2 El Helicoide

Modern Ruins and the Urban Imaginary

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> While the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not progression but image, suddenly emergent.
>
> —Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 462)

Introduction

The urban imaginary is full of ghosts. Some are fantasies about how cities were or should be; most are about how cities have been lived or imagined. Unlike human ghosts, this urban phantasmagoria is composed of material remains, the leftovers of eras that once filled the cityscape and are now barely backdrops, topographical layers of urban decay. Among these, the ruins of the twentieth century take a special place, for they are the paradoxical witnesses of a future that never happened.

One of the most outstanding of these modern ruins is El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya (Figure 2.1), a futuristic mall turned into a panoptical prison in Caracas, Venezuela. I propose to examine this extraordinary building and its peculiar history as an emblematic case of twentieth-century ruins. Rather than simply referring to past times, modern ruins help constitute our urban sensibilities, dreams, and memories. While much interest has been paid to these new ruins in the last ten years, connecting their literal manifestations to their figurative use as cultural metaphors, as I do here, will hopefully contribute to understanding the huge impact modern ruins have on our imaginary (Olalquiaga, 1992, 2003; Trigg, 2006; Boym, 2010; Hell and Schönle, 2010; Dillon, 2011; Cairns and Jacobs, 2014). The inextricable bond between matter and concepts is particularly relevant to comprehend the role of objects and memory at a moment when the perception of material reality is being dramatically reconfigured by digital technology.

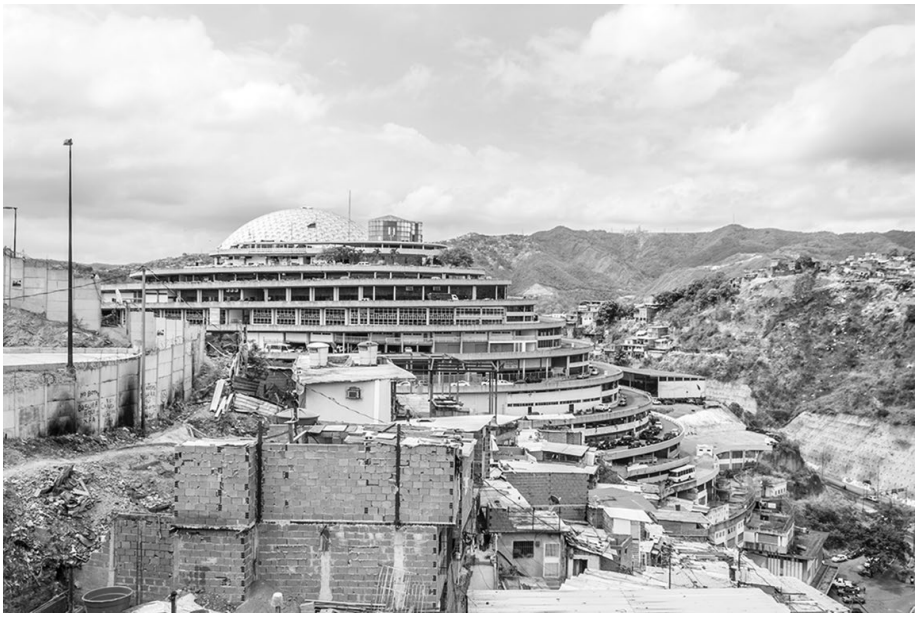

Figure 2.1 Partial view of El Helicoide. Photograph by Julio César Mesa, 2016.

The Trash of History: Walter Benjamin and Modern Ruins

Ruins were given a radical new twist almost a hundred years ago by a philosopher who understood and described the cultural value of things, particularly of modern things, long before anyone else: Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). With his massive and iconoclastic study of the Parisian passages, Benjamin inaugurated an entirely new way of looking at cities, their architecture, and also their oft-ignored urban furniture, as well as those apparently minor elements, such as street signs, that help organize urban space and experience.

Writing during and after World War I, Benjamin depicts a pervasive feeling of loss, which he explores and describes through the world of things, particularly the disappearing preindustrial world that the West European bourgeoisie was desperately clinging to. Benjamin (2008, p. 238) studies this 'extinct world of things'[1] in two iconic places, respectively public and private, that developed in the mid-1800s: the Parisian passages and the interiors of bourgeois households. In the passages and interiors, Benjamin finds an archaeological mine of frozen, crystallized memories for a way of life on the brink of extinction, with buildings and things as its most tangible manifestation.

One of Benjamin's greatest insights was to present these reified memories, these ruined things, not as testimonials of a glorified, monumental past, as is the case with classical ruins, but instead as residues whose deteriorated condition portrays the contradictions and failures of the culture

that produced them. His notion of the 'dialectical image' (Benjamin, 1983/1984), where the modern utopian desire is best apprehended through its material decay, shows how things are caught in a temporal quagmire, between the 'wish image' that produced them and what remains of this original wish after time (Buck-Morss, 1989, pp. 110–158). What lies in waste since the beginning of the twentieth century, the 'trash of history' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 461), is a modernity that was supposed to be ahead or at least in step with, rather than behind, us.

Benjamin's genius is his ability to ride the revolutionary wave of industrial technology, for instance, in his eulogy of photography and cinema in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin, 1968), while clearly showing that, doomed to become material traces, things gain in their postmortem condition a second and more lasting life that adds to, instead of taking away from, their comprehension. How this retrospective 'illumination' takes place is one of the most interesting aspects of Benjamin's dialectical image, an apparently contradictory notion, like many Benjaminian concepts and like much of modernity itself. For the utopian project underlying the wish image cannot be fully perceived in its initial manifestation in an object, but rather in the object's remains. As if the shiny glow of newness blinded us to the imaginary reality of objects, a reality that can only be revealed when they enter the realms of experience and history.

Like a photographic negative, an object's demise acts as the concrete surface through which its positive rendering can actually be seen. The wish image then becomes dialectical, illuminating its founding desire, much like Benjamin's famous 'angel of history' (Benjamin, 1968), thrown back by the blast of a future that it stares at in disbelief.

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.
>
> (Benjamin, 1999, p. 462)

In this way, the dialectical image 'crystallizes' past and present into one image (such as the modern ruin) that both contains and surpasses them.

The paradox of a future that did not make it to the present, yet quickly became a thing of the past, can be appreciated in another Benjaminian notion key to the world of things and memories: the aura. Presented as a conceptual patina that covers preindustrial culture (objects, but also people and events) and confers upon them a one-of-a-kindness all the more valuable in the age of mechanical copies, the aura is defined by Benjamin as 'the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 222). This is not a spatial distance, as Benjamin takes care to underline, but rather a temporal or, more

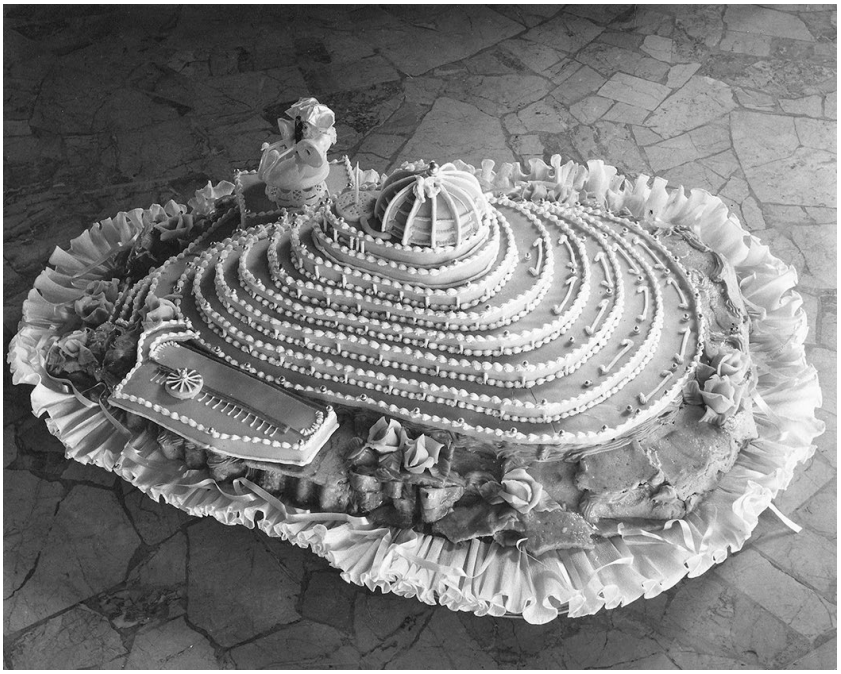

Figure 2.2 Architect Dirk Bornhorst's wedding cake in the shape of El Helicoide, Caracas, 1957. Courtesy of PROYECTO HELICOIDE/ Archivo Bornhorst.

specifically, an epochal one: the auratic object can be physically near and yet still convey a remoteness that places it at several removes from its onlookers.

This epochal distance, a blink to preindustrial uniqueness, points to what Benjamin distinguishes as 'cult' and 'exhibition' values (1968, pp. 223–225). These are the ritualistic and display equivalents of use value in that they are (or still were in the early twentieth century) related to direct experience; therefore, they are far from being marketable goods and farther even from the exchange value that determines worth in contemporary consumer society. The aura of a thing makes it an object of desire, raising its status from the familiarity of the immediate and known into the more exclusive and exciting one of distance and fetishism. The object becomes sacred in a nonreligious way. The aura may also be considered dialectical: it is distant while being close, and it can only be near from afar. As occurs with most use value, it begins to be cherished at a moment when singularity starts receding in the background. In this sense, the aura is a cultural ruin, which is precisely how Benjamin envisioned it, as he believed that the aura surrounding the extinct world of things was being literally hammered out of existence by mechanical repetition (Olalquiaga, 1998, pp. 80–95).

Whether dead or alive, the world of things survived and multiplied, creating a cultural overload that we can hardly handle 150 years after the

beginning of the industrial revolution. It is a world of excess and waste in which the lifespan of things drastically diminished, not only because they can be immediately replaced, but mainly because contemporary things are often made for a spectacular or performative purpose, quite different from the ritualistic, aesthetic, or functional parameters of previous times. The world of things became extinct, yes, but in an ontological manner: things quickly become obsolete and useless, and the vacuum their active meaning—that is, whatever connects us to material reality in a meaningful way, whether use, cult, or affect—leaves behind is filled by an interminable chain of wish images that are never satisfactory enough.

This compulsive condition is exacerbated by high technology and its creation of a virtual reality where things are ubiquitous yet intangible. Industrial proliferation pales in comparison to the myriad replicas produced by digital technology, each outdoing the previous one in the scope of its reach and potential impact. Consequently, material things become the vestiges of a time when touch, or direct contact, still prevailed as a form of human perception and connection (Olalquiaga, 2002; Bruno, 2014). In this sense, one could argue that digital technology has reinforced the aura, much like industrial reproduction started doing a century and a half ago. For virtual reality is itself a form of distant nearness where things are within grasp but not physically there. Such intangibility generates a longing for what cannot be touched, as if concrete matter held a certain degree of reality that otherwise escapes us.

Material reality, in other words, becomes infused with an aura of 'realness' where perception is no longer a question of 'seeing is believing', but rather 'touching is believing'. In this context, it is hardly surprising that material remains, such as ruins, should hold a special attraction for a culture experiencing a virtual overdose. Modern ruins are a double, if not triple, ruin: the ruin of a utopian future, of concrete matter, and of things, like El Helicoide, that rematerialized in an unexpected manner, acquiring through ruination a life of their own. Modern ruins may be said to induce a new form of memory, one that, rather than anguished by the evanescence of human life or history, focuses on the brittleness of a material reality dear to the modern spirit.

El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya

I would like to illustrate this theoretical framework with a building that has haunted me since I was a teenager and which to this day remains one of the most unusual places on the planet. El Helicoide de la Roca Tarpeya was built in Caracas, Venezuela, in the late 1950s as a state-of-the-art mall. Named after its peculiar shape, this monumental building was constructed on and around a hill, La Roca Tarpeya, which was carved to fit it like a glove (Olalquiaga, 2013/2014; Villota Peña, forthcoming). The building is encircled by two miles of vehicular ramps,

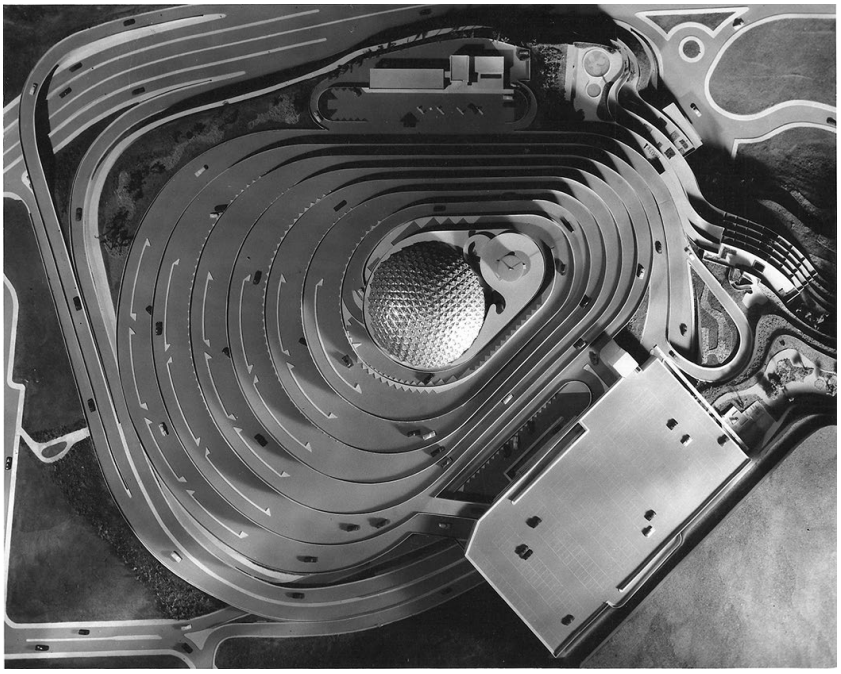

Figure 2.3 One of the models of the original 1956 project. Courtesy of PROYECTO HELICOIDE/Archivo Bornhorst.

which were meant to provide on-the-spot access to El Helicoide's retail businesses, combining two major elements of the 'American way of life': highway transportation and shopping centers.

Venezuela's oil industry was entering its golden age, and the country was eager to join the fast industrial modernity led by its northern neighbor. Combining the latter's pragmatism with Latin American extravagance, El Helicoide's futuristic design was so striking that the photos of its model were published worldwide and the building became the star of MoMA's 1961 show 'Roads'. As Roads' curators, Bernard Rudofsky and Arthur Drexler, state in the show's presentation: 'It is worth noting that this adventurous enterprise has been undertaken in Latin America rather than in the USA, where both highways and shopping centers are among our most ambitious efforts' (qtd. in Bornhorst, 2007, p. 26).

International fame notwithstanding, El Helicoide fell prey to political and financial disruptions and was never completed. Decades of abandon, failed projects, and informal occupations ensued. Originally a private initiative, the Venezuelan State took over the building in 1975 and ten years later gave the Venezuelan intelligence police a temporary permit to use it. Since 1985, El Helicoide has been a center of police training and political imprisonment, a penal character that has only increased with time, since the police presence there multiplied in the last decade, making this oppressive body El Helicoide's longest occupant.[2] Ironically, the gradual transformation of the building into a disciplinary

center has been largely ignored by the general public: One of the most striking aspects of El Helicoide is how invisible this monumental building is at the local and national levels, despite or maybe precisely because of its tortuous character.[3] Until recently, few knew or remembered what this enormous structure was originally meant to be and how it has been used during the last thirty years.

In 2014, however, the building's occupation by different national security forces was thrown into public light by the brutal governmental repression of that year's student protests, when hundreds of students were taken to El Helicoide, where many are still being held two years later. Still, 'El Helicoide' usually appears in the national news only as a name, or at most as the entrance to a disturbing place. Rarely shown, the building, as a visual artifact, is dissociated from its use. Quite literally Caracas's white elephant in the corner, the structure that *Time* magazine dubbed an enormous 'stack of flying saucers' ('Art: Shapes of the Future', 1957, p. 90) managed to remain alive in people's minds during the first twenty years after its construction was paralyzed. Yet after many failed private and public recovery projects, and once police intelligence settled in the building's two lower levels in 1985, El Helicoide started fading out of the city's imaginary, a fate all too common for many monumental modern projects that either did not make it or whose grandeur fell out of step with their time. Always moving forward, modernity is unforgiving toward its own legacy, which it can leave behind without a second thought.

For most citizens of Caracas, El Helicoide is yet another fantastic project gone awry, and there is no point in recovering it from oblivion. This public dismissal is furthered by the enormous expansion of the *barrios*, or shantytowns, that surround the building. Housing the densely populated communities of San Agustín del Sur and San Pedro, the barrios around El Helicoide, among the oldest and nowadays most dangerous in Caracas, have grown in the same proportion as the building has faded. Contrary to popular belief, these barrios were not fully developed when El Helicoide was built, but they had been in formation since the mid-1800s, housing the rural migration from the interior of the country to the capital (Marrero, 2012). In this sense, the area is emblematic of the modern exodus to capital cities.

Morphing with the barrios' informal architecture, El Helicoide appears as a continuation of those irregular structures haphazardly made with bricks and tin roofs that hang from the hills in multiple levels, each floor built by a different generation. Conceived for temporary transit, the barrios have risen and surrounded the structure in the last six decades. Their architectural eclecticism contrasts with El Helicoide's solid curves, yet simultaneously blends with the building's raw concrete exterior and arbitrary furnishings, creating an extremely textural, topographical continuum. The building and the barrios act as inverted mirror images of one another, with the shanties reflecting El Helicoide's never-ending downward spiral.

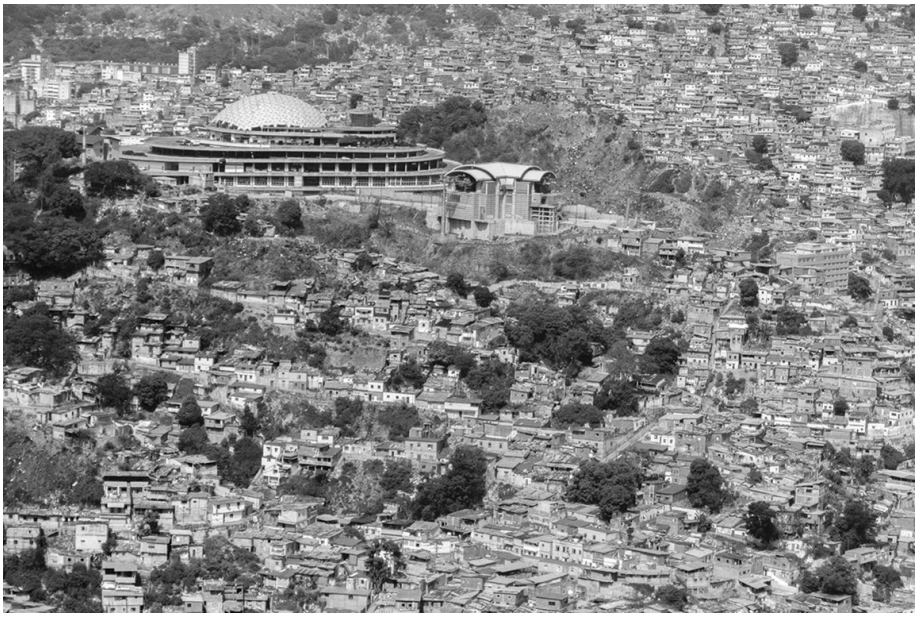

Figure 2.4 El Helicoide surrounded by barrios. Photograph by Julio César Mesa.

El Helicoide is the quintessential modern ruin. Built as a wish image, a spiral ascending to consumer heaven, it experienced a rapid demise that quickly transformed it into a dialectical image, displaying some of the main problems of a drastic modernization: a disproportioned commercial ambition with little or no concern for its impact on the surrounding communities, and a desire to conquer time through the taming of space in the reshaping of nature. Few places in the world portray such a frontal, dramatic contrast as El Helicoide and its neighbors. Together they form an extraordinary emblem of modernity's utopian dreams and their dystopian reality.

Despite their enormous disparities, El Helicoide and the barrios are both victims of an unbridled modernity that makes them equally invisible to the rest of the city. It is as if the building's contiguity to the shantytowns homogenized them, establishing a metonymical chain of ruination that goes from architectural and social failure to decay and finally trash. Despite their closeness, El Helicoide and the communities of San Agustín del Sur and San Pedro barely communicate, relating to each other as a fortress to its surrounding town, except that this particular fortress, rather than protect, towers threateningly over its neighbors from the heights of a hi-tech police surveillance system.

El Helicoide's failure and the rise of the shantytowns take the dialectical image one degree further, since this modern ruin is only partially abandoned, or rather half-occupied, making it a 'living ruin'[4] that reproduces the reasons and consequences of its tragic destiny: discontinuity, abandonment, indifference. Whatever the many reasons for its ongoing

fiasco, El Helicoide was broken from the very onset, a fate it shares with the Tower of Babel, one of its architectural inspirations. Legend and reality intertwine continually in El Helicoide, as if to make clear that things, no matter how modern or innovative, are bound up with the history that precedes them.[5]

As a leftover from Venezuela's impressive 1950s and 1960s modernist thrust, El Helicoide is a cultural residue, a material memory of what should have been but never was. It belongs to an architectural legacy that succumbed to a similar destiny, as is the case of the Universidad Central de Venezuela, whose main campus, located in the heart of Caracas, is a gem of modernist architecture that was declared World Heritage by the UNESCO in 2000, yet lies in sad disrepair. That bountiful moment of the city's wholesale modernization was forgotten, not only for political reasons, but mainly because Venezuela suffers from the modern *malaise* of instantaneous gratification, for which continuity and maintenance are secondary. What matters instead is the need to move on as if there were no tomorrow, or rather, as if tomorrow were all there is—the exact opposite of memory.

Cultural Ruins: Residual, Leftover, and Abject

I would now like to outline a tentative chronology of what might be called 'ruinous' concepts—fragments, residues, leftovers—in contemporary cultural theory. The almost simultaneous emergence of these concepts in different disciplines during the twentieth century indicates their relevance for a new understanding of the relationship between time, memory, and materiality. This phenomenon may be understood as the consequence of the vertiginous rise and fall of modern dreams and their wake of war-ravaged, industrially obliterated, and/or abandoned cities, as well as of an unprecedented production of short-span objects and ever-changing spatial arrangements.

While Benjamin was the first to apply the category of ruins—until then reserved to classical monuments, whether real or imaginary—to a modern urban setting, the idea of ruins as cultural traces rather than remains of bygone times derives from a discipline that marked the nineteenth century: archaeology, the science of discovering buried things. In turn, archaeology inspired what became one of the great human sciences of the modern era, psychoanalysis, the art of revealing hidden meanings. Sigmund Freud, a great collector and reader of archaeology, must be thanked once and over again for presenting the human mind as a repository of memories that are recycled ad infinitum.

As witnessed by Benjamin's distinction of two types of memory, the conscious and the unconscious, in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' and 'The Image of Proust', respectively, psychoanalysis underlies his extrapolation of archaeology to modernity. Benjamin's theory of ruins is

quite literally an archaeology of modern culture, where unrealized or degraded wish images constitute diverse urban layers according to their temporal pertinence or actuality. In short, Freud and Benjamin, two of the twentieth century's most influential Western thinkers, inaugurated with scarcely a few years difference psychological and cultural analyses in which space and time are articulated as active, intertwined agents of meaning: space as a *locus* or place where meanings materialize (however imaginarily); time as a continuum (however nonlinear or arbitrary) in which such meanings are displaced.

The theory of cultural ruins has its second great exponent in Raymond Williams (1921–1988), who in the late 1970s distinguished between primary and secondary cultural circuits, with their corresponding 'residual' and 'emergent' sensibilities (Williams, 1977, pp. 121–127).[6] Williams showed how cultural hegemony is not merely a question of domination, but rather a balance, albeit precarious, between the discourses and objects in the foreground of cultural exchange and those that either have not reached this primary circuit or have fallen off it, yet are no less culturally active. He calls the latter 'residual', for they are often considered out of fashion and useless, much like modern ruins. Far beyond a simple repository of past and discarded objects and experiences, cultural residues make up secondary and even tertiary circuits of things that revalidate and re-create objects and meanings that have been excluded from both mainstream and so-called 'high' culture.

These secondary circuits can be extremely alive and also provide multiple discoveries, pleasures, and social subversion, as shown by Tim Edensor (2005), one of the few authors to explore at length the physical, sensorial dimension of modern ruins, which he studies as places of alternative meaning formation. Yet what is more fascinating about residual circuits, I believe, is how the objects they circulate, in their dual capacity as previously 'useless' and now 'recovered', are frequently defined by excess: as 'useless' they are a cultural surplus and have little currency; as 'recovered' their newly found signification is not immediate but rather 'second-degree', as Roland Barthes (1972) would have called it, in their reference to a certain period or style.

Residual objects are excessive in their peculiar combination of past and present, where neither is fully enacted while both are completely at play, feeding off each other in an endless game of mirrors. This excessive quality enables cultural residues to transcend the human subjectivity that reduces them to objects, permitting us to regard them as things instead. In Bill Brown's formulation, 'Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)' (2001, p. 5). Excess contributes then to the thingness of cultural residues, allowing them to surpass their previous status as objects.

Whether as not-enough (junk) or as too-much (trash), cultural residues are usually tittering on the edge of downfall. In consistence with our culture's unbridled production and fascination with continuous replacement, even at a symbolic level excess is an overflow of meaning. In excess, meaning transgresses the limits of signification and becomes senseless; therefore, it is highly pleasurable but also threatening to the point of inspiring disgust. As such, the lack of meaning paves the way to its refusal, the abject. Georges Bataille (1991) was one of the first to recognize this cultural ambivalence towards excess, which he proposed as *la part maudite*, the damned part or 'accursed share': a surplus of cultural energy that must be disposed of so that it does not turn destructively on the society that produced it. However, it is Julia Kristeva who best explains why excess produces such an intense rejection. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) proposes that the abject is an idealized object that fell out of favor: It is a 'fallen object' where desire turned into rejection. She claims that this experience originates in the excess of maternal fusion, which generates its opposite, a violent craving for detachment.

Inspiring fascination and repulsion, the abject is crucial for understanding why once beloved things are discarded. Like the dialectical image, abjection is not the product of linear or mechanical cause–effect logic, but rather of a culture that is organic and subject to contradictions, ambivalences, and imperfections. In this sense, the abject is intrinsically connected to the last of the ruination concepts I am threading here. It is the Lacanian *reste* or leftover, the psychic surplus that determines desire. Better known as the *objet petit a* (Lacan, 2014), the leftover is one of Jacques Lacan's more important and complicated concepts (Olalquiaga, 2008). Briefly, the *objet petit a* is what remains after human beings have been socialized, that is, after our minds have integrated the Symbolic order (namely, language and the patriarchal authority it represents). This social integration, described by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is far from perfect, and while Freud (1989) sees it as the origin of neuroses (in becoming social we lose touch with our drives and are fated to be walking bundles of nerves), Lacan, who continues and expands Freud's thinking, takes the Symbolic a step further and claims the lack it generates as the root of all desire.

When we are born, according to Lacan, we experience the world around us in a very direct, sensorial way that is not organized in any shape and form. This moment is determined by a fusional maternal relationship, producing an Imaginary situation in which the drives and sexuality are predominant. As we are socialized by our integration into the Symbolic, this fusion is disrupted, suppressing our primal drives, but also psychic dimensions such as the Imaginary. We are then left with a substantial lack, *le manque*. Desire would be based on this lack that we

obsessively try to fill during our lives but are doomed never to satisfy, since desire is by definition an unfulfilled condition.

Lacan's *manque* is the Imaginary that escapes Symbolic organization. That remnant is *le reste*, the leftover, the *objet petit a* that represents a reduced maternal alterity (the 'small a') whose enormous Imaginary power determines our unconscious lives. In other words, while desire may be determined by lack, the search for what we do not have, its peculiar configuration (our likes and dislikes) is constituted by excess, that Imaginary yet, for this same reason, extremely potent 'damned part' where Bataille recognized an obscure area that culture is unable to handle.

Lacan's leftover is to the psyche what Williams's residues are to culture. Together the psychic leftover and the cultural residue converge in the Benjaminian ruin, whose abject character materializes as modern decay—whether as Bataille's energy surplus or Kristeva's fallen Other. Far more than simple historical remains, modern ruins represent the devastated landscape of our contemporary cultural unconscious, portraying the failures of modernity's utopian aspirations in their spatial-temporal language. Rugged fragments of fantastic futures, these ruins are usually fetishized as the only palpable remnants of the period that created or rejected them wholesale for presenting this harsh truth unvarnished. In either case, as things they are forgotten, since their worth is measured mainly by the cultural failure they represent, as opposed to by what they are in and of themselves: material remains whose fragmentary and decayed condition is intrinsic to the modern dystopia.

Modernity and Memory

Memory and modernity are almost antithetical terms. Advocating the dangerous notion of the blank slate, twentieth-century modernity wanted nothing to do with a past whose traditions bogged it down, forcing it to look back when all it wanted was to go forward to that new time called the future. A modern invention issued along with the notion of progress (conceived as a gradual improvement over the past based on industrial development), the idea of the future broke with the cyclical time that characterized Western culture for centuries. Cyclical time is infinite; it is the constant return of the same. As such, it has little place for novelty and change. Modern time, on the other hand, is linear, or so it pretends, moving from the past toward the future with occasional stops in the present (Calinescu, 1987).

El Helicoide is a traumatic memory in a city that specializes in erasing or ignoring all traces of the past. This monumental building changed the cityscape forever, yet its dramatic failure has been repressed so completely that the rest of Caracas is barely aware of its existence, considering it at

most an eyesore, a painful reminder of a Venezuela that almost made it to the top. And just like repressed memories, El Helicoide's bleak history, which many believe the result of a curse, keeps repeating itself, as if the building was fated to doom.

Failed, incomplete, occupied by armed forces and political prisoners, surrounded by shantytowns, El Helicoide has been left to rot away, a nasty leftover of a splendid impulse, a fallen object. Every so often, El Helicoide is proposed as the symbol of Caracas, whose once prosperous condition concealed a harsh, violent metropolis. Nowadays, the building represents a country divided by its inability to reconcile differences in the name of a common good. A modern Tower of Babel, El Helicoide seems to fulfill the destiny inherent in its mythical referent: a tower made to reach the heavens, whose ambitious builders, condemned to not understand each other, left incomplete. An unwilling tribute to modern *vanitas*, El Helicoide is the memory of an irregular modernity tucked away in the relative obscurity of those things that are thrown out, but that never cease to taunt us as a reminder not of what was but of what could have been.

Since their appearance in the early twentieth century, modern ruins have troubled both the urban landscape and its imaginary. A cultural paradox and material surplus, these ruins broke with the classic tradition of monumental ruins as historical vestiges (whether real or imaginary, as in the case of the fake ruins of the eighteenth century), inaugurating instead a new category of ruins that occupy a heretofore unknown temporal space: that of a future that became past without going through the present. Furthermore, and against the modernist dictum of straight lines and minimal visual distraction, a rationalistic impulse geared toward the industrial maxim of mechanical efficiency, these ruins literally 'littered' the cityscape with their eroding dreams, shapes, and textures.

Modern ruins are the dark face of modernity's bright moon. In this capacity they materialize all the contradictions of a discourse that had as little place for failure as for a past from which it wanted to rid itself wholesale. Yet these ruins' interest lies not only in how they provide a counterweight to the modern illusion of untainted progress as dialectical images, but, and perhaps more importantly in this early twenty-first century, in how they embody a material dimension that acquires increasing cultural relevance as it becomes secondary in the face of a technological, virtual reality. Modern ruins carry the burden of conveying a physical reality whose rough, gritty, fragmentary, and residual character recalls that organic nature which industrial modernity set out to conquer. This reality now comes back residually in the conceptual and material leftovers of a modernity whose forward thrust attempted, against all odds, to erase the memory of things.

Notes

This chapter is one of three dedicated to El Helicoide. The other two are: C. Olalquiaga (forthcoming), 'El Helicoide: Venezuela's Emblematic Downward Spiral', in J. Gosseye, T. Avermaete, and B. de Meulder (eds), *Acculturating the Shopping Centre* (Hampshire: Ashgate); and C. Olalquiaga (forthcoming), 'El Helicoide and La Roca Tarpeya', in C. Olalquiaga and L. Blackmore (eds), *El Helicoide: From Futuristic Mall to Panoptic Prison* (New York: Urban Research).

1 Jephcott's translation (see Benjamin, 2008) uses 'outlived' as opposed to 'extinct', which is the way this concept is usually referred to.
2 El Helicoide's two lower levels were assigned to the DISIP (Dirección de los Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención, now SEBIN, Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional) for fifteen years in 1985, but it remains there to this day. The UNEFA (Universidad Nacional Experimental Politécnica de la Fuerza Armada Bolivariana) has used the middle levels since 2006 and the UNES (Universidad Nacional Experimental Bolivariana de la Seguridad) from 2010 to 2014. The top level, conditioned in 1992 for the Department of Renewable Resources (Ministerio de Recursos Renovables), was turned over to the DISIP's directorate, which shares it with the PNB (Policía Nacional Bolivariana).
3 In an effort to bring El Helicoide and its history back into the public light, I founded the nonprofit organization PROYECTO HELICOIDE in 2013: www.proyectohelicoide.com.
4 The term goes back to the nineteenth century when it was used in travel descriptions, starting with O'Shea's *Guide to Spain and Portugal* (1868), which saw many editions. See also Lara Eggleton's '"A Living Ruin": Palace, City, and Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Travel Descriptions of Granada' (2013). My thanks to László Munteán and Lilly Handley for providing these references.
5 For the contradictions of modernity in Venezuela, see Alfredo Coronil (1997).
6 The 1970s witnessed a surge of interest in modern ruins, particularly with Paul Virilio's groundbreaking *Bunker Archaeology* (1994) and the industrial typologies of the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher (1970).

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