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The Leith Project: Industrial Ruins and Maritime
Heritage

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the politics and poetics of abandoned buildings juxtaposed with memorials to a thriving industrial past whilst walking through Leith. In the manner of Benjamin's (1999[1982]) "flaneur", I employ autoethnography, drawing on my personal experience to show how the material topography of Leith reveals capitalism's inherent obsolescence and counteracts its teleological version of time. I turn to Ingold's proposition that the landscape is an embodiment of accumulated activities, to show how multiple temporalities are enfolded into the decaying structures I encountered on my perambulations through Leith. These ruins provide a canvas for contemporary political critique, presenting a counterpoint to the lieux de memoire (Nora 1989) of Leith that valorizes its industrial maritime past.

Keywords: ruins, memory, nostalgia, industrialization, Leith

"At the approach of his footsteps, the place has roused: speechlessly, mindlessly, its mere intimate nearness gives him hints and instructions," so Walter Benjamin writes of the sensuous engagement with material remains of the obsolete arcades of 19th century Paris in his "Passagen-Werk" (The Arcades Project). The ways we engage with the past, either in remembrance or forgetting, has been a vast subject of study for anthropologists, philosophers, cultural and literary critics alike. Some claim that there is no serious or authentic way to engage with the past, as it is all invented to suit the needs of the present. Others see this "presentism" as ignoring the ways in which traces of the past can disrupt and upset official narratives. In Benjamin's theorizing, the physical remains of the past have a primary agency of their own, that in communicative interaction with the perceptive observer, revealing much about the past lives and times that played a part in their formation. My own research on the

urban landscape of Leith is based heavily on this engagement with material remains, therefore a brief discussion of Benjamin seems like a good place to begin. *Passagen-Werk* is a collection of quotes, research notes and comments on mass industrial culture, that sought to explode the capitalist view of history as a series of events with the present as its apex. A central motif in Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* is the flaneur, a stroller through the Arcades of Paris, simultaneously within the crowd and yet standing apart from it. Benjamin's flaneur is a historical figure of analysis; a metaphor, embodying the alienation wrought by capitalism in their wanderings through the long-defunct Arcades by Benjamin's time; and a methodological tool exemplifying Benjamin's intellectual practice of collecting seemingly disparate fragments and rubble of culture, drawing correlations and seeking truth in involuntary memories stimulated by direct engagement with material remains. Anthropologists have noted the similarities between "flanerie" and the practice of urban anthropologists. The flaneur, like the anthropologist, is a sort of detached participant observer, probing beneath the surface appearance of things. They deal in the traces and remnants of culture and their task is to "unite the fragmented views about the symbolic order...and thereby expose the soul of the city" (Nas 2012: 431).

It was with flanerie in mind that I set out upon a stroll through Leith. What follows are my impressions and suggestions on the effect of ruins in Leith where abandoned civic buildings and tenements evoke the spectre of working life that is almost beyond the bounds of living memory. Along my journey, I realised these ruins cannot be disentangled from official collective memory of Leith's thriving maritime past, evidenced by public artworks that glorify and commemorate this past. I particularly focus on one building, 165a Leith Walk, juxtaposing it to two examples of public art and sculpture near Leith Art School. By drawing together these seemingly unrelated edifices, I hope to show how the urban topography of Leith disrupts the narrative of progressive geometric time where we can somehow view the passage of time from an external vantage point. Instead, the ruins and lieux de memoire of Leith reveal "industrial ruination as a lived process" (Mah 2010: 399) where we feel and experience the remnants of the past erupting into the present.

DeSilvey and Edensor (2012: 466) define ruins as "site[s] where process is primary, and where agencies of decay and deterioration are still active and formative. These are

sites where the ‘absence of order’ ... and maintenance leads to a state of continual transformation”. Ruins often provoke a “sense of disarray” (Edensor 2005: 321); to our capitalist sensibilities they are chaotic “matter out of place”. I found them difficult to come across in my immediate environment, perhaps due to living in a fairly sanitized and affluent area of Edinburgh close to the University. A friend helpfully directed me to the Buildings At Risk Register for Scotland, a website which “highlights properties of architectural or historic merit throughout the country that are considered to be at risk or under threat”. In regards to the processes of forgetting and ruination the Register warrants some discussion. Ingold (1993) distinguishes between buildings and ruins, stating that buildings require the “regular input of maintenance and repair” (ibid: 170), whereas ruins manifest the lapse of human involvement, being left to the activities of other species and the vicissitudes of weather. Similarly, DeSilvey and Edensor (2012: 472) suggest that “the unstructured exploration of possible pasts, and the encounter with involuntary memories, can perhaps occur more readily in ruins that remain ‘open’ – *managed lightly, if at all*, still caught up in dynamic processes of decay and unmaking” [my emphasis]. I wondered if places listed on the Register could properly be classified as ruins, since clearly there was official interest in maintaining them. Moreover, DeSilvey and Edensor acknowledge that fully ‘open’ ruins are transient, their states of being dependent upon the political and economic context they inhabit. With little other recourse to locate ruins, I plotted a route through Leith stopping at six sites listed on the Register.

I do not claim to approach Leith without preconceptions, or what Crang and Travlou (2001) term memories “in absentia”, in other words memories for a place in which I have never properly spent time. My expectations of Leith have been informed by popular culture, specifically the highly acclaimed novel *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh, and the film of the same name directed by Danny Boyle (1996), which notoriously painted Leith as the heroin and HIV hub of Scotland. However, I was also aware of increasing gentrification in Leith, notably the blooming of several Michelin starred restaurants and shore side redevelopment (Brooks 2015). Leith’s strong community pride is also well known; the residents famously voted against incorporation into the City of Edinburgh in 1920, but undemocratically this vote was ignored. I did not want to participate in “dark tourism” (Strangleman 2013: 24) – a voyeuristic fetishization of industrial ruins or an aestheticization of poverty, known as

“ruin porn”, that would elide Leith’s current social reality or forget the years of prosperity. Simultaneously, I did not want to romanticize an industrial past that must have also contained hardship and suffering for many. The discussion of abandoned places and spaces that follows necessarily reflects my partial, personal experience of walking through Leith. Although I planned a route that stopped at several registered “ruins”, I endeavoured to be receptive to conflicting narratives.

The first registered building I visited was 165a Leith Walk (Figure 1). I was disappointed to find it fully fenced in, but I was able to clamber through a gap in the fence to access a vast empty lot behind the building. It appeared to be in a half-finished state of (de)construction. A lurid yellow workman’s container stood in the centre of the concrete square, heaps of leaves, empty crisp packets and concrete debris were neatly swept into piles in the centre and sides of the lot, whilst fluorescent traffic cones were placed haphazardly. One workman appeared to have forgotten his hard hat. I wondered if the re/deconstruction had also been abandoned. Or perhaps it was just because I visited on a Sunday. Even though there was little evidence of human habitation, there was evidence of human *attention* in the gates, fences and padlocks that keep people from exploring the innards of these abandoned places.



Figure 1. 165a Leith Walk from the back, where the trams were once housed. The figure of Ebenezer MaCrae can be seen on the middle rear doorway

In addition to the negative enclosure of the space by way of steel fences, gates, locks and warning signs, this site demonstrated other productive and playful human interactions. The graffiti sprayed along the walls of the barren lot signals an appropriation of urban space and defies capitalist codes of spatial purification (Edensor 2005). Artwork was stamped upon the pebble-dashed walls of the building. Some of this art was decorative, some informative. For example, on a doorway on the rear was a drawing of the architect Ebenezer MaCrae

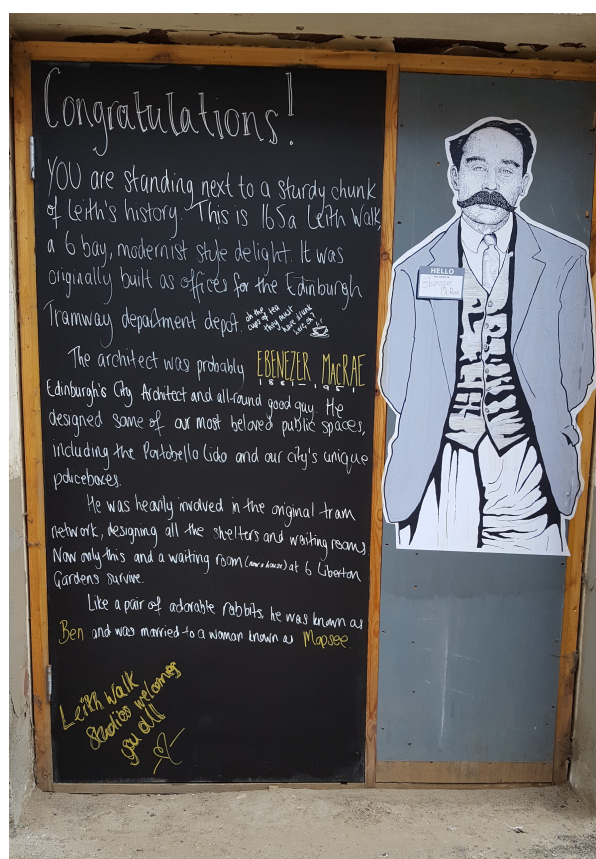


Figure 2. Ebenezer MaCrae (Yule 2016)

(Figure 2) next to text about 165's original function as the offices for the tram depot. All of a sudden the absence elicited by the empty lot was explained. It once housed the trams of Edinburgh's extensive tram network, created in 1871. Leith's trams were technologically innovative for their time, with the Leith Corporation Tramways pioneering the use of electric traction in 1905, allowing for a highly mobile workforce. The tram system was ended in 1956 when trams fell out of fashion (McClean 2013). The drawing also related MaCrae's wider contributions to the city; he designed famous police boxes, linking the structure to other features of Edinburgh's cityscape. Subsequent online research led me to discover that this art was the work of a local artist, that 165a had been leased as creative space and used as an Edinburgh Fringe Festival venue in 2016. 165a is not merely an untouched relic of the past, but is being used in the (very) recent past and present as a mnemonic device to reflect on history that still resonates to this day.

Other drawings, such as the print of Margaret Thatcher (Figure 3), instantly recognisable from her characteristic coiffure and pearls, were more overtly political. My gaze was drawn to the blood red badge on her lapel that read "Keep Yer Laws Off My Body". The image of Thatcher deliberately connects this site to the politics of deindustrialization, a highly emotive issue in British society, which caused ruin to many communities. By the 1980s, Leith was suffering serious deprivation following the decline of shipping throughout the 1950s and '60s. Thatcher's neoliberal economic restructuring during the 1970s did nothing to alleviate this. The closure of Robb's shipyard in 1984 heralded the end of 600 years of shipbuilding in Leith and the loss of thousands of jobs (McClean 2014).



Figure 3. Print of Margaret Thatcher

165a Leith Walk, here captured in a moment of renewal or abandonment, “draws

attention to the unprecedented material destruction wrought by accelerating capitalism” (Edensor 2005: 316) and its drive for endless innovation and recycling. The abandoned building offers a canvas for local artists to illustrate this political critique directly (see Figure 3). It demonstrates multiple temporalities in Ingold’s (1993) metaphysical conception of the landscape as a “taskscape in embodied form”. Ingold goes beyond the “naturalistic” and “culturalistic” binary that on the one hand sees the landscape as a neutral, external background to human activity, and on the other that sees it as a projection of the human mind. Instead, the landscape can be regarded as the physical expression of all the activity that has gone into its formation. Ingold does not limit the taskscape to solely human labour and general living practices, but includes the inanimate activity of weather, and the axial rotation of the earth. Drawing a comparison with music, he illustrates how our world is composed of different rhythms and cycles, for example the life cycle of a person compared with the cycle of a frog, or the cycle of a rock or a glacier. These cycles all interact and resonate with each other, albeit at different tempos. In prioritizing process over form Ingold blurs the ontological separation between landscape and temporality, demonstrating that every vista of our world is “suspended in movement” (ibid. 164). 165a Leith walk embodies this plethora of collapsed actions. The building is a “modernist style delight” overlooking the rubble of the now-demolished tram depot, the exposed walls of which are an easel for urban graffiti artists. In contrast to discourses of modernity that see the present as the apex of achievement, ruins show how “the landscape is never complete: neither 'built' nor 'unbuilt', it is perpetually under construction” (Ingold 1993: 162).



Figure 3: Mural of Leith’s maritime past

During my exploration of Leith I could not help but be struck by nostalgia for a maritime past. Like an *ars memoria*, the streets of Leith are “spatialized trips down memory lane” (Crang and Travlou 2001: 165), its nautical heritage directs the urban landscape, for example Maritime Road. Yet, shipbuilding in Leith ended almost 40 years ago after undergoing several decades of decline. Some of those shipbuilders and docks workers may still live in Leith however, this population is ageing and the increasing gentrification of the area has the potential to price out native residents. Leith’s former docks and ports have been redeveloped into shopping centres and industrial estates. Nora (1989) uses the term *lieux de memoire* to describe the distance between those in the present and living memory of the past. He argues that our current era is so obsessed with forms of collective memory because we have no way of accessing actual memories: “we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” (ibid. 7). In our efforts to keep hold of the past, modern society selects parts of history to commemorate that are often incapable of representing the past in its entirety. These representations are “moments of history torn away from the movement of history” (ibid. 12). The titanic mural on the side of Leith Art School depicts industrious Leithers drawing up ship plans, fitting turbines, alongside collective social events such as the parade seen in the bottom left of Figure 3. These activities have not occurred here for decades. Furthermore, the image of idyllic industriousness shows a limited view of life in Leith during that time, hiding domestic activity and times of hardship. Closer to the docks I found strips of iron twisted into nautical sculptures of boats, nets, and anchors (Figure 4). Even these *lieux de memoire* are themselves in a state of ruination and decay, or in the case of Figure 4 overlook a car park practically hidden behind trees and in danger of being swallowed up by ivy. Nora’s (ibid) metaphor of “shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” could not be more apt.

In juxtaposing these decaying *lieux de memoire* and 165 Leith Walk, itself in the process of being remembered and redeveloped, I hope to have shown how the material and architectural topography of Leith reveals a dynamic, pluri-temporal landscape. Despite efforts to limit official collective memory of Leith to a single nautical narrative, there are concurrent efforts to remember other histories,

exemplified in the use of the ruins of the old tram depot. Furthermore, the stories told by the ruins and the lieux de memoire resonate together. The trams were opened as Leith ascended in importance as an international trading port. The closure of the trams occurred alongside the decline of shipping and concurrent social decline, the capitalist need for constant innovation and efficiency “keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage”. Yet it is through this wreckage, ruins like 165a that we can glimpse, if only for a brief moment, the past that formed our lived present.



Figure 4: Sculptures showing Leith's maritime industry

All photographs are author's own, unless otherwise accredited

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