

Curated decay: heritage beyond saving - Book review

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Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving, by Caitlin DeSilvey, Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 233 pp., £86 (hardback), ISBN 9780816694365; £20.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780816694389; £18.71 (e-book), ISBN 9781452953724.

Curated Decay opens up a productive and provocative new front in the study of contemporary ruination. Recent years have seen rising interest in ruins as a contemporary phenomenon, but most engagements have tended to frame them as a static object – as an end point rather than a dynamic process. In *Curated Decay* DeSilvey takes the reader on an illuminating tour of ruination sites, each of which is then explored in order to show ruination as an ongoing entropic transformation.

DeSilvey's concern is to investigate ruination as an unstoppable force, and to chronicle how culturally and managerially, relevant stakeholders come to terms with that reality. She urges us to find benefits in the irresistibility of ruins' decay and their vitality and seeks to challenge the preservation-mindedness that has dominated the practice of heritage management since the late 19th century. DeSilvey argues that we face a "crisis of accumulation" (Harrison 2011), living within an era in which the preservation of stuff is now an end in itself. And here, we have a plethora of rules and rituals of preservation, but few of forgetting or letting go.

DeSilvey urges us to ask what *other* lives a ruin site has (in the past, present and future). In answer she chronicles the flora and fauna whose actions continue to curate such places as they disassemble by acts of material reconfiguration and transference. These processes create a sense of change – and give a glimpse of its fullness and potentiality. Thus her case studies revel in impermanence, incompleteness and slippage – and in how the revelations afforded by the ruin's decay humble us to the world beyond the human.

In *Curated Decay*, decay is an ecological process, predominantly the action of the non-human agencies upon non-human matter. Because of this the role of human agency in creating abandonment and initiating ruination is somewhat absented. Furthermore, DeSilvey's focus remains resolutely upon the materiality of ruination. But ruination is more than material decay – and perhaps in some circumstances *material* decay is not even the most important driver. There was scope here for a wider conceptualisation of why things fall apart, of how they lose their clear sense of form and type (semantic decay) and of purpose and performance (normative decay). DeSilvey could have given a little more prominence to the cultural and organisational factors by which the original decisions to withdraw care (in whole or in part) were made and implemented. Perhaps this would have taken the work closer to a study of abandonment than of ruination in its narrow, materialist sense. But foregrounding (and celebrating) material decay in isolation from its causes, and for its own sake, tends to lapse back into ruin-gazing and the Romantic ruin aesthetic, and its celebration of nature's reconquest of the human realm.

The sites visited are shown to be vibrant in their decomposition, but working within her ecological perspective DeSilvey could perhaps also have made more of the hostile-to-human agencies to be found within the body of the ruin. In short, the violence of the ruin itself as a harbourer of a material or moral toxicity, that acts outward, seeping into the world. Instead the sites that DeSilvey presents largely feel passive, defeated, terminal cases that are being *done-to*, or slowly *done-away-with*. In recent years heritage studies has benefited from theorisation and empirical investigation of moral contamination of historic sites, and whether (and if so how) that fades over time. Ruin studies would benefit from vibrant materialist studies that examine the role of toxic materials and symbols, and specifically how their toxicity is an obstinate (perhaps revenant) form of "difficult heritage"

(MacDonald, 2009) that speaks to the past in a way that intrudes into dominant historical narratives, especially where toxic exposure confounds the urge to ruin-gaze or ruin-wander.

But despite these - perhaps inevitable - limitations DeSilvey's book contains rich case study discussions of her core lines of argument. Judged in its own terms, *Curated Decay* accomplishes well that which it sets out to do: it eloquently and evocatively presenting an essentially material-ecological framing of ruins and ruination. It questions the fetishizing of preservation, and offers glimpses of the awkward, transgressive, realities of attempts at letting go, and of the merits of abandoning the preservation instinct in the hope of what might come forth from that. Overall, DeSilvey's book is a timely and very helpful contribution to debate in this developing field, and as she notes in her conclusion, much further work remains to be done to understand contemporary ruination.

References

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