

# **RUIN (,) THE FUTURE**

THE MEANING OF DECAY IN THE  
POST-INDUSTRIAL TRIESTE





Photos of ruins of industrial elements and a masonry building taken from the research area



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
KEYWORD	5
PROBLEM STATEMENT	6
RELEVANCE	7
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	7
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	8
METHODOLOGY	9
RESEARCH DIAGRAM	10-11
BIBLIOGRAPHIES	12

INTRODUCTION

The city of Trieste is a city of *decay*. In terms of both historical development and physical environment, Trieste had already departed from its most glorious moment of cultural and economic prosperity in the 19th century and arrived at the period of chronic degeneration after encountering the dramatic vicissitudes of the global geopolitical relations in the 20th century. The decay of the status of the city is materialised by its built environment, where the lack of resources and incentives to maintain the buildings rendered the urban conditions with tangible ageing, abandonments and ruinations. In such a setting, how to deal with the declining city and its architecture becomes a crucial yet controversial topic when society is approaching the post-industrial age. When preservation, transformation, abandonment and decay all have their political, economic and sociocultural connotations, how *decay* can contribute to both old and new architecture in response to the specific meanings of the building in a post-industrial background, and hence how ruins should be regenerated for the future indicate the direction for further research and design.

KEYWORDS

Decay, Ruination, Abandonment, Obsolescence, Heritage, Post-industrialism

# PROBLEM STATEMENT

Walking down the alley and the water promenade of Trieste, one can observe those grimy façades of historical building blocks in the urban fabric covered by wild vegetation, rubbles of damaged warehouses and rusted industrial structures in the port densify the typical cityscape of Trieste. Witnessing the decay of the city excusably provoked the pessimism of the locals as it made them conscious of the fact that their life and pride are degrading. The negative labels associated with *decay* inevitably seized the general definition and cognition. However, deterioration can only be understood as one of the superficial readings of the phenomenon of *decay*. As depicted in many art and literature, *decay* does have its only poetics, aesthetics and intrinsic values that embellish and complement the urban environment and memories. Meanwhile, the degeneration of architecture with symbolic values, be it an intentional or inadvertent incident, would implicate significant political messages and ideas to the society. These layers of comprehension of *decay* might point toward a potential which is long neglected owing to the negative classification of the term: a possibility that *decay* is considered a constructive phenomenon that can sublime as a form of regeneration. In the case of Trieste, the meanings of this natural (and occasionally artificial) process are still to be explored and discussed.

To deconstruct the meanings for abandoned buildings being in Trieste requires a historical understanding of the various statements on architectural preservation by different regimes involved in the timeline of Trieste, together with their interactions between their ideologies. In the historical chapters of Trieste, there are always multiple yet parallel political and economic outer actors in each era competing for or coordinating their own benefits. They participated in delineating the physical territory of the city and the identity recognition of its citizens. With architecture as the instrumental tool to materialise the ideology

of the political and economic actors, as well as the zeitgeist of every historical timeframe, every building represents the values of the power forces in a certain period. Therefore, when they were involved in organising the built environment of Trieste, they proposed distinct viewpoints on what their buildings mean to the future and how to treat the existing architecture done by the previous others. Delving into what meanings and symbols of historical buildings and abandoned ruins, and how they are kept, erased or dissipated would be the direction of the individual research to reveal the operational meanings of decay and ruination in the built environment under numerous external engagements. A position for designing with *decay* could then be constructed among the value systems of the historical regimes on selective heritages as well as the advocacies of (anti-)preservation in the general architectural discourse.

# RELEVANCE

Entering the post-industrial era in the 21st century, the port-industry-oriented Trieste began to face the radical transformation of the global economy and trading system. The swift changes in the building requirements eventually led to the rapid obsolescence of buildings, renouncing a large number of outdated structures into the already saturated pool of ruin landscape in Trieste. Similar situations happened around the globe when industrial countries in the developed world had met the crossroads in economic development where their production industries began to dwindle. The changes in production mode had urged those cities to keep updating their hardware frequently, while putting an end to the prospering manufacturing sector, leaving a lot of retired buildings and infrastructures among the urban fabric in vacancy and a slow process of decay. They occasionally

occupy valuable lands with strategic values for economic growth or social development, conflicting with the urban planning direction under new urbanisation plan or urban renewal.

When demolition and rebuilding, renovations, preservations and regenerations are the major approaches to tackle the abandoned buildings and ruins in the contemporary time, the option of including and embracing *decay* in the plan seems to be out of the picture. While the mainstream strategies of restoration and reuse have stirred up a few controversies that the preservative actions are actually depriving the heritage of its original values, it becomes critical to reflect on our current standpoint on the presentation of the old building in new age and rethink our relationship with *decay* as a way to help us proceed to the future.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What and how can *decay* contribute constructively to architecture?
2. What is the meaning of preservation, regeneration and decay for a historical city in the post-industrial era?
3. Why are some ancient ruins preserved and maintained as heritage while those of the modern and contemporary time are left as ruins?
4. What if Trieste can no longer act as an industrial port city, how can it move toward with its ruins in the post-industrial future?



# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The debate on restoration and anti-restoration when approaching heritages plays a vital role in the discussion of how to handle *decay* and the development of a position on the future of ruins. When it comes to heritage, one of the dominating voices on preservation would be Viollet-le-Duc<sup>1</sup>, who advocates bringing the old architecture back to the finished state in the idea of the original architect. On the other hand, there are opinions like the manifesto of William Morris which challenges restoration as inappropriate means to retain the historical values by suggesting a more romantic idea of allowing *decay* as a form to manifest the traces of time<sup>2</sup>. The research will then find its theoretical standpoint among these contradictory views.

When looking into the meanings and functions of ruins being in the urban environment, the idea of “ruin value” suggested by Albert Speer<sup>3</sup>, and the analysis on modern ruins by Pétursdóttir and Olsen provide insights to the research<sup>4</sup>. The former states as ancient ruins imply educational values to the future generations, the monumentality, in other words, how can it *decay* decently, of ruins has a significance on the selection of heritage leaving for the future. The latter addresses the issue that modern ruins fail to possess the “ruin value” due to the quickly decomposing materiality and its ubiquity under swift obsolescence. Nevertheless, Pétursdóttir and Olsen still suggest the functionality of contemporary ruins as complementary to the whitewashed orthodox history and memories with its characteristic aesthetics. These theories allow the research to situate in between the seemingly dichotomous view on valuable and invaluable ruins to explore more possibilities for the future design stage.

# METHODOLOGY

The research uses the cartographic approach as the fundamental instrument to understand the typological conditions and the morphological pattern in the historical urban fabric of Trieste. By mapping out various yet correlated topics in the field of interests, together with the collective mapping excises, a wider picture of the understanding of the entire site context of Trieste can be constructed while narrowing down the personal fascinations to building up an assumption for further studies.

Followed by a site visit, the second-hand data and information gathered so far and the hypothesis stemmed from the primary comprehension of the site can be verified. A first personal experience in the site on its impression, ambience and living in the city, as well as first-hand documented materials of the interested abandoned ruins and urban conditions can be collected.

Constructing on the basis of cartography and materials taken from the site visit, a more detailed and insightful idea on the topic could be elaborated in the way of further mapping and data analysis. The actions to be implemented include the categorisation of on-site images about abandonment and ruination of buildings in the city so as to generalise and visualise the situation of decay in Trieste. Another possible action is to create a mapping wiping out all abandoned buildings as a way to reveal its significance in presenting or obscuring the urban functionality. These elaborated ideas would then become the ingredients for design.

In parallel, a conceptualised idea of *decay* is to be developed by establishing a theoretical framework to dissect the component of the phenomenon, such as the material processes, aesthetics and implications, which also contribute as influential ingredients. In the search for a position for the research, dialectics could be set up to juxtapose related voices in preservation, anti-

restoration and ruin meanings. With the developed standpoint, all the materials collected and mappings created could be further examined, which in the end become the principle of how to combine the prepared constituents into a design solution.

<sup>1</sup> Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène E., “Restoration,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 314-318.

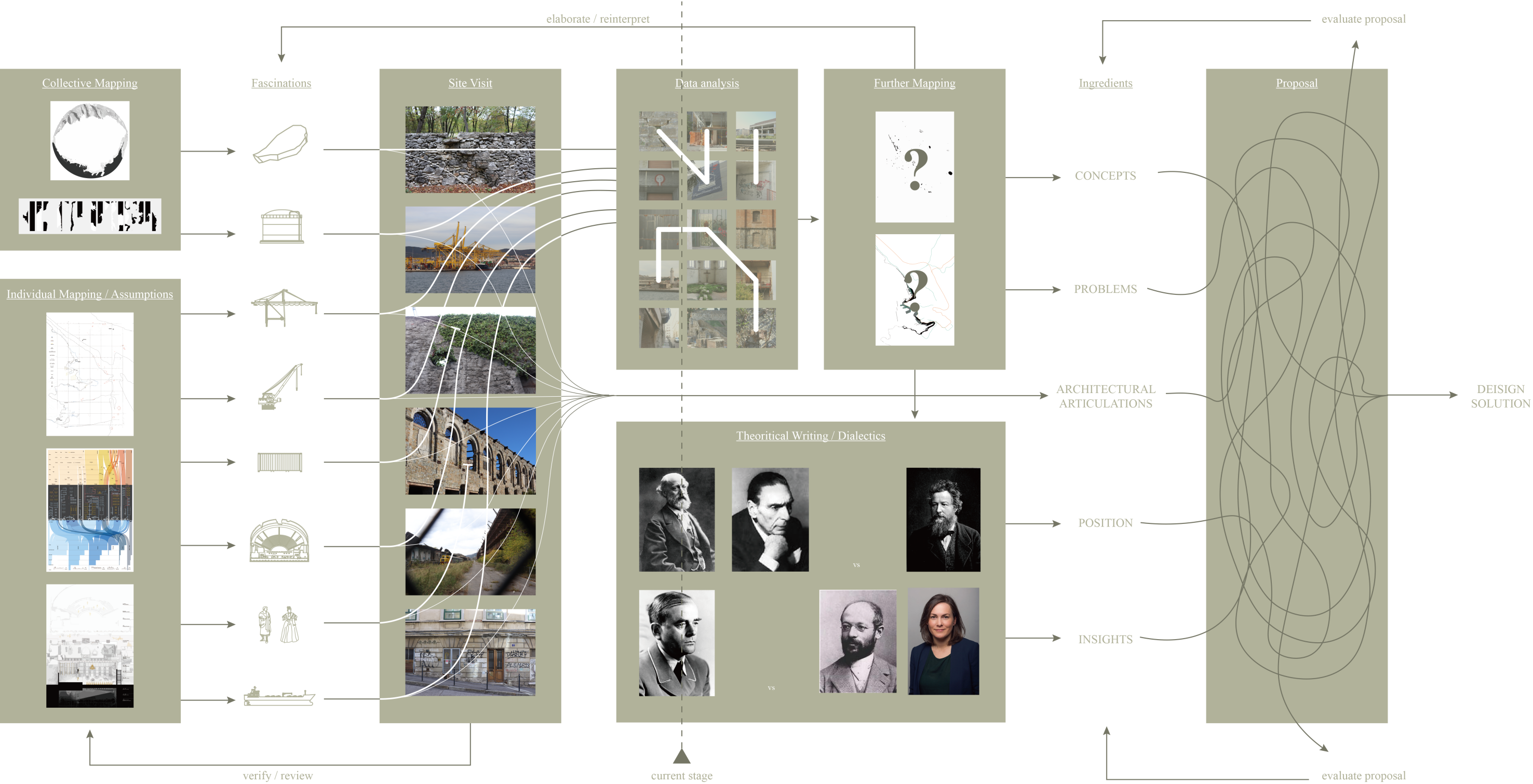
<sup>2</sup> Morris, William, “Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues*, 319-321.

<sup>3</sup> Ishida, Keiko, “Albert Speer’s “Theory of Ruin Value,”” in *Art Research Special Issue* 1, 35-43.

<sup>4</sup> Pétursdóttir, Þóra, and Bjørnar Olsen, “Modern Ruins: Remembrance, Resistance, and Ruin Value,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Claire Smith (Switzerland: Springer, 2014), 4983-4994.



RESEARCH DIAGRAM





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