. Plant and animal life is always present in the city, he notes, but is controlled and hidden by the enormous energy spent caring for properties, especially where a site has been built with little regard to its natural environmental features—as if the site were merely space and not place. Once that perpetual care ceases, native plants and animals return.

Edensor's book is interspersed with his own photography of industrial ruins, placed randomly and without caption as if to mimic the discovery process of urban exploration. Many are pictures of found objects and other details, such as hand-written signs, that remind us of the ruined building's former use. In a chapter titled, "The Spaces of Memory and the Ghosts of Dereliction"<sup>37</sup> he discusses these traces of mundane life that are of great poetic appeal to visiting artists. For Edensor, these details also serve as a critique of contemporary culture:

In ruins, the linearity of narrating the past is upstaged by a host of intersecting temporalities which 'collide and merge' in a landscape of juxtaposed 'asynchronous moments' (Crang and Travlou, 2001: 161), a spatialisation of memory which involves 'crossing, folding, piercing' (ibid.) rather than sequential organization.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

<sup>37</sup> Edensor, 125-164.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 126.

In such juxtaposition he sees an opportunity to “put forward an alternative politics of remembering which foregrounds the value of the sensual and the contingent, so as to bypass the ways in which memory is increasingly disembedded from place through commodification, legislation and the production of nostalgia.”<sup>39</sup> Our current economic system is quite comfortable with the production of waste, but normally waste is to be disposed of quickly. In contrast, “the ruin produces a slowly accumulating waste. The ruin is a shadow realm of slowness in which things are revealed at a less frantic pace.”<sup>40</sup> What is revealed is more than the ephemera, unprofitable fixtures left behind, and the innards of the building which appear slowly as the building deteriorates. Modern, industrial ruins also reveal the wastefulness and innards of a socio-economic and political system that has produced these ruins in the first place—and, in most cases, left them in the living spaces of human beings the socio-economic system finds equally unprofitable. As Gorringer argues, aesthetics is not irrelevant to social justice concerns.<sup>41</sup> Quoting John Archer, he writes that

Ideologies are only of consequence when they impinge on the material domain of everyday life through legal and political codes, social practices, and the shaping of space.’ The built environment, which ‘provides us with all the most direct, frequent and unavoidable images and experiences of everyday life’, is never just happenstance. It reflects conscious decisions which in turn reflect ideologies and class positions.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Gorringer, 110-111.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

But, as Karsten Harries argues (and Gorringer also quotes), “values...cannot be made or invented. They must be discovered.”<sup>43</sup> This implies that the “unity-in-variety” that would make up a beautiful built environment cannot be imposed by urban planners but must arise from the communities that dwell in that place. Among ruins, we see not only the revelation and critique of current systems, as Edensor highlights; we also see the resourcefulness of the people who lack the economic means to move away from a neighborhood in ruins or to have the buildings removed.<sup>44</sup> These ethical concerns may be intuited by the photographer, even if he or she doesn’t fully understand the history of the particular building he or she is visiting. Because of his or her own ordinary human experience with similar matters, the photographer can know in his or her body that a particular detail, such as a doll found in a factory, has some sort of significance, and he or she can take a photograph of that detail in a manner that moves the human heart.

#### Preserving and revealing: the role of the photographer

*Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our societies and their changes, small pieces of history in suspension. The state of ruin is temporary by nature, the volatile result of the end of an era and the fall of empires. This fragility, the time elapsed but even*

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<sup>43</sup> Karsten Harries. *The Ethical Function of Architecture*. 3<sup>rd</sup> printing. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 212. Quoted in Gorringer, 219.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Paul Draus (with Cornelius Howard). “Spying on an Eyesore: Space, Place, and Urban Decay.” *Research in Urban Sociology*, ed. Ray Hutchison, 59-79. (Stamford, CT: JAI Press Inc., 2000). In this article, Draus gives a camera to a member of a poor urban community (Cornelius Howard), who photographs his everyday environment and discusses them with Draus. What Howard photographs often is at first indecipherable to Draus, who has very different ideas of what in an environment is meaningful—for example, a strip of grass next to a building that represents for Howard the difference between his community’s “miserable grass” and the well-tended grass beside a commercial building. The difference is that the “miserable grass” is “*our* grass,” and because of this, it merits a photograph—an aesthetic form of communicating Howard’s community to Draus.

*so running fast, lead us to watch them one very last time: being dismayed, or admiring, wondering about the permanence of things. Photography appeared to us as a modest way to keep a little bit of this ephemeral state.*—Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre<sup>45</sup>

*In every place there is a secret beauty waiting to be uncovered. As an emerging photographer, I seek to reveal distinctive angles, unique colors, and ways to take you, the observer, into a new reality. I've been inspired by photography since childhood by shuffling through old photos my grandfather took during his military career in Okinawa, Berlin, and many other cities throughout Europe. Additionally, observing the work of many artists at home and abroad instilled fervor for the art within me. From these inspirations, I fashioned myself to be anything but typical, a rule breaker of sorts, hoping to make you freeze time and descend into my compositions.* —Shane Gorski<sup>46</sup>

Yves Marchand's and Romain Meffre's photographs of Detroit's ruins published in a coffee table book make excellent photojournalism or documentary photography, and it is clear from their artists' statement that this was their intention: to document an ephemeral state of "history in suspension." While these photographs may provoke interest in the particular histories of the sites they have photographed, they also invite gawking. Marchand and Meffre are from France, but why they chose to come photograph ruins in Detroit is not effectively communicated by their photos. Their technically good photos provide an opportunity for people who might never find themselves in Detroit, as well as Detroiters who do not venture into abandoned buildings, to see sights they would not otherwise see. There is value in all of that, but unfortunately, they do not offer any insights (and the insights of outsiders can be quite valuable).

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<sup>45</sup> From their artists' statement for their collection of photography, *The Ruins of Detroit*, reprinted on the website <http://www.steidlville.com/books/1050-The-Ruins-of-Detroit.html> and <http://www.marchandandmeffre.com/statement/index.html>. Accessed May 8, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> From the artist's statement, <http://www.flickr.com/people/shanegorski/>. Gorski's photos of the Michigan Central Station may be viewed at <http://rvision.daydreamlabs.com/user/22646823@N08/set/72157604114145363>.

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Their photo of the Michigan Central Station (hereafter “MCS”), for example (which may be viewed at [http://img.timeinc.net/time/photoessays/2009/reliques/reliques\\_01.jpg](http://img.timeinc.net/time/photoessays/2009/reliques/reliques_01.jpg)), is a cropped version of the photo most visitors to the area have also taken, though usually with less technical expertise.

By contrast, the local photographer, Shane Gorski offers insight. His photograph, *Sanctuary* (which may be viewed at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/shanegorski/3525172202/> and is one of many photos he has taken at the MCS), shows us a vision we might not have seen even if we had made it up to the balcony from which he photographed it and looked across the same architectural details on the face of the building. Looking at this and other photos of his, the viewer can tell that he has been grasped by the building and wishes to communicate that poetic intuition with us—as he says in his artist’s statement.

Maritain explains this distinction as a distinction between “useful” and “fine” arts. “[B]eauty, which is of no use, is radiant with intelligence and is as transcendental and infinite as the universe of the intellect. ... The need of the intellect to manifest externally what is grasped within itself, in creative intuition, and to manifest it in beauty, is simply the essential thing in the fine arts.”<sup>47</sup> Maritain does not wish to draw a hard line between the fine and useful arts; in fact this “need of the intellect” to manifest in beauty spills over into the useful arts (ideally, at least) so that beauty surrounds us in our everyday lives. But it is in the work that the artist is able to communicate his or her poetic insight:

The intellect in us strives to engender. It is anxious to produce, not only the inner word, the concept, which remains inside us, but a work at once material and spiritual, like ourselves, and into which something of our soul overflows. Through a natural super-

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<sup>47</sup> Maritain, 41.

abundance the intellect tends to express and utter *outward*, it tends to sing, to manifest itself in a work. ... Left to the freedom of its spiritual nature, the intellect strives to engender in beauty.<sup>48</sup>

“Left to the freedom of its spiritual nature,” the human being surrounds itself with beauty, by whatever means available: from the decorations and doodlings of a child to the design of products (if the concerns of cheap materials and efficiency don’t kill artistic freedom). Since human expression is shaped by culture, outsiders may need to learn to see beauty present in another community (as is often the case when affluent persons visit poor communities).<sup>49</sup> But this is part of the nature of a sign: it needs to be interpreted.

In the case of an art work, says Maritain,

...it is a sign—both a *direct* and a *reversed sign* of the subjective universe of the poet, of his substantial Self obscurely revealed. Just as things grasped by poetic intuition abound in significance, just as being swarms with signs, so the work will also swarm with meanings, and will say more than it is, and will deliver to the mind, at one stroke, the universe in a human countenance.<sup>50</sup>

The ability to be grasped by poetic intuition and to express it in works of art involves artistic virtues, habits that must be cultivated and can be neglected. “Art is a virtue of the practical intellect... The virtuous man is not infallible, because often, while acting, he does not use his virtue; but virtue, of itself, is never wrong.”<sup>51</sup> This is an important caveat, because it allows us to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>49</sup> García-Rivera describes an excellent example of such a cultural difference in *The Community of the Beautiful*, 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> Maritain, 93.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 35-6. He goes on to say that the virtue of art seeks the good of the work, not of the artist—and this is often seen in the photographs of urban explorers, who get themselves into very precarious positions for the sake of their art!

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recognize that even good artists can make bad art. It also helps us distinguish, when considering photography of ruins according to the test of “that which moves the human heart,” between bad art—which seeks to move the heart but might fail—and good photojournalism, which does not (necessarily) seek to move the heart.

### Conclusion

Ruins tell us of a past, reflect to us our present, and, if we are really attentive, give us some hints for a future. These hints may take many forms: warnings, but also reminders, calling us back to identities and habits we ought not to have discarded; defiantly manifesting a forgotten history and dignity; inviting us to attend to traces and promises of beauty among the rubble or to trust the wisdom of our own scars and frailties. They can, if we let them, hold us responsible to the particularities, intimacies, and communities that have engendered in beauty in this particular *place*. The uselessness of ruins is already akin to the uselessness of beauty, and the leisure and play afforded by ruins makes them a potential site for relearning how to look and see the dignity of the human being. Artists may, through poetic intuition and their practice of the virtue of art, draw out these values and help us share their vision.

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