

CHAPTER 3: ARCHITECTS OF DETERIORATION



Figure 1: The structures of the ancient capital of Angkor comingle with the roots of strangler figs, kapok, and banyan trees.

INTRODUCTION

Visit a site like Angkor¹ and the potent mix of deterioration and layering of nonhuman atop Human² structures produces an odd and intoxicating beauty. The temples are stunningly elaborate – magnificent bobbled domes, brigades of columns, with walls of intricately carved decorations –all the more so for being blanketed in moss, with roots of strangler figs caressing the stone roofs,

¹ Angkor is the remains of the Khmer Empire, from the 9th to the 15th century which are now protected as one of the largest and most important archaeological sites on the planet. They include the famous Temple of Angkor Wat and, at Angkor Thom, the Bayon Temple. According to UNESCO Angkor is a “major site exemplifying cultural, religious and symbolic values, as well as containing high architectural, archaeological and artistic significance.” Hardly abandoned, “the park is inhabited, and many villages, some of whom the ancestors are dating back to the Angkor period are scattered throughout the park.” <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/668/>

² Following Sylvia Wynter’s conception of Man, I capitalize Human to draw attention to the contested boundary surrounding those who may be considered human, thereby highlighting the systematic stigmatization, racial and gender hierarchy, and social inferiorization that projected the universality of the andro-Eurocentric Human as if it were all peoples, serving to justify the subordination of other peoples and nonhumans.

reaching down into the temple floors and stretching up into the canopy. It feels almost otherworldly. The stuff of the earth –trees, plants, lichens, dirt, water – transform anthropogenic remains of the Khmer Empire. Despite efforts by UNESCO, these transformations are also deteriorations, occasioned by the peoples who live within the site or arrive as tourists, and, of course, by the nonhumans which unbuild as they rot and grow and erode. UNESCO, like many museums and environmental efforts, are guided by what I call a “logic of preservation” according to which processes of decay are treated exclusively in terms of loss, lack, or failure to care. Undoubtedly there are countless things that ought to be protected and preserved. And yet, is it not also important to inquire into what has been left elided or denied by the preservation paradigm? This work suggests other ways of storying such changes and transitions.

It proposes that an understanding of the political and ethical ramifications of Human and nonhuman entanglement requires taking deterioration more seriously and more carefully, with an eye toward what such a process creates, engenders, or makes possible. To do so I turn to architectural theory and practice. Architecture, as the art of constructing, assembling, and creating, may seem initially at odds with decline. But in this improbable place, the arena of erection, there is much to say about the productivity deterioration and its nonhuman actors.

In buildings transformed by disuse, abuse, time, and the elements, we³ can observe the processual nature of (un)becoming. Just as the social meanings of spaces are produced and altered over time, so too do the buildings themselves, and their erosion and weathering expose the *creative power of deterioration*. To build is then resignified as just one form of creating, opening space for deterioration to be also understood as another mode of creating, revealing deterioration as another. Architects thus appear as contributing to the creation of both structures and their decline.

Contrary to understandings in which affirmation of deterioration aligns with the disposable nature propagated by Western (colonial) capitalism, the examples I explore illustrate that embracing decline does not necessitate destruction and with the help of architectural and heritage studies I suggest that decay is not synonymous with, or exhausted by, destruction. Destruction entails harm, justifying devastation and damage. Deterioration, on the other hand, is inevitable but can (sometimes) produce something better, even alongside diminishment. Destruction is something like clearcutting a forest; deterioration is something like a tree falling and decomposing on the forest floor. In what follows I distinguish destruction from deterioration and find ways in which preservation can include destruction, even while declines can create new possibilities.

In doing so I defend a political ethos that affirms decline, valuing the ephemeral and decaying just as much (in some instances more) than accumulation and preservation. Such an ethos asks: *What might happen if we embraced deterioration (or at least accepted) rather than routinely arresting it? How can efforts against preservation communicate a worldbuilding politics? Can the work of sharing memory be disentangled from objects’ material continuation? What is being preserved because it is valuable and what is being valued because it has been preserved?* Answering these distinctly political questions requires an affective shift of radical openness to the generative character of decline, dissolution, and deterioration. Such a move requires a

³ The we, and us, and our of this work are the Occidental humans at the center of the narrative. I use I and we to indicate those humans, not because all peoples are equally responsible for ecocide, but because a collective group of humans are. It is not individuals who have created the anthropocene, it has been capitalism, and patriarchy, and colonialism, and promethean myths of progress and abundance, but these systems are also collective, operating through collectives of people just as they oppress communities of humans and otherwise. Collective efforts have created the anthropocene, and so I refer to this collective as we, us, and our.

consideration of preservation-as-failed-decline rather than decline-as-failed-endurance. The reconsideration questions the ruling preservation paradigm, highlights the harms associated with continuation and the anthropocentrism of anti-decline sentiments. The move also celebrates nonhuman creativity and affective atmospheres of reverence in spaces of mingling between the anthropogenic and the nonhuman. The good of letting go, of passing on, and becomings concludes the move by promoting a change in the ethical model of the category of care to include a mode that incorporates and celebrates finitude.

STUDIES OF UNBUILDING

In the collected volume *Political Theory and Architecture*, editors Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka lament that, “for a discipline that prides itself on interrogating the structures that govern social life, contemporary political theory has had surprisingly little to say about the built environment.”⁴ While political theory may have little to say about architecture, architectural studies has much to say on how the deterioration of structures can function as a voicing of political critique, a mode of remembering (political and otherwise), and impermanence of preservationist tendencies.

While architectural studies are often concerned with the erection of buildings, the creation of monuments, and the preservation of heritage sites, Jes Weinberg’s “creative dismantling”⁵ represents a foray into the world of decline, where “decline” represents a practice that occupies the space between conservancy and demolition. In Weinberg’s approach, “remains such as building materials and furnishings are stored for future use,” while “the ‘creative’ element in the process is the investigation, which gives birth to new knowledge and storytelling.”⁶ More than a process of disassembly, dismantling emerges as part of creative storying and knowing, and so as a positive force.

Creative dismantling celebrates the mingling of preservation and deterioration,⁷ reasoning that maintenance and dissolution are never binaristic. Instead, the two are co-present processes, simultaneously operative, less as a continuum than as a comingling in which the proportion and direction of the emphasis on either construction or dissolution for any particular thing/body/process depends on its specific situatedness in space and time. Loss, then, comes not from the “dismantling” but rather from construing conservation and deterioration as only ever juxtaposed.

CONTERPRESERVATION AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE

⁴ *Political Theory and Architecture*, 1

⁵ Wienberg, Jes. “Four Churches and a Lighthouse: Preservation, ‘Creative Dismantling,’ or Destruction,” *Danish Journal of Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 68–75.

⁶ Wienberg, Jes. “Four Churches and a Lighthouse: Preservation, ‘Creative Dismantling,’ or Destruction,” *Danish Journal of Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 74

⁷ This affirmation of decline should not be confused with something like Joseph Schumpeter’s concept of “creative destruction,” in which a continually intensifying market economy produces constant reconfigurations of the economic order, resulting in a process simultaneously that destroys in order to make anew. As Schumpeter explains, creative destruction is “incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.” Such an approach lauds destruction as a necessary element of creation.]

Daniela Sandler’s neologism “counterpreservation” names the “intentional use of architectural decay in the spatial, visual, and symbolic configuration of buildings” to communicate political resistance.⁸ Rather than restoration or replacement, under counterpreservation “decayed buildings are transformed functionally, materially, and symbolically by acts of design: decisive, consequential interventions in architectural and urban space, motivated by activism and an ethical commitment to long-term goals.”⁹ Using newly reunified Berlin as an example, Sandler traces the ways in which architects, artists, and activists worked alongside abandonment and decay to develop a political critique.¹⁰

Berlin’s counterpreservation movement is not, though, a celebration of deterioration itself but rather something closer to a refutation of the attitude identified by Theodor Adorno as the “intention . . . to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory.”¹¹ Decaying buildings are incongruous with new or restored buildings in this increasingly touristic city beholden to real-estate development. Situated among the new and wealthy, counterpreservation acts as an uncomfortable aide-mémoire of how the past lingers in the present, as well as an irritating manifestation, and so also a reminder, of present inequities.¹²



Figure 6: Buildings [should this be possessive?] street façade in Berlin

⁸ Sandler, Daniela. “Counterpreservation as a Concept” in *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989*. 19

⁹ Sandler, Daniela. “Counterpreservation as a Concept” in *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989*. 26

¹⁰ Sandler, Daniela. “Counterpreservation as a Concept” in *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989*. 20

¹¹ Adorno, Theodor. “The Meaning of Working through the Past,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 89.

¹² Freud [nice]



Figure 7: Daniela Sandler's photo of KA 86 and Tuntenhaus, street façade on Kastanienalle 86 (2003): "We remain different."

Operating by *irritating* and *reminding*, counterpreservation is not synonymous with passivity, neglect, or even active effacement. Instead, the movement is a reappropriation of already-present decay to put deterioration to social use, working to achieve affordable living and provide workspaces in prime real-estate neighborhoods. While the sources of a building's deterioration range from nonhuman processes to Human actions such as war (itself dependent on the manipulation of nonhuman forces), counterpreservation *frames* decay as a feature worthy of being "preserved" and displayed.¹³

BUILDING MEMORIES

In some ways counterpreservation serves as a method of memorialization, allowing deterioration to remind us of past events and ongoing inequities. While monuments most often act as a technic of remembering in which "we ask certain buildings, objects, and landscapes to function as mnemonic devices, to remember the pasts that produced them, and to make these pasts available for our

¹³ An example in the US context might be the restoration work of H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture in 1987 of the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which "took advantage of what nature had accomplished" by preserving the decayed interior surfaces damaged by rainwater. The resulting "rich tapestry of color and texture ... became a major element of the design" and "taunts the senses with random juxtapositions brought about through the layering of time." Sandler, Daniela. "Counterpreservation as a Concept" in *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989*. 24

contemplation and concern,”¹⁴ some scholars in architectural studies suggest that allowing the built environment to deteriorate fully can itself be a mode of memorialization.

In Cornelius Holtorf’s discussion of the destruction of a twelfth-century church in Norway, he suggests “change and creative transformation may actually help maintain a connection to the past rather than sever it. It is possible to perform remembrance through transience, although this may require a willingness to find value in alternative material forms.”¹⁵ The *process* of material loss, rather than acting as a technic for forgetting, might, in some instances, be a better monument to collective memory. Rather than the formed or deformed materiality acting as a holding space for collective memories, perhaps processes of unbecoming so function. Memories might then be connected to transformative processes rather than to a shaped object.

Similarly, Caitlin DeSilvey proposes “it may be that in some circumstances a state of gradual decay provides more opportunities for memory making, and more potential points of engagement and interpretation, than the alternative.”¹⁶ With a metamorphosis of collective memory into less organized matter, deterioration, rather than preservation or restoration, might expose another relationship between memory and matter. If peoples, things, and spaces are constantly in processes of becoming, deterioration, as a process of (un)becoming, might facilitate memorialization better than a static monument, ossified through preservation.

TRANSIENT PRESERVATION

Such an embrace of deterioration, the affirmation of allowing important places and spaces to decay, dissolve, and disappear, may feel wrong. An aversion to deterioration is very nearly instinctual, and for good reasons: spoiled foods cause sickness, rot invites unwanted nonhumans, and decomposition can be proximal to disease and predators.¹⁷ To denaturalize the drive for continuation and to destabilize the impulse toward perpetuity, some in architectural studies have also worked to remind us that even the desire for permanence is not so permanent.

Preservation tendencies are culturally and historically situated, not innate desires. “Some of the ideas fundamental to modern conservation” Seung-Jin Chung argues, “are inevitably based on European conditions.”¹⁸ The effort to “ensure the authenticity of the aesthetic and historic values of the monument being restored”¹⁹ is but one mode of caring for structures. Other cultures “have placed special emphasis on and formed themselves around the organic relationship with surrounding natural settings rather than on the physical structure itself, and on the spiritual messages embodied in such structures beyond the reality of the visible material world.”²⁰ As evinced, there are other modes of remembering and honoring which do not require the preservation of an object.

¹⁴ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 4

¹⁵ Holtorf, Cornelius. “Averting Loss Aversion in Cultural Heritage,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 4 (2015): 405–21.

¹⁶ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 14-15

¹⁷ Harrison NA, Gray MA, Gianaros PJ, Critchley HD. “The Embodiment of Emotional Feelings in the Brain.” *The Journal of Neuroscience*. 30(38):12878–12884, 2010.

¹⁸ Chung, Seung-Jin (2005) East Asian Values in Historic Conservation, *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 11:1, 58

¹⁹ Chung, Seung-Jin (2005) East Asian Values in Historic Conservation, *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 11:1, 56

²⁰ Chung, Seung-Jin (2005) East Asian Values in Historic Conservation, *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 11:1, 58

Similarly ignoring endurance, the Japanese aesthetic philosophy wabi sabi, for example, embraces the beauty of imperfection, transience, and the natural cycle of growth and decay, valuing impermanence as a sign of the unalterable flow of life and matter. Wabi sabi seeks the beauty “in a constant state of flux, evol[ving] from nothing and devolv[ing] back to nothing.”²¹ Rather than a glorification of permanence, endurance, or resilience, “it offers an aesthetic ideal that uses the uncompromising touch of mortality to focus the mind on the exquisite transient beauty to be found in all things impermanent.”²² We might look to these places for practices and philosophical attunements which embrace, rather than deny, processes of deterioration.

Further, commitments to preservation vary across time as well as space. The predilection for preservation of specific objects only emerged in its modern form in the late nineteenth century²³ as a response to the European fervor for “restoration.” Prefiguring what would become the default in conservation, the pinnacle of restoration was to be the preservation of a structure’s original state.²⁴ The early twentieth century saw a rash of legislation promising to make all reasonable attempts to protect designated objects in perpetuity.²⁵ As Graham Fairclough explains, “The obsession with physical conservation became so embedded in twentieth-century mentalities that it is no longer easy to separate an attempt to understand the past and its meaning from agonizing about which bits of it to protect and keep. ... The remains of the past ... seem to exist only to be preserved.”²⁶

The preservation of buildings, then, is a contestable space where preservation can never be disentangled from deterioration, where preserving deteriorated buildings can be an element of a political movement, and where the disintegration of monuments can be a form of memorialization while also reminding that desires and modes of preservation are themselves rather ephemeral. This perspective allows for contemplation of materiality, time, and existence within the realm of built spaces.

PRESERVATION PARADIGM

There ought to be contestation around preservation. For the most part, there is not. Think of the conservation of historical buildings to preserve history, the maintenance of landmarks to protect cultural memory, the protection of commodities in plastic cases, the preservation of ephemeral

²¹ Juniper, Andrew. 2003. *Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. 1-2

²² Juniper, Andrew. 2003. *Wabi-Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. 2

²³ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 3 This trend involved the demolition of old sections of buildings and the construction of new portions in an “improved” style, in order to enhance the appearance of the structure, albeit without strict oversight regarding what qualified as an appropriate intervention. The Romantic perspective on restoration fostered a deep yearning for sincerity, an affection for ancient monuments, and consequently, an aversion to overly zealous interventions.

²⁴ Seung-Jin Chung, “East Asian Values in Historic Conservation,” *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 11, no. 1 (2005), 57.

²⁵ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 4; Legislation included the United Kingdom Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act of 1913 and the United States Antiquities Act of 1906.

²⁶ Graham Fairclough, “Conservation and the British,” in *Defining Moments: Dramatic Archaeologies*, ed. John Schofield (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005), 158. Moreover, the current preservation paradigm is situated within a broader historical cultural milieu lauding the disciplining of knowledge through classification, documentation, and cataloguing within expert-determined categories. Capturing objects in inventories has allowed them to be transformed into artifacts to be protected and preserved. DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*.

experiences with pictures and videos, the perpetuation of files by giving them second homes among the clouds, and the injection of foods with chemical preservatives to fight spoilage. Things, our practice seems to say, should not disintegrate – preservation is the ruling paradigm.

Of course, preservation can be part of an ecological ethic that calls for the conservation of lands and animals, the protection of spaces and sites, and the perpetuation of things for future generations. However, while calls to “conserve” and “sustain” are not inherently troubling, an exclusively preservative politics can be stultifying. The failure to disintegrate, the insistence on persisting, normalizes a status quo politics that can veer into a politically oppressive conservatism.²⁷ In other words, the hegemonic preservation paradigm has political power.²⁸

Yet we can only ever single out a small subset of things for preservation, as worthy of duration: preserving always obscures and eliminates some existents, even as it works to perpetuate others. Within the preservation paradigm only certain peoples, things, and places are allowed to persevere, are given the care they need to endure, even as others are discarded or rendered as wasteland. Marco Armiero speaks here of the “social process through which class, race, and gender injustices become embedded into the socio-ecological metabolism producing both gardens and dumps, healthy and sick bodies, pure and contaminated places.”²⁹ Just as pure places can only continue to exist through the dumping of waste in contaminated places, the preserved requires the eliminated, indicating the necessity of exposing the unethical and invidious distinctions operative within seemingly natural efforts to “preserve.”

Of course, things *do* rot and fall apart, even if everyday life is often organized against this “danger.” Preservation tendencies often occlude how the routines of daily activity are contingent on the very decomposition of objects. Overlooked are the ways in which things are not meaningful only in their persistence but also, and sometimes more so, in their diminution.³⁰

TOXIC BURIAL

Preservation tendencies are resilient and although acts of preservation are not unique to the contemporary period, or even to the anthropic domain, Humans have become exceptionally skilled at techniques of preservation. In so doing, we flirt with new (and potentially dangerous) practices of perpetuation.³¹ Even goneness can be subject to preservation attempts. And the preservation of the already gone presents its own uniquely dangers.

²⁷ Moreover, according to the logic of preservation, allowing a thing to dissolve is selfish, whereas the work of upkeep is a selfless act oriented toward those who will come after.

²⁸ The preservation paradigm intertwines with a preference for a specific kind of bygone era—one that is delicate, irreplaceable, and in need of our intervention. Preservation actions blend together various entities, both human and otherwise. With each preservation effort, the fragile object integrates itself (albeit minutely) into our collective identity, while its deterioration threatens to erode our sense of self. In environments marked by uncertainty, safeguarding cultural artifacts takes on the role of forging a communal identity, where objects morph into an integral part or extension of a subject or group of subjects. Additionally, the inclination towards continuity reveals contemporary sentiments of shared vulnerability in a world where communal existence has become increasingly precarious.

²⁹ Armiero, Marco. *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. 10

³⁰ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 29

³¹ The discovery of microplastics throughout the planet and within living bodies, “forever chemicals,” and the myriad projects of life extension and even transhumanism through bioengineering—these comprise explicit fights against death

Funeral practices in much of the West regularly require preservation of the dead through embalming. While this protects the dead body against rapid deterioration, embalming practices simultaneously harm those working with the dead. The most pressing “medical issue related to embalming,” reports the Green Burial Council, “is the risk to embalmers and funeral directors from inhaling the vapors of embalming fluids, which contain formaldehyde, benzene, ethanol, ethylene glycol (an ingredient in antifreeze) and other toxic chemical.”³² Here, preservation produces untimely deaths, endangering embalmers with increased fatality rates.³³ Severed from biological cycles of decomposition, the dead become deadly through the practices that preserve them.

Entombed and cremated bodies spread harms that swell out and burst far beyond the deceased body. Dead Humans pumped full of pharmaceuticals and preservatives in life, then embalmed with noxious chemicals in death, contaminate lands and waters, harming those who live in the wake of death. As Lia Purpura reflects:

The effects of contemporary burial practices refract out, degrading the integrity of the body, wounding those who care for our outsourced dead, imperiling the land meant to receive us, and, as ecosystemic violence will, wrecking the integrity of relationships among all while obscuring the existence of those relationships entirely. Of our resistance to direct return, one friend wrote: “Embalming is damage to the infrastructure.” When we eat and are not eaten, we are thieves and the theft is from the system, the whole, the larger communion. Only humans are foolish enough to believe we should or even can launder our energy into crypts or caskets that will preserve us.³⁴

The populations, Human and otherwise, that live among the dead are also contaminated by the pollutants that leach into surrounding soil and water tables.³⁵ Whether cremated or in cemeteries, a large quantity of pharmaceutical products are released into the ecosystem; the remnants of life-preserving drugs administered widely in the population, most especially in the elderly, persist in the ground long after the bodies once containing them have decomposed.³⁶ Caring for those in decline with drugs extends the life of the recipient while also creating enduring compounds which are “chemically stable and persistent,” resisting declination. The more soluble and unstable substances percolate into groundwater, where they remain into the deep future.³⁷ Once separated from the bodies to which they were administered, these chemicals continue to live long lives, haunting landscapes and bodies long after their dead have been buried or burned.

While preservation often connotes saving, caring, protecting, and safeguarding, the harms of burial practices draw attention to the damages of preservation, illustrating the destructive consequences and implications of the dominance of the preservation paradigm. If the political choice to remain within the preservation paradigm is, in some instances, harming bodies and places, then I propose

and are often accompanied by prophecies of “silicon succession,” in which carbon-based life forms are posited as something to be phased out in favor of eternally resilient silicone (AI) successors. Simon Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (Prometheus Books, 2006)

³² Purpura, Lia. *Imagining Burial*

³³ Purpura, Lia. *Imagining Burial*. Embalmers risk thirteen-percent-higher death rates, an eight-times-higher risk of contracting leukemia, and a three-times-risk of contracting autoimmune and neurological diseases.

³⁴ Purpura, Lia. *Imagining Burial*

³⁵ Pollutants such as “heavy metals ... [were] among the most detected in several studies” Dison S.P., Franco et al.

³⁶ Dison S.P., Franco et al. 6

³⁷ Dison S.P., Franco et al. 7

turning to the work of nonhuman “architects of deterioration” as a path for unpacking the theories originating with architectural studies, as a method to take seriously the deterioration which is always already a function of processes of becoming and entanglements with nonhumans, and a form of care grounded in “letting go.”

NONHUMAN ARCHITECTS

Architect most commonly designates the trained professional who design and plan buildings, structures, and spaces. However, if we understand the term a little more broadly, as indicating those “who play a crucial role in shaping the built environment,” those “contributing to the functionality and aesthetics of the spaces we inhabit,” Humans may not be the only architects. Through eroding, through depositing dirt, through pelting with rain and pushing roots among, through gnawing at and building homes in, nonhumans also play a pivotal role in shaping built environments and contributing to their functionality and aesthetics. Especially at sites of ruins and in places of decay, nonhuman forces are clearly agentic, perhaps more lively and impactful than Humans, as they work to alter the material world. We might then consider nonhuman actants as architects.

And yet, I want to distort the category of architect a little more. Not to make it unrecognizable, but to make it a little more capacious. Capacious enough to include the work of deterioration done by architects such as the strangler fig trees of Angkor. Although *architect* insinuates quite a bit of planning, devising, and strategizing, this particular metaphorical claim allows us to stretch the concept of creation. Recognizing “creation” as both a building and a process of deterioration because *deterioration is productive*. Processes of becoming through decay correspondingly produce something new. Something has ended, but it is not (only) destruction. Something new is also created when the strangler fig grows out of the temple ruins.

I suggest the something new created from deterioration undermines the Human hubris of creation via erection and the corresponding denigration of the often small and slow work of deterioration by nonhumans. Further, by chronicling the work of some architects of deterioration, we can begin to visualize the entanglements of humans and nonhumans and the ways in which they are always movements of untangling and decline which need not be a mere prelude to other forms of building but which are, instead, good and beautiful in themselves. Because deterioration is not juxtaposed to the good, I suggest an ethos can be extended which prompts responses and relations that extend care without presumptions of perpetuation.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM OF ANTI-DECLINE

The preference for perpetuation and a disgust at decay endures despite preservation’s destructive potential. For Georges Bataille, disgust at decay and hatred of nature are linked. Produced by the “mingled horror and fascination aroused in us by decay,”³⁸ “man’s ‘no’ to nature” appears as repugnance at the nonhuman world.³⁹ This “no to nature,” Bataille insists, “is behind a belief we once held about nature as something wicked and shameful: decay summed up the world we spring

³⁸ Bataille. *Eroticism*.

³⁹ Bataille. *Eroticism*.

from and return to, and horror and shame were attached both to our birth and to our death.”⁴⁰ Here, disgust is doubled: disgust at the thing decaying and disgust at the world for being other-than-human.

We can infer from Bataille the corollary that anthropocentrism remains intimately tangled up with anti-decay sentiments, instead preferring preservation. The anthropocentrism of preservation means affirmation of dissolution rubs against Human hubris, the type of hubris which portrays the Human as the primary actor in a world of “dead matter.” Anthropocentrism, which lauds the heroism of Human construction, often simultaneously denigrates small, mundane, and often nonhuman efforts of decay. As such, the anthropocentrism of preservation often occludes nonhuman actants and the active role they play in cultivating deterioration.

Juxtaposed to Human action and activity, deterioration is positioned as “letting nature take its course,” an entropic occurrence in which active Human attempts to preserve and maintain are thwarted by the passive happenings of deterioration. The anthropocentrism of preservation means decay takes on a dull role, as a state of inactivity and abdication of creation, the default processes that reign when “effort” is lacking. Within the preservation paradigm, deterioration and decomposition are often conflated with forms of abandonment. “Without constant vigilance and labor to keep things in their place,” without the anti-decline efforts of the Human, “order immediately begins to break down.”⁴¹ A state of entropic dissolution appears to spontaneously emerge, one seemingly devoid of activity and agents once it has been abandoned by the Human. Anthropocentrism tends to position deterioration as a state, a set of occurrences, a seemingly inevitable entropic happening.

Or decay is figured as something more sinister, in which “nature” is the primary but cruel actant,⁴² destroying anthropogenic creations and rendering Humans an aggrieved party. If one remains attuned only to explicitly Human activity, “then the onset of decay and entropic undoing may look only like destruction, an erasure of memory and history.”⁴³

Decay, though, is neither passive, nor is it malevolent. A reconsideration, one attuned to the active character of decline, suggests deterioration might be better understood as the more-than-human-world taking a primary and positive role in forming its milieu and creating deterioration. Deterioration takes energy and effort, and recognizing the work of decay allows us to see the ways in which creativity exceeds direct intentionality, a creativity which is occasioned most prominently by the nonhuman. Humans may aid or “influence the pace, but they do not drive the process of decay itself.”⁴⁴

Indeed, architects of deterioration can aid in understanding the ethical, political, and ecological impacts possible if we emphasize and accept the active character of nonhumans, especially the role they play in practices of deterioration. Framed in the context of vitalist processes,⁴⁵ practices of decay are destructive *and* generative, efforts of erasure *and* propagation. Take, for example, ruins.

⁴⁰ Bataille

⁴¹ Minnegal, et. Al. *The Waterfall and the End of the World*. 49

⁴² Bruno Latour in “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications.” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 370

⁴³ DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. 28

⁴⁴ Minnegal, et. Al. *The Waterfall and the End of the World*. 49

⁴⁵ See a further discussion in chapter 1.

Ruins are archetypical sites of nonhumans and peoples co-creating through processes of deterioration. Matter pressed into anthropogenic structures intermingles with dynamic nonhuman processes of erosion and rot and mold and corrosion. Ruins must be, can only be, structures created by humans *and* nonhumans acting together. Ruins, then, might be better understood not as the destruction of Human monuments but instead as co-creations produced by peoples and nonhumans, the built structures themselves never being entirely anthropogenic.

GROWING MOLD

Ruins are not only structures destroyed but novel structures co-built in practices of Human and nonhuman collaboration. While few of these structures are intentionally designed to acknowledge collaboration with nonhuman entities, Méret Oppenheim's *Brunnen*, a prominent figure in Switzerland's artistic scene, does.



Figure 4: *Brunnen* (fountain), located at Waisenhausplatz in the old city of Bern, Switzerland.

Amid Oppenheim's extensive surrealist portfolio, *Brunnen* (Fountain) sprouts at the heart of her chosen city, Bern.⁴⁶ Highly unpopular at the time of its installation, this concrete and aluminum spiral-shaped pillar has with time transcended its initial brutalist form. Like a traditional fountain, water cascades down its exterior, but to a greater extent than others, this fountain is an ongoing transformation facilitated by relations with processes of growth and decay. Over time, water and minerals have collaborated to generate peculiar tufa formations, a type of limestone that grows on the column and which provides places for plants to sprout from the top while mosses and lichen contribute to an evolving texture reminiscent of mold and rot.



Figure 5: *Brunnen* (Fountain) in different seasons

The appearance of *Brunnen* changes with the passage of seasons. In winter it becomes draped in icicles; in spring delicate flowers adorn its peak; the summer sun encourages a lush covering of moss. The constant metamorphoses prompted by nonhuman architects accentuates the fountain's continuous and collaborative recreation, in which human artistry has created a frame for nonhuman forces that shape and compose a living sculpture evolving with the rhythm of the seasons. Here the anthropogenic creates a space to be layered upon by the nonhuman, the work of nonhuman architects folding on top and into the work of Humans.

While Oppenheim invited nonhumans to co-create with her work, something even more collaborative has occurred at *The Living Room*, an exploratory exhibition housed in a basement of Copenhagen's *Medicinske Museion* (Medical Museum). Remnants that might otherwise have been discarded are gathered together in new configurations with objects preserved by curators but no longer on display in current exhibits. These are things "without a proper place, they are subject to (and a product of) disorganization and decay, muddled registration systems, and insect invasions,

⁴⁶ "For the fountain on Waisenhausplatz, on the other hand, Oppenheim chose an open form: thanks to various plants and the running water, *Brunnen* (Fountain) changes according to the seasons. Its organic structure and its form, conceived with process in mind, is symbolic of the radically open concept of the work that Oppenheim represented throughout her life." From "Meret Oppenheim. My Exhibition" exhibition guide https://www.kunstmuseumbern.ch/admin/data/hosts/kmb/files/page_editorial_paragraph_file/file_en/1718/p83028_en_kmb_af_meret-oppenheim_web.pdf?lm=1634808539

persisting as a kind of residual unculture.”⁴⁷ Where stained scientific literature, discarded medical devices, and colored glass dental bowls once only flaunted a “too-muchness,”⁴⁸ they are now re-displayed and imbued with new significance.

The Living Room explores more than the discards and excesses of the desired. The exhibition is an active collaboration between artistic practices, conservation science, and nonhumans such as insect larvae and fungi.⁴⁹ Acting as an experimental space, the exhibit morphs the museum, a place specifically designed to preserve, into a space capacious enough to affirm decay. Taking up Caitlin DeSilvey’s concepts of “caring beyond saving” and “curating decay,” the experiment allows for, and actively encourages, the appetites of “heritage eaters.”⁵⁰ Here, objects are decomposed and recomposed through encounters with hungry organisms.

Through a method called “sounding,” these decompositions can quite literally become sonic compositions. The curators place “specially designed JRF contact microphones to capture the sound of the mushroom cultivation processes: decomposers effectively become composers, enabling us to listen in on the otherwise inaudible sounds of decomposition and sound art to unfold from this encounter.”⁵¹ As certain elements of the exhibition deteriorate and are metabolized, other features are brought into existence – materially, sonically, conceptually – created through processes of decay.

If *Brunnen* is a fold, a co-creation through the layering of the anthropogenic and the nonhuman, then *The Living Room* is something like a loop, the repetition of humans following the lead and effort of nonhumans. Nonhuman architects of deterioration layer upon anthropogenic efforts that are then layered upon again by Humans as they collect and display the morphing items.

⁴⁷ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 35

⁴⁸ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 38

⁴⁹ <https://www.miragenews.com/decay-on-show-in-living-museum-exhibit-689694/>

⁵⁰ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 36

⁵¹ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 42-43



Figure 3: *Slow Show* (2021–) by Maria Brænder in collaboration with *The Living Room* exhibition. Mixed objects: Pink oyster mushrooms grown in discarded medical books; discarded medical equipment and other fringe objects; and Jrf contact microphones to explore the sonic entanglement of objects.

Human curators rescued the objects from being discarded, and in so doing moved the objects from the category of “waste” to “exhibit artifact” within the taxonomy of the museum. Not waste, but also not guarded by preservation practices, the objects in *The Living Room* are able to move into new relations of meaningfulness and care with peoples and nonhumans. The objects can be food for mushrooms and larvae, homes for mites and book worms, and “can be touched and encountered, allowing visitors to breach the boundaries that museums usually create between objects and bodies: no touching, just looking.”⁵² In these encounters Human and nonhuman actors⁵³ actively work to forge new relations while experiencing “release, regeneration, and recomposition inside the walls of a museum.”⁵⁴

The objects’ status is unstable, as “not only do they continue to undergo material changes (partly because of their placement in the basement), but their value also remains, to a certain extent, open

⁵² Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 42

⁵³ As explained by Bruno Latour in “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications.” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 370 the use of the term actor or actant “does not limit itself to human individual actors but extend the word actor -or actant- to non-human, non-individual entities.” Following Latour, Bennett argues that “an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

⁵⁴ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 42

and underdetermined.”⁵⁵ This instability is odd. Especially so in the space of the museum, the archetype of the preservation paradigm, in which great care is taken to ensure objects are ossified in their material configuration. However, with *The Living Room*, the objects morph materially as they are decomposed and recomposed, eaten and handled, forged into something new.

This forging anew is partially possible because deterioration occupies the fuzzy borderland between the existing and the gone. If preservation obscures ordinary processes of decay and tends to fix the identities of objects and spaces, deterioration blurs the boundaries of objects. Decay quite literally renders things soft and porous, allowing bodies to merge and dissolve into one another. During dissolution, physical borders lose their rigidity, and the distinction between objects and their surrounding spaces become fluid.⁵⁶ Preservation fails to acknowledge the value of ecological flux and co-penetration. It misses the Ecotones that Romand Coles theorizes as “the edges and overlaps between different ecosystems that are often extraordinarily fructiferous zones teeming with evolutionary potential.”⁵⁷ Deterioration, then, need not always be a tragic tale but can instead contain potential for increased awareness of the world’s mutability.

The Living Room could then be understood as an example of the protean spaces and objects deterioration can create, as well as the potential to establish new relations through practices (un)made by decline. “Here, potential designates a state in which multiple possible pathways exist, opening a space of mystery, a gap between what is and what might be, what could be or should be,”⁵⁸ a gap produced through processes of deterioration and practices other than waste-making or preservation.

HOLE-INNESS: FAITH IN FALLING APART

Let me conclude by accentuating the key themes illuminated by these architects of deterioration. 1) Deterioration can be untangled from acts of destruction. 2) While preservation has traditionally held sway as the dominant approach, continuation can be a form of harm while allowing something to disintegrate can be a mode of care. 3) Deterioration can be an act of creating, producing novelty and new possibilities. 4) However, deteriorative processes are frequently orchestrated by nonhuman organisms, forces, and processes, which often means that 5) one mode of anthropocentrism is an unreflective anti-decline orientation. And yet, 6) works of deterioration can be politically transformative. To underscore these points, I now turn to a final example which revisits and further emphasizes these core themes.

Outside these sites where architects of deterioration have been invited and allowed to flourish, their work might be most evident in dilapidated buildings. This is particularly evident living in Baltimore, where some buildings tell tragic stories, tales of decline and deterioration that recount the sorrow,

⁵⁵ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 39

⁵⁶ Processes of decay, as Tim Edensor suggests, “transform the familiar material world, changing the form and texture of objects, eroding their assigned functions and meanings, and blurring the boundaries between things.” Edensor, Tim. “Waste Matter: The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World,” *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 318.

⁵⁷ Coles, Romand&Scarnati, Blase. (2015). Transformational ecotones: The craftsperson ethos and higher education. 116

⁵⁸ Grünfeld, Martin, and Caitlin DeSilvey. “Fringe Objects: Cultivating Residues at the Museum.” *Museale Reste*. 41

pain, and harm done to those that were forced out, or made to remain and rot. The cost to peoples makes these modes of decline cross the boundary from deterioration into destruction. Yet sometimes, in their midst, new and vibrant possibilities flourish amidst the rubble. So I go a little outside of Baltimore, to explore a different story of deterioration. Not because stories of the creative and positive modes of decline that ought to be affirmed cannot be found in Baltimore – they can. But because with the racist and exploitative histories driving divestment in Baltimore, the city does not need its dilapidated buildings affirmed. Such an affirmation might, in fact, be politically dangerous.



Figure 8: Panorama photo inside St. Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church (2023)

A little outside Baltimore, what was once a church is slowly deteriorating. Abandoned after a fire from a lightning strike in 1926, the site is now the greenest thing on the hilltop during the winter months. Its open walls surround a small congregation of trees who grow, live, die, and decay within and along the walls. Ivy snakes around the arched window frames and crawls up what remains of the edifice, while roots do the work of deconstructing their lower levels. At all the places where it once held effortlessly together, the holy has become, still becomes, hole-y.

While the structure has been formally “abandoned,” it has many visitors, as attested by graffiti, beer cans, a footpath, a five-star rating on Trip Advisor, and by trees and ivy and moss. Spider webs stretch across openings and birds call from overhead, refusing to forsake this sacred space. The sole model, it seems, in which this church has been abandoned is a purely anthropocentric one centering sanctioned and continuous, rather than prohibited and periodic, exclusively Human “use.”

The church helps make *visible and legible* the radical entanglement of Human building with nonhuman creation. The once-holy site teems with active processes of deterioration and creation. Anthropogenic and nonhuman processes mingle to produce novel structures co-created through lightning and fire and ivy and trees and moss and graffiti and erosion. Here we can readily observe entanglements that layer human and nonhuman processes. A church, built on a hill to get closer to God, burnt by lightning, now witnesses ivy growing, traveling constantly upward until, unable to grow anymore, it dies and begins to rot. A stone painted with the words “spread joy” rests on the decaying roots of a tree that sprouted, grew, and died on what was once the floor of the church. Not intentionally designed as a collaboration like *Brunnen*, and not explicitly advancing political ideals like counterpreservation in Berlin, the structure, the unbuilding it now is, has nevertheless been made in its unmaking.

What was once a church is *being made* into something else, a powerful remaking through which it has acquired an additional gravitas, through deterioration. The space demands a new type of reverence, one that attends to the significance, the beauty, the weightiness it holds *because* it is falling apart. As one visitor reflects: “In some ways, it feels that seeing the stone walls being slowly absorbed back into the earth makes it an *even more sacred space*: a liminal place where heaven and earth seem to intersect.”⁵⁹ Only in such a state of dilapidation does the church produce the conditions belonging specifically to this type of appreciation. While buildings do not need to be destroyed to become beautiful, while the harm which can accompany “abandonment” should not be elided, so too the beauty of decay ought not be occluded, nor the reverence that can accompany architectures of deterioration be ignored.

Bataille had seen something of this relationship between the beautiful and the decaying. For him, the beautiful grows from the rotten. He exalts “putrefaction as sources of new energy,”⁶⁰ demanding that we recall the flower’s “flight of angelic and lyrical purity” has “risen from



Figure 9: “Spread Joy” rock on a decaying tree inside St. Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church (2023)

⁵⁹ Emphasis added <https://shorturl.at/bptyK>

⁶⁰ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, in *Rethinking the political: the sacred, aesthetic politics, and the college de sociologie*, chp 3, pp 104-143.

the stench of the manure pile.”⁶¹ The good and the beautiful are intimately conjoined with, and can never be disconnected from, the disgusting refuse of decay. And yet the conjoining is processual, the beautiful flower *emerges from* the disgusting manure pile. I want to go beyond Bataille to insist that the *deteriorating is itself beautiful*. That the decaying need not only be fodder for the wonderful but can, in itself, be wondrous.

The awe and respect present at the church, both my own and that of visitors who have recorded their impressions of the work architects of deterioration have undertaken at the site, hint at some of decay’s inherent wondrousness. A journal left in the church around 1999 by someone only identified as Susan, collected sentiments, all weighty with reverence for the space: “Are rocks ‘sentient’ or do they just absorb and reflect the energy around them?”⁶² asks one. “Good to see something slip gracefully into the earth instead of paved over with a Taco Bell squatting over it,”⁶³ another sarcastically quips. “I made a clay model of this church, and I burn a candle in it. Isn’t it ironic that the church was hit by lightning in 1921, and yet the sacred feel is still going strong 78 years later!”⁶⁴ someone comments. Then, finally, a last entry states, “What started for me as an expression of anonymous ‘reaching out’ to others in a time of personal distress has blossomed into so much more – and I thank each and every person who has left a bit of himself or herself here. – Susan.”⁶⁵ Inside this journal, record remains of things falling apart, a chronicle that requires no promise of better futures to inspire devotion or respect.

Here, processes of decline flaunt their skills as Humans applaud their actions of reclamation and recuperation. “The remains of the church and its cemetery,” one visitor remarks, “now lie in the forest that is slowly taking over the site.”⁶⁶ Beautiful and arresting, this space welcomes adoration *because of* the interplay of anthropogenic structures and deterioration processes. As another visitor observes: “The ruins of the church are an affecting place to visit on a winter afternoon – and probably anytime. They feel old beyond their actual age, and very quiet. It feels almost haunted in a very nonthreatening way – by memories and echoes, perhaps, rather than ghosts.”⁶⁷ The affective atmosphere, the mood of the site, condenses appreciation for the church’s un-building.

What resonates most profoundly in these entries and within the structure is the affective weight of the space. It is an emotionally potent location. Crafted through its beautiful deterioration is a structure which not only occupies physical space but is also thick with affection, engendering awe, respect, reverence, and appreciation. Here, deterioration does not necessarily manifest melancholically but instead elicits a spectrum of emotions suggesting how decline can strengthen positive modes of affective attunement.

While affects always already traverse the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, they may be particularly present in locations undergoing deterioration. Producing an ambience thick with moods, sites such as the church serve as portals where the divide between human and nonhuman becomes more permeable, prompting contemplation on the sentience of rocks and imbuing the surroundings with a sacred quality.

⁶¹ Bataille. *Visions of Excess. The Language of Flowers*. 12

⁶² Lukens, Alice. “Church’s spirit lingers in the woods” *The Sun*: Friday, September 8, 2000: Page 13A

⁶³ Lukens, Alice. “Church’s spirit lingers in the woods” *The Sun*: Friday, September 8, 2000: Page 13A

⁶⁴ Lukens, Alice. “Church’s spirit lingers in the woods” *The Sun*: Friday, September 8, 2000: Page 13A

⁶⁵ Lukens, Alice. “Church’s spirit lingers in the woods” *The Sun*: Friday, September 8, 2000: Page 13A

⁶⁶ <https://www.belasphoto.com/blog/2017/2/26/ruins-of-st-stanislaus-kostka-church-patapsco-state-park>

⁶⁷ <https://dynamicsymmetry.livejournal.com/1375397.html>

The ability for processes of deterioration to create, amplify, and reflect appreciation and awe is not without political import. Affects, moods, and emotions are crucial political forces, particularly evident in locations that evoke specific emotional responses. The potency of these elements moves through and the landscape, underscoring the power embedded in the evolving mood of the site. Spaces that slow us down, that prompt contemplation, that allow for a celebration of nonhuman processes of deterioration seem especially important – ethically, politically, emotionally – in our broken-down present.



Figure 10: Ivy-covered window of St. Stanislaus Kostka Catholic Church (2023)

These alternative ways of valuing and caring produce modes of relinquishment which make possible other systems of significance, modes of valuing that allow for activation of distinctive dimensions of remembering and caring without necessitating material continuation. In a world awash with discards and destruction, deterioration can allow for caring relationships among more-than-human worlds and the peoples who encounter them, who partially are them.