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## Reflections on the deep structure of place; ruin and transformation, decay and construction Cities and other ruins: Reflections on Astley Castle

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## Reflections on the deep structure of place

### Ruin and transformation, decay and construction

#### Cities and other ruins: reflections on Astley Castle

*Juliet Davis*

All too often, a fascination with ruins produces little more than reflection on the qualities of decay and abandonment that stimulate nostalgia for lost and vanquished pasts. In this exhibition by Witherford Watson Mann, a subtle reflection was provided on the potential for ruins of diverse kinds to have contemporary life and relevance. Indeed, the beauty of the exhibition belied the willingness of this practice to engage with places that would not often be regarded as ruins worthy of careful study or adaptation, and to transform them precisely by doing so.

The focus of the exhibition, held at Sir John Soane's Museum in London in February 2014, was Witherford Watson Mann's 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize-winning Astley Castle project in Warwickshire. This project involved re-inhabiting the remains of what was originally a medieval castle to create a 'festive house' for the Landmark Trust to be run as a holiday home. The castle was gradually adapted and developed up until the nineteenth century, but when the practice took it on in 2007, it had been in a state of ruin for several decades following a fire.

It was never a piece of exemplary or first-rate architecture, more a fortified house when first built than a great castle. And, arguably, it had acquired a greater power architecturally and visually as a ruin. The project resulted in the creation of a carefully crafted contemporary intervention which preserves the experience of ruined fragments while stitching newly inhabitable spaces into and between them. With the house occupying roughly half the area of the ruined castle, the rest remains open to the sky, allowing human inhabitation, nature and the



1 View across the front room to Lincoln's Inn Fields

elements to establish a variety of relationships with its compellingly 'broken edges'.

The exhibition's title conveys Witherford Watson Mann's desire to locate Astley Castle in a wider framework of ideas about the importance of being able to use new architectural interventions to add to rich archaeological layering of use that previously developed sites reflect, rather than to either preserve them as untouchable heritage or erase them through redevelopment. This was realised in an exhibition display which situated Astley among the practice's urban projects at Bankside and in the Lea Valley and which sought to establish relationships between understandings of the durability and persistence of the ruined castle and the ruin-like qualities of urban fabric built over time. Both the castle and the city are understood as tangible products of long-standing and ongoing processes of social, cultural, economic accumulation and transformation.

#### Resonances with Soane

Fittingly, the spatial container of the exhibition comprised two rooms of 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, one of the three town houses built by Sir John Soane between 1792 and 1834 that now comprise the Soane Museum.

Originally formed within Soane's own home at number 13 for the benefit of his architectural students, the Museum showcases a number of characteristically romantic representations of ruined architecture, allowing Witherford Watson Mann's work to be viewed in this distinctive context. In the tiny Picture Room for example, Piranesi's theatrical renderings of ruined Paestum are hung in close proximity to Gandy's watercoloured visions of Soane's own masterwork, the Bank of England, as a ruin. While the former highlight the achievements of a distant past through the contemporary drama of its ruins, the latter anticipate the future ruination of present endeavour and production. Both resonate with Witherford Watson Mann's approach, which is to value the evidence of time that historical boundaries, structures and fabric provide, while yet supporting their ongoing reinterpretation and adaptation in the context of present dynamics of reuse and development. Such an approach implies an openness to the possibility of the future re-appropriation and transformation through contemporary interventions, creating scope for reflection on questions of appropriate durability and resilience.

Originally comprising a drawing room and a bedroom, the pair of exhibition rooms echoed the 'order' of domestic spaces in Astley Castle – a series of indoor and outdoor spaces of gathering and meeting, food preparation and dining, bathing and sleeping. At the same time, the relationship between the public street-facing drawing room and the private bedroom at the back echoed the relationship established through the exhibition's curation between Astley Castle as a domestic building and Witherford Watson Mann's urban projects. David Grandorge's photograph [1], shot diagonally across the street-facing room and in which a blurred Lincoln's Inn Fields can just be seen through the rain pouring down Soane's full-height sash windows, beautifully expresses this relationship. Subtle dialogues between Astley's and Soane's rooms, as between the exhibition and the Soane Museum, and between the house and the city were enacted in several other ways through the arrangement of items on display.

For example, a powerful Hélène Binet photograph taken prior to Astley Castle's construction, of a fireplace and crumbling chimney breast, was aptly situated over the fireplace in the front room. The dialogue between the photograph



2 View across the front room with Hélène Binet's photograph above the fireplace



3 The 'autopsy' model

and the exhibition setting is reflected in David Grandorge's classically composed photograph looking towards the fireplace [2]. Binet's photograph captured the atmosphere of the uninhabited castle where evidences of former domesticity such as the blackened hearth and shuttered windows recall its former life while at the same time serving as hallmarks of abandonment. Muted colours of materials left exposed to the elements, rich textures of decaying materials and complex geometries of heavy walls rendered structurally fragile appear as both tragic and potent. For me, they recalled compellingly Georg Simmel's contention that while: 'what has led the [ruined] building upward is human will [,] what gave it its present appearance is the brute, downward dragging, corroding, crumbling power of nature'.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, the photograph revealed the different kinds of time which, for Witherford Watson Mann, were important sources of imagination, from 'the hours traced by the sun through its ruinous gashes [to] the generations gathered under its roofs, and the centuries traced by its stones'.

At the centre of both rooms were table-top displays of models of Astley Castle from different stages of design for its re-inhabitation. In the front room was what Witherford referred to as the 'autopsy model' of individually explored pieces of

the project – difficult junctions, special walls and elements of glazing for example which had to stitch together broken historical edges [3]. This model served to represent not only the complexity of the project but also the creative decision-making processes intrinsic to design. In the back room, three models of Astley Castle explored the structural logic of intervention in its ruins in different ways. A three-part model expressing the tripartite tectonic order of the project – retained stone ruin, new masonry construction and new timber structure – was particularly striking for its diagrammatic clarity. Aside from a few carefully chosen precast-concrete elements used to tie structures together, masonry and timber were the only structural materials used in the project, speaking to the Modernist ethos of 'truth to materials'. The emphasis on models and model-making in the exhibition highlighted the practice's commitment to thinking through the haptic, and also resonated with Soane's own collection of carefully displayed architectural fragments and artefacts.

#### The deep structure of place

Appropriately, the themes of ruin and transformation developed in Witherford Watson Mann's urban projects were explored through displays in the street-facing front room. The exploration began in the first cabinet with a series of

maps showing the urban evolution of five places well known to Witherford Watson Mann – the buildings of Astley Castle and the Bank of England, and the neighbourhoods of Shoreditch, Whitechapel and Bankside [4]. The significance of these mappings for their design practice was subsequently revealed through displays of their studies of the 2012 Olympic site, commissioned by London Legacy Development Corporation, and their framework for the incremental design of public spaces in Bankside. The challenges of these two projects couldn't be more different – the one a largely cleared landscape redeveloped on a large scale, the other an incrementally developed, fine-grained urban hinterland to the rapidly developing Thames frontage near the Tate at Bankside. However, the models and drawings for the two projects revealed the consistency of approach taken to both, which, as Witherford put it, is based on uncovering the 'deep structure' of place as a source of inspiration for place-specific design.

This approach results in drawings which are both analytical and propositional. Bird's-eye drawings of Bankside's 'Urban Forest', for example, showed how the framework of public space improvements and developments could emerge and evolve in relation to anticipated development at Bankside's edges over time. They suggested that



4 Urban analysis and projects displayed

the scope for the development of this framework should emerge through a carefully managed mediation between the forces of planning and development that are shaping the area's future and the existing patterns of activity and ownership which characterise its everyday life. Meanwhile, the characterisation of the different rivers that pass through the Olympic site as 'urban' or 'wild' derived from recognition of their different historical uses and developments, which pointed to ways of organising new Olympic legacy parklands and development. Like Astley Castle, these projects engage with processes of dismantling, building-up and survival against the odds that typify urban change. However, in an age when redevelopment and reconstruction are the major tools of regeneration, they also highlight the potential for an architectural practice to adopt a political stance through doing so – beginning with more nuanced approaches to spatial, social and historical contexts.

The inclusion of numerous working drawings within the exhibition revealed how the act of drawing in a thoughtful architectural office can reflect the processes of getting-to-know sites and developing appropriate responses to them. Drawings included hand-drawn sketches, paintings and representations combining manual and digital methods. Conventions of plan, perspective, isometric and elevation – in watercolour,

pencil rendering and Photoshop collage – were used together to communicate ideas about closely observed qualities of place. A small view of Flat Iron Square, in the cabinet to the right of the fireplace, particularly stood out for me for its accurate depiction of London's grit, atmosphere and weather in a way that sophisticated computerised renderings often fail to do.

#### **The perpetually unfinished character of buildings and cities**

Moving through to the smaller back room, displays focused on the design and construction of Astley Castle, as shown in David Grandorge's photograph of this space. Working drawings of the 'broken castle' revealed the enormity of the challenge of building inside a ruin, and the need for imagination and craftsmanship in doing so – reflected in innovations such as the 'clay block diaphragm walls' used to build-up new masonry onto existing walls up to two metres thick. Translating the practice's ideas into construction clearly depended on establishing a series of rules of engagement between new and old, as instructions to the contractor on one drawing illustrated: 'Remove existing brick back to this line. Insert reclaimed bricks where coursing differences prevent new brick from keying in and avoid slivers of brick less than a header in width'. However, it also depended on developing a capacity for new construction to adjust to numerous interfaces, which details

such as the choice of a flexible, 'quarter lap bond' for new brick walls enabled.

Astley's ruined fabric suggests the difficulty inherent in many historical buildings of defining what is original or 'authentic' and challenges us to see value in the process of growth rather than in work from a particular era of building. Displays of the Great Hall, including photographs of the 'finished space' by Philip Vile alongside design sketches and historical photographs of the castle emphasise the architects' view that the value of heritage lies to a large extent in the stories and memories that architectural fabric is able, at different times, to embody. These do not only include major historical events that radically shape buildings, but also the many everyday memories and experiences that locate it in a social context. One visitor to the project was quoted as having said that: 'My wedding reception was held at Astley Castle in 1965 and the memories I had of the building I thought would be shattered'. This sensitivity to the significance of human engagement with buildings recalls John Ruskin's historicist distaste for the falsehood of 'restoration', inviting us to 'think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when these stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them "See! this our fathers did for us".'<sup>2</sup>



5 View through the back room to Joseph Gandy's Bank of England painting

The sense which this quote also captures of the capacity for cross-generational relationships to be forged through buildings is also suggested by the piece marking the culmination of the journey through the exhibition to the rear of the second space – Joseph Gandy's famous watercolour of Soane's Bank of England [5]. This is of course usually housed within the Picture Room among Soane's other past and future ruins. As the Museum's curator Jerzy Kierkuć-Bieliński explained, Soane and Gandy's intention was to reveal the building's durable construction and not only to anticipate its future destruction. The potential for a double reading of this image resonates with the exhibition as a whole with its emphases on ruin and transformation, on decay and construction, and on the significance of the fact that it takes many hands over time to make buildings and cities.

In general, this exhibition encouraged appreciation of the perpetually unfinished character of both buildings and wider urban settings. Contained within its beautiful displays was a powerful critique of the lack of durability of much of the modern city – as exemplified by large-scale developments such as the Heygate Estate in South London which

lasted less than a generation. It points to the potential to view the role of an architect as one of engagement with, and translation of, social, cultural and economic processes rather than one of brittle object creation. As Richard Sennett argued in a panel discussion following Witherford Watson Mann's lecture at the London School of Economics on 12 February 2014, urban evolution is an 'unsteady process' which, as Astley's own construction history reveals, tends to proceed through the 'dynamic tension' of 'rupture and accretion'. If the crowding of visitors into two small rooms over the time of my mid-week visit is anything to go by, these ideas are met with a groundswell of support and interest.

*Cities and Other Ruins: Reflections on Astley Castle was held at Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 4–15 February 2014*

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#### Notes

1. Georg Simmel 'The Ruin', trans. by David Kettler, in *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio

- State University Press, 1959), pp. 259–66 (p. 261).
2. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: John Wiley, 1849), pp. 154–55.

#### Illustration credits

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