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# The Re-Use of Urban Ruins

## Atmospheric Inquiries of the City

**Hanna Katharina Göbel**

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# The Re-Use of Urban Ruins

How do urban ruins provoke their cultural revaluation? This book offers a unique sociological analysis about the social agencies of material culture and atmospheric knowledge of buildings in the making. It draws on ethnographic research in Berlin along the former Palace of the Republic, the E-Werk and the Café Moskau in order to make visible an interdisciplinary regime of design experts who have developed a professional sensorium turning the built memory of the city into an object of aesthetic inquiry.

**Hanna Katharina Göbel** is a cultural sociologist and works as a post-doc researcher at the Institute of Human Movement Science/Performance Studies at Universität Hamburg.

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# Preface

This research project was made possible by the University of Constance and funded by its Excellence Cluster 16 (EXC16) "Cultural Foundations of Social Integration". The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) provided funding for my visits to the University of Edinburgh, where I met with Jane M. Jacobs. The Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart also supported the project, offering space where I could think and write outside of the university. Andreas Reckwitz and Jane M. Jacobs, have been very supportive, and I thank both of them for their supervision and assistance in the development of the project and their faith in my work. I am very grateful to all members of the colloquium of the Chair for Social Theory and Cultural Sociology at University of Constance (since April 2010, at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt [Oder]). My interdisciplinary experience in the EXC16—graduate school "Cultures of Time" in Constance was crucial for the development of my ideas, and I thank all participants for their inspiring feedback on my chapters. I would also like to thank all of my colleagues who shared with me their thoughts about my work, and my family and friends, who encouraged me to keep going. I am particularly grateful to my husband Tim Göbel.

Claire Bacher helped me to write readable English and I thank her for her patience and diligence. She also translated the interview material and the quotes from German literature, for which I am very grateful. Most importantly, I would like to thank all those who participated in my research—all the re-users associated with ruins who were willing to be interviewed and observed. They provided invaluable material and ideas. Two of my participants, MR and RR, unexpectedly passed away during my months of fieldwork. I hope that through this book, their distinct cultural knowledge of urban ruins that can no longer be transmitted through their practices can at least be recorded and preserved.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1. URBAN RUINS WITHOUT DESIGN?

> SP: That means, I suppose, that this conversion takes place only in historical buildings or buildings with different historical uses. I think that there are probably many more conversions than one imagines. Probably at any given moment, something somewhere is being converted.

On a Monday morning in the spring of 2010, I found myself on a guided tour of the industrial ruin of the E-Werk on *Wilhelmstraße* in the central Mitte district, in what had once been East Berlin. This was not a nostalgic sightseeing visit for tourists, but rather a for-profit activity in which professional sales managers were showing this *historical location*—as it is known in the field—to event managers interested in temporarily renting the refurbished property to host business events. RR, the tenant of the E-Werk and the director of 'Event-Company III'[1] who was leading the tour, welcomed a potential client and two of his event managers at the entrance to the building. Although they had never met before in professional event-management circles, RR and his guests immediately began to swap their recollections of shared experiences in the former ruin. The potential client knew the E-Werk from the 1990s. In the years after the re-unification of Berlin in 1989, RR and his friends ran a globally renowned techno-club in the abandoned Hall C of the E-Werk ruin. In the illustrated brochure that RR and his sales managers give to potential clients and their event organizers, this period of improvised temporary use is historicized in a special section. While RR was steering the tour through Hall C, one guest was delighted to discover some remnants of club graffiti on the walls; he put his finger into a hole in the stone wall and knocked on the exposed steel in the gallery, laughing. RR smiled to see the guest's amusement. When I later asked him about this incident, he answered:

> RR: There were really a lot of people I've [pause] run across again. In various places. [HS: Mmm.] Well, mostly as clients, to be honest.

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> [HS: Really?] Yes [laughs], that's how it works. So, it was insane. The E-Werk [club] was only there very briefly, from 1993 to 1997, four years. But that was really a generation, the decision-makers would say today. That went through there. So, that was really a lot of people. Because it was something new.

Already the image of the nineteenth-century castle ruin teaches us that these objects are cultural products of memory that serve specific aesthetic purposes of melancholy and nostalgia. Urban ruins in re-use, such as this former E-Werk, therefore, act as aesthetic objects in the modern city. They are involved in an ongoing atmospheric translation of their cultural memory. In the account of RR: "We wouldn't have done it [the re-use of the E-Werk and other ruins] if they [the ruins] had no atmosphere". Their cultural past is their key aesthetic feature, which generates logics of its own cultural and economic value making. This acts according to aesthetics of urban ruins, which are specifically designed and fabricated, and not *naturally* given as it is often assumed. Thus, to think of contemporary re-used urban ruins as undesigned leftovers would be a very naive point of view.

The pioneers in the study of urban ruins were Georg Simmel (1993) and Walter Benjamin (1983), who observed metropolitan Berlin and Paris in the early decades of the twentieth century, noting the aesthetic agencies of ruins and nineteenth-century built environments that resulted from the increasing speed of modern life. Throughout the twentieth century, urban ruins have come to perform as a (Romantic) counterweight to smooth, rational, and regulated modern urban environments (Edensor 2005; Hell and Schönle 2010b) by invoking a material critique of "single-minded commitment" (Hell and Schönle 2010a, 8) to modern urban progress in urban planning and architecture. The traumatic experience of the *Abrissmanie* (demolition mania) of the *Trümmerstädte* (ruined cities) after the end of World War II (Assmann 2009; Till 2005), the de-industrialisation of inner-city environments in most of the Western cities, post-colonialist as well as post-socialist orderings of cities produced an extended perspective of modern urban ruins, which included leftover fragments that might be the remnants of destroyed or demolished buildings by military interventions, buildings that have deteriorated, or that are simply empty and in a state of decay.

Since the 1970s, in use or out of use, formally or informally used, urban ruins and their aesthetics perform as one of the key urban material co-creators of the "culturalized city" (Reckwitz 2012). As urban sociologist Jane Jacobs stresses in her critical manifest *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (orig. 1961), abandoned "old materials" are needed to re-invent the *cultural* life of inner-city environments[2] and seem to resist the high-speed capitalism of (Western) cities—as one can study in many processes of gentrification.[3] At the same time, in the semantic interpretation of the term, gentrification (German *Veredeln*) in the culturalized city is the ongoing sensual and aesthetic refinement of an (partly existing) urban-built environment. Cultural

economies of the city and cultural policies of urban planning such as the paradigm of "creative cities" (Florida 2002), which has been condemned for its neo-liberal and academic motivation (Peck 2005),[4] or "experience cities" (Kiib 2009), have proposed the regeneration of inner-city districts by aesthetic means (Degen 2008). This "self-culturalization" (Reckwitz 2009) includes the transformation of urban ruins into buildings—which, however, still keep the aesthetic structure of a ruin that exhibits its past. Many methodological devices have been formulated by urban designers to name these transformations: The re-design, re-animation, re-vitalization, conversion, change of use, (adaptive) re-use, recycling, re-purposing, or renewal of former docklands, industrial ruins such as the E-Werk, former churches, military bunkers and other post-war ruins, post-socialist buildings and other abandoned built structures "from the archive" (Assmann 2010) contribute to the ecologies of this "aesthetic economy" (Böhme 2003).

Urban ruins are specific urban materials that belong to cities' "cultural memory", as developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann (2011). Cultural techniques of designing their aesthetics in the arts or in architecture have turned upside down the modern premises of imagining design from the future. Svetlana Boym stresses this in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), which deals with the re-unified city of Berlin: "The urban renewal taking place in the present is no longer futuristic but nostalgic; the city imagines its future by improvising on its past" (75).[5] *Bauen im Bestand* ("building in existing structures") is a major field of activity in the discipline of architecture: "We have started to reaccess the value of the past, and increasingly relativise everything new, and this means adopting new positions" (Käpplinger 2006, 18). Indeed, many publications seek to describe (increasingly using photographic images rather than text) the results of these revaluations of abandoned materials (Bordage and TransEuropeHalles 2002; Breitling and Cramer 2007; Greenslade and Saxon 1979; Gruentuch and Ernst 2006; Hauser 2004; Hudson 1987; Klanten and Feireiss 2009; Licata 2005; Littlefield and Lewis 2007; Schittich 1999; Scott 2008; Stone, Brooker, and Preston 2004; Züst and Joanelly 2008). In inner-traditions of the profession of architecture, this idea to conceive about built material culture as something pre-existent to the work of architects is still perceived as a "perverse view" (Cairns and Jacobs 2014).

The politics of design aesthetics of the transformation and re-design of E-Werk and other former urban ruins are the topic of this book. Design is understood as a practical accomplishment and not as an intentionally directed task, a collaborative activity of stabilizing and de-stabilizing built objects, "even if in some cases the 'collaborators' are not all visible, welcomed or willing" (Latour 2008, 6). The study of the aesthetics of these activities includes following the paradoxical paths between the structural constraints of economic progress and the ecologies and politics of cultural memory in the 'making'. The book makes visible the emergence and stabilization of an interdisciplinary "regime" (Thévenot 2001) of urban design

practices that fabricates its own epistemologies and politics of aesthetics bridging the disciplinary borders of architecture and urban planning, the arts and urban activism.

Applying these ideas to urban studies, this book promotes a 'flattened' view on the cultural value making of buildings. It is to understand built material culture "as part of the on-going (re)design of the world" (Jacobs and Merriman 2011), which requires thinking of buildings as fluid entities in the 'making' (Latour and Yaneva 2008). It requires leaving aside the static and fixed everyday understanding of buildings and their uses or the assumption that buildings act as a semiotic transfer picture of society (Delitz 2010). I wish to underline with my study that buildings (and in this case urban ruins) are actively involved in the makings and unmakings of the socialities 'inside' and 'outside' of them. This follows the idea "to embed architecture *in* practice" (Jacobs and Merriman 2011, 211).

This praxeological perspective on culture industry (Lash and Lury 2007) and "objectual practice" (Knorr-Cetina 2001) is far removed from the Marxist legacies inscribed in the predominant theories of gentrification and urban design. This research heuristics for the study of built environments concentrates on how to study human-material relationships by taking into consideration the theoretical resources of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Science & Technology Studies (STS). Whereas the field of critical urban studies has focused more on capitalism, a praxeological focus would have its locus of attention on the city that acts as an object in its own cultural logic (Farías 2011; Farías and Bender 2009). Ignacio Farías (2011) proposes broadening the field of "inquiry" (366) to urban aspects other than only capitalism.[6] With a focus on material culture, I will look on how ruined materials possess atmospheric agency in urban practices of re-use, a perspective that should be considered neither architectural-historical (Hollis 2009; Macrae-Gibson 1985) nor urban-morphological (as represented by the Chicago School or the work of Christopher Alexander [1979] tracing how built forms mutate). This book explores the epistemologies of these aesthetics to the extent that it asks *how* designers act as social and cultural engineers that develop aesthetic competences to deal with these material leftovers in the city. And it traces *how* the design of these cultural memory sites unfolds atmospherically. It re-works the critical approaches on materials and aesthetics of cultural industries and of urban studies in order to present insights into the practical knowledge of designing the urban. With my exploration of reanimated buildings, I seek to complement the scholarship on urban atmospheres that has emerged as an urban praxeological inquiry over the past decade. In architectural theory, the architectural atmosphere acts as the sensual and aesthetically enfolding concept of the built environment. It organizes the connections between humans and the built environment in the urban sphere. Following the publication of Kevin Lynch's book *The Image of the City* (1960), there has been a (still ongoing) discussion in urban studies and planning with regard to the analysis of atmospheres. This

study underlines the importance of atmosphere as a social entity of the culturalized city and not a vaguely defined *pre*-social accompaniment (Stewart 2010). In order to complement this view, a more detailed methodological engagement with the aesthetic dimensions of the materiality of urban ruins is required.

## 2. BLIND SPOTS IN THE CIRCLE OF GENTRIFICATION: THE PROBLEM WITH AESTHETIC AGENCY

Since the 1970s and the crisis of modern architecture and urban planning, a neo-Marxist perspective that explains urban change through political-economic transformations dominated research traditions in urban studies. This perspective quickly overlooks the material and aesthetic agencies of built materials *qua* methodology. In the conceptual circle of gentrification, artists serve as the "pioneers" (Ley 1994) and innovators of aesthetics in the reanimation of abandoned neighbourhoods and urban ruins. As Sharon Zukin (1992) observes, cultural motives act over economic motives when it comes to the development of design techniques for "proper perspectives for viewing the historical landscape". She argues that the "cultural value of modern cities" and the explorations for "establishing the proper perspective for viewing the historical urban landscape" is in the hands of "contemporary artists and intellectuals" (229). Her influential study *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (orig. 1982) deals with New York's SoHo transformation of its industrial landscape into new middle-class living and working environments in the 1960s and 1970s. Already in the 1950s, at the time when the first exhibitions of the new art scene around Yves Klein and other abstract expressionists were organized, these artists discovered abandoned nineteenth-century industrial spaces, palatial environments that could combine working and living. Although the planners of that time had decided in 1959 to completely demolish the district, the artists Jean Tinguely, Robert Rauschenberg, Jackson Pollock, and later Andy Warhol and others not only occupied but also inhabited the aesthetic environment of this industrial age. In the 1960s, George Maciunas, the pioneer of loft living and a member of the Fluxus movement, promoted the legalization of this occupation. In 1982, when Zukin first published her study, the loft had already become a common—but still stimulating, and often faked—reanimated residential object (Dochantschi 1997; Hartmann and Hauss 1985; Leitner 1985; Podmore 1998). In her study, Zukin (1987) follows how the artists have developed aesthetic techniques in order to repurpose the old industrial buildings into lofts. She concentrates, however, mainly on the symbolic dimensions of these aesthetics when exploring the economic success of this new lifestyle of loft-living and how it diffuses from the arts into the realms of the new middle classes: "The reason that people develop a sentimental [ . . . ] attachment to the industrial aesthetic is

that it is not real" (73). She speaks of "return to a more manageable past" and the "nostalgia for simpler machines", a "[d]reaming of durables, we associate the old industrial materials with even older natural ones" (73). In this perspective of studies of gentrification, major attention is paid to the commodification of those cultural values that urban ruins offer as design objects. The focus has been on the political-economic effects of properties and how their economic value changes when working-class and subcultural users are squeezed out of their homes by new investors and middle-class interlopers. As Martin Jager (2010) diagnoses in respect to the transformation of urban ruins into commodities: "[T]he past becomes a commodity for contemporary consumption, the consumption circuit is extended both in time and space" (155–157).

The material and aesthetic agencies themselves are quickly overlooked in such a perspective that is exemplarily to the prevailing assumptions in the social sciences. Classical aesthetics was defined in the *Aesthetica* (1750–1758) of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten as the science of any kind of sensitive perception (the *aisthesis*). Baumgarten's definition did not limit the artefacts under investigation to the field of the arts. Rather, Baumgarten focused on the sensory experience itself, searching for where exactly the aesthetic might take place. In Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), Baumgarten's worst fears regarding the rationalization of perception came true. From an aisthesis point of view, Kant's aesthetic judgment rarefies the sensual experience in itself, substituting intuition with seemingly passionless *a priori* criteria intended to enable judgments of beauty in the arts. Thus, for the judgment of architecture, once it was included as an art worthy of contemplation, the sensual experience is not of interest. Richard Hill's (1999) interpretation of Kant clarifies the philosopher's view on architecture:

> The distinguishing aesthetic feature of architecture is not an actual encounter with a physical object: buildings are not important from a tactile or visual point of view, but because they instantiate certain forms. Those forms are not important in themselves, but only as "aesthetic ideas". It is not the actual use of buildings that is important, but the concept of their use.
>
> (187)

Kant's definition of aesthetics through the lens of rationalization has dominated the discourse and reinforced the sovereignty of the fine arts in modernity (Kant's views on architecture have become similarly entrenched), but clearly at the theoretical expense of sensory plenitude and the consideration of the affordances of materials.

In twentieth-century social sciences specifically, this rarefied image of the aesthetic resulted in views intellectualizing sensual experience. Material culture and its aesthetics were conceived as *pre*-social entities, outer impressionist effects of the 'social' without analytical relevance and agency

for making claims about the rationalization of modern society. The field of sociology of art specifically became less interested in the actionability of perception itself, focusing more on how aesthetic judgments are enabled by outer 'social' structure and its reproductions of class distinctions in the neo-Marxist sense. Two figures should be mentioned as representative of this paradigm: Pierre Bourdieu (1982) and Howard S. Becker (1982). These two scholars primarily focus on the preconditions of the production of art and its reception, as found in both Bourdieu's field theory approach, with its concept of the habitus, and in the 'production-of-culture' analysis developed by Becker. ANT scholars Antoine Hennion and Line Grenier (2000) state their criticism of sociology of art succinctly: In their view, sociology of art is the study "against art", meaning against any sort of aesthetic experience. They berate Bourdieu and Becker for their intellectualized concepts that access art "*a priori* and from the outset"—that is, systematically rejecting the sensual actionability of artworks themselves when directly addressing issues of valuation and judgment. In addition, the field is still limited to the study of art production and reception in art institutions. As a result, there is not only a restricted view of art production and reception outside such institutions, but also a general lack of recognition for the varieties of artefacts outside the sphere of the arts that might lead to aesthetic experiences. Sociology of art is considered the arbiter for the division between aisthesis and aesthetics, and scholars in the field have systematically narrowed Baumgarten's early vision of aisthesis.

This anti-aesthetic assumption of social aesthetics, which rushes over its object of study, therefore, offers exemplarily a key lack of methodology in the social sciences. The general refusal to consider material and aesthetic cultures is due to the text-based mentality of sociological analyses and the semiotic text- and image-based focus cultivated by the field of visual culture studies (Prinz 2014). Antoine Hennion and Bruno Latour are critical of the fetishistic aspects of these theories and the fallacy of scholars' belief in the authentic experience of materials. In their view, scholars are taken in by the concept of the aura in aesthetic theory as Walter Benjamin conceived of it in "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (1937):

> [W]hen looking at the past, the nostalgia for the aura is itself seen, by Benjamin, as an illusion, as a relic, as the residue of a cult value. So the critic of modern art can itself be criticized as a reactionary looking for a lost bourgeois elitist conception of art.
>
> (Hennion and Latour 2003, 92)

Although STS and ANT have turned attention to social effects of materials moving away from social structure (Reckwitz 2002) even this camp of research struggles here to some extent with the legacies of the social sciences. Its philosophy of technology disregards the philosophy of art in many

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