

Article

## At the Stage of Their Fate: Salvaging the Urban Obsolete in Sydney<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Chronicling the interiors and exteriors of selected abandoned buildings in Sydney, this article examines the problem of memory in spaces that are not only isolated and devalued, but often have played no role in the life of the casual visitor or observer. How can the ruins of someone else’s past be made to speak, and how might contemporary ruinscapes reveal a different way of engaging with the past in urban space, particularly in one of the “youngest” cities in the world: a city not defined by decline; constantly undergoing redevelopment; and known more for contemporary architecture than contemporary ruin? Through describing personal encounters with each site, this paper adopts the attitude of Benjamin’s collector who encounters old books in a way that does not consider their use-value but instead sees them as fated objects, encountered as ephemeral remnants of the past. Like the salvaged but outmoded book, the modern ruin is just as much a site in which history is played out as any house of parliament or mainstream newsroom. Further, history need not be the dominion of those things and people that speak loudly and clearly—it is equally constituted by boundless, amorphous, liminal, discarded, rejected, silent things—in this case, ruined buildings of a recent, remembered and accessible past.

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin; urban ruins; modern ruins; urban decay; urban explorations; Sydney; Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> In memory of the Edwin Davey Flour Mill ruins 1996–2013.

## 1. Introduction

In the Paris arcades of the 1920s and 1930s, Walter Benjamin recognised the traces of a recent past, quickly obliterated by destructive forgetting. For the visitor in Benjamin's time, the Parisian arcades presented a collection of neglected shop-fronts and quaint stores, housed in the once opulent forerunners to modern shopping malls. The various musings that grew out of Benjamin's fascination with these semi-derelict spaces of early consumer culture provided the foundation for *The Arcades Project* [1].

What was it that Benjamin was looking for in the arcades, and what was it that he ultimately found there? The collective history Benjamin sought was not his own—those recollections were reserved for his writing on Berlin, the city of his childhood. As portals crossing the threshold between the now and the what-has-been, the arcades in a state of decay proved to be fertile ground for Benjamin's ideas. In them he found the origins—the wish images and dreamworlds—of his own era. If the abandoned arcades proved to be of use (not despite, but because of their decay and obsolescence), what purpose can modern ruins serve for researchers investigating contemporary urban space?

There are already a number of texts which discuss modern, urban ruins at length; the practice of urbex, the growing interest in images of ruin, and the aesthetics of urban and industrial decay are considered particularly by Tim Edensor [2], Dylan Trigg [3], David Pinder [4] (all of whom make mention of Benjamin's theory) and within the collection *Ruins of Modernity* edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle [5]. Tim Edensor and Caitlin DeSilvey summarise the growing body of literature on ruins in *Reckoning with Ruins* [6], which offers an extensive summary of relevant literature and key thinking to date. I recently contributed to the field with an article about my experiences in Pripyat (Chernobyl), New York, Detroit, and Berlin in the context of a tactical engagement with liminal urban spaces and material decay [7]. Rather than revisiting these approaches, or reviewing the core theory around urban ruins and decay, this article describes my attempts to adapt the method behind two of Benjamin's most well-known undertakings—the voluminous and fragmentary account of the surviving ephemera of the Nineteenth Century contained in *The Arcades Project*, and the equally fragmentary writings about Berlin that Benjamin compiled while in exile during the 1930s, *Berlin Chronicle* [8] and *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* [9]—to my own experiences in ruins of a recent past, in my adopted home city of Sydney, Australia.

As a method, the process of encountering a fragmented past, embedded in a materially fragmented space, allows the researcher to collect and collate relics—from discarded objects, to segments of text, to the images, quotes and ideas that make up *The Arcades Project*. This collage-like “method” is emulated by many Benjamin scholars—notably, Susan Buck-Morss, who, in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, assembles a selection of pictures and vignettes which underpin her theoretical exploration of Benjamin's work, as a means to comprehend the lack of chronology or linearity in Benjamin's ideas, and to undertake the very work of excavation and rescue that Benjamin sought in his own assemblage of fragments. This article similarly emulates (or, perhaps, extrapolates) a Benjaminian methodology, in which materials are encountered in-situ—not uncritically, but as a constellation of tangible and abstract correspondences—a collection of ruin spaces, and images of ruin spaces, which are offered up as the jumbled content salvaged from material and historical progress. (The notion of a “collection” of ruins will be expanded in the final section of this essay).

This article attempts to combine an auto-ethnographic account of my experiences in particular locations that are of personal and local significance, with Benjamin's efforts to chronicle his own experience of decay and memory—both private and collective. Of course there are limitations in the application of Benjamin's theory—not least of which are the context and subjectivity that shaped Benjamin, as a middle-class, well-educated, German-Jewish man whose philosophy and recollections were particularly influenced by his privileged, if sickly, upbringing, as well as his experience of war, marginalisation, deprivation, academic rejection, and personal tragedy in the period from 1917 to 1940. Further, Benjamin often appeared to be preoccupied with the aesthetic (whether auratic perception, the aestheticisation of politics (fascism in particular), or (as in one of his earliest and largest complete works, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) what could be termed a romantic aesthetic of decay), which may seem quite pertinent to the discussion contained here. However, as this article will discuss, it is Benjamin's interest in salvage, fascination, and collection, as well as the (often-rejected or endangered) objects and spaces on which he focused his critique of teleological histories that are the primary concern of this research, as these areas constitute the most materially grounded and deeply historical dimensions of Benjamin's writings, and were also those writings linked most closely to his interest in the arcades. Benjamin's project to write the Ur-history of the 19th century from its disappearing remains is the aspect of his work most directly related to the ruins, and images of ruins, that are contained in this discussion (in both approach and content).

The images included in this piece are a roughly assembled collection intended to both exemplify the fragmented nature of Benjamin's own reflections on categorically similar spaces, and to visually demonstrate the manner in which Benjamin's model of research and writing has impacted the encounters with the sites of dereliction and city spaces that are the focus of this piece. Further, such an approach is founded on the relationship between the semi-derelict arcades and contemporary urban ruins, and an affinity between ungrounded images of decay, and the detached worlds that can be found across the threshold of many urban ruins.

Chronicling personal experience of the interiors and exteriors of selected abandoned buildings in Sydney—via constellated photographs and vignettes, through the lens of Benjamin's personal experiences and writings—this article addresses the questions: how can the ruins of someone else's past be made to speak, and how might contemporary ruinscapes reveal a different way of engaging with the past in urban space, particularly in one of the “youngest” cities in the world, a city that is not defined by decline, but is constantly undergoing redevelopment and known more for contemporary architecture than contemporary ruin?

## 2. Sydney's Ghosts

Ghost towns are spaces haunted by the possibility of what was, and what could be. Ghost relics, in an otherwise active urban space, haunt the urban fabric itself, at once present and absent from the surrounding landscape. Avery Gordon states that “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” while it is the ghost itself, the fleeting sense of something missing yet palpable, “that tells you a haunting is taking place” ([10], p. 8). Sydney is a city haunted by many pasts, not least its rather dark colonial

origins, and in its constant development and change, Sydney is just as much haunted by absence as it is by remnants.

In 1992, the inner-Sydney districts of Pyrmont, Ultimo, Blackwattle Bay, White Bay, and parts of Rozelle were in a state of dereliction. Previously industrial hubs once filled with abattoirs, factories, wool stores and silos, power stations and the cottages and public houses of their workers, had transformed into a landscape of obsolescence—abject ruins surrounded by an increasingly corporate urban heart, and gentrifying suburbs. Such a landscape might today have been described as a Drosscape [11], or *Terrain Vague* [12], perhaps a liminal landscape [13], overtaken by HI-TOADs (high impact temporarily obsolete abandoned derelict) [14] and heritage listed industrial architecture awaiting redevelopment, but it took decades for Pyrmont to be seen as anything other than an eye-sore. One particular ruin that stood decaying in the suburb for years was the Pyrmont Incinerator, designed by Walter Burley Griffin (who also designed the nation's capital city, Canberra). At the time of construction in 1935, the incinerator was intended as a monumental piece of industrial architecture, which Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin hoped would withstand the predictable obsolescence of industrial buildings. Despite such lofty aims, it fell to demolition by neglect, unsalvageable by the time urban renewal began to change the face of Pyrmont and surrounding areas. Although the loss of the incinerator was the salvation of many other industrial wrecks in the area, (which were stabilised in the aftermath of its decline), a spectre still haunts the suburb, lingering in the minds of those who remember the stark chimneys, which stood for many years as both a symbol of urban decay, and as icons of Pyrmont's industrial past. The vanished incinerator continues to inspire web sites, artworks and exhibitions, depicting various stages of function and decay in loving detail, its absence keenly felt.

As of 2013, Ultimo and Pyrmont, once twin industrial suburbs, are almost completely redeveloped, with warehouses and factories converted into museums, galleries, apartments and offices, a green business park (Workplace6), and a casino roughly where the incinerator once stood. Nearby sections of foreshore in Blackwattle bay and Rozelle are also undergoing the final stages of redevelopment, demonstrating the rapid and unchallenged nature of Sydney's constant construction.

Pyrmont and Ultimo, as a case study, exemplify Sydney as an unfinished city—an interesting counter to cities like Detroit (in rapid and ongoing decline), or New York and Manchester's uneven redevelopment-in-progress over many decades. Sydney shares some affinities with cities like Berlin which are also “unfinished” and constantly undergoing large-scale development (if for very different reasons). However, unlike many other cities, most of inner-Sydney's industrial wastelands have undergone demolition, renewal or redevelopment, and those that stand are very particular exceptions, reduced in number year by year.

This article presents a small section of a much larger chronicle of Sydney's ruins, which goes back to 2007 and includes a considerable collection of images and notes on personal encounters with decay in the inner city. In the intervening years, many of ruins I have entered are no longer ruined; the only significant ruin that still stands as such is a factory abandoned after its roof was damaged in a hail storm. That site (Figure 1, below) is filled with asbestos, rendering it useless even for redevelopment without major remedial works. Other ruins that I have visited as recently as August 2012 are now covered in hoardings, demolished, or have been completely incorporated into new developments.

**Figure 1.** Abandoned factory (2007).



The following accounts of Sydney's ruins are intended to both memorialise a small selection of now-lost places, and to evoke the process of salvage which has been a central part of my ongoing engagement with urban decay and ruins.

### *2.1. Glebe*

My earliest experiences in the ruins of Sydney took place in my newly-adopted suburb of Glebe in 2003, then undergoing the final transition of its foreshore from a scruffy industrial bay to a well-maintained recreational space, and simultaneously enjoying an extended period of gentrification. I had recently moved to the city, and the ruins I came to know between 2003 and 2007 quickly became my markers, grounding me in an alienating landscape. Of these, a handful of abandoned Victorian mansions (Bellevue and Reussdale (Figure 2)), a boarded up church, and a rambling and damp tram shed have all been renovated, although small pockets of industrial decay survive in neighboring suburbs, reflecting the now-lost industrial landscape. A lone Burley Griffin incinerator is now one of the few remaining indicators of industrial heritage in Glebe (salvaged because its towering Pymont cousin was lost, both designed by the same architect, but built on vastly different scales, and subject to two very different fates not completely in keeping with their individual significance). As of 2012, the strikingly small, though nicely reconstructed, incinerator sits uncomfortably in a foreshore parkland, unloved in renovation, just as in ruin, while the rust-tinged chimneys of the White Bay Power Station (Figure 3)—another local industrial icon and Sydney's equivalent to Battersea Power Station in London—seems ready to topple at any moment, just across the water. Though the industrial past of Sydney has long receded into memory, and can be difficult to identify in the city's quickly changing landscape, some element of that collective past can be detected in the remnants that do persist, not only through recollection or historicisation, but in the deliberate configuration of personal encounters with such remains.

**Figure 2.** Reussdale (2007).**Figure 3.** White Bay Power Station (2007).

In the introduction to *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Benjamin refers to “the irretrievability—not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past” ([9], p. 344) which he encounters in writing what is simultaneously personal recollection, and an account of a time which cannot occur again, because the necessary conditions could never, realistically, be reconfigured. However, an encounter with this past in some form is not discounted by Benjamin. Rather, he seeks to conjure that time through a series of vignettes; almost static, dream-like images which, collected or separated, render fragments of that experience accessible to the reader.

Taking Benjamin's approach to his own childhood recollections—replicated in his writings on Marseilles and Naples, *One Way Street*, and elsewhere—the two vignettes below represent a conscious attempt to constellate both personal and collective experience in an accessible form, and to explore both the fascination of material ruins, and the potential to conjure a sense of the past through such traces, filtered through personal experience with Benjamin's writings as a guide.

In mid-2012, I visited the tram sheds in Glebe (Figures 4 and 5) for what would be the last time, arriving just as contractors began a process of renovation. A place I had visited regularly since 2007, this ruin was one of the few industrial relics to remain near the waters of Blackwattle Bay, the north-western shore marking the edge of the suburb. The following extract is taken from my account of this visit:

“I walked past the back of a derelict tram workshop near my home, a transitional space which was the result of both long-term decay and pending urban renewal. Construction workers had begun the regeneration (demolition) of a rambling and iconic industrial site and sports ground, once the heart of a working-class suburb, now set to transform into apartments for city workers, with adjoining art and performance studios, and food market. Peering through the mesh-covered fence, I was struck by two things. The first was the familiarity of the smell of decay that transported me, abruptly, to places I had been before—the smell of the tram sheds in a state of decay was the smell of the interior of every dank, damp building I had ever set foot in, and in that moment, every unloved and mouldering place I'd entered hovered for a moment in my mind. The second thing which struck me was that over all the years I had lived nearby, walking past the overgrown palms and unchecked ivy that had established a wild garden around the sheds, it had seemed such a static thing—though decaying, quite solid. I could (and would) wander in whenever the fence was conveniently open, keeping a directionless lists of things that were the same (the smell, the green mould on the walls, the old trams up on blocks) and things that had changed (the graffiti, the half-patched holes in the roof, the random ephemera scattered about). There were always new things I noticed (reflections in puddles after rain and the precarious lean of the tall corrugated doors, large enough to admit the now-rusting trams that had come in on rails, but would leave on trucks—obsolete now that the tracks had all been torn up or covered over in their wake). Each time there were things I had forgotten (the inevitable mud and the least obtrusive entry point). In my repeated visits to this ruin, there had been a sense of permanence, even in the precariousness that defined the entire place. To walk past and see that someone, in less than a week (maybe even in a day) had torn up vast sections of the garden—a garden so established that it very-nearly hid the rambling building from sight—and left a dirt-covered mess that provided no clues as to what had just been, was unsettling.”

“What was also unsettling was that once the dirt piles wholly take over, I probably won't care very deeply for this place. The erasure of the physical remnants was also the erasure of the material link to that location—and the obliteration of a point of interest for me (in this case, an accessible and familiar urban ruin; a locally significant landmark; an impromptu and uncared-for tram-sanctuary; a whole history evident in tell-tale ruins that exposed decades of neglect and illustrated something vital about our investment in constant development). Around the corner, the rest of the site already failed to keep my attention. Weeks before, I had paused, fascinated, to take inadequate pictures with my camera phone, chronicling the violent semi-demolition of a paceway and its spectator stands, which looked as if some great monster had torn them in two, raggedly chopped at one end, still-functional on the other.

All I saw now was a pit-to-be, a mountain of dirt, and some passingly interesting debris piled beyond the reach of myself or my camera.”

**Figure 4.** Rozelle Tram Depot (Glebe, 2008).



**Figure 5.** Rubble from demolitions, Sydney (2012).



The next time I wander past, I will come upon a place where the tram sheds *used* to be, a site haunted by the memory of all those personal encounters with what was already a vestigial relic of the history of Glebe, and of Sydney, more generally. Trams stopped running in February 1961, and although the sheds were occupied by various tenants until the 1990s, they had really been dying a slow death for all those decades. As I left, I knew I would not be the only person who would mourn this

space. The tram sheds may be transformed, but their haunting presence will persist in the landscape, in the memories of locals, those who worked there, and those who visited just for the large-scale decay.

## 2.2. Pymont and the Mill

The bearing that city-space might have on collective and private memory and experience can be isolated in the city of Berlin at the beginning of the 20th century that Benjamin recollects, which is tainted by his knowledge of how it appeared to him later. Considering the childhood space of the Zoological Garden:

“And before the economic crisis had so depopulated these resorts that they seemed more ancient than Roman spas, this dead corner of the Zoological Garden was an image of what was to come, a prophesying place. It must be considered certain that there are such places; indeed, just as there are plants that primitive peoples claim confer the power of clairvoyance, so there are places endowed with such power: they may be deserted promenades, or treetops, particularly in towns, seen against walls, railway crossings and above all the thresholds that mysteriously divide the districts of a town.” ([8], p. 610).

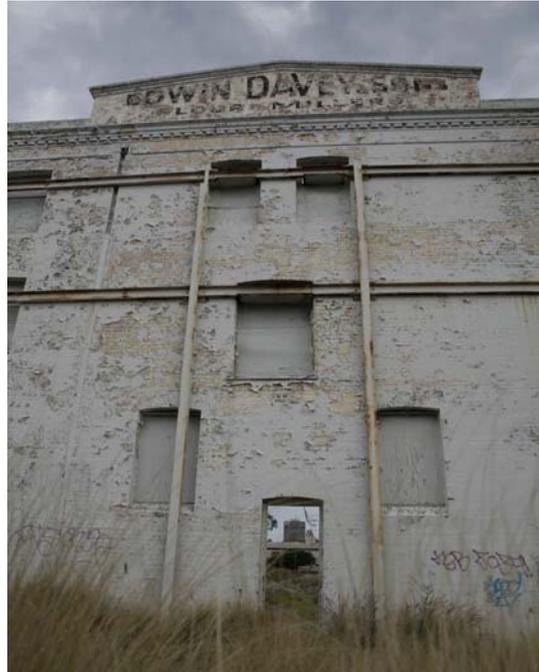
Benjamin’s approach opens up the possibility for an understanding of city spaces as highly porous sites of recollection, with ruins, fragments and remnants appearing as fractured or dislocated portents of multiplicitous pasts, and unknown futures. A reworked section from *Berlin Childhood* (which mentions the same spring, Bad Pymont, that the suburb of Pymont was named after, as if emphasising the relationship between multiplicitous moments, spaces and eras) reverses this seer’s vision and directs its gaze at the past:

“At that point, the avenue which welcomed the visitor resembled, with the white globes of its lampposts, an abandoned promenade at Eilsen or Bad Pymont; and long before those places lay so desolate as to seem more ancient than the baths of Rome, this corner of the Zoological Garden bore traces of what was to come. It was a prophetic corner. For just as there are plants that are said to confer the power to see into the future, so there are places that possess such a virtue. For the most part, they are deserted places—treetops that lean against walls, blind alleys or front gardens where no one ever stops. In such places, it seems as if all that lies in store for us has become the past.” ([15], p. 365).

In these two passages, Benjamin not only imbues deserted or rejected miscellanea with a power, but also a virtue—gazed upon, the neglected spaces of the city become prophesying places which are simultaneously dead and transformative for the viewer. Blind alleys, deserted promenades, railway tracks—these are thresholds, they divide the everyday world from an almost magical world of stasis and transformation. The remaining ruins of Pymont are similarly transformative—the seers gaze is directed toward the past, but also the inevitability of what is to come, and suddenly the urban landscape (and memory) takes on a new form.

There is such site in Pymont that I have always called “The Mill”, but which was long known as the Edwin Davey Flour Mill (operational until 1996) and, more recently, Harbourmill (a pending residential development on the site) (Figures 6 and 7).

**Figure 6.** Edwin Davey Flour Mill (2007).



**Figure 7.** Edwin Davey Flour Mill and UTS tower (2007).



The Mill had been standing as a ruin for more than 10 years when I first came across it in 2003—spied from a tram stop below and pursued through a series of winding streets, just beyond reach until I

gained the crest of a hill. Standing alongside the spring after which the suburb of Pymont was ultimately named, I spied the Mill perched on its promontory just a block away—with a gaping hole in the fence as if somehow my arrival had been anticipated.

In 2007, one of my earliest extended records of Sydney's ruins, I wrote of the Mill:

“My favourite place in the city is not really a “place” anymore, just three bare walls, an enormous wrought iron gate, and a few scattered concrete platforms with remnants of machinery attached. From its empty windows an observer can see the city skyline, Anzac Bridge, Wentworth Park, Blackwattle Bay, the old Sydney Depot (and Ultimo quarry) and a light-rail stop directly below. Within the walls is a field of high grass partly smothered by discarded household appliances and broken glass. The roof is open to the sky, admitting sun and rain and giving the impression of being both sheltered and exposed. The walls are held up by criss-crossing scaffolding, which arches above, casting curious shadows. Everyone I have ever taken here has been astonished by this strange, silent place.”

“Standing or crouching in one of its empty windows, I can see the city sprawled around me. At one time, I imagine I would have seen the stacks of White Bay across the water, but the view is now obscured by a block of flats—already greying around the edges, its garish terracotta colour scheme dull and dirty. With the long brown grass stirring around me I imagine I can see the harbour in the distance, or look out across the park to see the globes on top of the old Grace Brothers building—once abandoned and semi derelict itself. If I stand on the very edge of the overhang and cling to the fence, I can see the UTS tower framed perfectly through one of the windows.”

“Though there are continual reminders of the world outside—empty spray-paint cans, a torn and mildewed armchair, the occasional whirring of the light rail below—it is easy to disengage; to revel only in the immediate surroundings. There is a feeling of suspension, of crossing borders, as if this space is slightly misaligned with what goes on beyond its walls—detached from the everyday existence which continues its frenetic pace, while I stand captivated by something just beyond its grasp.”

I was, and still am, haunted by the Mill, drawn towards the experience of the space as if called by a distant spectre, which is forever stranded just beyond the explicable, recountable experience of the ruin. Gordon's conceptualisation of ghosts and haunting describes the sensation of haunting as one that transforms our understanding of the world, despite being amorphous, incomplete or ill defined (perhaps, even, because of this transience): “The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” ([10], p. 8). Gordon is particularly concerned with sociological absences that haunt us despite not being overtly present, but her description of this ontological way of knowing echoes my experience in ruins, both as a physical encounter and as a research topic which is often overlooked *and* deals with disappearing places. I am drawn to these ruins, I am haunted by them, as is the landscape in which they manage to survive, against the powerful drivers that are development and change, and the broader force of historical progress.

Though it was in pieces, the remnant of the Mill suggested its former completion and spoke of the largely industrial history of the suburb of Pymont, now mostly obliterated from the landscape, irretrievably lost to demolition and development. Benjamin's list of deserted places, blind alleys, out-of-place treetops, and quiet corners mentioned above is what I am adding to in my pursuit of ruins, the places in which traces of past and present coalesce. That I seek abstract traces in actual ruins

may seem to be a quite literal, even blunt reading of Benjamin's work. However, the power of the fragment to evoke considerable detail was of great significance to Benjamin, particularly as a tool for remembrance in urban space, where progress is so often materially destructive, and where material traces are a trigger for remembrance, both collective and biographical. As Benjamin suggests, forgotten and neglected places (like the junk in an attic) can be of significant value:

“If I chance today to pass through the streets of the neighborhood, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. And in truth, this dead district with its tall apartment houses is today the junkroom of the West End bourgeoisie”. ([16], p. 606).

Benjamin's junkrooms are sites of perpetual movement, in which aspects of a collective past remain. Benjamin also located the past in the physical traces of the nineteenth century that persisted in the arcades; he identified books, old toys, rags, discarded objects as keys to the past. Why not spaces? If we are to speak of spaces, why not the collective and biographical urban experience of a city's past—a past that haunts us through its ruins—just as the arcades seemed to haunt Benjamin throughout his exile in Paris, and perhaps, even, to his unremarkable death in Portbou in 1940.

### 3. Reading Ruins

To employ Benjamin's theory and criticism in urban spaces, and to revert the figurative representation of the city as a ruin to ruins of the city is precisely the method of *The Arcades Project* itself, the constant negotiation between physical fragments and remnants and the model of modernity as fracturing and dislocating experience. In the unfinished notes that make up his *Paralipomena to On the Concept of History* [17], Benjamin intimated that history is rightfully a text, one which is ever in the process of being deciphered, and perpetually written and rewritten, enacted, personal, never universal, and constantly shifting [18]. Enigmatically, he concludes that “to grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience” ([18], p. 405).

Benjamin considers progress as a force that generates literal and figurative ruins, destroying the past on which such progress is founded. His *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* [19] in particular attests to this, as do the attempts he makes to salvage a vanishing past in *One Way Street* [20] and *Central Park* [21], as well as *Berlin Chronicle* and *Berlin Childhood*. In another way, the city itself, as a site of consumption and obsolescence, as the space in which commodity culture most definitively manifests, is a haven for the neglected, forgotten and discarded remnants of that culture. The (unfinished) *Arcades Project* is, in subject and form, a testament to the notion that the past resides in the outmoded, dusty and fragmenting sites that persist in contrast to the perceptions of the city in terms of newness and wholeness, progress and renewal. Together, the abstract notion of history as rubble or refuse and the city as a repository for objects and sites that hold the “secret index” ([18], p. 390) to the past by virtue of their persistence against that process of ruination provides the possibility to at once redeem the past through the investigation of the rejected and lost, and to redeem modern ruins as important sites of urban experience. It is a perpetual practice of redemption through which teleological histories, materialist emphases, and reductive urban planning assessments can be reconsidered through the re-evaluation of what constitutes both a ruin and urban experience.

To explore Sydney with Benjamin's words in mind generates echoes, reflections, translations and, importantly, experiences of a particular type; experiences which superimpose several pasts upon one moment, and several places upon a specific site. Recollections which are not my own can reverberate across a contested urban topography, doing away with any singular perception in favour of an encounter which includes not only the image before me, but a multiplicity of moments and recollections, constellating on a single site.

This approach allows Benjamin's writing to undergo its own transformation; to be introduced to the new city, to wander the fragmenting ruins of a new century, and to impose itself upon a haunted landscape; to be found again in old sites, and their reconstructions. His writing is able to impress and affect a changing city, in recognising the affinity of the present space with its many pasts.

Urban space as a repository for multiple happenings is summarised by Benjamin in considering:

"...the Place du Maroc in Belleville: that desolate heap of stones with its rows of tenements became for me, when I happened on it one Sunday afternoon, not only a Moroccan desert but also, and at the same time, a monument of colonial imperialism; topographic vision entwined with allegorical meaning in this square. Yet not for an instant did it lose its place in the heart of Belleville" ([1], p. 518).

Here, Benjamin emphasises the "interpenetration of images", a sense of the past that imbues a site—particularly a ruined or desolate site—with the impression of multiple temporalities, moments, or events. This is especially relevant in the context of urban space and development, where a newer topography overlays (or is overlaid) by earlier histories, so that one place or space can encompass more than a single "topographic vision" at a time, and may even (as with the Zoo) embody entirely distant and unrelated moments and temporalities—even the possibilities of the future.

Throughout *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym relies heavily on Benjamin's work to express the idea that in an experiential urban archaeology lays the possibility to confront the inequality of a history that signposts sites of perceived heritage with a view to the future, while the past is left behind in ruins. Boym refers to Benjamin's work on Naples (particularly its "dilapidated ruins") to consider the ways in which we "can discover the urban past", by exploring the ruined and marginal sites of the city, and is critical of the empty gestures of "memorial plaques", which cannot, in their attempt to acknowledge heritage, express the "elusive and uncanny" past ([22], pp. 76–77). Boym's conceptualisation offers a mode of including marginalia in historical perception by anticipating alternatives and possibilities presented by "hybrids of past and present" ([22], p. 31) (a reading that admits the unresolved tensions and of an era to a space of multiple temporalities that are vital to an experience of the past embodied in material remnants ([22], p. 258) and the porosity of history, time and space in the city ([22], p. 77)).

In the familiar space of Sydney, where my habitual engagement with a known environment often desensitises—a concept suggested by Benjamin in his work on the Flaneur and Hashish in particular (See convolute M of *The Arcades Project*; and the Tara Forrest's writings on Benjamin and Hashish [23])—modern ruins offer aesthetic and experiential contrasts to a homogenised everyday city. Rather than the sparkling waters of the harbor, or the architectural wonders of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House; rather than George Street, Victoria Road or Broadway, these remnants of Sydney's industrial past reveal an interpenetration of the past and present, and the real impacts of urban renewal

projects that remove traces of the recent past, (particularly industrial traces) as if they are a source of shame or sign of failure.

Benjamin identified a destructive momentum in our obsession with the new and devaluation of the recently outmoded. To oppose this force of progress that leaves rejected ephemera and epic history as the predominant remains of the past, Benjamin indulged in an experimental configuration of remnants—forgotten literary and art works, as well as material fragments—as images or concepts that he assembled at the point of their oblivion “where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest” ([1], p. 475). Dialectically, transient material remnants hold the promise of the new and the truth of decline. As an example, Benjamin notes that the “Arcades are such monuments of being-no-more. And the energy that works in them is dialectics.” ([1], p. 833). Here, he suggests that at the point of disappearance, one finds the potential for a reversal in which “the moment of their ceasing to be” ([1], p. 833) distills the essence of both the structure and the epoch, and revolutionises the site.<sup>2</sup>

Graeme Gilloch directly attests to this, in relation to the concept of the dialectical image:

“The arcades became the perfect object of the dialectical image, that method concerned specifically with the pause between life and death. The dialectical image captures the last fleeting moments of the afterlife of the object, the precise instant of the demise in which illusion withers and truth becomes manifest. On the brink of oblivion, the crumbling arcade reveals itself as the locus of dreaming. The dialectical image is the redemptive ‘at last sight’ of the ruined phantasmagoria of modernity” ([24], p. 127).

On the brink of oblivion—a real threat in a city gripped by constant renewal—the ruins of Sydney, like the crumbling arcades, offer the possibility for redemption and salvage of many versions of the recent past, threatened by the pace of change, and ever-renewing modernity. The ruins I have written of are now mostly lost—this chronicle attempts to grasp the afterlife of these spaces, the rejected ephemera of Sydney which are also inhabitable images of transience, suspended between life and death, accessible as never before on the point of disappearance, offering a transformative potential on the verge of disappearance.

#### 4. The Urban Obsolete

Like Kafka’s Odradek [25], an unwanted remnant, unrecognisable and worthless (whose shapeless, spindled form remains ambiguous to the observer), the ruin is a broken and dislocated relic that momentarily haunts the present as it intercedes on any moment: “Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion.” ([16], p. 811). Benjamin sees this discarded and distorted object, on the point of oblivion, as both signifying the guilt of forgetting, but also the (collective) historical perception which relegates things to the realm of the forgotten, and the possibility presented by oblivion for bringing the object back to light: “Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka’s stories presses toward the light” ([16], p. 810).

Bringing Odradek back from oblivion is one of many redemptive images Benjamin borrows from the German literary canon. As a “guilt ridden” object, rejected and forgotten, the Odradek calls us to account for all of our forgotten pasts, as well as calling up the echoes of vanishing pre-history. Of the Odradek’s favoured haunts, Benjamin notes “Attics are the places of discarded, forgotten objects”. He

<sup>2</sup> See especially convolutes D°4, D°6 of the *Arcades Project*.

goes on to isolate these objects as things that we avoid, encounters we “would like to put off [...] till the end of time”, for fear of having to face the residual guilt, the weight of forgetting ([16], p. 811). Fundamentally, Benjamin wishes to isolate things in motion, things that are passing from the world, and freeze them in a moment. Crucially, that moment must come when such a thing is in transition—that is, holds within it past, present and future possibilities—pressing toward the light, coming into view from the darkness or rejection, deviance and defeat.

Similarly, ruins are a final product of the events that slide and mingle and happen or are forgotten, of forces and practices and intentions, the sort of things which, step by step or perhaps with a crash, create the ruin space. It is as if the whole story of the place is gathered up at this point of its existence and can be intuited within the immediate experience of that space. It is not a history, in the conventional sense, because there are details which may not be known (may be unknowable); however, the essential qualities of its being, becoming and ceasing to be are all caught up in the abstract and concrete impressions of places which have been abandoned to obsolescence.

Ruins offer an experience in a world generally devoid of (and/or after) animated living—this is the possibility Benjamin identified in the arcades. It is also the possibility identified by others who investigate such spaces—just like Kathleen Stewart’s exploration of the “ordinary affects” that can be detected in forgotten, mundane or transient things, this exploration encompasses circuits and flows, shocks, undertows and constructions, “things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too” ([26], p. 3). A contemporary space of decay and ruin conjures a simultaneity: the moment of demise, the moment of intrusion, a collection of impressions and artifacts, senses, smells and sounds which will reverberate within the spectator as experience (later, as recollection), and as an echo of the past released under the pressure of an active human presence. History is thus tied to ruins which are tangible, and persistent, “They haunt. They become not a symbol of loss, but the embodiment of the process of remembering itself; the ruined place itself remembers and grows lonely” ([27], p. 93).

## 5. Salvage

Benjamin’s reflections on the collector seem apt here. Though he speaks specifically of the book collector and of the collector in general, as the “physiognomists of the world of objects”, spaces in a state of neglect and abandonment take on the same fascination for me as objects might to another collector, one who becomes an “interpreter of fate”, who is enthralled and fascinated by the history of their chosen object, but also by its future, its potential in itself and to them ([28], pp. 59–67).

This article argues that, despite the unfinished nature of *The Arcades Project*, and Benjamin’s problematic relationship with some of his subject material, his explorations (physical and theoretical) of the arcades have left us with a kind of historico-spatial scholarship, which bears further consideration as a mode or even method of engaging with lingering remnants from the past. Whether such a perception is truly a “method” is beyond the scope of this article, but certainly Benjamin’s approach to the material world, as evidenced in the work of the collector, combines fascination with accumulation in a manner that dictates both the content and approach of his research. As observed by Ackbar Abbas: “Benjaminian method gives fascination itself a critical role. He sees in fascination not a will-less affect, not the response of last resort, but a willingness to be drawn to phenomena that attract our attention yet do not submit entirely to our understanding” ([29], p. 51). Urban ruins are just such

phenomena, fascinating, yet often just beyond our grasp, (in any sense). Abbas goes so far as to suggest that the collector plays a role in reconfiguring dominant histories, and resisting obsolescence, by salvaging the traces of the past, regardless of their use-value ([29], p. 55).

The collector has, Benjamin writes,

“a relationship to objects which does not emphasise their functional utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them” ([28], p. 60).

Though Benjamin was expressly referring to the collector of books, this sentiment of salvaging artifacts from an uncertain fate bears a close relation to the collection of ruins contained in this article, assembled from a jumble of recently ruined buildings, and sorted into an approximate order, inspired by both the “profound enchantment” and love described by Benjamin above, driven by the need to preserve traces which are in danger of disappearing forever.

Even the pictures of these ruins are stranded refuse, media which, for whatever reason, does not qualify for a particular purpose. Rather than curated exhibits, the images offered here are snapshots, mental triggers for an experience, condensed reminders of each of these sites—often blurred, too dark, washed out, too filled with light and contrast, useful only to me—to be made sense of most by one who was there. These images are a vital part of my collector-salvation of the ruins, half-useless themselves.

I do not want to relegate these already abandoned places to a space of further uncertainty—not the usual fate of photographs to become dusty and dull in a hidden corner, which could have been fitting—but the more contemporary damnation of digital neglect, so many numbered images in a folder within a folder marked “photos” and “ruins to sort”, respectively. The painstaking, yet haphazard curation of this collection is inspired by the desire to salvage something of these sites, not a romantic ideal of a ruin aesthetic, nor primarily because they are so empty, rejected and forgotten, and in need of being “saved”, but mostly because it is here—as much as Stonehenge, the Colosseum, or Pompeii or any number of well-trafficked ruins—that history happens and *is* happening.

Salvaging such ruins need not be a colonising act, taking stock of their pasts, or beautifying their decay. It may be enough to be aware of their existence, to have some sense of experiencing them in their final stages of life, to meet them and know them at that place and time, stripped and incomplete.

These ruins are grand versions of the abandoned trinkets in second-hand stores, dust covered, damaged, with no clear function upon first inspection. Like obscure and neglected books piled in a crate in some forgotten corner, to emerge mildewed and crumbling for the eager perusal of someone who sees something more to them—more to their fate—than simply that of unwanted rubbish.

## 6. Conclusions

If I could pick up such ruins and fold them into my hand, I would keep them close by to be unfolded and inspected, studied, revealing every secret to me so that I could hold them even closer. Observing each little sign of deterioration, letting others view them so that they too could feel themselves weave into the ruin, taking something of it away with them and leaving something of themselves wandering within, haunted by, yet haunting, the ruins themselves.

My personal experiences in these ruins exemplify the merit of an approach that perceives a destructive energy in perpetual growth and engages with the interpenetration of historical content in the material world, constellating multiple temporalities and states in one moment. Thus, an encounter in modern, urban ruins is the experience not simply of hopeless decay or tragic social breakdown so much as a redemptive historical perception that sees the moment of collapse stilled and inhabitable, rather than spaces that have been rejected and are expected to fade from the world, unremarked.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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