



Unreal Estate and China's Collective Unconscious

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More than two decades ago, at the height of postmodernism, French historian Pierre Nora lamented that there no longer existed any *milieux de memoire*, or environments that embodied real everyday experience. What was left, according to him, were merely *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory. As such, historical monuments and other memory sites do not seem to carry any fixed historical meaning anymore. Rather, they have emerged as focal points of memory contestation and identity politics, becoming “pure signs” with “no referents in [historical] reality” (Nora 1996, 19).

Indeed, even in China, where the kind of politics of representation common to liberal democracies is seldom applicable, there has been a proliferation of counter-memories—from private museums to Cultural Revolution theme restaurants—that do not always conform to the grand narrative sanctioned by the government. The country's rapid economic growth over the past three decades has essentially produced an accelerated history, or what Nora and others refer to as the collapse of the present into the past, of memory into history. Not surprisingly, a spontaneous movement is emerging to collect, preserve, and archive all sorts of tangible and intangible artifacts and practices, such as old photographs, recipes, oral histories, and folkways, in contemporary China's new economy of nostalgia.

What has often been left out of this postsocialist archive fever, however, are the numerous sites that are slipping not into, but out of, history. China's reckless urbanization and real estate speculation have produced countless architectural wreckages—buildings, neighborhoods, and even cities—that are incomplete, destroyed, abandoned, or otherwise unused. Out of sight and out of mind, these sites do not register in public memory. Some of them may look monumental, but they are not monumentalized. In short, these are sites not of dissonant memories, but of collective unconscious.

For the photographic series featured in this issue of *Cross-Currents*—“Unreal Estate: China’s Unsettling Settlements”—I have selected a diverse range of ruinous spaces to tell an alternative history of contemporary China’s hysterical transformation. Whereas historical monuments in China are frequently used by the state to symbolize civilizational pride and national humiliation, in order to mobilize the masses to observe their patriotic duty, the ruinous sites I seek to foreground in my photographs are non-places that represent the specter of history.

Significantly, even if these ruins are neither sites of memory contestation nor “proper” ruins created by historical violence, such as the Great Wall and the Old Summer Palace (*Yuanmingyuan*), they are the very spaces where some of contemporary China’s most brutal social and economic conflicts—land disputes, forced demolition, dispossession, and social dislocation—routinely unfold.

To be sure, each of these sites has its own specific history and story. For instance, the derelict factories in Beijing and Chongqing from the socialist past remind us of the broken promises of a curtailed revolution. Likewise, the never-completed theme parks in Beijing and Wuhan tell the story of the rise of domestic tourism and the growing middle class in the post-1989 era. But, not unlike the ghost malls in many cities, they are also evidence of poor planning and overdevelopment in China’s breakneck economic growth. Meanwhile, even though the images of Ordos in Inner Mongolia reveal a scenario of speculation and greed, they simultaneously tell us stories about the nouveau riche, coal extraction, and environmental desolation. Finally, if the half-finished and unused residential and office towers in Ordos show how real estate development has gone awry in the new millennium’s exacerbated process of relentless capital accumulation, the ruinous urban village in the southern metropolis Guangzhou demonstrates how the same logic of global capitalism has resulted in forced relocation and demolition in a large-scale real estate project that seems to have promised yet another utopian future. Here, in addition to the urban slum created by a demolition stalemate, neglected migrant workers live precariously in half-destroyed buildings that resemble those in a war zone. Indeed, if real estate is a major vehicle for capital accumulation and GDP growth, “unreal estate” refers to the unimaginable, surreal, and yet actual scene of destruction behind the myth of “economic miracle” in this restless nation.

Local circumstances aside, I do not want to overemphasize the local specificities of these places, which would relegate them to exceptions or incidents of historical aberrance. Similarly, I

resist the temptation to view these devastations merely as the inevitable cost of modernization in a way that would further valorize the narrative of progress. By bringing together a wide range of seemingly unconnected ruinous sites, I seek to highlight the larger symptomatic and systematic failures of this peculiar mode of development, which the government and many others call progress.

In this respect, I think of the subjects of my photographic series not as spectacles of nostalgia or sublimity for visual consumption, but as empirical and figurative signposts of China's high-speed growth. As Walter Benjamin famously put it, ruins in the realm of things are like allegories in the realm of thoughts (1977, 178). Using these concrete sites to think allegorically in this context is productive precisely because the meanings of allegories are not always stable. Therefore, these images of transience, decay, and devastation can help to open up new possibilities to critique the regime of progressive time and the state's constant assertion that "development is the only imperative."

Ultimately, I hope debris of modernization, as well as forgotten architectures of anticipation and failure, can be used to construct an alternative set of symbolic repertoires. Only then may we be able to begin to reimagine history not as linear progress but as fragments, disintegration, and destruction.

Tong Lam is associate professor of History at the University of Toronto. The images in the accompanying photo essay in this issue of Cross-Currents were originally displayed in the exhibition "Unreal Estate: China's Unsettling Settlements," at the Institute of East Asian Studies Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, September 16–November 6, 2013.

References

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