

# ‘But, what’s wrong with ruins?’ Traversing inevitable loss in industrial heritage

*cultural geographies*

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj)**Pablo Arboleda** 

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**Abstract**

An architect and a cultural geographer meet to visit a vast industrial complex in southern Spain that was gradually abandoned between 1962 and 2012. Despite being formally designated as protected heritage, the practical absence of material intervention, historical interpretation or control of access turns the act of walking through these ruins into a highly immersive, sensorial and reflective experience. Drawing from fieldnotes and photo-documentation, this contribution broadens the generative potential of preserving-by-not-preserving, a novel heritage approach recently tackled in cultural geography literature.

**Keywords**

creative writing, field notes, heritage loss, industrial ruins, photography, sensory walking

**The landing**

Leaving our family homes before dawn, we drive along country roads, trailing behind tractors through undulating olive groves and fields of photovoltaic panels: productive landscapes dedicated to sunshine. There is a welcome sign with the town’s name (Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo), a logo of smokestacks signalling its unique industrial identity in a remote, rural corner of Andalusia. We turn left. The chimneys had already punctuated the valley from afar. On Christmas Eve, 2022, we are visiting a version of a post-natural present, perhaps a post-human future.

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Backlit, the hills' silhouette is still dark as night, against the crystal-clear sky that announces another beautiful day. Within minutes the blanket of fog vanishes. By noon, the crispness of winter gives way to the cheerful warmth of springtime; we will fail to notice our faces pinkening with sunburns.

We park on a narrow street of whitewashed houses and undertake the 500-m walk to a point from where it seems reasonable to begin a ramble among ruins. An elderly lady, wearing a flannel robe over her pyjamas, approaches us. Our hiking outfits and unfamiliar faces give us away as out-of-towners. Smiling, she enthused: 'There you go, a couple of curious-minded people!'

## The experiment

Around 10,000 inhabitants remain in Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo. Retaining only a third of its peak population in the 1930s, it continues being the centre of services and facilities in this inland area of southern Spain. The investment of French capital at the end of the nineteenth century prompted the establishment of one of the most expansive coal mining and lead smelting sites in the world. Declining economic competitiveness triggered closure and progressive dismantling of industries since the 1960s. This disinvestment also made defunct the railway infrastructure that drove its industrialisation – no passengers have alighted there since 1974. In 2018, the ruins of dozens of foundries, warehouses, power plants and administrative buildings were awarded the highest grade of Spanish heritage designation, but this does not prevent these ruins use for military training exercises simulating urban combat. The severe soil contamination by heavy metals presents a substantive barrier for the recuperation of a brownfield area the size of 85 football fields.

We knew little about the history or geography of this ruined landscape before setting our feet there. This was deliberate: we set out to employ a multimodal (auto)ethnography that, limiting our preconceptions and outside influences, draws from ruins' affordances to summon personal senses, reflections and readings to the fore.<sup>1</sup> We thus prepared by preparing little, constraining ourselves to only reading an article in a local newspaper, navigating Google Maps and clicking through information on the town's website. One in charge of field notes, the other of photo-documentation – both walking together, observing and ruminating aloud – our intention was not to anticipate or predict what we would encounter but rather embrace improvisation, imagination and speculation.

## The walk

We are not being completely honest with each other. We both doubt whether we can enter the complex. It might be fenced off entirely. We are resigned to circumambulate its perimeter, or perhaps, to find a gap to sneak through.

Our first stop is the central warehouse, a massive rectangular building erected in 1917 by Gustave Eiffel's studio. It seems to be the only rehabilitated construction, operating as a railway museum, venue and exhibition centre. It is closed today. Next to it, an information panel proclaims good news: with multiple entrances, the whole complex is accessible. Since the area forms part of a 'green' walking route, one can freely wander so long as they stick to a few rules: chiefly, do not enter buildings. Visitors are invited, for 0.60€, to download a smartphone application that will guide them through the place and its industrial history; the panel also suggests that 'if your profile is more exploration-oriented', QR codes may be found around the site. We do not install the app. The codes were another layer of detritus, leading to dead links.

By then, we have taken note of ruined brick chimneys, like obelisks crowned with stork nests, passed by the dangling limbs of pylons stripped of electric cables and stumbled upon ammunition shell casings scattered among shrubs and brick fragments. It feels like the battlefield it simulates,



**Figure 1.** Landscape, zoomed-in (photographs by authors, 2022).

but long after the war has passed (Figure 1). It is difficult to grasp whether we are witnessing slow ruination, sudden destruction or both. The advanced state of decay makes us hesitate. Door and roofs cling precariously to dilapidated buildings, fallen chunks of cement and plaster reveal original brick beneath. Structures have been stripped of pipes and cables by scrap dealers, further contributing to buildings' decomposition. Fig trees grow inside roofless depots, branches reaching through unglazed window frames. There are half-standing structures, de-fleshed and raw. They appear older because their fungible architectural elements have disappeared. In this pristine decay they resemble picturesque follies – the surrounding ruderal flora complementing this Romantic postcard (Figure 2). Beyond, there are structures whose disintegration is so advanced that they can hardly be interpreted as ruins: they are heaps of rubble.<sup>2</sup>

Furrows and dumped mining by-products whisper the extractive past of the landscape. Decades of erosion and unintended ecologies disguise this anthropogenic creation as geomorphology, but of a different planet where slag heaps are indistinct from a land art. Less abstract is the massive phallus drawn on a footpath, coupled with an inscription wishing 'Feliz Navidad' ('Merry Christmas'). This geoglyph was likely etched with a stick, but perhaps the virtuoso dragged their fingertip in the contaminated soil. There are no warnings about the presence of heavy metals, and we – between caution and exhaustion – think twice before sitting. We contemplate the improvised junkyard next to us. Precariously enclosed by factory facades and bedframes, it shares the squatted lot with a sheep corral and chicken coop, aside a small train station converted to a garden shed. The engulfing silence is sporadically interrupted by baas, clucks and bark (Figure 3).

Throughout our visit, we exchange greetings with the few people we encounter. Some are walking dogs, there is a woman jogging and we ask ourselves how such a postapocalyptic place absorbs mundane everydayness surrealistically. We see an elderly man gazing upon a ruined factory building. His expression is contemplative, perhaps nostalgic. Fighting our social scientific impulses, we





**Figure 2.** The spectrum of ruination (photographs by authors, 2022).



**Figure 3.** Earthworks and other works (photographs by authors, 2022).

avoid engaging a conversation, not wanting to interrupt an introspective moment. We carry on, speculating on whether he is a former worker for whom this sensory immersion raises memories about hard labour, camaraderie, solidarity – or not. A hound stealthily approaches, sniffing our ankles. Another old man, sitting a few metres ahead, assures us that we need not fear his exuberant companion. The man takes us for journalists. He begins a soliloquy:

‘You’d better mind your step in here. . .’

‘. . .some motherfuckers drilled illegal wells and the holes aren’t visible. . .’

‘. . .the shrubbery is too tall this time of the year’.

‘Look at this, they’ve pillaged bricks, metal, even roof tiles. . .’

‘. . .it’s a pity because there’s nothing left for the younger generations to learn’.

‘You know what? These are the outskirts *of* the outskirts. . .’

‘. . .I guess if this were somewhere else it would be different’.

‘Now I can wander into all the buildings. . .’ (laughs)

‘. . .one day I’ll have an accident inside, or a heart attack, and nobody will find me.

Not even my wife!’ (more laughs)

The most advanced ruins feel solemn, almost ecclesiastical. Sometimes, the degree of deterioration blurs the lines of being indoors or outdoors. The man’s words linger, tempting us. We cannot resist trespassing; something beckons from within the buildings. There are no impediments: no boarded-up windows, no security tape, no CCTVs, no security guards. We do not feel guilty since the fear of being caught does not exist. The relaxed ambiance of Andalusian rurality somehow dictates that wandering inside is the most natural thing to do, and there is nothing heroic about it. It is a subtle thrill, but not a struggle for the transgressive re-democratisation of inaccessible spaces through the breaking of societal norms: more intuitive and less claiming. Ours is not a self-conscious practice of ‘urban exploration’.<sup>3</sup>

There are dwellers inside a warehouse. We do not see them, but their presence is evident from a sweet-yet-erie sound. Pigeons’ coos, wings flapping. Wooden floors creak, concrete rubble crunches beneath cautious footsteps. Whether by naïve superstition or automatic reflex, one of us keeps their fingers crossed. Damaged pillars, sagging beams, collapsed ceilings, a fragile staircase leading nowhere. Another warehouse is less threatening. Completely diaphanous, it seems to have been carefully emptied by someone who only forgot to sweep. Seeping water leaves viridescent stains drip down 15-m walls supporting a roof that was pocked and perforated as if it had been hailed. Under the zenith sun, the composition turns mystical; a play of radiating, dappled light transports us from a sublime landscape to an Impressionist painting.

We encounter the traces of previous trespassers, and we find the first trace of youth presence. A good time was had in their ephemeral occupation, judging from trampled confetti, crushed cans of energy drinks, a mattress and empty crisp bags – salt and vinegar, to be archaeologically precise. Other buildings’ interiors present a spectrum of graffiti techniques, elaboration varying from simple tags to well-executed stencils. Most touching is a handwritten inscription, combining Spanish grammar with English vocabulary: ‘No solo es urban lo underground que también es de la town’



**Figure 4.** Encounters (photographs by authors, 2022).

(‘The underground isn’t just urban, it’s also from the town’). Contemplating the off rhyme, we realise nearly all the graffiti in the complex is to be found within buildings, whilst facades are left untouched, as if visibility logics were subverted, hidden and intimate. Perhaps this was in reverence to external purity, honouring the buildings’ afterlife. Surely the walls shielded their creative interventions from the prying eyes of townspeople (Figure 4).

After 6 km of drifting, we exit the complex through its opposite end. Hanging on a tall enclosure, a banner promotes a virtual reality tour to passing motorists. Established by a local heritage association, it must be booked in advance and takes place atop a belvedere, the only spot where tour visitors set foot. From there, equipped with goggles, they can (virtually) wander the area, toggling between experiences of the site’s original and current states. Historical and technical information is provided, and the tour can even be practiced from a home computer, though it is acknowledged that this would not be *as* immersive. The tour is intended to raise awareness of endangered heritage, promoting the perspective that conservation is imperative for the socio-cultural and economic development of the region.<sup>4</sup>

We admit to ourselves that, in principle, the virtual tour offers some advantages. It allows visitors zero-risk access to the full complex, including interiors, an exploration modality that is inclusive for all ages and most bodies; also, it provides technologically mediated time travel materialised in the narration and simulation of the area’s past. However, its rationale is embedded within conservation discourses and memory politics that are more-than-virtual. Does the existing ruinous state cause shame or arouse anxiety? The presumption is that this virtual exposition might eventually drive material conservation, attracting tourism and consolidating local identities. But most everything here cannot be recuperated, it can only be significantly modified, mostly erased. Architectural intervention – even to just arrest further decay – would require millions of euros. We suspect that there are not funds to tear buildings down or remediate the soil. We also doubt



that many visitors to Córdoba – the city with the most World Heritage Sites in the world – will travel an hour to experience mining history. As stimulating as we find it, industrial heritage is niche. ‘This is way more than Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo can manage. . .’, one of us thinks to themselves ‘. . . at least in conventional heritage terms’, the other concurs in his notebook. The site will continue to decay.

### ‘But, what’s wrong with ruins?’

– we ask ourselves aloud. We, accustomed to studying ruination, had never experienced such a vast assemblage of unaltered abandonment before. Consciously uninformed in advance, our experimental approach ultimately contributed to our enhanced fascination. The value of this site needs not be decoded within authorised heritage discourse;<sup>5</sup> its meaning is also constructed by its use. In this exercise, we sought to appreciate ruins for what they are – not what they signify or should be – less objective knowledge production than phenomenological disorientation. Ours was a tourist gaze, albeit unconventional.

The site, like a Duchampian Readymade, can be re-signified without changing anything but context and the viewer’s perspective. The lack of intervention or remediation is a (largely involuntary) form of landscape curation through which ruins are preserved outside of formal commemoration. Beyond the industrial past, this decaying complex speak to contemporary histories and archaeologies: those of de-industrialisation and capitalist globalisation, the ghostly unravelling of extractive industries and their infrastructures, emerging ecological imaginaries of the Anthropocene. Heritage – a discursive as much as a material practice – emerges as a process of becoming, even through material disintegration. If entropy could be embraced – or at least tolerated – the generative qualities of inevitable loss could recast Peñarroya-Pueblonuevo with ground-breaking approaches to conservation recently voiced from cultural geography.<sup>6</sup> This is not to dismiss local initiatives focused on securing funding for restoration and reuse, but an invitation to overcome frustration by acknowledging the value of a massive ruin park. Perhaps we are doing our part as curious visitors. Documenting moments. Trapping thoughts.

Taking a nice walk amongst ruins.

### Ethics statement

Authors affirm that this research has been conducted with unwavering commitment to ethical principles. The study did not involve human participants, and therefore, the concept of informed consent was inapplicable. Ethical considerations, appropriate to the nature of the research, were diligently observed throughout the entire study, ensuring the integrity and credibility of the findings.

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## Notes

1. J.Armstrong, 'On the Possibility of Spectral Ethnography', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 10(3), 2010, pp. 243–50.
2. For the “flesh” metaphor that compares modern and old ruins, see: Þ.Pétursdóttir and B.Olsen, 'Modern Ruins: Remembrance, Resistance, and Ruin Value', in C. Smith (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology* (New York: Springer, 2014), pp. 7304–16. On the different conceptions between ruins and rubble, see: G.R.Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
3. Urban exploration involves trespassing into abandoned spaces, attracting enthusiasts interested in history and architecture, who find excitement and rebellion in this performative act. See: B.Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London: Verso, 2013).
4. The tour's website is available at: <https://www.cercoindustrialvirtual.com>.
5. The authorised heritage discourse is an expert framework that constructs and represents cultural heritage by reinforcing state-dominated historical and identity narratives. For its formulation and contestation, see: L.Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).
6. C.DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); C.DeSilvey and R.Harrison, 'Anticipating Loss: Rethinking Endangerment in Heritage Futures', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(1), 2020, pp. 1–7.

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