

The landscape that Present the Unpresentable -- The Tempo-spatial Narrative in Chiayi's Ruins --

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Abstract

The paper deals with the theoretical insight of ruin in the tempo-spatial formation of Chiayi County in Taiwan. The argument of this paper could help urban design discipline in terms of conceptual identification and polemic redefinition. By choosing various sites of Chiayi County, taking photos on these places, looking into historical documentary and consulting with theoretical literature of ruin, the paper tries to explore the possibility of incorporating tempo-spatial references of ruin with design thinking in the context of Chiayi County's metamorphosis. According to preliminary visiting of ruinous sites in Chiayi, the research divides them into three categories: industrial ruins, ruins in the City Park and countryside ruins. Following this categorization, the study tries to argue that the conception of ruin combines with Genius Loci and Zeitgeist, with a multiple projection of tempo-spatial connotation, which also concerns with the reflection of social and cultural aspects. The study starts with characteristic investigation of various ruinous sites and continues by in-depth interpreting of these landscapes of ruin, as well as a purposeful conclusion on the significance which ruins represent in design thinking and practice.

Keywords: ruin; Genius Loci; Zeitgeist

1. Introduction

Chiayi County is a tropical area located in southern Taiwan. Comparing to other better-developing counties, its recent development has not been dramatic, thus leaving many ruinous sites untouched. From the study of Chiayi's ruinous sites, the living experiences of various historical periods can be identified, and their tempo-spatial formations and cultural representations can be investigated. On the other hand, recent development of Chiayi County has paid much attention to reinvesting ruinous sites for tourist purpose; this study could also provide supplementary information to this kind of development.

Based on specific characters and formations in various sites, the study divides the target ruins into three categories: industrial ruins, ruins in the City Park and countryside ruins. This categorization is followed by an investigation of tempo-spatial transformation of different locations. The investigation is based on the concepts of Genius Loci and Zeitgeist. Genius Loci, the spirit of the place, are about ruin's association with history, memory and place-making. On the other hand, the Zeitgeist is about contemporary spirit, which provides an antithesis of ruin and a conceptual base for all kinds of newness and avant-garde. From these concepts, the study will explore the multiple connotations of the ruin. In short, the study tries to argue that the ruin, as a solid object and a specific concept, could register various notions for design thinking and practice, as well as provide a foundation for further spatial interventions.

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2. The Industrial Ruins



Figure1. The Ruin of Chiayi Distillery.

The photo shows the tanks for raw materials in Chiayi Distillery. This distillery was built by a Japanese businessman in 1916 and transferred to Japanese colonial government six years later. After World War II, the distillery was reorganized by Taiwan's government. It was expanded in 1967 because of a higher consumer demand, and stopped production in 1999 because the production line had been moved to another location. In 2003 the distillery was transformed into the Chiayi Cultural and Creative Industries Park.¹ Therefore the ruin of old distillery has been transformed under the strategies of cultural industry and city marketing. In this context, the ruin of Chiayi distillery is hoped to resurrect like a phoenix from the ash.

However, the purpose of the study is to extract multiple connotations of the ruin from surveyed sites, and the study's inspiration partly comes from a lecture given by Peter Eisenman in Rice University in 2010. In the lecture Eisenman emphasized the importance of *Genius Loci* and *Zeitgeist* in architectural formation. He also used these two notions as prologue to explain his recent work *City of Culture* in Spain. Generally *Genius Loci* mean the spirit of the place, and the word represents a way to understanding special qualities of the place. In various cultural contexts, the *Genius Loci* have been understood in different ways. As for the *Zeitgeist*, it could be the cultural dominant of the new social and economic conjuncture, or stand as the richest allegorical and hermeneutic vehicles for some new description of the system. (Rapaport quotes Jameson, 1993:352) In the case of Chiayi Distillery, the *Genius Loci* could lie on its transformation from Japanese firm, with all the colonial spatial representation, into a contemporary one, with different demands and facilities. The time and becoming have engraved in various producing facilities and formed the spirit of the place. On the other hand, the culture-led strategy for urban regeneration has become the *Zeitgeist* for the distillery. The very name of the newly created Cultural and Creative Industries Park has all the allegorical and hermeneutic meaning for the new perception of the contemporary system. Besides, Eisenman's lecture talked about three kind of capital, and he considered his *City of Culture* belonged to the third kind of capital, the late capital; therefore he coined his lecture as "Lateness and the End of Crisis." In this light, the ruin of Chiayi distillery belongs to earlier capital and it is produced by capital abandonment of site of industrial production. It can be considered as the mark of capitalism in that the site is derelict and it is no longer profitable. (Mah, 2010: 399) Furthermore, the industrial

¹ <http://chiayi.cca.gov.tw/>

ruins are rooted on various socio-economic reasons. One of the important issues about industrial ruins is that the regeneration often transforms the socio-economic landscape of the sites. In the distillery case, the regeneration has changed it into a cultural venue and design incubator, as well as various exhibition spaces and performance stages. This is a tempo-spatial transformation of global level, which is symptomatic by similar culture-led development strategies employed by various cities in different countries.



Figure2. The Chiayi Distillery under Regeneration

For the industrial ruins, the reflection of their decays could be tinged with sadness, loss or a sense of nostalgia. They also evoke localized and living memory. These feelings and memory are essential ingredients of Genius Loci. The regeneration of the distillery actually combines the memory of an old industrial ruin and the experience of a new Cultural and Creative Industries Park. In other words this urban strategy merges both Genius Loci and the Zeitgeist. The result is a new social and economic conjuncture partly dominated by a globalized cultural industry.



Figure3. The Shinshin Ceramic Factory under Ali Mountain

Another noteworthy industrial ruin in Chiayi is the Shinshin Ceramic Factory, which lies on the bottom of world-renowned Ali Mountain. Facing scenic greenery, the factory occupies pivotal roadside location toward

Ali Mountain, a famous tourist destination and home of aboriginal tribe Chou. Currently the factory stops to operate and gradually shows deteriorating appearance. Its specific character possesses a kind of abstract connotation. The photo here reminds us of special conception comes from Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic work treats industrial ruins as an abstraction. When they work with abandoned industrial structures, these structures immediately become conceptual and disassociated with the industrial context of the productive process. (Krivy, 2010: 841) Workers and the surroundings of the factory are excluded from the photo. The result is the objects reduced into isolated forms and shapes. This way of operation creates a kind of Zeitgeist with new cultural implication, as well as a new design thinking and practice. This disassociation with local context makes the ruin a new

artistic representation, transcending it into a totally new object without the connotation of decaying. This working of *Zeitgeist* testifies Jameson's notion that it stands as the richest allegorical and hermeneutic vehicle for some new description of the system.



Figure4. The Shinshin Ceramic Factory with ceramic truck passing by.

Conversely, this photo shows a strong sensation of *Genius Loci*. A ceramic truck passes by, but it does not come from or go into the factory. The irony is framed by natural surroundings and the nostalgia of an industrial feat is raised. This notion of *Genius Loci* could provide an experimental ground for narrative possibilities and tempo-spatial interpretations. Furthermore, since the heritage tourism has expanded to more recent sites such as industrial ruins, (Rudd and Davis, 1998:85-86) this kind of factory has possibility to become a specific tourist destination. The old technology and industrial ruins could produce an unique sense of nostalgia. Industrial heritage such as this may become popular site for tourist industry because there has been a long time since the separation of the public from industrial sites. Besides, studying this kind of industrial ruin produces a fascinating narrative possibility regarding details of technology and its cultural connotation, as well as enhances the sense of specific place.

While looking into these two studied ruins, both sites are related with a cultural geography of de-industrialized landscapes. If the Shinshin Ceramic Factory site can be opened for general public, it will, like Chiayi Distillery, interpret specific industry's material artifice and producing processes. This kind of interpretation can improve the identity of industrial era, create a sense of place and help create a culture of heritage. On the other hand, the consideration of opening old industrial site to public might face some awkward situations. According to Summerby-Murray: "The heritage discourse is constructed through the creation of memory and the processes of commodification and consumption...The resulting landscapes...with a tendency to be overly romanticized and sanitized or at odds with contemporary images..."(Summerby-Murray, 2002: 48) Thus the commodification of industrial past for contemporary consumption in forms of tourist heritage requires more consideration. With the creation of spontaneous or fake nostalgia, the sensation of ruins might become superficial and media-oriented. The ruinous site after transformation might become a kind of simulation which weakens real living experience. Moreover, the study tries to argue that specific ruin's contemporary spirit, the *Zeitgeist*, may depend on well understanding and expressing of it spirit of place, the *Genius Loci*. As Herbertson's stated:

There is a *genius loci* as well as a *Zeitgeist*--- a spirit of a place as well as of a time.... The spirit of a place changes with the spirit

of the time; it alters with man's relation to the region. The historian has to reckon with both in his great cycle; the geographer has to consider both in trying to understand the present regional consciousness. (Loukaki quotes Herbertson, 1997: 308)

In terms of honestly reflecting its historical role, the ruin of Shinshin Ceramic Factory may have the potential to reproduce both *Genius Loci* and *Zeitgeist*, which is connected by local living experience and global trend of industrial transformation. It represents a tempo-spatial conception with connotation in industrial reminding, place identification and cultural redefinition. In a site surrounded by greenery near Ali Mountain, it could be a valuable effort to preserve the factory's original scene after deindustrialization. With all the complex facilitates and productive structures undisturbed or reinvested, it could serve as the reminder of a particular time and living experiences. A ruin like this testifies the metamorphosis of our production process and living experience.

3. Ruins in the City Park



Figure5. The ruin of Japanese Shrine in the City Park

According to the official sign near the ruin, this is the first-generation Chiayi Shrine relic. Approximately 120cm high and facing south, the stone-based altar and the base of the pillars are made up of two face-to-face structures. The original shrine, destroyed by termites, was dismantled. This ruin of Japanese shrine attests the history of Japanese colonization from 1895-1945, a long period of time for personal experience but a short one for human history. During Japanese colonization, the colonial government had erected this kind of shrine all over Taiwan to implant Japanese faith into the land of Taiwan. Because the youth of Taiwan gradually lose the tangible feeling and understanding of the colonial history, we could argue that this ruin of shrine also gradually loses its *Genius Loci*. The shrine's original sense of place has been transforming into the *Zeitgeist* of everyday life. Every now and then many senior citizens do their body exercises on the top or around the ruin. Somehow, the spirit of the place, the *Genius Loci*, has been changed by daily experiences of contemporary local people.



Figure6. The Base and the Text of a Monument

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According to the style of the monument, the base should be erected during Japanese colonial period, and the stone piece on the top of it by Taiwanese government after 1945. The inscription of the stone comes from Confucius' saying: "When the grand way is working, the things under heaven belong to the public." The sign of intertextualism could be evident, but this coincident have not been noticed by most passersby. The Genius Loci of this monument could lie on its combination of two objects from different periods, but it has not been noticed generally. This kind of unnoticing could add the difficulty in interpret Genius Loci. Meanwhile, this unnoticing may represent a Zeitgeist of fast-forgetting of media era. This double-coding could be caused by an accelerated compression of time and space. (Harvey, 1990: 260-283) On the other hand, figure6 consists of a solid podium, so does figure5. In the lecture in Rice University, Peter Eisenman had talked about the using of podium in Mies's New National Gallery in Berlin and New York's Seagram Building. He considers that the using of podium represents the Genius Loci, a notion referring to traditional use of podium in Greek temple, which is in contrast with the building of Zeitgeist above the podium. This notion gives anything above the podium a new possibility and entices people to image what can be done above the podium. In the same light, the podium could be the grounding which allows any kind of newness to sprout, thus implying the Genius Loci as backdrop that anticipates the transformation from Zeitgeist.



Figure7. The City Park's "axial area" now and then (source of the old photo: Chiayi City Historical Relic Museum)

The City Park's another inspiration of ruin, as well as its regeneration, comes from the change of the "axial area". It testifies a transformation in spatial representation according to different cultural identification. The photo on the left side shows a gateway with the cultural formation of Chinese style. On the right side it is a Japanese torii. Both photos indicate an axis and a gateway leading to specific destination. The two photos actually show the same location in the park. They demonstrate the landscape of time. A landscape of grounding anticipates various spatial metamorphoses, as well as a landscape of human implantation registers a notion of history and reinterpretation.



Figure8. The Chiayi Tower

The aforementioned destination of the axis is this Chiayi Tower², with the nickname of Tower of Shooting Sun. According to aboriginal legend, there were two suns scorching the land. The fest of bringing down a sun by two generations of heroic effort shapes the myth, which is the source of the nickname. The tower's location had been the site of former Japanese Shrine, which was transformed into the Memorial of Heroes by Taiwanese government after 1945. Aforementioned two photos with different gateways attest this transformation. However, a fire had burned down the structure in 1994, and the Chiayi Tower, which is a twelve-floor tower with the Memorial of Heroes relocated in the ground floor, was erected after that. Different historical episodes of the axis and its destination remind us of the tempo-spatial transformation. The transformation from Japanese shrine to the Memorial of Heroes, and to the Chiayi Tower with major aboriginal reference shows a interesting change in cultural identification and spatial representation. After Lyotard's argument about the abandonment of meta-narrative, local and fragmentary experiences have been given more attention, and this tempo-spatial palimpsest in the City Park seems to reflect a new kind of Genius Loci with fragmentary and multiple ingredients in it. However, the Chiayi Tower glorifies local environment and indigenous experiences. The form of the tower symbolizes the trunk of the Holy Tree in Ali Mountain. Inside the trunk is a 24-meter high bronze relief depicting the legend of Shooting Sun. Pair of sculpted Cloud Leopards, which belong to an extinct indigenous species, frames the entrance. The mosaic inside the tower illustrates Hundred Pace Vipers. All these motifs relate to local species and aboriginal legends. On the top of the tower is an observatory with a 360-degree view which includes Ali Mountain, Jade Mountain and other superb landscapes. Here people can witness the climax of Genius Loci with all the historical, geographical and cultural connotations. In this context of Genius Loci, the metamorphosis of the site and the multiple stratification of Chiayi Tower seem to tell a story of Zeitgeist.

² <http://www.tivs.cy.edu.tw/kcc/zgetsun/getsun.htm>





Figure9. The building for worship equipment

Figure9 shows the storage of worship equipment, which is part of the relics of Japanese shrine. Its exterior wall, simulating woodwork, is actually constructed with concrete. Guessing by current condition, the building should not be used for storing worship equipment anymore. It has become a backdrop of informal gathering. Random table and stone stools witness this kind of activity. We can even see a tin trash container standing on the corner. A sacred building has been transformed into the background of make-shift actions. The original tempo-spatial meaning has been neutralized. When we look closer from the second photo, we see two ordinary calendars and a simple clock. These three items all represent time, and we sense a feeling of time-going-by and a hue of surrealism. While looking simultaneously at these two photos, a sense of chance and displacement rules the scene. Here Genius Loci are in motion, and Zeitgeist becomes make-shift actions and spontaneous events.

To add a supportive notion, we would like to quote Benjamin's words in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the Trauerspiel is present in reality in the form of the ruin...the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay...Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (Benjamin, 1977)

In the case of the City Park, the history of ruin has physically merged into the setting. One of its best examples is the metamorphosis of the "axial area", with the Chiayi Tower on its zenith of tempo-spatial transformation. The palimpsest of the City Park confirms the idea that the history is mainly hidden in the decay. From ruins of the City Park, as from the allegories of thoughts, we contrive both Genius Loci and Zeitgeist, as well as anticipate Chiayi's future.

4. Ruins in the Countryside



Figure10. The Liu Mansion in the countryside

The Liu mansion should be built around 1920s¹³, with a combination of local brick work and Western style. This kind of hybridization in architectural representation had been widely practiced for the newly rich at that time. This hybrid style prompts an exotic and extraordinary sensation. Its showy façade might be connected to a specific traditional consciousness called “Honoring ancestors and upholding forebears.” The bricks produced by local factory possess a nostalgic kind of materialism. The green plants entangling with red bricks bring us a strong feeling of passing time.

On the other hand, the scene behind Liu Mansion is generally the natural surroundings. The ruin of Liu



Figure11. The scene behind Liu Mansion

Mansion has submerged into the natural landscape. Thus the place of the ruin is in nature, and the place of nature in the ruin. (Ginsberg, 2004: 201) This harmonious coexistence is the Genius Loci of this place, and it may relate to the nineteenth century aesthetic treatment of the ruin, which connects mortality with nature and human existence. One of the examples comes from Flaubert: “I love above all, the sight of vegetation resting upon old ruins; this embrace of nature, coming swiftly to bury the work of man the moment his hand is no longer there to defend, fills me with deep and ample joy.” (Trigg, 2006:106) Although the windows, doorways and walls are still in their original forms, the distinction between exterior and interior has disappeared. That the inner space is gone does not necessarily negate the structure’s meaning. The inside walls come to us with the unexpectedness of being in the open. The sensation of absurdity shocks us and the connotation of the ruin is similar to Ginsberg’s words: “Incongruity in the ruin helps in the isolation, detection, and characterization of appealing features.” (Ginsberg, 2004: 52)

In this light, contemporary Japanese architecture has provided two inspiring examples. First case is Ryue Nishizawa’s House A, which introduces various plants into modernist white boxes. (Nishizawa, 2010: 110-111) The architect mentioned that the conception of using plants inside the house was partly related to a travel experience of visiting southern Italian town Salerno. The historical town center with ruinous scene provides profound vitality that new buildings cannot offer. The House A has exploited this kind of ruinous atmosphere and imposed it into contemporary urban environment. Adding Nishizawa’s deftness in proportion, transparency and lightness, the House A achieves an in-between phenomenon where metaphysic meets reality, as well as a blurring between inside/outside and artificiality/nature.

³ <http://travel.tw.tranews.com/view/chiayi/minhsiungkuei/wu/>

Second case is Sou Fujimoto's House N. The design idea of the house was related to the conception of ruin in a conversation between Fujimoto and Nishizawa. (Nishizawa, 2010: 135-136; 143) It has three layers of skins which consist of a variety of opens without windows. A weird house or no-house, the House N could be the ruin in the ruin. It also blurs the boundary between inside and outside, but its blurring is more a conception than reality. In this context, the "ruin" becomes a metaphysical idea, and House A and House N both become conceptual.

In reality, the Liu mansion might approximate House A and House N by replacing its red brick walls with modernist white panels, but it is too superficial. In contrast, the Liu mansion could approximate House A and House N more intellectually satisfied in the metaphysical level. For in this level the profundity and richness of the ruin, as well as the architectural representation of House A and House N, have already been perceived as a transcendental conception. Thus the conception of ruin reaches an allegorical intensity and sets a spatial prototype for architectural inspiration.

5. Conclusion

Although the research divides ruins into three categories and discusses their connotations separately, there could be a concise meaning of ruin like this:

That is a return to that point where all human constructs were nullified that future construction would again be possible...Ruins to me were a source of imagination...Professing faith in ruins was equal to planning the future... (Isozaki, 2006: 97-100)

Following this statement, the study tries to argue that the conception of ruin combines with Genius Loci and Zeitgeist, with a multiple projection of tempo-spatial connotation. In ruins, the spirit of the place and the spirit of the age are two elements entangling together. Their mutual influence postulates an important inspiration for design thinking and practice. By observing and contemplating the ruin, we notice the transformation of the spirit of the place, as well as the metamorphosis of the spirit of the age. In short, the ruin embodies the conception of space and time and stimulates our Genius Loci and Zeitgeist. Because design thinking and practice, especially for architecture, is about time and space, the study of ruins become reasonable and rewarding. Furthermore, the conceptual core of the ruin could be presenting an unrepresentable, which is similar to the emptiness in Chinese landscape painting. In this light, the emptiness is a kind of void with spiritual meaning, from which the viewer can sense the unseen reality and wholeness. The emptiness is beyond vision, implying a denying of physical decay. If we accept the original being is a void, we may recognize the condition of ruin as a normal part of infinite cycle.

In urban design discipline, the concept of ruin provides a notion of grounding and transformation, as well as an unavoidable living cycle which dominates the daily experience and evolution of human settlement. People's living experience, social network and physical environment are three main elements of urban design discipline, and they are the grounding, or background, of almost every urban design project. The economic, political and other elements will transform this grounding



and take it to another stage. Thus the concept of apt urban design can be considered as a specific condition that keeps in temporary balance. Normally this temporary balance is achieved by two dialectic sides which represents by the power of progress and the welfare of human beings. Understanding this polemic issue can help designers to avoid the pitfall of over-design and design for immediate profit, thus keeping an alert mind toward our environment. In addition, this conceptual notion of ruin and void may have similar insight as the notion of the unpresentable which was associated to the idea of sublime by Lyotard. Historically, achieving sublime was one of the main goals for Western design thinking and practice, especially when they were submitted to the meaning of living experience. Lyotard had argued that the artists were working without rule, and they were searching for the feeling of sublime which makes the unpresentable felt. (Brooker, 1992:139-150.) To conclude, the void in Chinese landscape painting, the conceptual emptiness of ruin, and their connotation of presenting the unpresentable, all work like instant interpretation for aforementioned House A and House N. This conceptualization of House A and House N not only influences architectural discipline, but also provides an alternative understanding to related disciplines such as urban design.

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