Obsolete Architecture: Revitalization Along a Spectrum of Utility

Garrett Goodridge

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/architecture_theses

Part of the Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/architecture_theses/285
OBSOLETE ARCHITECTURE
Revitalization Along a Spectrum of Utility

Garrett Goodridge
Design Thesis | Spring 2015
Advisor: Kyle Miller
Committee: Molly Hunker, Anne Munly
An issue that exists within the world of architecture is that, today, a gradually increasing portion of the built environment is becoming obsolete. A quote that perfectly frames this issue is, “Everything that is static is condemned to death; nothing that lives can exist without transformation...” Where death implicates impermanence, transformation insinuates the potential for revival. With these views in mind, this thesis project mines the potential significance of obsolete architecture by uncovering its embedded historical, material, and spatial richness in an attempt to reassign cultural and architectural value.

'Obsolete' is not only something that has fallen into disuse, but something that is also vestigial: a small remnant of an entity that was once much larger. When we look at examples of obsolete architecture, we can see that the 'much larger' part is the realm of architecture itself, and the remnants represent a range of different types: cultural obsolescence, civic obsolescence, and infrastructural obsolescence. I am particularly interested in this third category because of the temporality associated with it. Unlike the other two categories, infrastructural obsolescence is representational of something that was commissioned in the heat of the moment, for instance as a defense mechanism.
With that being said, this thesis project will focus specifically on naval fortifications, which are a particularly unique example of obsolete architecture. Ironically, the naval fort is defined as being not only a military stronghold but also something that is insusceptible to outside influence. Today, most forts are considered defunct or abandoned and are recognized as historical artifacts, such as Fort Gorges and Fort Scammel located in Maine’s Portland Harbor. An artifact, by definition, is something that is deemed to be culturally relevant. As such, the artifact should be seen as something that continually contributes to contemporary culture and its surrounding context, both of which the two aforementioned forts fall short of accomplishing.
**fortress** | ˈfɔːtrəs |

noun

1. a military stronghold, esp. a strongly fortified town fit for a large garrison.

2. a heavily protected and impenetrable building.

3. figurative - a person or thing not susceptible to outside influence or disturbance.

Rectifying this issue of being labeled an artifact, but more poignantly the issue of obsolescence, leads to a variety of different methodologies. For instance Jason Payne, whom I referred to toward the beginning of my thesis research, approached the revitalization of the obsolete in one of four ways – exploiting it through nullification, transforming it through adaptation, appreciating it through indifference, and interpreting it through ambivalence. Each strategy warranted a different result, such as the Liberty Hotel in Boston, MA which demonstrates adaptation and transformation by using the shell of an older building to project alternative programs, or some of Rachel Whiteread’s work which focuses on ambivalence and interpretation by self-reflectively analyzing everyday objects to understand their innate qualities and to create a commentary from them.
While these methods are perfectly reasonable, a more appropriate way of looking at historic architecture and how to reactivate it would be to consider an obsolete architecture’s past and current states as equal opportunities for exploration. According to Bryony Roberts in her investigation of Post-Authenticity and Post-Integrity, we should, “consider giving up the revival of the past and instead set up more open ended combinations of past materials and current experience...new and old should be on equal footing. Each should have partial integrities that can overlap to produce more complicated totalities.”
With this in mind, rather than approaching the forts as opportunities for conventional adaptive reuse, this project speculates on the placement of obsolescence at the midpoint of a spectrum of utility and pushes it toward both the useless and the useful. This project exploits the fact that an obsolete architecture is essentially caught in limbo between being nonexistent or being occupied and active, between dead or alive.
Generate an intervention that facilitates flexible activity & functionality

Generate an intervention that facilitates specific engagement & functionality
As I hinted at before, I am interested in two different sites: Fort Gorges and Fort Scammel. Located only one mile apart from each other, the two forts coexist in an active harbor (Portland Harbor) which lends itself to good visibility as well as the potential for better accessibility. Above all, though, having two adjacent sites allows for my spectrum of utility to be easily applied and to be read as a binary dialogue as opposed to two separate entities.
FORT GORGES

CHARACTERISTICS & HISTORY:
- Floating hexagonal volume (autonomous)
- Predominantly granite masonry (Int & Ext)
- Two levels of barreled roofed casemates
- Parapet level overgrown
- Constructed in 1858, Third System
- Portland, Maine Harbor Defense Initiative
- Entered caretaker status in 1916
- Used as submarine mine storage (WWII)

FORT SCAMMEL

CHARACTERISTICS & HISTORY:
- Embedded in the earth
- Two pentagonal bastions (1-2 levels)
- Brick masonry (Int), Granite masonry (Ext)
- Subterranean, linked magazines / storage
- Constructed in 1808, Second System
- Portland, Maine Harbor Defense Initiative
- Expanded in 1862, Third System
- Decommissioned in 1903
As a way of facilitating these forts’ reintegration into society, this project speculates on the agency of radical intervention and its interaction with the existing architecture. Taking cues from Koolhaas, Super Studio, and Dogma, this project pairs dramatic intervention with an acute look at experience and engagement.
Additionally, through an analysis of other theorists and practitioners, I have developed an identity for myself that not only pinpoints my interest in obsolescence, but also identifies my methodology as being an implementation of inactive and active interventions (to represent useless and useful) as well as project my end result as being rationalist in its form and appearance to allow for both the radical intervention and existing architecture to remain on equal footing.
GARRETT GOODRIDGE

Methodology

Implementation of Extremes
(explores useless and useful as an infrastructure of nothingness vs. an infrastructure of condensed activity)

Relevance

Spectrum of Utility (setting up a framework, simplistic in its style and form, to highlight & enhance the outdated)

Rossi
Terragni
Payne
Virilio

Revitalizing Obsolete Architecture (Naval Fortifications) through radical intervention
Speaking further on adopting a rationalist aesthetic, the goal is to (as Aldo Rossi would put it) create a “form [that] is devoid of any figurative or individualistic feature, guaranteeing it will perform in the most rational uniform way.” In my case, neither architecture (radical nor existing) are meant to take precedence; they are intended to work off of each other. Maintaining simplistic features in my intervention allows for it to be seen as a framework that can be used to heighten the perception of the adjacent, outdated fort.
The interesting part about investigating radicality, whether it is investigating certain representational styles or aesthetic qualities, is that, while it may deal with the issue of scale or a level of invasiveness, it stresses (above anything else) the importance of perception. Understanding this in terms of obsolete architecture, one could argue that obsolescence is a perceived concept.

My goal with this thesis project is to change the perception of the obsolete in an attempt at being more critical; essentially allow the obsolete architecture to be seen in a different light and no longer as derelict infrastructure. The vitality of the forts, one representing the useless side of the spectrum and the other representing the useful, is dependent on revitalization. Accentuating a binary of usage and highlighting contrasting experiences paints the obsolete architecture in a new light, which in turn reinvigorates how it can be perceived.
Once again, some key concepts and terminology to keep in mind from what was just covered are the issue of obsolescence, but more importantly situating the obsolete between useless and useful, the issue of radicality and how to use radical intervention as a way of altering the perception of an existing architecture, and an adherence to rationalist aesthetic, or simplistic form and features to establish consistency and a dialogue between new and old.
TOTAL SQUARE FOOTAGES:

**Dock | Entry Stair** - 1,800 SQ. FT.

**Walkable Platform** - 119,000 SQ. FT.

**Restrooms** - 175 SQ. FT.

**Fort Gorges**

0' 25' 50' 100'

TOTAL SQUARE FOOTAGES:

**Dock | Entry Stair** - 10,000 SQ. FT.

**Promenade** - 55,000 SQ. FT.

**Repurposed Fort** - 40,000 SQ. FT.

**Residential** - 61,000 SQ. FT.

**Commercial** - 28,000 SQ. FT.

**Institutional** - 22,000 SQ. FT.

**Multipurpose** - 35,000 SQ. FT.

**Open | Communal** - 10,000 SQ. FT.

**Utilities** - 4,000 SQ. FT.

**Circulation** - 48,000 SQ. FT.

**Fort Scammel**

0' 25' 50' 100'
Fort Gorges is approached through the implementation of an intervention comprised of ‘nothingness’. What I mean by this is that the intervention itself is not necessarily useless, but the type of activity that exists on the intervention and how it interacts with the obsolete infrastructure is what calls attention to how the fort can be perceived. In this intervention I have set up a series of platforms that are situated just beyond the parameters of Fort Gorges. In this case, I am working with the footprint of the existing fort by offsetting it, but I am also denying any physical overlap between built forms. There is no prescriptive program for the platforms, aside from the inclusion of a restroom, but creating a distance between the radical intervention and the existing architecture results in a disconnected experience.
Essentially, the obsolete is stripped of its accessibility but is still ironically put on display. Fort Gorges is not provided with any new functionality, nor is it physically altered, but establishing a new view of the fort and hindering direct engagement pushes Fort Gorges toward being perceived as useless.

Through the use of experiential vignettes, as can be seen in the following pages, you are allowed to position yourself upon the useless side of the spectrum. Each rendering provides a glimpse at the lack of prescribed activity and the intangibility of being able to engage with Fort Gorges.
Fort Scammel is approached through the implementation of an intervention comprised of ‘condensed activity’. What I mean by this is that the intervention itself is not necessarily useful, but the type of activity that exists on the intervention and how it interacts with the obsolete infrastructure is what calls attention to how the fort can be perceived. In this intervention I have set up a series of towers that are situated directly above the parameters of Fort Scammel. On this side of the spectrum, there is a prescriptive program, one that encompasses the radical densification of rituals and programs associated with urban life. This includes residential, commercial, institutional, and other communal spaces. In this case, I am also working with the footprint of the existing fort, however contrarily to Fort Gorges, I am aggressively embracing the overlap between built forms. What pushes this intervention more toward the useful is that it is uncovering space that would otherwise be considered unusable due to the fact that most of the existing fort is subterranean. Ultimately, creating direct engagement between the radical intervention and the existing architecture results in a more fluid experience (where it is more difficult to distinguish new from old).
Essentially, the obsolete, in this scenario, is given unprecedented exposure and is used as a foundation or pedestal in and on which a microcosm of activity can exist. Fort Scammel is provided with new functionality and is physically altered which pushes it toward being perceived as useful.

Through the use of experiential vignettes, as can be seen in the following pages, you are allowed to position yourself upon the useful side of the spectrum. Each rendering provides a glimpse at the energy now existing on Fort Scammel resulting from the rigorous intersection between new and old.
My goal with this thesis project is to push forward the idea of balancing the new and the old, or more specifically the radical intervention and the existing obsolete infrastructure. By placing obsolete architecture along a spectrum of utility, I want to allow for these naval fortifications to be seen through a different lens - a lens that warps the perception of how they are currently viewed and a lens that demonstrates how pushing obsolescence toward the extremes of useless and useful can unpack hidden or forgotten architectural potential.