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Archaeologies of Collapse: New Conceptions of Ruination in Northern Britain

In northern regions of the UK, 'ruins' tend to be valued and understood according to romantic tropes and/or industrial aesthetics. In southern regions, however, they have increasingly been examined using expanded understandings of materiality and temporality, including the use of speculative approaches from across the arts and humanities to explore how they are visually and materially entangled in contemporary global human and non-human relations. Using anthropological approaches and analogies from film and 'contemporary archaeology', this article considers two 'ruins' sites in Scotland in relation to current discourses and conditions, including futurity, value, ethics and neoliberalism.

Keywords: Anticipation, temporality, materiality, value, futures, ruination, housing, collapse

Introduction

In northern parts of the UK,¹ sites of 'ruination',² whether pre-, proto- or historic, tend to be aesthetically examined, represented and valued in relation to either their romantic or their industrial significance, while southern sites have increasingly been explored, particularly within film and contemporary art contexts, in relation to the wider human and non-human networks and systems in which they are entangled.³ Here, I argue that, as discussed in the introduction to this issue, this divide is produced by and bound up with historic and contemporary cultural and political beliefs and practices that have characterized 'the north' as a cultural imaginary defined on the one hand by its association with the industrial revolution and its geographic remoteness from centres of power in southern England, as well as its historical significance as a place of sublime 'purity', its embodiment of 'spiritual properties' and vast reserves of natural resources on the other.⁴ While these understandings are important in the histories and to the development of ontological outlooks that have shaped academic enquiry into the north and in the ways it has been represented in visual and material forms including art, literature and architecture over the last 300 years, these entrenched ways of conceptualizing it also necessarily *limit* how its materiality might be understood in relation to contemporary social and political conditions, cultural practices and political dispositions.

Drawing on the recent work of archaeologist Shannon Dawdy⁵ and film theorist Paul Dave,⁶ both of whom are influenced by the philosophy of Walter Benjamin, as well as theorists and practitioners of 'contemporary archaeology'⁷ and 'New Materialism',⁸ I argue that, in addition to studies that examine their relationship to romanticism and industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sites of ruination in the north would also benefit from being examined much more extensively in relation to their twenty-first-century social, economic and cultural significances, especially as they are tied to the values and practices associated with neoliberal capital. To do this, expanded definitions of 'ruins' themselves are required, in addition to new conceptions of temporality that, according to Dawdy, 'collapse' both the exceptionalism of the Enlightenment and modernity and the disciplinary boundaries between anthropology, archaeology and speculative approaches drawn from the arts and humanities, in order to map their relationships to and embodiment of regional, global, human and non-human networks in the neoliberal world.

Archaeologies of collapse

The most recent 'bloom of ruinophilia', as described by Svetlana Boym in the *Atlas of Transformation*, is strange. It manifests itself in our increasingly digital world as an obsession with ruins as particular kinds of material forms that 'appear to be an endangered species, physical embodiments of modern paradoxes reminding us of the blunders of modern teleologies and technologies alike, and of the riddles of human freedom'.⁹

In contrast to the romantic constructions of ruination that have characterized the last three centuries, in which they evoked nostalgia, conceptions of the sublime and the picturesque, primordial histories and deep, shared pasts that united modern nations, twenty-first-century views of ruination have mutated and merged with the cultural and psychological effects of neoliberal capital and private enclosure. Ruins now carry an affective charge related to continuing economic decline and uncertainty in the West and a growing distrust of the progressive view of time as enshrined in modernist and capitalist worldviews. Boym goes on to say that:

The contemporary obsession with ruins is neither a Baroque meditation on worldly *vanitas*, nor a romantic mourning for the lost wholeness of the past. Rather than recycling romantic notions of the picturesque framed in glass and concrete, the ruins of modernity question the making of such a 'world picture,' offering us a new kind of radical perspectivism. The ruins of modernity as viewed from a 21st century perspective point at possible futures that never came to be. But those futures do not necessarily inspire restorative nostalgia. Instead, they make us aware of the vagaries of progressive vision as such.¹⁰

'Ruins' as a particular cultural construction and 'way of seeing' possess the uncanny ability to embody multiple temporalities, at once carrying the past and pointing to the future, all the while being 'read' and experienced in the present.¹¹ As a number of studies over the last twenty years have shown,¹² their 'invention' and representation in art and literature coincided more or less with the invention of Britain as a single, unified state, and they were understood and represented as cultural

forms embodying social relations that demonstrated continuity between present and ancient populations through time and space. They thereby became central to justifying geographic and material claims to territory, language and political systems, as well as symbolic of particular cultural practices and values in the regions in which they are located.¹³ In relation to the production of 'northern' identities in particular, ruins have long been key to distinguishing 'northern' populations from their 'southern' counterparts, in some cases with historians, archaeologists and writers going as far as to align contemporary cultural practices with 'ancient' ones in geographic locations such as the Orkney Islands, which I discuss in more detail below. The broad interest in decay that has emerged over the last decade, however, has tended to engage more overtly with futurity and the 'creative destruction' wrought by contemporary capitalism.¹⁴ The rise of scholarly *and* popular interest in 'modern' and 'contemporary ruins', in particular, points to the failures of modernity's supposedly durable teleologies,¹⁵ particularly since the banking crisis in 2008.

Even before the widespread public exposure in the media of the series of entangled ruptures and events now collectively referred to as the global 'financial crisis', however, Maddern and Adey noted, in a 2008 special issue of *Cultural Geographies*, that the first few years of the twenty-first century had been characterized by a growing sense of 'liminality' and anxiety especially in relation to everyday life in Anglo-American contexts.¹⁶ Spectres and hauntings relating to the perception of 'lost futures', they argued, had become a hallmark of the way time and space were characterized in media representations, as well as embodied within cultural practices performed and carried out in temporal-spatial relations across the world. '[C]ommentators proudly proclaimed the end of history at the close of the twentieth century where all moments in time are neatly ordered and in their rightful place', they said, where 'the twenty-first century has so far transpired as a century of haunting; of irregular, unexpected and (un)anticipated events that appear to be "beyond the real", and rendering time "out of joint"'.¹⁷ Referring particularly to events such as 9/11, the representation and experience of post-Katrina New Orleans, economic decline and urban ruination in Detroit, as well as the Asian tsunami of 2004, all of which exposed the inadequacy of supposedly durable state infrastructures for dealing adequately with crises and their social and cultural consequences, they argue that life is viewed as no less vulnerable, despite constantly evolving technologies and growth which modernity promised would become central to safeguarding human life.

To a certain extent, 'ruins studies' have embraced and engaged head on with these dilemmas. Numerous examinations of industrial crisis and decline, especially in places such as the bankrupt post-industrial city of Detroit, as well as sites of industrial disaster including Chernobyl, have been explored by cultural geographers. In the UK, particularly in northern regions such as Lancashire and Yorkshire, the examination of 'industrial ruins', by Tim Edensor and Caitlin DeSilvey, has focused on processes of ruination and decay as they relate particularly to nineteenth- and twentieth-century structures and the socioeconomic histories and art practices that mediate our current experiences of them. Continuing to

look at these sites and places in these ways, in particular focusing on industrial decline since the post-war era, necessarily limits *other ways* of understanding the networked relations between 'local', regional and global networks that 'ruins' necessarily embody.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's view of temporality as 'non-progressive', Shannon Dawdy has recently outlined what she refers to as a 'material' or 'archaeological' turn in cultural anthropology, and in the social sciences more generally. She identifies the need for further studies of how ruins of both the distant and recent past relate to the prevailing social, economic and cultural conditions and practices of the contemporary world, but also how this requires reconsidering entrenched ways of conceptualizing and studying ruins. In a recent article proposing Benjaminian frameworks that can inform the examination of 'recent' ruins, she says:

Attending to...ruins undermines the stability of modern, progressive time and simultaneously alters our perceptions of contemporary space ... Benjamin models a way of understanding everyday objects that takes into account their shifting meanings and, in fact, suggests that objects acquire more intensely affective, complex meanings as they age and become archaeological ... In kinship with the object biographies of [Igor] Kopytoff and [Arjun] Appadurai, Benjamin's method encourages us to view the history of the object through its life course but with the distinct demand that we pause on its death and rebirth ... in order to comprehend the contradictions, failures, subterfuges, and comedic-tragedies of the society that produced it ... It was through his intensive visual interaction with everyday objects in the streets and shops of Paris that Benjamin came to see the temporality of modernity as an illusion. Its insistence on the new covered up the persistence and recycling of the old. Although a Marxist, he rejected the progressive temporality of social evolution fundamental to Marx's critique of capitalism and vision of a socialist future. Instead, for Benjamin this cult of the new was itself a form of false consciousness. He in fact called the *Arcades Project* a prehistory of modernity. He understood temporality as the past and the present constructing one another in an ongoing dialectic, pp. 768–769.¹⁸

Sites that might be considered in this way could, of course, include industrial ruins, but may also include contemporary objects and structures in rural and urban contexts that have been the subject of *both* recent construction and decay, and that engage overtly with the fleeting nature of speculative housing markets under neoliberalism. This is emblematic of the creative destruction of progressive time that Benjamin observed so keenly in the *Arcades Project*, in which he explored the short lives, accelerated deaths and resulting material and allegorical decay of shopping quarters in Paris from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Other examples might include houses that have been subject to mortgage foreclosures, shops that have gone bankrupt in the wake of economic downturn and sites that have been subject to natural disaster and whose landscapes and structures are subject to regeneration projects. Methods that help to situate them in their current entanglements include a number of observational strategies. These include exploring the detritus produced in and around them, the landscapes in which they are situated, the decay that envelopes them, and examining, using both short- and long-term ethnographic investigation, how people living near them use, understand, engage with and appropriate them, how and whether they are subject to any form of maintenance, and whether they are entangled

in both 'formal' and particularly informal¹⁹ economies. All those enquiries help to situate them in relation to current and projected economic trajectories, the social relations they embody and mediate, the semantic and symbolic meanings they hold, and so on.

Beyond archaeology, a number of other fields have taken on board the kind of material and archaeological turn which engages with Dawdy's Benjaminian proposition. Here, the north/south divide seems to emerge in disciplinary terrain again, especially in terms of the kinds of film and contemporary art practices currently being produced that focus on ruins and their relationships to present cultural practices and economic positions.

Over the last two decades or so, practices rooted in theoretical positions from within film, geography, art and, of course, archaeology itself have been instrumental in producing new ways of seeing and contextualizing 'ruins', many of which coalesce in the southern reaches of England. Most recently, for example, the work of English Heretic produces sonic fictions that examine and subvert the ways in which English history is represented by binding it with science fiction narratives, Ballardian dystopias and appropriated, occulted objects and images from antiquity to the more recent past. Pil and Galia Kollektiv produce live performances and films at prehistoric sites, so far including Stonehenge and other sites in southern England, which play with the presence of 'branding' and 'value', as well as ideas about mass consumption as an 'occult' modernist practice, juxtaposing imagery taken from prehistoric sites with modernist-influenced costumes and aesthetics during their performances. Similarly, the 2013 exhibition 'On Vanishing Land' by Mark Fisher and Justin Barton at the Showroom in London featured sonic fictions and photographic images that ponder the relation between Anglo-Saxon ruins, privatization and contemporary property ownership along the Suffolk coast, thus exploring the changing relation between power, material remains and contemporary conditions that have characterized that landscape over millennia.

Film theorist Paul Dave has noted how filmmaker Patrick Keiller draws on 'the archaeological imagination' as well as Benjaminian conceptions of temporality and materiality in his 'Robinson' trilogy of films, all of which in one way or another have ruination at their core.²⁰ All the films, including *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and the last in the series in particular, *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), engage with the relationship that historic sites have with changing corporate land ownership, the production of commodities within those landscapes and how both human relationships and non-human relations are mediated by globalization. Historic and prehistoric sites are visited by the film's narrator, where stories about the particular 'ruins' are told, which are then frequently visually juxtaposed with contemporary events and everyday practices (events related to economy reported on the news, a farmer harvesting crops, the camera lingering on plants swaying in the wind). In this way, as Brian Dillon has remarked, Keiller's film essays '[follow] Walter Benjamin's call for a 'profane illumination' of mundane existence'.²¹ Dave remarks that:

The point of departure in *Robinson in Ruins* is ... the problem of capitalism ... Indeed, the English perspective of the film is used mainly to get into focus wider political issues linked as effects to the planetary problem which is globalized capitalism. For instance, the stories from the English past of the problems of survival faced by the agricultural workforce during the consolidation of 'natural' market capitalist relations of production fit with the problems, that face the global South under the impositions of the WTO and the IMF as rural–urban migration approaches one-third of the global population ... [I]n such ways neoliberalism is destroying older systems of production and survival in favour of global armies of free labour. The problems of hunger and starvation, as experienced in the English countryside undergoing a similar process, are thus echoed in a contemporaneous globalism in the film.²²

Each of the projects described above is an example of the expanding understanding of how 'ruins' are both defined and examined within the arts, humanities and social sciences. At present, however, they are taking place within southern regions in the UK, locations that might appear more subject to the global flows of capital than regions in the north. This, of course, is not the case. In the next two sections, I outline two case studies that engage with expanded definitions and practices at sites of ruination in northern locations.

Romantic aesthetics, the commons and global relations in Neolithic Orkney

This section outlines a research project that endeavours, in the manner of *Robinson in Ruins*, to contextualize existing prehistoric and historic ruins in relation to the economic systems, social values and cultural practices they mediate and embody. The prehistoric ruins of the Orkney Islands, which lie just off the northernmost coast of the Scottish mainland, are among the most celebrated in archaeological history. The assemblages of Neolithic settlement sites and 'ritual' complexes are dotted across the archipelago, and are famed, alongside Bronze and Iron Age material remains, as well as medieval and eighteenth-century structures, for their romantic appeal. I have noted elsewhere²³ the appeal they hold for archaeologists, heritage enthusiasts, scientists and also aesthetes, especially in relation to those elements Davidson refers to in his 2005 volume *The Idea of North*: their 'elemental', remote qualities and the assumption that the material remains there somehow embody the myths and primordial origins of Scottish nationhood.

Many of those sites have been appropriated for romantic nationalist representations of Scotland, often being imbued with pre-capitalist 'spiritual' qualities for people who visit and/or make pilgrimages there.^{24,25} My research, based on ethnographic research I conducted among Neolithic sites in Orkney²⁶ over the course of a year, revealed that people often made very explicit comparisons between the atmospheres and affective qualities of Orkney's Neolithic sites and the affective properties they believed to exist at similar sites in 'the south' of the UK, particularly at Stonehenge. Notable comments in interviews included perceptions of Orkney's monuments as 'spiritually intact', that they had retained their 'souls' and they were also frequently described as being 'alive'. By contrast, Stonehenge was often described as 'dead' and 'spiritually

sucked dry'²⁷ by the perceived relentless commodification of its imagery and the overtly commercial 'tourist experience' it offers. The sharp 'north/south' divide in the experiential qualities of the monuments equated, too, in these discussions to the 'remoteness' of the Orkney sites in comparison with heavily populated centres in the south, and also linked to the 'traditional values' Orcadians were perceived to possess—respect for place in particular—that were lacking at more heavily regulated sites in the Neolithic landscapes of southern England.

Rather than focus on what entrenches the differences between 'northern' and 'southern' prehistoric ruins and how such beliefs help to produce and reify the UK north's connection to romanticism, I want to focus on a more recent phase of the Orkney study that puts the monuments squarely in the centre of contemporary global debates about the overt ways in which 'value' is determined under neoliberalism.

In 2008, the prized aesthetics of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney (HONO) monuments, all of which draw overtly on visual tropes of 'northernness' as understood in Britain, and are held dear by heritage organizations, members of the Orkney public and many archaeologists, came under visual threat in the form of a proposed wind farm which was to be erected within view of the sites. In a number of public meetings and media statements, and during an official Scottish government inquiry that year, different social and cultural groups debated whether to approve or deny a planning application to construct the wind farm, which would provide a substantial output of renewable energy. Here, I examine the ways in which social actors involved in the conflict built arguments about its value as a community 'commons' that relate to the production of historic and scientific knowledge, and the ways in which its potential for generating renewable energy production could provide forms of social and economic capital for Orkney communities.

Arguments both for and against the introduction of a wind farm in the area, though seemingly contradictory and paradoxical, appeal to particular strains of utilitarian humanism central to the function of neoliberal capitalism. Exploring these threads, and the way they are negotiated and used to inform social action in the present, adds to our understanding of how archaeological sites play an active role in using the past to help shape moral codes and visions of 'the future' within contemporary societies.

A private landowner living near the HONO site submitted a planning application to the Orkney Islands Council in 2007 outlining plans for the construction of a wind farm in the Merranblo region of the Orkney mainland. The landscape where the wind farm would be situated was within view of three of the World Heritage Site monuments, including the Ring of Brodgar. The developer, along with a Scottish renewable energy firm, proposed that the enterprise would be partially community-owned, in that 10 per cent of profits from the eco-efficient energy generated by the three large, white 900KW turbines would go to the community immediately surrounding the site. Objectors to the development, including local, national and international cultural and natural heritage conservation agencies and organizations (including UNESCO),

as well as local authority and academic archaeologists and community interest groups, argued that such a development would threaten the very 'values' with which the site was inscribed. The aesthetics and authenticity of the monuments, they claimed, would be destroyed if the turbines were to be erected.

From the outset this conflict generated arguments steeped in moral rhetoric on both 'sides' about what the priorities of 'conservation' should be within a contemporary society that is concerned both with its history and heritage and with the well-being of its future inhabitants. The various 'values' the site is claimed to embody in terms of its narrative worth to science, human history and origins, and even aesthetics, were publicly set against arguments about the role and 'moral' responsibility that both the Orkney community and the Scottish nation should have in promoting and providing resources for renewable energy, how the economic future of the community and 'culture' could be ensured (and, indeed, 'conserved') through the profits generated by the wind farm and the role its members should play in deciding what happened to the development in the consultation process. The planning application for the Merranblo project was eventually rejected by the Orkney Islands Council, owing to the disruption that such a material intervention would cause to the World Heritage Site.

Over the last four decades or so, archaeological sites have been presented as a kind of contemporary 'commons' that can be used for the economic benefit of particular communities by affirming social and cultural value, the articulation and telling of 'micro-histories' from often overlooked local and amateur points of view, as well as other intangible qualities. I propose this understanding in two senses. First, heritage sites are viewed in some geographic and governmental spheres as cultural 'resources' understood to contribute to the 'common good' of humankind. Indeed, the lexicon long used in North American and Australian contexts explicitly refers to historical and archaeological remains as 'resources' that can be physically depleted; a kind of material form that can provide the means for the production of wealth for those who live among them.²⁸ This understanding of the commons is very much in line with the ways in which anthropologists and cultural ecologists have tended to discuss and analyse 'commons' resources since Garrett Hardin's famous thesis on 'Tragedy of the Commons' in 1968.²⁹

Second, the idea of heritage sites as a particular form of 'commons' is also compatible with other more recent definitions of such resources of the kind that have been developed by social scientists and historians of science in their examination of digital resources. The latter are also viewed as particular types of commons that benefit humankind precisely through mass access; that is, *'the more they are used, the more valuable they become'*.³⁰

These paradoxical definitions of 'commons' resources appear contradictory in a number of ways. For example, the material fabric of historic sites can be depleted and destroyed through 'use', but their value lies in the information they can provide about past societies to future populations. Gaining an understanding of them in the context of the Merranblo

case helps us to understand the competing claims that the social actors involved in the case presented in their arguments and, thus, how discourses of heritage management are constantly negotiated, contested and in tension. Though not unprecedented or new in the context of management strategies, these definitions highlight the ways in which both public and private enclosure of archaeological resources is ultimately entangled with the objectives of neoliberal capital.

All the arguments in 2008, whether for or against the development, had interesting points in common. In particular, all parties argued that the kinds of social capital they promoted somehow related to a broader common good, and each party claimed that its favoured form of social capital negated the validity of the others. How, then, were these arguments (and the way they were publicly, discursively, contested) tied to ideas about community, society and culture, in particular?

Those in favour of the development promoted the economic benefits of 'community' wealth generation and hybrid 'ownership' via the social capital generated largely by private enterprise, which would ensure community cooperation and potential growth. The developer, speaking in the local newspaper *The Orcadian*, said: 'Orkney has a tremendous wind resource. We are trying to do it as a local developer keeping the revenue within Orkney to help the Orkney economy. You have to look at the balance of economic benefit, community benefit and the visual impact.'

Those against the project invoked the highly rhetorical lexicon of UNESCO policy and analysis, including the fact that any development that threatened the aesthetic, 'universal value' of a public (government-owned) commons that attracts tourism and profit should be rejected on the basis that a common good is under threat.

Arguing for a more overtly utilitarian approach to cultural conservation, that is, for ensuring the 'sustainability' of the Orkney community by securing its financial future, those in favour of the project argued that profit generated for the Orkney community via the Merranblo would keep the 'community' modern, alive and dynamic in the face of collapsing traditional industries such as agriculture and fishing; that it would boost the role of Scotland as a nation and 'a people' in the burgeoning 'sustainable energy industry'; and demonstrate Scotland's environmental awareness, concern and compassion within a globalized world threatened by climate change. Those categorically against the project argued that it threatened the conservation of historic, aesthetic authenticity; historical continuity and traditional values in an increasingly globalized world; and the role of Scotland on the 'World Culture' stage.

Katherine Samuels has argued that a primary element of the 'value' and significance of archaeological remains is rooted in the histories and values of the liberal nation-state.³¹ Such values, she argues, have been dictated by economic significance as defined by institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as being intimately tied to notions of private property and essentialist conceptions of culture, citizenship and national identity. These concepts continue to

dictate how heritage is defined and managed in the present, even in the most abstract and philosophical terms.

Samuels argues that contemporary notions of value, as enshrined in state policies and practices, have generally split 'value' into two distinct parts, including 'moral duty' and political economy, both of which are heavily tied to *the acquisition and ownership of property*. In archaeology, she argues, these values overlap considerably. Morally, conservation and preservation philosophies and practices revolve around what she recognizes as a 'keeping while giving' strategy. That is, they retain archaeological remains (and, in many cases, the landscapes in which they are situated) and commons resources as state assets, while 'giving' them to the public in terms of access (much of which is fee-based) and presenting them as commons resources that relate to potential future knowledge production, as well as helping to lay claim to a particular representation of the past.

On the other hand, value at archaeological sites is also defined in terms of the World Bank's notion of value (development of the future via capitalist economic means). The arguments both for and against the development of the wind farm are both entangled in some way with teleological arguments for growth and progression, including, overtly, private development and, rather more obliquely, scientific endeavour and management, also tied to economic gain.

In a critical examination of UNESCO policies and practices, J. Paul Narkunas makes a case for the ways in which liberal humanism is embodied in Western economic doctrines and filtered through cultural policy, ultimately relating to 'development' practices:

UNESCO can apparently culturally specify and quantify through [social research] such affective relations as trust, suggesting that statistics can measure even evanescent 'interior' practices—human souls—within specific geographies. Trust is presumed *carte blanche* to be a universal human trait; indeterminate and unruly human affect must, therefore, become habituated as trust. Deviant local variations from the 'high trust ratio' will, as a result, require adjustment to establish transparent regimes for economic development.³²

These arguments about the way in which the visual and material qualities of 'ruins' have traditionally been understood and discussed in relation to the deep past, romantic histories and public/community interest show that the ruins of Orkney are enmeshed in far more entangled and nebulous structures than have so far been discussed in academic discourse. Their contested values and aesthetics stretch beyond the now-dated questions of 'who owns the past' and are rather more akin to engaging in an archaeology that links material culture to its contemporary relations.

Capital ruins

With the rise of 'regeneration' projects initiated by New Labour from the mid-1990s through the mid to late 2000s, a wave of state building projects as well as a speculative housing boom swept across Britain. In the wake

of the 2008 crisis, however, thousands of such developments across the world were halted, as developers and building companies folded overnight. Discussing this phenomenon in Ireland, O'Callaghan, Kitchin and Gleeson have remarked that landscapes characterized by such developments are:

the direct result of the neoliberal housing policies of recent years, the outcome of the growth in speculative development underpinned by footloose global capital and weakened forms of financial and planning regulation designed to lubricate capital's work. This increased distanciation of capital from the material spaces it produced, combined with a growing acceptance of accumulation by speculation, resulted in a situation whereby development became increasingly divorced from the needs of citizens. Freed of constraints, investors pumped footloose capital into the built environment in the expectation that 'at some point in the future, the infrastructure they have put in place will inevitably be used for something and generate value, even if it is not for the purposes intended' (Simone, 2010: 171). This form of speculative political economy has a tendency to breed vacancy and oversupply. Whilst unfinished estates are largely the product of Irish developers borrowing from Irish banks, they were nevertheless dependent on the influx of global capital into Ireland, borrowed by indigenous banks from European banks and bond markets. Thus, Ireland's property bubble was contingent upon the financialization that underpinned this latest era of accumulation.³³

Although Ireland's ghost estates are more plentiful than in other parts of the world, such sites exist in cities and towns across Eastern and Western Europe, as well as in the Americas. As a result, 'stalled spaces', 'ghost estates' and 'troubled developments', as post-crash development sites are often referred to in planning literature and media reports, have been the subject of much debate among planners, politicians and communities across the world. They have also been a source of media fascination, receiving heavy, primarily image-based, coverage in online news publications and blogging sites over the last several years. They have also tended to attract young, middle-class urban explorers, who, drawn by the perceived uncanny and 'dangerous' qualities of such sites, aim to physically conquer their material and spatial otherness. Despite the scale of interest in the exotic, spectral images of such sites, however, their specific impacts on the everyday lives of people and communities who inhabit those landscapes have not yet been explored in any sustained depth, except in and around the Irish 'ghost estates'³⁴ and around London and the south-east in Britain.

In the UK, London-based artist and theorist Laura Oldfield Ford's work deals with the impacts and devastation that ultra neoliberal regeneration policies have had in historically working-class neighbourhoods in London. In her blog *Savage Messiah*, she has recently remarked that:

Many of the 'ruins' we see emerging at an accelerated rate around London and the South East are the ruins of the future, the new build luxury highrises and inevitable victims of the next collapse in the property market. There are ranks of empty blocks, like Capital Towers in Stratford, bought off plan in auctions in Hong Kong and Malaysia and left as menacing totems of a speculative free for all. What will become of these places? Maybe they will end up as negative equity ghettos like the Pinnacles in Woolwich, sublet to recent arrivals from the former colonies and left in a state of chronic disrepair, or perhaps they will be seized and occupied by bands of rent defaulters, young people unable to afford anywhere to live in the South East whose desperation has led them to take militant direct action.³⁵

Like Keiller's expansive examination of the relations that particular places, landscapes—and ruins—have with global flows and dynamics, Ford's writing and artwork engages overtly with the role of regeneration practices in the displacement of populations in London and the south-east, who, owing to the ever-expanding property market, are being ejected from central London and forced to the fringes of the capital.

Taking on board the thrust of Dawdy's call to employ archaeological approaches in the service of understanding contemporary materiality, and to 'collapse' previously exclusive temporal domains of traditional, linear views afforded by the prehistoric/historic divide in archaeological discourse, I have initiated a project in Edinburgh that examines peoples' experience of the Granton Waterfront housing complexes, which feature in Robert Davies' photo essay in this issue. These housing sites are a typically speculative form of twenty-first-century, 'globalized', architectural design. They are assemblages of ubiquitous material forms that were a key component of a regeneration 'master plan' outlined in consultation with Edinburgh City Council in the early to mid-2000s. The style of the structures is as likely to be found in London, Manchester, Newcastle or Glasgow, and they were specifically constructed in this instance to sit alongside a shorefront and to stand out—shiny, playful and new—in contrast to the historic twentieth-century council-housing estate that sits immediately to the south. The siting of the development therefore follows current trends relating to sustainability in the context of 'growth', by at once evoking the weight and cultural cache of history and 'heritage', while also emphasizing 'tasteful' intervention among those very historical fabrics with 'cutting-edge', forward-looking design, the syntax of which is intended to point optimistically to how the site will eventually contribute usefully to sociocultural and economic futures of the city through the 're-use' and 're-vitalization' of areas that, while aesthetically valuable, outgrew their original use. Furthermore, its design also draws on ideas about 'mixed-tenure' housing developments, which are intended to facilitate cross-class communication among the residents.

For all the positive intentions and economic hopes pinned upon and materially embodied within the design of the Granton project, however, it currently feels as if time, here, is *on hold*. This is apparent in Davies' rich photographs of the area, which capture its spectral atmospheres. For while, on the one hand, the structures bear many hallmarks of human activity and social interaction, vast portions of the site currently lie entirely unoccupied or are situated in Ballardian landscapes characterized by detritus, piles of rubble building materials that have lain *in situ* since the banking collapse of 2008, as well as rusting temporary fencing that still surrounds many of the complexes.

The liminality and uncanniness that characterize the experience of the Granton developments are manifold. Anyone passing, especially on foot, through or around the interior or exterior of the complexes will note the numerous 'for sale' and 'to rent' signs that have remained centrally placed on many of the windows of the complex since it was constructed. The visible emptiness of the surrounding landscapes but for ruined building materials is emphasized by the fact that they were, of course,

designed especially for people to 'gaze' upon the everyday activities and social exchanges intended to take place there, rendered exclusive by way of their location and context, and thus to be observed and envied from afar. Such activities are now conspicuous in their absence.

These kinds of 'ruin' are not exclusive to 'northern' spaces in the UK; they are a form of materiality specific to the particular structures of neoliberal capital. Nonetheless, in undertaking the Capital Ruins project, which involves extensive ethnographic fieldwork in which I live with residents of the housing complexes and interview local inhabitants, I examine how such sites embody and become symbolic of specific places, while also being tied to and the result of neoliberal capital. They are a kind of materiality that symbolizes and mediates our experience and understanding of both specific historic events and contemporary circumstances that have characterized, and indeed dictated, social, cultural and economic spheres of everyday life since the 'official' advent of the global crisis of capitalism in 2008, thereby tying 'ruins' in regions such as the north inextricably to the flows and networks of global capital. It is thus possible to 'map' how similar processes of ruination diverge and converge elsewhere across the world.

Conclusion

This article has engaged with some contemporary ethical and moral questions about how people understand 'ruination' in the twenty-first century. It has discussed temporal understanding of 'progressive time', which is the normative view as entrenched in modernity and capital, and which has shaped academic enquiry over the last 300 years, as well as the need for a 'collapse' of this conception of time into a Benjaminian conception of time as non-progressive. It has also discussed how 'ruins' in the north, most often produced and mediated by definitions of progressive time, romanticism and the industrial legacies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are in need of much more extensive exploration in relation to the flows and networks of neoliberalism.

These discussions have done two main things. First, as in the Orkney case, they help to contextualize ruins in northern parts of the UK—whether ancient or contemporary—in relation to contemporary networks, the production of value as enshrined in development projects, such as wind farms and regeneration, and property ownership. It also shows how those same market forces also shape supposedly neutral practices such as archaeological heritage management, which appeal to people's humanist sense of morality, duty, community and the idea of working towards a 'common good', which is ultimately inextricably linked with market value.

Second, studies that focus on contemporary planning and architectural practices in northern Britain have shifted and changed over the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century away from the belief in investment in lasting social housing to speculation and the objectives of finance capital, as in urban centres in the south. Speculative structures

are now also subject to processes of decay and ruination, contributing to the seemingly increasing pace of creative destruction wrought by capitalism. Thus, the expanded definitions of ruination help to demonstrate how present economic circumstances have had catastrophic global effects.

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Notes

- 1 Defined here as north-east and north-west England and Scotland.
- 2 I am defining 'ruination' and 'ruins' as a particular way of seeing material culture in relation specifically to the processes of decay that they embody in the present, as well as how they have shaped specific ways of aestheticizing landscapes, places and histories.
- 3 See especially Keiller, *The Possibility of Life's Survival on the Planet*, 2012.
- 4 See Davidson, 2005; Holt, 2010; Holt and McClanahan, 2013; McClanahan 2013, 'Curating Northernness'.
- 5 Dawdy, 'Clockpunk Anthropology'.
- 6 Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins: New Materialism and the Archaeological Imagination'.
- 7 Holtorf and Piccini, 2010.
- 8 Simon, *Neomaterialism*.
- 9 Boym, 'Ruinophilia'.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Dillon, *Ruins*.
- 12 See especially Bender *Landscape*; Bender, *Stonehenge*; Jones, *Archaeology of Ethnicity*.
- 13 Jones *Archaeology of Ethnicity*.
- 14 Dawdy, 'Clockpunk Anthropology'.
- 15 Hell and Schonle, 2010.
- 16 Madder and Adey, 'Editorial: Spectro-geographies'.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Dawdy, 'Clockpunk Anthropology'.
- 19 Informal economies refer to practices relating to the circulation of services, products and wealth that are not legitimized or recognized by the state.
- 20 Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins'.
- 21 Dillon, *Ruins*.
- 22 Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins', 29.
- 23 McClanahan, 'Histories, Identity and Ownership'; McClanahan, 'Curating Northernness'.
- 24 McClanahan, 'Histories, Identity and Ownership'; McClanahan, 'Curating Northernness'.
- 25 McClanahan, 'Curating Northernness'.
- 26 McClanahan 2006; McClanahan, 'Histories, Identity and Ownership'.
- 27 McClanahan 2006; McClanahan, 'Histories, Identity and Ownership'.
- 28 Nonini, *Global Idea of the Commons*, 1
- 29 Hardin, 'Tragedy of the Commons'.

- 30 Nonini, *Global Idea of the Commons*, 71, emphasis added.
 31 Samuels, 'Value and Significance in Archaeology'.
 32 Narkunas, 'Utilitarian Humanism'.
 33 O'Callaghan, Kitchin and Gleeson, 'New Ruins of Ireland?', 9.
 34 See especially *ibid.*
 35 Oldfield Ford, 2014, <http://lauraoldfieldford.blogspot.co.uk/>

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