

## A Return to Romanticism? Exploring the Aesthetic Continuity in Berlin and Japan through Ruins

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In this paper, I explore the ideological and historical undercurrents that led up to the recent surge of ruin aesthetics in Germany (particularly Berlin) and Japan. I argue that post-war reconstructions of cities eventually resulted in the urban romantic movement that is evocative of aesthetic values associated with Romanticism, observed both in German and Japanese intellectual traditions. Ruins are an effective leitmotif that illuminates the historical and architectural trajectories in the two cultural settings, leading to the contemporary reevaluation of typical romantic ideals, such as transiency, embracement of nature, and imagination into the past. While the current ruin aesthetics as a form of urban escapism is an international phenomenon, Germany and Japan particularly share similar historical trajectories to give rise to such an active scene of ruin tourism: romanticism as an intellectual movement, the destruction in WW2, and the following reconstructions of cities that marginalise ruins.

Both Germany (particularly Berlin) and Japan in the post 2000s saw a rise of 'ruin aesthetics' as an internet subculture, primarily staging on travel and photography blogs. With the ever-heightened interest among the public to illegally break in ruined buildings, some sites have been officially developed as tourist destinations. The Unesco-designated mining island Hashima (Nagasaki), the elegant resort hotel ruin Maya Kanko Hotel (Kobe), the tuberculosis sanatorium complex Beelitz Heilstätten (Beelitz), the former US listening station Teufelsberg (Berlin) are among the examples of 'monitored and maintained' ruins. Although the investment in and protection of those sites for tourism is relatively a recent phenomenon since the mid-2010s, the aesthetics that surround those properties demonstrate both historical undercurrents and ideological continuities from the past centuries.

It is to be noted that European Romanticism in the late 18th century resonates with traditional Japanese aesthetics in some key aspects. Transiency, decay, melancholy, unity of nature and civilisation are common elements that are observed in ruin motifs in both intellectual traditions. To provide the most well-known examples, Casper David Friedrich painted gothic ruins in natural landscapes in certain stillness and melancholy, while Kenko-hoshi pondered in pleasurable melancholy as he saw ruins of the temple constructions built by declining aristocrats (徒然草 第二十五段). Some scholars point out the compatibility between Buddhism and European Romanticism (See Lussier

2007), though Japan had embraced Buddhism and wabi-sabi aesthetics to its cultural core for much longer.

While both German Romanticism and Japanese wabi-sabi are intellectual traditions that were accessible to limited audiences, the brutal and indiscriminate destruction of cities during WW2 brought a whole new symbolism of ruins to the two countries. Post-war cinema in Allied-occupied Germany gave birth to 'rubble films', depicting ruins as the symbol of destruction as well as the following nation-building and re-defining of national identity (Moeller 2014). The experience of radical destruction in Japanese cities also influenced the film directors who later created special effect monster films, such as *Gozilla*, in which demolition of buildings are depicted as violent disturbance of everyday lives (Ryfle 1998). The utter destruction and post-war recovery in the two countries thus forcibly reset the romantic association with ruins for a new symbol of loss and resilience.

The attempts of recovery from the war damage and the following economic boom until the 1970s led to the urban construction culture of 'build and scrap' in Japanese cities, making cities a space that repudiates the existence of ruins. This generated an early Showa cultural renaissance trend that yearns for nostalgia and calls for photographic documentations of industrial ruins. This includes abandoned train stations and railways in the 1980s, expanding to hotel- and restaurant-ruins in the 1990s (飯田 2015). On the other hand, Germany, particularly Eastern Germany, underwent the post-war urban reconstruction distinctive of communist aesthetics and industries, many of which have been abandoned after the reunification. Berlin, once divided and now a trendy and desirable capital city, set a trend to redevelop ruined building sites into a variety of entertainment venues such as event halls, hotels and nightclubs. While those venues often retain their industrial and 'ruin-esque' atmosphere to appeal to the young, urban audience, ruins as abandoned buildings have slowly disappeared from the heart of the city, creating a new scene for ruin photography and urban exploration. Corresponding to the cultural values attached to the ever-peripherised ruins, both Germany and Japan saw a rising online popularity in ruin aesthetics since the 2000s.

The radical destruction and the following development of cities forged an experience of urban living that returns to the Romanticist existence of ruins; a peaceful sanctuary that witnesses the history in its slow process of decay and unification to nature. With a hint of regret and peril for eventual disappearance, popular sites for urban ruins continue to offer 'the radiance of natural life' in 'the traces of humankind' (Shikibrand 2018), and explorers observe that 'even abandonment and neglect are comforting in the face of almost certain development' (Fahey 2020). The recent tendency to deploy popular ruins for tourism, yet without refurbishment or sanitisation, exhibits the public's collective empathy for Romantic values in ruins and their reluctance to 'ruin' the ruins by artificial interventions.

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