

## Time and (Architectural) Space

By Jennifer Egleton

Time is a continuum in which events occur in irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future. Space is that quantity of extension, the distance from one thing to another, the interval between any two or more objects. It is the space between here and there: the small spaces we live in and travel in, on to the more official spaces where we work.

How do we think of the architectural spaces along the time continuum?

The most moving of them for me are ruined and tumbledown buildings. It is because they narrate the unofficial history of places. Ruins are a link to what has gone before: they are an archaeology of a culture revealing the fragments of a past that can seem distant and foreign. They are important in discovering the roots of our place in history, even (or especially) if they tell a tale that is less than pretty. Ruins can be seen as places that warehouse the memories of a rapidly changing culture. Their myriad stories are told in the cryptic language of crumbling architecture, old machinery, unexpected objects, and personal detail.

There is a tendency to clean up and pave over our built environment – to the extent that we erase the heritage of the recent past. Take Hong Kong for example. Its history has become defined by roadside signage marking spots where events took place, with little or no physical remains to tell the tale, so we ponder history totally out of context. How can this be used as an attraction to draw the tourist dollar?

Nor do “rebuilt” ruins evoke the same kind of emotion. One definition of *rebuilt* is “made

over, usually with changes”. Ruins *cannot* be made over to fit our idea of the past. Sometimes they aren’t pretty, but neither is history. Visiting picture-perfect renovated villages fails to evoke a visceral response. Ruins in this instance become newly minted structures that seem antiseptic and divorced from their history. They sit uncomfortably with their new airbrushed selves.

The untidiness and decay of untouched ruins mean that *time has moved on*. We acknowledge that change has occurred. Civilizations rise, fall, and die, just as we do. Why cannot we come to terms with this? Buildings and spaces left to decay make us see more clearly and so value more that which has went before and the time we have left.

Similarly, abandoned buildings have an interest and meaning beyond the original design intention – in fact, they become something quite different; their original function has been lost with time and disuse. They transform over time from a utilitarian structure to one that is devoid of function. The architectural meanings and interpretations have altered, with a new and cryptic language emerging. These rooms, buildings, and landscapes housed memories of a past in empty silent spaces and relinquished the present to decay. They provoke a more visceral response than ruins. Despite modern technology and our continual striving to be relevant, things (and our own small role in the universe) all have their use-by date.

Some of our cultural prejudices affect the way we see abandoned buildings (which are on their way to being ruins if left alone). Old hospitals particularly strike a cord. The architecture is heavily loaded with what the viewer imagines the history of this place might have been. The architecture becomes charged with our own perceptions of what a hospital is

and what we have been taught or heard about hospitals in the old days: you were lucky if you came out alive. We imagine what it was like to be there and what kinds of suffering or healing may have occurred in those wards and operating rooms. Do ghosts still inhabit those rooms? Does a hidden contagion? We have come a long way – or have we? (Remember the SARS legacy?)

Is this why we tear down buildings when they have lost their original role? The Hong Kong Medical Museum has varied its function only slightly to become a cipher of the past: a static display of the tools of its previous trade. We can almost smell that blending of the chemical and the human. Others have been revitalized into new identities, completely breaking with the past. For example Tate Modern, the new bastion of modern art in London was once a power station. This place no longer hums with the rhythms of turbines and workmen in their steel-tipped boots and hard hats, but is filled with modern works of art. The (re)designers have left its innards more-or-less intact, and have incorporated its history by supplying headphones and tapes at certain places within the building, telling of its previous life in a then unfashionable part of the city.

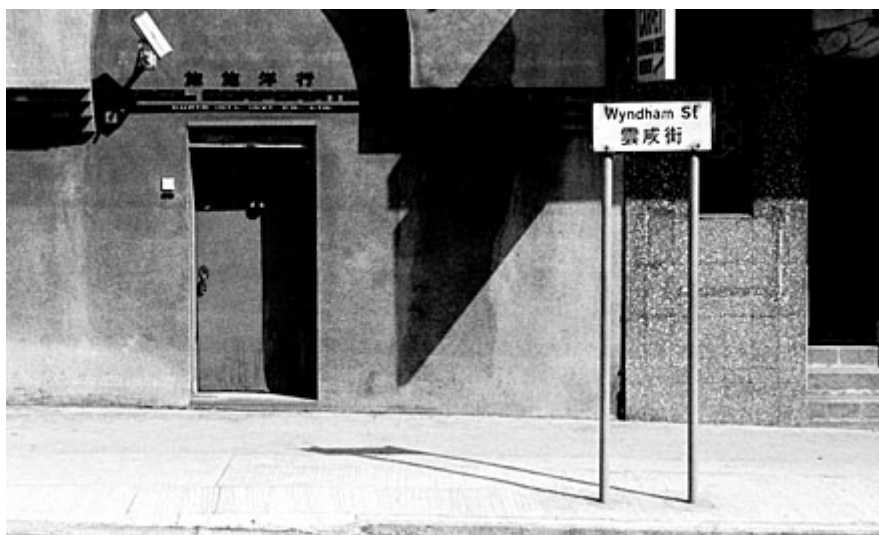
I also like to go to overlooked places on my travels. That means bypassing the grand monuments for things that dominate that community – that steel mill, that old distillery that back alley – where the past is very much in the present. These places have had a profound impact on how people have lived for decades and continue to do so, despite their de-acceleration in function. They are not stripped bare; objects within these old places are similar to the buildings in that they carry the weight of their history with them.

So when you see details like scratches on loose bricks at the base of the ancient wall in Nanjing, you can sense the individual workman as he toiled under unforgiving taskmasters. Seeing old tin utensils in an old miner's camp in outback Australia reminds one of the hard life led all those years ago in order to make a fortune. They have become charged with the life that surrounded them, they become receptacles to contain memories. What once was an ordinary utilitarian object can become a powerful symbol of past events. There is a metamorphosis in the perception of what the object is, so that its symbolic value is increased, from the ordinary to the extraordinary. It is like translating an early form of the language into one that is more familiar to us.

Many people can be scared of spaces with a past: the site of a murder, multiple suicide or violent crime. It seems that we project the effects of events onto the space where our imagination roams. Hong Kong has its fair share of ghosts, just like other places. Not all are horrific: they are merely images of lives and personalities emerging from the walls and bits and pieces of detritus left behind. Even the everyday spaces walked through everyday impart a psychological effect of time and make us think of other spaces we have walked through in the past.



Silverton, N.S.W, Australia (author's photograph)



Photograph by Anthony Ho [<http://an.thony.net/>]

**Bio:**

Jennifer Eagleton (B.A., M.A. Asian Studies) is a research assistant in the Department of Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her work involves writing research proposals, editing manuscripts, and organising the publications of the department. She writes for cultural and educational publications, as well editing dictionaries, fiction, Asian-studies texts, and general publications on a freelance basis for major Hong Kong and international publishers. For details about Jennifer's work, please consult her website:

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