

Book reviews

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Paul Dobraszczyk, *The Dead City: Urban Ruins and the Spectacle of Decay*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017; 272 pp.: 9781784537166, £72.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Pablo Arboleda, University of Glasgow, UK

‘Gasping, dying – but somehow still alive ...’. This excerpt, borrowed from the British band The Smiths’ 1985 song ‘Well I Wonder’, may well resonate throughout Paul Dobraszczyk’s book, for whom the ‘Dead City’ is not that dead. This work aims to build bridges between discourses in which ruins are perceived as objects of desire, and condemnatory visions that consider such romanticisation counterproductive for ignoring the political and socio-economic meanings behind abandonment. Building on the thought that modern ruins are usually seen as the antithesis to the expected promises of neoliberal progress, the author states that the way in which we imagine urban ruination ‘impacts upon how we approach and plan for it in real life’ (p. 1). Conveniently repeated and stressed, this is the main argument of the book and is indeed a major contribution if we consider that, since the academic ruin lust started to emerge a decade ago, scholars have attempted to find the practical utility derived from our increasing fascination with ruins.

Dobraszczyk’s introductory chapter is one of the most complete reviews in terms of literatures and debates regarding ruin

imagery/imaginary. The rest of the book unfolds with a series of case studies that the author divides into three different sections: ‘Histories’ (London, Manchester), ‘Explorations’ (Varosha, Chernobyl) and ‘Futures’ (Detroit, several unfinished geographies). In my opinion, these divisions are not as rigid as they may seem, and the fact that themes are actually intermingled can only be understood as the demonstration of ruin studies’ rich complexity. Be that as it may, what stands out clearly is the author’s focus on the renewed, fetishising perspective towards ruin aesthetics – something that, being controversial, should ultimately serve as an ignition to future re-appropriations. It is true that, in this book, most of said re-appropriations remain in a brief, desirable and speculative sphere, but, far from seeing this as a limitation, it must be interpreted as an invitation to *act* in our cities (as demonstrated in the chapter dedicated to the artistic operations in Detroit).

For many of us ruin-researchers, the experience of *being there* and its subsequent representation has commonly been a first step to tackling deeper enquiries on ruination. At the core of this investigation there lies the role of urban exploration, which Dobraszczyk liberates from its often denigrated heroic constraints and superficial aura to intentionally place it as a valid research method with the potential to be sufficiently analytical and ‘more inclusive’ (p. 15). This is something that I have myself examined to the extent of categorising urban

within every chapter. Based on the enriching narrative power of ruins, each of these chapters begins with the history of the places in question, and finishes with constructive recommendations on how to repurpose them. Since the sites studied in this book have long been characterised by ruination, the most interesting feature in Dobraszcyk's thought is his emphasis on incorporating architectural decay – as a representative, cultural value – into any envisaged project. Only through this will the past potentially resonate into the future, affording our cities to heal their wounds while negotiating identities – a process that will surely require accepting (and subsequently overcoming) failures, placing ourselves as a better society when mirrored in the *humility* of modern ruins. Hence, this book makes a great contribution to urban studies since it should be read as an actual push towards the inevitable tendency within ruin scholarship: to focus on existing practices where abandoned buildings are being re-appropriated while respecting their condition as ruins. This is a challenge that, just recently, DeSilvey (2017) and Sandler (2016) have started to explore, and it will allow us to materialise the poetics of ruins acquired in previous years.

The book has certain limitations, but it is worth mentioning that Dobraszcyk has been wise enough to note them himself, especially when he admits that this is a Western-orientated contribution, and that ruin theory is still lacking further attention from the Global South. Similarly, he notes his role as an outsider, claiming for locals' empowerment to build up their own stake. I would add that a wider interdisciplinary scope is missing, where voices from heritage studies and contemporary archaeology may well have supplemented the author's discourse. Since the book is committed to ruin imagery, it would have benefited from higher-quality coloured pictures. Also, the chosen referencing style where endnotes and

bibliography are indistinctively mixed makes the reading at times a little less fluid than it could be.

Be that as it may, this book is compellingly rounded, and it will be of great interest to those who love ruins because we think they are one of the few spaces of hope in the on-going neoliberalisation of our cities. Yet if the city is dead, then long live the city!

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Monia Cappuccini, *Austerity and Democracy in Athens: Crisis and Community in Exarchia*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; 219 pp.: 978-3-319-64127-0, £72.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Georgia Alexandri, Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain

I would never in my life have imagined that a book about the neighbourhood in which I was born and raised would be published in English by an Italian anthropologist who would capture local struggles just the way they are: absolutely rational, just and humane. This book directly depicts the multiple and multi-dimensional symbolisms the place of Exarchia has for emancipatory