

# re:think

a journal of creative ethnography

issue one: summer 2018

"Leith's Abandoned Lighthouse: The Liminal Experience  
of Ruins"

Isla Whateley

Vol 1, Issue 1, pp 11-15.

# Leith's Abandoned Lighthouse: The Liminal Experience of Ruins

---

Isla Whateley

## Abstract

Ruins can play a particularly poignant role in modern capitalist society, and exist in a liminal, marginal state between the past and the future. Western Harbour Lighthouse in Leith, Edinburgh is an example of this kind of ruin, separated from the rest of the city by a physical and metaphorical boundary. Ruins also have an affective presence, inciting a particular feeling in those who enter them. This essay explores how the liminal status of the Lighthouse disrupts the usual 'order' of the modern city.

**Keywords:** ruins, liminality, cities, affect, modernity

Western Harbour Lighthouse (see Figure 1), also known as West Breakwater Lighthouse, stands at the edge of the world. Only accessible via a long reinforced concrete walkway jutting out into the Firth of Forth, surrounded by old industry, redeveloped docklands and wind, it is abandoned and lonely. It is surrounded by an apparently impenetrable, tall industrial fence, and what is left of the building is covered in colourful and bright graffiti – inside and out. There is a dispute on when the lighthouse was built, when it stopped being used and how long it has been left derelict – but most online information says it was built in the 1950s and has been out of use for several decades due to the advent of modern navigation technology (Morrison, 2012). I visited the lighthouse in February 2018 with my boyfriend as part of a homework task to find a 'modern ruin'. As described in the course handbook, "this should NOT be an official 'sign-posted' ruin, but a neglected space or place in which you can encounter the enigmatic traces of past lives and times gone by." After researching such ruins online, looking for one in Edinburgh to visit, I came across Western Harbour Lighthouse on an 'urbex' (urban exploration) forum and travelled there on a cloudy Monday afternoon.

The lighthouse is what is known as a 'modern ruin' – an architectural site where long-term neglect has led to a state of visible decay (Fraser, 2012: 137). It is also a 'slow ruin' (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013) – in that it has gradually slipped into this state over time, sidelined by the social and economic changes occurring around it. The lighthouse is 'betwixt and between' the past and the future, to use the words of Victor Turner in his discussions on liminality in the 1960s. Ruins such as the lighthouse are spaces in between the past and the future – they will either become something else at some

point or disintegrate into nothingness (Edensor, 2005). The lighthouse has lingered in this state – a liminal state – for decades, surrounded by ambiguity as to what will happen to it. On my trawls through the internet to try and find as much information as possible about the lighthouse, there was nothing saying what was due to happen to it, not even on the Edinburgh City Council website. Despite the surrounding docklands having undergone massive redevelopment over the past 10 years, the lighthouse has been left to descend further into ruination and liminality.



Figure 1: Western Harbour Lighthouse, 5th February 2018 (author's own photo).

Liminality as a concept derives from the seminal work of Arnold van Gennep on rites of passage in 1909. Talking about rituals, he coined the 'tripartite' structure of rituality – every kind of ritual (particularly rites of passage) goes through three significant stages: separation, the liminal period, and then re-assimilation (van Gennep, 1909 in Thomassen, 2012). The middle 'liminal' state is very much in-between, and you can go either backwards or forward from this. This links strongly to ruins, which are 'betwixt and between the structural past and structural future' (Turner, 1967 in Fraser, 2012: 149).

In this essay, I will argue that the liminal status of modern ruins, particularly the abandoned Western Harbour Lighthouse, disrupts the usual 'way of things' in cities. I will utilise De Certeau's theorising about 'networks of order' in urban spaces, as well as Navaro- Yashin's work on affective spaces to demonstrate this, through discussions of segregation and modernity.

Many liminal spaces are often marginal as well. Liminality and marginality as concepts, although linked, are not the same (Andrews and Roberts, 2012). The lighthouse inhabits a physically marginal space – it is literally on the coast, on a boundary with the sea, jutting out into the Firth of Forth, miles away from the bustling streets of Leith and the rest of Edinburgh. As well as this, it is also noticeably separate from the surrounding area, by means of the 3-metre-tall industrial fence. This is primarily used to stop people getting into the remains of the lighthouse (which has not worked, evident from the excess of graffiti and debris on and around the building itself), but also serves another function of keeping the space ‘bounded’ and separate from the rest of society. According to Mary Douglas, society is formed by defining what is ‘dirty’ and comparing this to what is ‘pure’ (Douglas, 1966 in NavaroYashin, 2009). Boundaries are created between the ‘dirty’ and the ‘pure’, as it is considered dangerous to have them mix. Ruins are often put into this category of ‘dirty’ and are dealt with accordingly – segregation, demolition, rejuvenation etc. This attitude is clear in relation to the lighthouse – on Blipfoto, a photo journaling website, a 2013 thread about the lighthouse includes a number of comments expressing how ‘sad’ it is that it has ‘decayed’ into this state, and how nice it would be if it was redeveloped (Blipfoto entry, 2013). But what makes the state of the lighthouse a bad thing? Why are cities defined in this way?

To help us understand the treatment of the lighthouse (and other modern ruins) in this way, we can utilise De Certeau’s theory of networks of order in the city. These networks create a particular and ordered city, with any and all ‘waste products’ being rejected (De Certeau, 1984 in Fraser, 2012). If these waste products are not dealt with in an appropriate manner, they cause negative effects that are contrary to the spirit of modernity and contemporary capitalism. Ruins are most definitely ‘waste products’ in this context and are very much disruptions to the order of the city (Fraser, 2012). Their status as liminal complicates this further – Turner describes liminal spaces as ‘detached from mundane life’ (Turner, 1967 in Fraser, 2012: 148), particularly in that there is huge ambiguity as to what is being done with the lighthouse. Modernity, as an ideology, valorises newness and linear plot lines and goes hand in hand with the development of capitalism (Dawdy, 2010: 762). According to Walter Benjamin, it is a rapid and repetitive cycle of ruin and devastation (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013). Linking this back to the lighthouse, we can explore the rapid industrialisation and deindustrialisation of Scotland’s dockyards and shipyards, and how this shows the rapid changing face of capitalism in Edinburgh. The lighthouse was built in the 1950s only for navigation technology to advance and render it useless not long after, then the surrounding docklands fell into disrepair as shipbuilding declined in Leith. We are now seeing the residential redevelopment of the area, which the lighthouse has not been included in. The liminality of the lighthouse complicates this rapid

change: it is a 'waste product' that has not been dealt with, allowing people to see into the past and confusing the processes of capitalism and modernity.

But what are these confusing 'effects' of the lighthouse as a waste product, as outlined by De Certeau (1984 in Fraser, 2012)? According to Navaro-Yashin (2009), these effects are affects. Affects are beyond emotion and beyond normal feeling – they are non-subjective entities that move through human bodies and can be discharged by the ruin. Melancholia is an affect discharged by many ruins, however much of this affective experience is very difficult to put into words. With regards to my own experience visiting the lighthouse, I very much felt these 'affects'. After getting out of the car, parked beside the new flats on Western Harbour, we walked out to the path that would lead us to the lighthouse. The path, reinforced on either side by concrete, was gravelly and had no railings to prevent accidents. As the wind from the estuary buffeted us, it felt like the world went cold and silent as we approached the lighthouse.

The tall railings loomed before us, as we realised it would be near impossible to get in. We walked slowly on the edge of the concrete outside the fence, all around the structure, peeking through the gaps in the fence to see as much as possible. The whole experience and situation felt detached from the rest of the world – with no-one else around, in a secluded location, with nothing but the elements and the ruin – I felt an incredibly strange sense of abnormality, which is the best way I can describe it. Upon engaging with the literature, I can assume that this was an 'affect' as a result of the affective space of the ruin (Navaro-Yashin, 2009). These strong emotive affects are exacerbated by the liminal state of the lighthouse; it is in-between the past and the future, which creates a disturbing and disjointed feeling in a world that is so used to the fast-paced movements of modernity.

In conclusion, it is clear that Western Harbour Lighthouse's state as a liminal space is disruptive to the 'usual' way of things in the city (in this case, Edinburgh). As a waste product of the city's networks of order, it has been bounded and segregated (by erecting the large fence) and left to its own devices. This is disruptive to the ideology of modernity that dominates our social and political world and creates adverse effects – known as affects – that affect people when they visit the ruin. The liminality and 'in-between-ness' of the lighthouse exacerbate all these effects further, as it is shrouded in ambiguity and doubt. To date, the lighthouse still stands – nobody really knows what is going to happen to it, if anything. It could be left to decay even further, or it could be redeveloped like the surrounding docklands. But nobody knows, and this is what gives the ruin of the lighthouse its power to cause such disruption.

## Bibliography

Andrews, H. and Roberts, L. (2012) Introduction: Re-mapping liminality. In: Andrews, H. and Roberts, L. (eds.) *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, experience and spaces in-between*. New York, NY: Routledge. Pp1-17.

Blipfoto entry (2013) *Craig's Journal [online]*. Available from: <https://www.blipfoto.com/entry/3282391> [accessed on 22 Feb 2018]

Dawdy, S. L. (2010) Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity. *Current Anthropology* 51(6): 761-793.

DeSilvey, C. and Edensor, T. (2013) Reckoning with Ruins. *Progress in Human Geography* 37(4): 465-485.

Edensor, T. (2005) Waste Matter – the Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World. *Journal of Material Culture* 10(3): 311-332.

Fraser, E. (2012). Urban exploration as adventure tourism: Journeying beyond the everyday. In: Andrews H. and Roberts, L. (eds.) *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, experience and spaces in-between*. New York, NY: Routledge. Pp136-151.

Morrison, D. (2012) *Graffiti-covered lighthouse 'puts city to shame' [online]*. The Scotsman. Available from: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/graffiti-covered-lighthouse-puts-city-to-shame-1-2481343> [accessed on 22 Feb 2018].

Navaro-Yashin, Y. (2009) Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15(1): 1-18.

Thomassen, B. (2012). Revisiting liminality: the danger of empty spaces. In: Andrews H. and Roberts, L. (eds.) *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, experience and spaces in-between*. New York, NY: Routledge. Pp21-35.