

Purification Through Bathing: The ritual of rebirth as manifest by ruin

Adolph Sutro built in 1869 a pleasure palace for the citizens of San Francisco, an enormous indoor bathing area – the largest in the world. There were six salt water pools and one freshwater pool, each with different water temperatures. Ocean water was captured in tidal basins, heated to different temperatures, and pumped into the pools. The baths served as a learning center as well, with museum collections to view as well as circus acts, bands, games and contests. Great ingenuity was exercised in emptying the baths with the most advanced ideas on sanitary engineering and in protecting the baths with massive break water (450,000 cubic feet of rocks). The tanks had an ocean frontage and the buildings being of iron and glass, the bathers could see and hear the breaking waves.

Over time, the Baths became less popular, due to the Great Depression, reduction in available public transportation and new public health codes. In 1964, developers with plans to replace the Baths with high-rise apartments bought the site and began demolition of what was a great structure. In 1966, a fire destroyed what was left of the Baths; the city did not pursue the high-rise apartment plans. Today the site lies in ruin at the edge of the ocean.

“Can we imagine what it was like to set out on sea voyages in the ancient world – voyages that would take sailors into the heart of darkness and unknown? Given a lack of reliable maps and adequate navigational devices, the prospect of sailing on a trackless waste of water must have been terrifying. The ancient Greeks even coined a special word for the open sea, *pontos*, and they were terrified of going astray on it, instead preferring to cling to the coastline and to travel from port to port in the cautious manner that came to be called *costagierre*, in which the fearful sailor never lost sight of land.” This anxiety of the edge was present simultaneously with a fascination. Man feared and was intrigued by the edge of the earth. There was an ancient fascination – indeed, an obsession – with the idea of being “at the borders of the earth.” “Such borders were considered “the physical extremities of the earth...the limit of the human world”, and were believed to be the origin of the universe. It was important to respect this phenomenon of nature because “edges act both to protect us from what threatens on the other side, as well as block us in our forward movement”. To stay on the other side of the edge meant to stay within the confines of man’s fearful mind.

For ancient man the construct of myth was a coherent framework for understanding the world. The gods that were present in these myths and the changing personalities of nature needed to be appeased for his protection. “The world appears to primitive man neither inanimate nor empty but abundant with life [...] Any phenomena at a time may face him, not as ‘It’ but as ‘Thou’”, an emotional presence that may manifest itself as a thunderclap, sudden shadow, or an eerie and unknown clearing. For this reason, primitive man was perpetually participating in rituals to mediate reality. One important ritual involved the ushering in of the New Year. Ancient man viewed time as cyclical, starting anew with the restoration of primordial time at the end of each year. “Since the New Year is a reactualization of the cosmogony, it implies starting time over

again at its beginning, that is, restoration of the primordial time, the "pure" time, that existed at the moment of Creation. This is why the New Year is the occasion for "purifications," for the expulsion of sins, of demons, or merely of a scapegoat". Ancient man could also become close to the moment of creation at the edge of the earth, where he believed the universe originated. Unlike modern man's conception of linear time, ancient man's cyclical view of time implied a certain interval coming to an end in order to make way for the new beginning. "It is also a matter of abolishing the past year and past time. Indeed, this is the meaning of ritual purifications; there is more than a mere "purification"; the sins and faults of the individual and of the community as a whole are annulled, consumed as by fire."

Wouldn't it be fair then to claim that the Sutro Baths were purified as they burned to the ground, leaving only ruin in their wake? The ruins provide groundwork for rebirth. The site lies frozen in time, reaching back to the beginning while remaining accessible to the present. Ruins make us participate in rituals that were laid down before our individual lifespans, especially the ritual of rebirth in which man symbolically participated in the reactualization of time. "By symbolically participating in the annihilation and re-creation of the world, man too was created anew; he was reborn, for he began a new life." Historically man has desired to come as close as he can to the perfection of beginnings. "Man desires to recover the active presence of the gods; he also desires to live in the world as it came from the Creator's hands, fresh, pure, and strong." He could gain this by symbolically participating in the re-birth of time. "Life cannot be repaired; it can only be recreated through symbolic repetition of the cosmogony, for, as we have said, the cosmogony is the paradigmatic model for all creation." In this way man was purified.

Ruins are stories that are half written completed by our own memories and imagination. In particular, a complex interplay of presence and absence is constructed, determinacy and indeterminacy takes place. It brings about the material conditions for a veritable scenography of the empty and the full, the discontinuous and the continuous. "As residues of the past that have been rejected or by-products of economic progress, ruins can become the site of a critique of the ideology of progress, of the ever-more-stringent forward movement of history." Because they are frozen in time ruins force us to slow down and reflect upon the transience of man, to think back to a time when things were slower, more pure, as in the primordial time of creation. Historically, areas of ruin spoke not only of the horrors of war, but also the possibility of renewal and rebirth. Here, we find conditions conducive with purification.

The ruins of Sutro Baths exist at an edge, at the edge of coast and sea, at the edge of past and present, and at the edge of creation and destruction. What was once destroyed by fire is now washed over with water as the borders of this edge condition are blurred. The low stone and the concrete walls are merging with the background and the structure is extending into the ocean, blending with the waves and creating its own soothing sound. The horizon far away seems to extend its arms to meet the waters and the land. The continuity of time can be experienced here at this place. We are invited to participate in the ritual of restoration. The life cycle of the site has been returned to a new beginning. However, the past has not been abolished but left manifest as

the scars of ruin. The site has been purified through fire and rebirth and thus is suited for the process of bathing, which in itself is an edge, a state of transition and transformation from an unclean state to a state of purity. The act of baptism as a purifying act of immersion in water is evident throughout history. The ancient Greek word baptizo was meant to express the immersion or washing of one's body as a religious rite or ritual. Homer mentions the washing of hands before prayer, and the purification of an entire army with water in the Iliad. And in ancient Babylon, water was an important spiritual cleansing agent. The Nile's cold water was believed to have regenerative powers and was used to baptize the dead in a ritual based on the myth of Osiris' death in the Nile. This ritual symbolically represented one's death to the life of this world. Today, Christians participate in the sacrament of baptism as repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the opportunity to live a new life.

Thus I have decided to continue the cycle of ruin by proposing a Bath House that will provide experiential healing baths for the public. Here, man will be able to become in touch with himself and his collective history as a species that longs for renewal. A quiet, intimate setting will provide guests with an opportunity to be transported from their everyday reality to a more self-conscious experience, connecting micro to macrocosm, present reality to cultural history. Through man's participation in the ritual of bathing, a parallel can be drawn between his change of state from unclean to pure and the ancients' transition from sin to renewed purification. Man and world being a part of the creator himself, strives to be as close to perfection as possible – through new beginnings and purifications.

I invite everyone to join me downstairs in a ritual of purification...

You have now entered sacred space. Please take your position on the brick platform. This room has been transformed from its intended purpose into the curated setting for this particular ritual. Bricks with a history of ruin now inhabit this room and contribute to its sacred quality. They embody the essential alchemical elements of earth, air, fire, and water which have acted upon each other in order to be transformed into what we recognize as these bricks. The earth was cultivated as clay and mixed with oxygen to be fired into the rough, porous nature of brick. They were assembled into a determined position for a period of time, eventually deconstructed and disposed of by the river at the end of their intended lifespans, and left to decompose as they began to return to the earth, constantly eroded by the currents of the river as the cycle brings each element back to its origin. These bricks remind us of the narrative of humanity, of the "instability of built grandeur, of the chronicles of heady calamitous risings and tumbings" that constitute it. There is a constant cycle of the building up of the human environment and the crumbling down by natural or man-ensued means.

This ritual is similar to that of bathing. The sound of deconstructed brick against the wood flooring envelopes the room and the guests within it, filling our senses with the essence of a

grand movement: a landslide, an earthquake, or a rush of water. As the small, scattering pieces rush around you, they create an atmosphere of escalating sound and vibration, culminating with a serene silence as the pieces come to their final resting place in front of you. The entire action is reminiscent of the ritual of bathing. The enveloping sound and movement of the brick pieces is like plunging the body into water. As they trickle up to their vertical configuration, the impact of the ritual is left in the body, but the physical presence of brick and sound falls off like dripping water and evaporating steam.

The pieces that form the vertebrae of this structure were once components of the bricks on which you stand. They have been further deconstructed in order to be reconstructed, continuing the cycle of the human narrative. They were taken from their previous situation as pieces of ruin to be re-ordered as the backbone of a new structure. They have been broken apart in order to be reassembled, just as Plato says the tekton artist cuts and joins, divides and connects in order to build. There is an edge between the solid brick platform and the constant, flowing trails of brick pieces. The active, constructive pieces create the built environment of the present while the dormant, ruinous bricks remind us of their past forms.