

# Albert Speer's "Theory of Ruin Value"

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## abstract

The architecture of Albert Speer (1905–1981) was specifically built according to the theory of ruin value (*Ruinenwerttheorie*). He argued that the monuments of the Third Reich should be erected with the consideration that they keep their aesthetic value even after thousands of years, much like the ruins of Roman and Greek monuments. A number of researchers have suggested that Speer's theory inherited the 18th century's romantic imagination for ancient ruins. My view, however, is that there are considerable differences between Speer's theory and the aesthetic of the 18th century. In this text, I aim to point out the lineage and uniqueness of Speer's theory by comparing it with the imaginative taste of 18th-century painters and architects for "ruins."

## Introduction

Albert Speer (1905–1981), the representative architect of the Third Reich, designed many pieces of architecture for the glorification of the Nazi Party. Among his works, the Nazi Party Rally Ground in Nuremberg, the so-called "cathedral of light" (*Lichtdom*)" (fig. 1), is presumably best-known through the famous propagandistic film *Triumph of the Will* by Leni Riefenstahl. However, a lesser-known fact is that these monumental works were built specifically according to his "theory of ruin value" (*Ruinenwerttheorie*). Speer argued that the



Figure 1. Cathedral of Light (Bundesarchiv).

Third Reich's architecture should be erected with the consideration that they retain their aesthetic value even after thousands of years. His ideal were the ruins of Roman and Greek monument, which still remind us of the glory of their times. A number of aestheticians have pointed out that Speer's theory is not original, suggesting that his theory inherited the romantic imagination for ancient ruins from the influential picturesque or capriccio aesthetic movements of mainly 18th-century Europe. It is true that Speer was a successor of the traditional aesthetics of ruin, albeit a peculiar one. However, I believe that there exist considerable differences between Speer's imagination inspired by the ruin theory and that of the 18th century. In this paper, I aim to point out the uniqueness of Speer's imagination by focusing on his perceptions of time.

## 1. On Speer's Theory of Ruin Value

In his memoirs, published in 1969, Speer described how his theory of ruin value occurred to

him: as he passed by a building under reconstruction, he saw that the iron debris, which remained after the building had been blown up with dynamite, had already begun to rust. “This dreary sight” led him to the idea that “by using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics,”<sup>1)</sup> they should build structures that would resemble Roman ruins even after hundreds or thousands of years. He wrote:

To illustrate my ideas, I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outline still clearly recognizable. In Hitler’s entourage this drawing was regarded as blasphemous. That I could even conceive of a period of decline for the newly founded Reich destined to last a thousand years seemed outrageous to many of Hitler’s closest followers. But he himself accepted my ideas as logical and illuminating. He gave orders that in the future the important building of his Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principle of this “law of ruins.”<sup>2)</sup>

Unfortunately, this sketch drawn by Speer has not survived. Schönberger therefore doubts even the credibility of this episode about the “law of ruins,” suggesting that it was in his memoirs that Speer first developed this theory.<sup>3)</sup> However, her supposition is not convincing, because Speer’s words in 1937 remind us of his ruin theory. He observed:

While few iron bridges or halls are expected to survive more than forty years, thousands-year-old Egyptian and Roman buildings still stand there as powerful witnesses to the past of the great nations. Those buildings often

exist as ruins because of the human enthusiasm for destruction.<sup>4)</sup>

He [the architect] chooses the stone, which can offer him all possibilities to form, and which is the only material to pass down tradition—the tradition that remains for us in the stone buildings made by our predecessors—to future generations because of its constancy.<sup>5)</sup>

In his statement that the ruins of Egyptian and Roman architecture are the certain evidence of the grandeur of the nations, we can certainly recognize almost the same content as in the theory of ruin value, even though the term is not used in these sentences.

Moreover, a speech of Hitler’s in 1938 supports the supposition that Speer and Hitler had already embraced the theory of ruin value at that time. Hitler said that “the truly great architecture” can “claim that it can stand up to thousands of years of critical trials, and during those years it can be the pride of the people who created the work.”<sup>6)</sup> Moreover, he insisted that such works “are finally judged and assessed in terms of thousands of years.”<sup>7)</sup>

A number of researchers unhesitatingly accept Speer’s statement about his theory of ruin value and discuss it. As I observed above, they concur that Speer’s theory on ruins is an imitation or descendant of the aesthetics of ruins of the 18th or 19th century. For example, Kitschen mentions Horace Walpole (1717–1797), the English author of Gothic Romance, the German painter Kasper David Friedrich (1774–1797), and John Soane (1753–1837), the English architect of neoclassicism, as precursors of Speer.<sup>8)</sup> Tanigawa also suggests that Speer’s theory of ruin value was inspired by the imagination of John Soane and French painter Hubert Robert (1733–1808).<sup>9)</sup>

I agree that Speer could not have developed his theory without those preceding ones.

Nevertheless, I believe that more careful research and deeper analysis are required for this judgment. Therefore, I will focus especially on two artists of the 18th and 19th centuries, Hubert Robert and John Soane, for they both imagined the same “future ruin” as Speer’s.

## 2. The Ruin in the Future” by Hubert Robert and John Soane

Hubert Robert, known as “Robert des Ruines,” studied painting in Rome for over ten years. After returning to Paris in 1765, he painted many paintings of ruins under the great influence of Italian painters of capriccio, such as Pannini (1691–1765) and Piranesi (1720–1778).<sup>10)</sup> Capriccio is an architectural fantasy in which buildings, archaeological ruins, and other architectural elements are placed together in fictional combinations. His famous work “Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins” (1796) (fig. 2) is one such capriccio, in which he imagined



Figure 2. Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins (Dubin 2012, p. 153).

the ruins of the Louvre gallery in the future; through the gallery’s roof, almost completely destroyed, the blue sky can be seen; on the ground, the fragments of stone pillars are scattered, among which a young man is drawing the statue of Apollo Belvedere. At that time, Robert was serving on the committee that was in charge of designing the new national museum at the Palais du Louvre. In this



Figure 3. Bird’s – eye view of Bank of England, drawn by Gandy (Middleton 1999, p. 222).

position, he executed several dozen views of the Louvre, including that work of the Louvre in ruins. The picture (fig. 3), a bird’s-eye view of the Bank of England in watercolor, was designed by John Soane and drawn by his assistant Joseph Michael Gandy in 1830. In this drawing, the Bank of England is illustrated as an imaginary ruin in the future in the same manner as Robert’s. Soane devoted nearly forty-five years to the renovation of the Bank of England, and this drawing of a ruin was produced in honor of his lengthy labor. By 1798, Soane had already ordered Gandy to illustrate another romantic ruin of the Bank of England (fig. 4). These pictures clearly show that Soane had a



Figure 4. An imaginary view of the Rotunda of Bank of England in ruins (Middleton 1999, p. 231).

certain taste and imagination for ruins, which was certainly influenced by the theory of Picturesque, a dominant aesthetic, especially in 18th- and 19th-century England.<sup>11)</sup>

Robert and Soane both imagined that the contemporary architecture they built would decay and collapse and become ruins in the far future. In

this respect, their imagination seemed to be the same as Speer's in his theory of ruin value. However, we should conduct a more precise investigation from the perspective of the temporality inherent in ruins. As many have noted, ruins have ambiguous temporality; on the one hand, ruins give us a sense of transiency and instability, but at the same time, permanence and continuity<sup>12</sup>). The art historian Alois Riegl pointed out that cultural heritage possesses a certain age value (Alterswert) and considered ruins as "unintentional monuments."<sup>13</sup>) The sight of ancient ruins like Roman and Greek monuments convey a melancholic feeling because they remind us of the ephemerality of human efforts and the undeniable fact that we all are to decay. However, ruins impress us the opposite feeling of the eternal flow of time and the authority produced by such time.

Perhaps we can say that every representation of ruins has more or less of this double temporality. However, we should not overlook the outstanding feeling in Robert and Soane's ruins: uncertainty, instability, and the anticipation of some catastrophes in the future. They seemed to be conscious of the unpredictable and uncertain future.

We can recognize such feelings in Robert's strong interest in his contemporary ruins. As for a motif of his painting, he often took the demolition of buildings as a result of disasters or of the

redevelopment of Paris. In 1781, Robert created a pair of works (fig. 5, 6). One depicts the great fire of the Opera House of the Palais Royal in 1781, and the other the skeleton remaining after the fire. This paired work seems to reflect Robert's special sensibility of time, that is, its uncertainty and transition. That will be clearer when we look at the picture painted in 1796 (fig. 7), paired with the work previously presented, the Louvre in Ruins (fig. 2). It depicts the completed Gallery of the Louvre in the near future. Robert's sense of time was probably cultivated in the atmosphere of Paris during the decades of the Great Revolution, in an age of upheaval and constant change. His future ruins can be "appreciated less as remnants of a disappearing world than as proof of a precarious one,"<sup>14</sup>) regarding the contingency and the unpredictability of the future in his age.



Figure 7. Project for the Grande Galerie of the Louvre (Dubin 2012, p. 152).

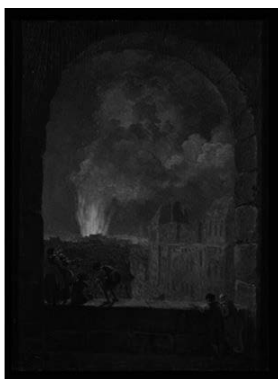


Figure 5. Fire at the Opera House of the Palais-Royal, Viewed from a Crossing in the Louvre (Dubin 2012, p. 62).



Figure 6. Interior of the Opera House of the Palais Royal the Day after the Fire (Dubin, 2012: 63).

At first glance, the ruin picture by Soane and Gandy seems to have nothing to do with such feelings. In neoclassicism, discipline and regularity are generally highly regarded and put focus on the beauty being related to stability and eternity. However, I think that the future ruin of the Bank of England has the similar sense of time as Robert's, that is, uncertainty and transition. It is produced by the fragmentariness of Soane's architecture. Actually, his talent and originality rather lie in his complicated inner space, which seems to be



influenced by Piranesi.<sup>15)</sup>



Figure 8. Interior of Bank of England (Middleton 1999, p. 217).

We will comprehend that when we glimpse at the inner space of the Bank of England (fig. 8) and Soane's private residence at Lincoln's Inn in London built by Soane during the years 1796–1837 (fig. 9). This picture shows that the Bank of England had a multilayered space formed by several arches and vaults. As for his formation of space, a number of researchers have pointed out the influence of an imaginary prison by Piranesi (fig. 10). The house in Lincoln's Inn Fields looks more Piranesian. The inner space of the house is, similarly to the Bank of England, layered with several rooms and the effective use of some millers. Moreover, the large size of his collection, composed of the fragments of ancient architecture and sculptures accumulated in



Figure 9. Interior of Lincoln's Inn Fields (Middleton 1999, p. 157).

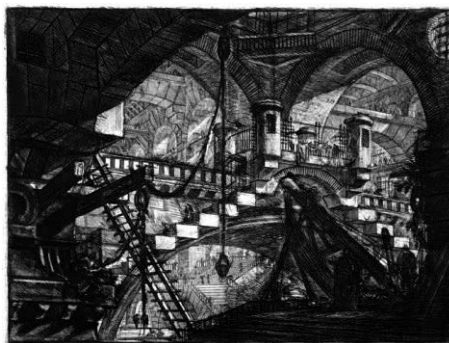


Figure 10. Imaginary Prisons (Ficacci 2000, p. 167).



Figure 11. Interior of Lincoln's Inn Fields (Middleton 1999, p. 154).



Figure 12. Antichita Romane II (Ficacci 2000, p. 354).

the rooms (fig. 11), reminds us of the obsessive accumulation of ancient artifacts in Piranesi's works (fig. 12).

These works by Soane demonstrate that he was a descendant of the Baroque, the fashion which remained quite apparent in Piranesi's work. Furthermore, according to the interpretation by Walter Benjamin, we could again recognize that he is a kind of Baroque artist. Benjamin analyzed the Baroque tragedy and described its usage of allegory as some kind of ruin, the accumulation of the relics

and debris, decayed symbols that once had some clear meanings. Benjamin then related this fragmentation of allegory to a moment of time, that is, the fragility, contingency, and transiency of our life or age.<sup>16)</sup> I think that the future ruins by Soane and Gandy can be understood well from this view of Benjamin's allegory. The ruin of the bank by Soane, which exposes its inner composition like a labyrinth, is filled with the melancholy of the Baroque allegory by Benjamin, which reminds us of our mortality. This feeling is impressed more deeply by the contrast between the contemporary view of the building in front and the decayed building of the future in the back.

### 3. Speer's ruins in the future

As I mentioned above, ruins can possess an ambivalent sense of time, that is, transiency and continuity. The analysis above indicates that the representations of ruins in the future by Robert and Soane were rather inspired by transiency. In contrast, it can be presumed that the ruin value in Speer's work lies in the sense of continuity and eternity, because Speer, as well as Hitler, had a vision of the eternal, a thousand-years-lasting Reich and intended to build an enormous edifice as its historical evidence.

Actually, all the monumental architecture of the Third Reich was planned to be durable and permanent. That can be seen in the fact that stone was regarded as the most important material in terms of durability, as I mentioned above. Moreover, they should be massive in order to serve as a future memorial, like an Egyptian pyramid. All the features of Speer's architecture—its enormous, simple, and regularly ordered structure stressed by the vertical lines; large walls with small windows; and smooth surface with minimum ornaments—indicate that his neoclassicism was distorted so that the building



Figure 13. Façade of the Reich Chancellery (Schönberger 1981, p. 79).

would look like a kind of memorial (fig. 13). He tried to make his architecture the eternal symbol of the glory of the Reich.

Therefore, the future ruins by Speer must have been an anticipation of their eternal honor in the future. In fact, in his memoir that I quoted in the first chapter, Speer contrasted the dreary sight of artificial ruins resulting from the destruction of bombs with ruins overgrown with ivy after generations of neglect. This episode tells us that he must have imagined a type of ruin that gradually decayed and naturally changed over a long period, being placed in the eternal flow of time. Therefore, we can suppose that his view on ruins is quite different from the melancholic view of the unstable future in Robert and Soane's ruin pictures.

Having considered these matters, it might be said that the perception of time in Speer's ruins is rather similar to that of the ruins in the classical paintings such as Claude Lorrain's (1600–1682) (fig. 14). The originality of Lorrain lies in his skillful handling of the composition, in which the ancient



Figure 14. Capriccio with ruins of the Roman Forum (Wikimedia Commons).

ruins merge into the landscape, and his delicate sensibility to perceive light and air, which is often compared to Impressionism. In his utopian landscape, we can feel the peaceful and eternal flow of time, which invites us to the glorious age of the ancient Empire.

Yet we should not overlook the difference between Speer and Lorrain. Above all, it should be pointed out that the direction of time is contrary. Lorrain looks back to the past. His view is filled with nostalgia for the lost Arcadia, impossible for us all to reclaim. This means that there exists a rupture between his present time and the utopian past. In the case of Speer, however, the present time is linked to the future time in his consciousness, for he tried to manage the time of the far future in a completely materialistic way. As mentioned previously, Speer's ruin theory highly regarded material and techniques. He thought that using "special materials" and applying "certain principles of statics," should enable the building to last over thousands of years. In that materialism, the future was thought to be something calculable and controllable. In other words, he and Hitler attempted to make the future identical with their own time. Therefore, we could say that the temporality of Speer's future ruin is timelessness in its exact meaning, for time in itself consists of a series of heterogeneous happenings or events and a concern for something which is non-identical to ourselves, as Emmanuel Levinas tells us<sup>17</sup>). In fact, the space of his building is so tranquil that it makes us feel as if time has stopped (fig. 15).

## Conclusion

The above discussion has led me to the following conclusion. The considerable difference lies between the perception of time in the 18th-century future ruins and that of Speer's imagination; while the former is based



Figure 15. Inner court of the Reich Chancellery (Petsch 1976, Bildteil 27).

mainly on transiency and the sense of distance and discontinuity between the past and the present, the latter is mainly based on timelessness and continuity. Furthermore, the analysis of Speer's theory above indicates that the insanity of Nazism lay in the mixture of rationalism and irrationalism. The "ideologue of the Third Reich" earnestly dreamed of erecting an eternal building on the basis of materialism and modern archeological consciousness. Speer's words also support this perspective: "On one hand, I am a romanticist, and on the other, I am an enthusiast for technique. I am both."<sup>18</sup>)

We now know the future of his buildings. They were completely destroyed by the air raids at the end of World War II (fig. 16) and became ruins only a decade after Speer imagined his eternal ruin.



Figure 16. The bombed Reich Chancellery (Schönberger 1981, p. 72).

## Notes

- 1) Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970, p. 97.
- 2) Ibid., pp. 97–98.
- 3) Angela Schönberger, “Die Staatbauten des Tausendjährigen Reiches als vorprogrammierte Ruinen?: Zu Albert Speers Ruinenwerttheorie,” *Idea: Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*. Prestel, 1982, S.106.
- 4) Albert Speer, “Stein statt Eisen.” *Der Vierjahresplan* 1, 1937, S. 135.
- 5) Ibid., S. 137.
- 6) Adolf Hitler, “Rede zur Eröffnung der ersten Deutschen Architektur- und Kunsthandwerksausstellung in München im Haus der Deutschen Kunst am 22. Januar 1938.” Max Domarus (Hrsg.), *Hitlers Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945*, Bd.1, Wiesbaden, 1973, S. 778.
- 7) Ibid., S. 779.
- 8) Martin Kitchen, *Speer: Hitler’s Architect*. New Haven: Yale University, 2015, pp. 34–35.
- 9) Atsushi Tanigawa. *Haikyo no Bigaku*. Tōkyō: Shūeisha-Shinsho, 2003, p. 159.
- 10) See Nina L. Dubin, *Futures & Ruins: Eighteenth-century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012, p. 18, 28.
- 11) On the theory of the picturesque, see Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, Vol. I, London: J. Mawman, 1810.
- 12) For example, Ozawa argues this double temporality of ruins. See Kyoko Ozawa, *Toshi no Kaibōgaku*, Arina Shobō, 2011, pp. 135-156.
- 13) Alois Riegl, “Entwurf einer Gesetzlichen Organisation der Denkmalpflege in Österreich.” Ernst Bacher (Hrsg.). *Alois Riegls Schriften zur Denkmalpflege*, , Wien: Böhlau, 1995, S. 58–60.
- 14) See Dubin 2012, p. 2.
- 15) See Robin Middleton, “Soane’s Spaces and the Matter of Fragmentation,” Margaret Richardson and MaryAnne Stevens (eds.), *John Soane Architect: Master of Space and Light*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1999, pp. 26–37.
- 16) See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Bd. I-1, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, S. 341ff.
- 17) See Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l’autre*, Fata Morgana, 1979.

- 18) Albert Speer, *Technik und Macht*, Adelbert Reif (Hrsg.), Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1981, S. 46.

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