



## Ruined museums: Exploring post-foundational spatiality

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### abstract

The paper turns to interdisciplinary museum and ruin studies with the objective to think about space, politics and the political. Situated in a post-foundational understanding of political difference, which roughly distinguishes between ‘politics’ as the realm of standardized, normalized positions and procedures of power, and ‘the political’ as the irreducible antagonistic dimension of political life, we explore the mutual interpenetrations as well as political divergences between ruins and museums. For this purpose, we consider ‘museumification’ as a socio-spatial process that tends to inscribe an order of ‘politics’, whereas we view ‘ruination’ as a potentiality to create socio-material voids, which may (re)activate moments of ‘the political’. In this framework, the museum signifies an attempt to conserve, exhibit and transmit selected narratives of the past, potentially evoking a topographical notion of space, whereas the ruin dislocates, ambiguates and dismantles orders of the past, possibly leading to a topological understanding of space. After revisiting accounts of the museumification of ruins, we argue that the latter can be understood as a process which disambiguates, commodifies and thus depoliticizes ruins as polyvalent matters. We introduce the ‘ruination of museums’ as a material, discursive and affective process, bringing attention to the interrelated and conflicting modes of absence and presence in time and space. In ‘ruined museums’, museums and ruins coalesce into spatio-temporal tropes that attend to complex and complicated narratives of time, space and history. In ‘ruined museums’, the ossified politics of place(s) become mobilized via ‘the political’. To illustrate this conceptual proposition of the ‘ruined museum’, we engage with the 9/11 memorial museum Reflecting Absence in New York City. Through this empirical case, we hope to advance a post-foundational understanding of space that acknowledges (urban) public places as inhabited and politicized by the agency, materiality and spatiality of ghostly presences.

## **Museums and ruins between presence and absence**

In times of economies of attention, visibility and digital hyper-connectivity on the one hand, and alleged political disenchantment, atomization and indifference on the other, one may argue that museums function as places that try to mediate these challenges. They deliver programming for the inclusion of non-audiences, they offer online content, they create spaces of encounter and exchange and invite people to participate in museum activities. While these attempts to ‘activate’ or ‘open’ the museum might point to the museums’ assumed role and responsibility to serve as a public and/or democratic place (i.e. stressing their relevance as sites of contemporary societal discourse and socio-cultural transformation), museums continue to be fraught with troubling practices of (re)presenting colonial histories and artefacts, as well as providing space for the celebration of selected visibilities (i.e. marking museums as sites of continued social, cultural and racial exclusion or absence). In the context of this ephemera special issue, our aim is to put forward the notion of ‘ruined museums’ as a particular spatio-temporal formation that oscillates between absences and presences. These absences and presences, we argue, are situated within accelerated crises of both (re)presentation and partial (in)visibilities in public space.

Based on a post-foundational understanding of space that highlights antagonism and political difference, we aim to bring to the fore an arguably odd pair of spatial structures, scattered across urban space: museums and ruins. With the example of museums and ruins, we explore how presence and absence translate into socio-spatial structures, producing constant yet productive tensions. For this endeavor, we consider museums and ruins as two distinguishable socio-spatial structures with regards to questions of politics, the political and space. We suggest that museums aim to strengthen the existing order of things through their stable, organized and hierarchical topography, while ruins may have the capacity to challenge and change existing orders via unstable, disorganized and non-hierarchical topologies. At the same time, we acknowledge Kevin Hetherington’s (1997: 215) remark that ‘museums have always been heterogeneous classifying machines that aim to perform homogeneity.’ With this admittedly ideal-typical conceptual scheme, however, we do in no way mean to dismiss the many historical and recent

efforts of museum scholars and practitioners to attend to social activism, (radical) democracy or community-building (cf. Janes and Sandell, 2019, Sternfeld, 2018). Instead, we strategically position the relatively more ossified notion of museums against what we call the ‘ruined museum.’ Based on this deliberate conceptual differentiation, we unpack the assumed binary between museums and ruins in the following way: Firstly, we trace recent trends, which discuss political engagements with abandoned buildings, suggesting that ‘museumification’ of ruins depoliticizes the latter by turning them into heritage sites and tourist spectacles (Edensor, 2005; Mah, 2010). Secondly, we examine the potential of politicizing museums by ‘ruining’ them. For this purpose, we engage with the Reflecting Absence memorial museum on Ground Zero in New York City (NYC) as an example of a socio-spatial structure that transposes a ruined form into a museum-memorial site. This site offers exhibitions and a collection of artefacts (indicative of museum functions), a commemorative architectural structure consisting of two massive ‘reflecting pools’, pouring water into the ground (pointing toward memorialization), which, at the same time, reminds of the death and loss that occurred in this place (signaling the ruinous character of the site). Importantly, instead of essentializing the entire ensemble as a discrete entity of ‘being’ a museum, a memorial, both or neither, we wrestle with the entanglements between politicizations of space, and spatializations of politics and power through what we call the ‘ruined museum.’ In the memorial museum in NYC, the tensions between absence and presence, between museumification and ruination come to the fore. The site makes present the absence of lost people and matter, yet it turns this loss or absence into fleeting artefacts to be encountered anew on a daily basis. In other words, Reflecting Absence is not a finished, fixed museumification of a ruin, but remains open and vulnerable to the ruination of its own museality. This spatial structure ‘is’ (in an ontological sense) nothing but its own absence. Against spatially or otherwise essentialist notions of museums, with the advance of the ‘ruined museums’, we hope to articulate new ways to conceptualize the confluences of space and politics between and across agencies, movements and standstills, absence and presence.

We employ a post-foundational negative ontology of both space and politics to think ‘the political’ spatially. In contrast to Deleuze-inspired ontologies,

which privilege activity and vitality, we are interested in the ontological and political positions and agencies of absence. Situated in a larger project of conceptualizing post-foundational spatial theory, which revolves around concepts such as contingency, conflict, absence and negativity, we denote negativity not as undesirable, displeasing or discomfoting location or affect, but as ontological position of incommensurability and ungroundedness, which we assert is applicable to both museums and ruins (cf. Grønbaek Pors et al., 2019; Landau, 2021a). Based on our engagement with the 9/11 memorial museum, our aim is to show how 'ruined museums' reveal themselves as contested, haunted, and ambivalent. The ruined museum cannot be permanent, it never will be. With the perspective of radical political spatial theory, we suggest a notion of 'ruined museums' that allows us to not only shed light on articulations of activity or agency, e.g. collecting (or not), conserving (or not), admiring, gazing, passing-by, destroying (or not), but also to attend to notions of decay, which cannot simply be dismissed as merely passive, inert, dead or otherwise inactive.

By focusing on the relationship between absence and presence on the example of a memorial museum, we tease out how unsettled matter such as the ruined museum can unfold new modes of the agency, materiality and spatiality of absence. In other words, we foreground not only how absence affects our sense of place, but opens new avenues to attend to the contingent and complexly entangled meanings and politics of places such as museums, ruins and ruined museums. The debate about the link between absence and presence complements scholarship in ruin and museum studies; to study not only what 'is' there and tangible, but to attend to the implications of absence in places of cultural representation, narrations of history and power as well as portraying decay and loss. Our focus on absence does not simply dismiss absence as passive, inert, dead or otherwise inactive. Ultimately, by qualifying our exploration of post-foundational spatial theory as a hauntological approach, in which the ghostly implications of absence and presence play a role, we hope to open new ways to consider the politics of absence and presence in space.

Our objective in this article is two-fold: First, we develop a notion of the 'ruined museum' to initialize a discussion about the political implications of presence and absence via the example of the 9/11 museum memorial. Second,

we aim to push the parameters of absence and presence to think about space through a post-foundational approach of political difference and antagonism, as a way to advance post-foundational spatial thinking. To proceed, we briefly carve out our post-foundational approach to space and spatiality, then explore the political interconnections between ruins and museums. In what ways do museums resemble ruins? How do museums provide space for the display of processes of ruination, how are ruins musealized, and how are museums 'ruinized'?

### **A post-foundational approach to space**

Post-foundationalism stems from a joint reading of thinkers, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Ernesto Laclau, highlighting their common understanding of the difference between 'the political' on the one hand, and 'politics' on the other (cf. Marchart, 2007). While politics denotes efforts of stabilization, closure and control, the political is considered a counter-force to politics; it traverses any attempt at social sedimentation, fixation, totalization or routinization (Landau, 2019). In doing so, the political emphasizes the uncertain and contingent potential of politics, and necessarily thwarts consolidated assumptions about any 'last grounds' such as Truth, History, Science, Objectivity, Necessity or Religion. The political dislocates assumed normalcies and draws attention to the absent and ungroundable dimension of meaning and power. It causes disturbance, disorder and disruption. Some claim that the political is structurally compatible with the psychoanalytic expression of 'the unconscious' as it denotes something that cannot be symbolized by the existing/dominant order and can only be discerned in contingent ways (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2021). Others consider the political as a spectral category with reference to Jacques Derrida. Marchart (2007: 163), for instance, points out that post-foundational political thinking is a form of 'hauntology', as it senses the political only through symptoms that both reveal and hide the truth of the repressed. The political thus never appears in-itself, for itself, but only through the cracks and limits of politics – the political 'is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes' (Derrida, 2006: 63). Post-foundational thought takes difference to an extreme to keep open the crumbling certainties about reality, religion, science and truth, brewing in multiple crises. Post-foundationalism

as theory, methodology and political practice departs from the assumption that there 'is' no ground, necessity or objective rationale from which to justify human existence or political action, but that it is rather from absence that any attempt at social life, society or 'politics' can be constructed. Briefly, as Marchart puts it (*ibid.*: 169), 'not "everything is political", but the absent ground/abyss of everything is the political.'

Most of the works that have recently aimed at conceptualizing post-foundational thinking have neglected spatiality and partially also materiality at the cost of theorizing politics or the political (cf. Marchart, 2007; Marrrtila, 2015; Paipais, 2017). At the same time, those accounts who confront post-foundational thinking with space often localize concrete political protests in contested (urban) spaces (cf. Enright and Rossi, 2018; Hou, 2010; Mayer et al., 2016), but might not push conceptual categories beyond their empirical application. As part of a larger project to think about the implications of post-foundational theories of space (Landau et al., 2021), we are concerned with the spatial expressions of politics and the political. We investigate the ways in which moments of the political can be conjured via ma(r)king absences rather than merely reifying expressions of power and presence in articulations of politics. To further increase awareness that the political must be considered in spatial terms, we extend Swyngedouw's (2014) and others claim that space for those who have no place in the social order (i.e. no or only temporary presence) must be created, conceptualized and attended to. We mobilize political difference by going beyond a merely metaphorical use of space, or rather, aim to stretch the limits of this metaphor. While we agree with the post-foundational diagnosis that space constitutes 'a mode of political thinking' (Dikeç, 2012), we elaborate on the meaning of post-foundationalism as a mode of *spatial* thinking. The starting point of our investigation rests on the relationship between topographical and topological approaches to space, which have emerged in human geography in recent years (cf. Martin and Secor, 2014). While topography is considered as the spatial realm of fixity, surface and territory – often subsumed under the notion of Euclidian space – , topology stands for spatial thinking that allows to replace sharp borders with fluid and relational boundaries. Topology traverses the fantasies of spatial ordering by pointing to multiple and incommensurable spatial components situated in one and the same place (Blum and Secor, 2011). With regard to

political difference, politics is grounded in topographical space, whereas topological space activates (and is activated by) the political. Topology dismisses the allegedly solid grounds of tropes such as ‘the city’ or ‘the state’ and instead opens the door for the spectral present absences that unsettle topographical figurations (Secor, 2013). In short, we inquire about the spatial dimensions of post-foundational thinking with the aim to understand space as structured by (political) difference to gain insight into the always-already contested and potentially haunted dimensions of both politics and space. Thus, our approach differs from vitalist Deleuzian approaches to space via topology (cf. Cockayne et al., 2020), because our notion of space departs from the assumption of a unstillable lack of absence of last grounds.

In the following, we demonstrate how conceptual differences between politics and the political can advance an understanding about the interpenetrating functions and places of museums and ruins. In this schematic framework, we position the process of museumification within the realm of politics, while we consider ruination as a process related to the realm of the political. Again, we subsume memorials and museums within the former conceptual category (and simultaneously acknowledge and encourage attempts by both museum practitioners and theoreticians to make and think museums as spaces of the political). However, to advance a difference-oriented framework of space and politics, we explore the ways in which these two spatial figurations, museums and ruins, refer to politically different realms of the social production of meaning and memory. In this complex tension between museums as hinged on the realm of politics and ruins as lingering in the realm of the political, we push for a post-foundational consideration of thinking the politics of space through absence and conflict to ultimately sharpen notions of space, spatial analysis and practice as inherently unsettled, negative and ungrounded. For this endeavor, we borrow from ruin studies an understanding of ruins as capable to unlock a topological ‘metaphor for the erosive, unpredictable aspects of human memory’ (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013: 471) by contouring a political topology of ruins, depoliticized via museumification. We sketch museumification as an attempt to master the past and deprive the ruin from its instable and contingent spatiality by filling its constitutive void with prescribed and monolithic meaning. Subsequently, we examine the museum memorial site *Reflecting Absence* as an example of a ‘ruined museum’, which

breaks with the logic of museumification by capturing the topology of the political in a museum-like spatial urban context.

## **Museumification and the realm of politics**

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), established in 1946, a museum is a 'non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment' (ICOM, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Distilling from these five definitional functions of museums, the museum appears as a discursive and material-spatial formation, which provides a platform for the narration and display of historical artefacts, events and objects. Against this background, Theodor W. Adorno (1967: 175) refers to the museum as the 'family sepulchre of works of art', while Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Johnson, 1993: 99) sees the museum as a 'meditative necropolis.' Foucauldian museum scholars have framed museums as heterotopic spaces, which conserve and cultivate notions of knowledge in line with hegemonic apparatuses (Bennett, 2009; Hooper-Greenhill, 2015). Scholars of so-called 'new museology' have long called for a more process-oriented and malleable understanding of museums as sites of contestation and plurality (Karp et al., 2006; Karp and Lavine, 1992), having situated museums as contact zones (Clifford, 1997; Pratt, 1991) to accommodate difference and conflict. Recent museum accounts have conceptualized museums as radical, haunted and disobedient sites (Message, 2018; Sternfeld, 2018) and places with geographies of their own (Geoghegan, 2010; Macleod, 2005). To this day, museums are arguably widely conceived as grounded or materialized spatial structures and primarily considered as places to conserve narratives of power and to discipline, regulate and govern behavior (Bennett, 2009; Luke, 2002). Put differently, museums predominantly appear as more or less permanent and spatially fixed formations with walls, outsides and

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that ICOM is currently engaging in a debate about renewing the official definition of museums, including concerns for social and environmental justice, equity, and a more political backbone:  
<https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>  
(cf. Landau, 2021b).



boundaries of some sort, however movable, flexible or fluid these walls may be.

Scholars working on ruination often refer to ‘the museum’ in rather dismissive terms, highlighting its potential to trigger a ‘commodification of memory’ (Edensor, 2005a: 126–139). Memories are commodified as soon as they are no longer part of the subject but externalized and inscribed into an object, such as a museal artefact. While museum scholars surely attend to the contested nature of exhibition-making and objecthood in museums (cf. Macdonald 2003; Martin, 1998; Reilly and Lippard, 2018), in light of the conservational function of museums, ascribed by above ICOM definition, the commodification of history, memory, memories and the past might take place, quite literally, in museums (cf. Ashworth et al., 2007 for a contrary account, arguing for the need to pluralize the past in museums). In sum, despite assumptions about museums’ rigidity or the diagnosed death of the museum (Grenier, 2013), some museums increasingly self-reflect their institutional stability or place, for example, via initiatives of story-telling in the museum to de-colonize (Lonetree, 2012) and detox (Wajid and Minott, 2019) their very institutions.

If the museum is considered a stable place which can steward and uphold historical artefacts and its related stories and sentiments over time, across generations and political regimes, this place evokes a sense of spatiality we discussed as topographic (cf. Hetherington, 1997 for a unique analysis of museum topology). Topographic museum spatiality would order, separate, categorize and classify historical and cultural artefacts, including memories. As Caitlin DeSilvey (2017: 32) puts it, ‘acts of counting, sorting, stacking, storing, and inventory convert things from the category of stuff to the status of museum object.’ The museum as a place of conservation and display can fixate and ossify individual memories from their embodied, psychic, affective, and overall haunted context, and might instead offer educational strategies to convey one version of historical turmoil and past rather than many. In short, museums as places might present a supposedly uncontroversial and solid surface of History, seemingly aligning with the mandate to educate, communicate, research and inform. This ordering aspect, which has been described as the most primordial function of museums (te Heesen, 2015), thus aims to reduce complexity, confusion, and chaos for the sake of establishing

an order and hierarchy of meaning. Despite running the risk of turning into an ultimate site of 'nostalgia industry' (Edensor, 2005a: 127), museums select and discriminate to show a certain dispositive of the past, while necessarily excluding, or with more violent consequences, neglecting, deprivileging, suppressing, censoring, criminalizing, condemning or not giving room and time to others.

In museum practice and scholarship, studies have shown the work of activists that aim to question the museum as a hegemonic space, which might retain and reproduce dominant narratives about who and what matters. Activist museums have, for example, highlighted the role of museums in providing local communities during and after environmental or political conflicts, in fights against racism, sexism and homo- and trans-phobia (Carvill Schellenbacher 2017; Janes and Sandell, 2019). Put differently, empirical case studies of museums have illustrated how museums have been transformed into sites of political contestation. In addition, museums' capacities to document, exhibit and thus inform and sensitize the public about conflict and activism have been researched (for an overview, cf. Landau, 2021b). Despite these potentially politicized positions and operations of museums, however, the general understanding or definition of museums seems to consider the latter as public institutions with prescribed functions and mandates to be managed rather than places of irreducible contingency and conflict (Sandell and Janes, 2007; Lord and Lord, 2009). With regard to our post-foundational framework of political difference, museums appear as places of politics rather than the political. In short, the museum might appear as a site of abundance rather than lack (Tønder and Thomassen, 2005), or presence rather than absence. In the museum, antagonism that wages in the realm of the political is to be tamed via the politics of display, (re)presentation and pedagogy, however contestable those may be. Ultimately, with regards to the hauntological dimensions of politics and space, there might not a lot of room for ghosts in museums, for haunted counter-voices, non-conforming, suppressed and a-normalized bodies, stories and knowledges, even though they most definitely linger in the walls ornamented with relics of the past (Sternfeld, 2018; Ward, 1995)– let alone the overwhelming parts of collections, which remain unshown to the public (Macdonald, 2002). In sum, while the spatial structures of museums manifest in significantly different

ways, the majority of museums in their currently contracted states might appear as topographical spaces of politics, which set out to establish order, access and knowledge to preselected forms of knowledge and power.

### **Ruination and the realm of the political**

In contrast to our positioning of museumification as arguably ordered, ordering and more or less coherent trope, 'the ruin's positivity depends on what it does not have – completeness, full form, order' (Cairns and Jacobs, 2014: 168). While the somewhat archetypical museum described in the last section is geared towards a stabilization of 'History'/'Memory' as seemingly monolithic forces that would create reliable, solid, uncontested or even objective narrations of the past as 'Past', it remains questionable whether the ruin can be considered an 'object' in the first place. As philosopher Mladen Dolar (2017: n.p.) puts it: 'What kind of thing is a ruin? The ruin is an object, which is the rest of an object. It is by definition a partial object, part of an object, a damaged object...it's less than an object. It is an object minus, a minus inscribed and included in the object.' As an 'object minus', the ruin is structurally fragmented, incomplete, and already includes its own negativity. Thus, the ruin is not so much understood as an object organized around a defined set of positive properties or functions, but rather as an object organized around a void (Gordillo, 2014; Pohl, 2021). While our understanding of ruins foregrounds the negativity and immateriality of ruins, we acknowledge that other approaches in ruin studies focus on ruins' material dimensions, spilling into dynamics of urban decay and, accordingly, call for an engagement with ruins with regards to 'what they are' (Edensor 2005b; Pétursdóttir, 2016).

The fascination of ruins, which has culminated in prominent signifiers such as 'ruin lust' or 'ruin porn', stems from the fact that dilapidated places usually do not appear in typically capitalist urban environments. For most city dwellers, the abandonment of residential areas, factories or even skyscrapers do not play a significant part of their everyday life. In the past, ruin scholars have pointed out that ruination should not be understood as simply a marginal phenomenon or case of exception, but rather as an ontological dimension inherent in every building: 'Every building at all times is in the

process of ruination' (Edensor, 2016: 349). Processes of conservation and restoration actively prevent built environments from making decline and degeneration visible. But as soon as these 'ontic', restorative and in a way positive processes can no longer be guaranteed, first cracks appear, and decay sets in. In post-foundational terms, ruination can be understood as the absent ground of every building, matter or space; ruination is a constant threat and possibility that persists in the oscillations between stabilization, closure, control and emancipation.

Accordingly, we consider the ruin as an open and vulnerable object, in which everything (no matter how unpleasant or inappropriate) can claim and maintain a place: 'Ruins foreground the value of inarticulacy, for disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, uncanny impressions, and peculiar atmospheres cannot be woven into an eloquent narrative. Stories can only be contingently assembled out of a jumble of disconnected things, occurrences, and sensations' (Edensor, 2005c: 846). Since there is no authority that manages or masters the ruin, it turns into a prescribed site for memories that are not consciously remembered, but 'emerge out of the workings of the unconscious' (Edensor, 2005a: 143; cf. Pohl, 2021). Sigmund Freud (1961: 69–71) referred to the ruin as an analogy for the unconscious, because it is impossible to clearly distinguish the past from the present. Just as in the unconscious, different contradictory elements topologically coexist; regardless of their potential separation in time and space; in the ruin, a variety of different temporal and spatial layers cohabit in one and the same object (Blum and Secor, 2011). Memories arising from ruins therefore often have an uncanny effect: 'We encounter an object that, while still persisting in space and time, is displaced from its native context and so points to an elsewhere that is no longer' (Trigg, 2009: 29). The ruin evokes the familiar and the strange at the same time. Moreover, the ruin is haunted, a hauntological object par excellence, because in it, history is not simply externalized but topologically bound to the present (and future), so that the past can find its way into the present in somewhat unregulated ways (Edensor, 2001; Pohl, 2020). So, in other words, ruins are inhabited by past subjects and objects of meaning, power and desire, by ghosts, which are impossible to grasp and experience, yet penetrate the meanings, places and politics of ruins.

As ruins openly engage with ghosts, they might contribute to a ‘politics of memory’ (Derrida 2006: xviii), in which history is not stable, enclosed and controlled, but encountered in its precarious, contingent and affective relevance for the present. While various scholars in the recent past have referred to ruins as ‘political counter-sites’ (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013: 469), offering a wide-ranging critique regarding ‘ways in which urban space is produced and reproduced’ (Edensor, 2005a: 17), post-foundational concepts such as lack, negativity and absence might offer further analytical avenues to engage with the political nature of ruins. Against the background of counter-hegemonic ways of memory-making, and memorialization, the ruin might open spaces for those specters, who might not have (or have had) a place in organized museum spaces before (again, some radical museums have been working to open museums and make room, places and times for these excluded voices, perspectives, traumas, and ghosts). As the ruin disturbs, disorders and disrupts every idea of mastering the past by pointing to the impasses unfolding from topographically ordered spaces, a ruinous analytic might advance a radical conceptualization of museums. In Derrida’s (1987: 92) words: ‘A piece of waste land [terrain vague] has no fixed limit’.<sup>2</sup> The ruin therefore breaks down the logic of spatialized routine and power, located in the realm of politics, and offers a place for the political in its radical topology.

### **Museumification of ruins**

Since the ruin reminds us of losing mastery over socio-political realities, it is not surprising that ruins are frequently turned into heritage sites, tourist destinations, spectacles, and objects for cultural and historical consumption. We consider these processes as ‘museumification’ of ruins. Scholars have emphasized that processes of museumification are not bound to museums’ institutional setting; they ‘have no geographical limits and their essence is not based on technical or institutional aspects’ (Aykaç, 2019: 1247). However, within the last years, ruins have been considered as a preferred site for museumification (cf. Mah, 2010: 401). Museumification primarily refers to a

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘terrain vague’ denotes an ‘abandoned space’, which is defined by ‘emptiness, absence, but also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation’ (Solá-Morales, 1995: 119).

strategy of official memory-making that uses the ruin as a rem(a)inder of a particular moment in history. In this context, ruins are perceived less as objects embedded in specific social realities, but appear as historical landmarks from which we learn about a time utterly different from the present. Museumification allows to position ruins as symbolic references to an imagined past, often evoking images of a *better* past. Illustrative of this nostalgic trend is Michigan Central Station in Detroit. When it opened in 1913, Michigan Central Station was the tallest train station in the world, Detroit being one of the most prosperous and wealthiest US American cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the wake of the crisis of Fordism and political riots motivated by racist police behavior in 1967, Detroit gradually shrank by more than half its population. 75 years after its opening, the last train left the train station – and the abandoned train station became a Detroit icon, a ‘mocking symbol of its lost greatness’ (LeDuff, 2013: 81). While Detroit was flooded with post-industrial ruins at the time, no other ruin has served as a signifier to create an imaginary vision of Detroit’s former glory just as Michigan Central Station, allowing local citizens to yearningly long for a different time (Pohl, 2019). To fulfill its function as a sentimental remainder of economic vitality, the museumification of ruins such as Michigan Central leads to ‘an associative imperative to arrest decay, hence, to freeze time’ (Edensor, 2005a: 133–134). Museumified ruins are often carefully restored and preserved to stay in shape<sup>3</sup>, to represent a specific notion of a past, just as museums which exhibit artefacts of the past. One could also argue that they are lifted into a mode of standby (i.e. not fully functioning or ‘on’, but also not entirely abandoned or ‘off’). Throughout the last decades, millions of dollars have been invested in the maintenance of the Colosseum in Rome, to name another famous example for the museumification of a ruin, which have partially put processes of decay, erosion, and disintegration on hold, because ‘in order for the object to function as a bearer of cultural memory, it must be protected in perpetuity’ (DeSilvey, 2017: 32).

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3 In the case of Michigan Central Station, it is worth noting that the local interest in the ruin increased significantly at the moment when it was fenced and sealed off for preservation. However, the peak of its museumification is ongoing, since it is currently subject to a massive renovation process (for a more extensive discussion, cf. Pohl, 2019).

Museumification is an ‘institutional and discursive means of past-mastering – a process with which to effect a form of depoliticization, in relation to a highly politicized and contested heterotopic space’ (Connor, 2017: 131). The museumification of ruins aims to master the past by turning the ruin into a solely historical matter – discursively and materially speaking. Similar to museum objects, objectified ruins are not to intrude social realities or provoke, unleash or encourage unpleasant memories about the past. Museumification aims to bury the unconscious, wants to dry up the ghosts who inhabit ruins and transforms unequivocally one-dimensional objects. With respect to the post-foundational difference between the topography of politics and the topology of the political, the museumification of ruins can be understood as an attempt to impose limits on the political topology of the ruin, dragging it into a topography of museumified politics. Museumification tries to provide coherence, to turn ruins into functional places or surfaces, held together by particular modes of institutionalization, (re)presentation and regulation. The museumification of ruins follows a ‘politics of conservatism’ (Edensor, 2005a: 131), through which ruins gain fixed meaning and commodified value. Instead of constituting counter-sites to commodified memories, ruins then might articulate themselves as ultimate hotspots for the commodification of memory. The reason why places such as Machu Picchu, Luxor, or Pompeji have become popular global tourist attractions is that all these sites seem to allow their visitors to gain knowledge about a ‘lost’ world, seemingly separate from ordinary or ‘real’ realities. In ruins, we experience memory as being located *outside* of ourselves, distinct from us, elsewhere, as something we can purposively enter and leave, and thus consume whenever ‘we’ want to.

### **The 9/11 Museum Memorial – Reflecting Absence**

After examining the depoliticization of the ruin through museumification, we shift focus to investigate a possible re-politicization of the museum through ruination. Recent scholarly interest in discussing the materiality, spatiality and agency of absence informs our conceptual ambition (cf. Edensor, 2019; Frers, 2013; Ginn, 2014; Meier et al., 2013; Meyer, 2012; Meyer and Woodthorpe, 2008). We sketch the potential of a political re-reading of the museum as ruined, with the goal to (1) contribute to ruin studies’ engagement

with the challenges of museumification and (2) to advance museum studies' efforts to destabilize seemingly monolithic notions of 'History'/'Memory' towards polyvalent understandings thereof, by means of counter-hegemonic practices and interventions. In the overall discussion about the political prospective of absence as organizing matter and politics, we suggest the notion of the ruined museum to address the inherent non-fixity, contingency and ghostly nature of places that identify as or resemble museums. Although these conceptual threads would extend to ruined memorials, ruined ruins and other spatial formations, we anchor this contribution in critical museum studies and ruin scholarship while acknowledging, and welcoming spillover effects for studies on contested heritage, memorialization and curatorial strategies.

American journalist Adam Gopnik (2014) points to the interferences between the function of museums and memorials at the 9/11 site:

What happened on 9/11...was a crime deliberately committed in open air as a nightmarish publicity stunt, one already as well documented as any incident in history. We can't relearn it; we can only relive it. This means that, if there is an absolute case for a memorial, the case for a museum is more unsettled. Museums first preserve, and then teach, and, although a few grimly eloquent objects are preserved here — a half-crushed fire engine, a fragment of the pancaked floors from one tower — nothing is really taught. ...Those who lack faith in fixed order and stable places have a harder time building monuments that must, in their nature, be monolithically stable and certain...

While some of these observations can easily be called into question, such as the general dismissal that the 9/11 museum does not teach anything, or that monuments generally lack order, what is worth noting in the context of our argument is the intricacy of museums and memorials. In short, the 9/11 complex is a strange place, not quite a museum, not equivocally a monument, a still-living, necessarily haunted creature, which we conceptualize as 'ruined museum'. Overall, we argue that the ruined museum changes our thinking about ruins, museums and memorials as places imbricated in complex pasts, to acknowledge the entangled politics of these symbolical and material infrastructures as ambivalent. This conceptual proposition shall also spark conversation about counter-hegemonic futures for ruinous sites. Briefly, the ruined museum encourages us to think of museums as always-already imbricated in ruination, potentially inhabited by ghosts, and thus less



controllable than often imagined. In addition, it shall promote further understanding of ruins as only-ever partially prone to an ossified narration of the past.

Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008) discuss the conceptual interpenetrations of museums and cemeteries, reiterating the necrophilous associations of museums mentioned earlier. If we consider the museum through the lens of a cemetery, we encounter the presence of something materially absent, maybe even something beyond absence. Accordingly, all spatial configurations are charged with a particular social expectation to make *something* present in or via absence. Regardless of the concrete, differently layered entanglements between ruins, museums and cemeteries, we consider all these spatial infrastructures as spaces which can mobilize the political via the conjuration of absences and presences. Meyer and Woodthorpe (*ibid.*: 6) specify that ‘absence occupies a space’ via specific objects which exude situated forms of agency. This agency, as well as its function and form, is contested because it is haunted by pasts, presents, possible and desirable futures, potentials, and by the political. Brief, museums and ruins (and cemeteries and memorials, for that matter) can become sites for and of the political because they affect matter with regards to how memory, time and place are being displayed, experienced, felt, conserved. In this understanding of both absence and presence as active, Maddrell (2013: 505) considers absence as ‘given presence through the experiential and relational tension between the physical absence (not being there) and emotional presence (a sense of still being there), i.e. absence-presence is greater than the sum of the parts.’ In this beyond-zero-sum-game scenario, the ruined museum activates absent presents, absent pasts, present absences, present pasts, thus conjuring the void spaces that cannot be fully grounded or filled, as the ruined museum remains inhabited by ghosts.



Figure 1: One of the ‘reflecting pools’ at the 9/11 Museum Memorial, Photograph: Author

So, how and where do we find these ruined museums? In what ways do they differ from conventional museums (or ruins or memorials)? Do they *feel* different? Do they look different? What are their spatial features? To ground our conceptual discussion, we turn to the 9/11 memorial museum complex, including the *Reflecting Absence* installation by Israeli-American architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker. The formation was selected in an international design competition which included more than 5,200 memorial proposals from 63 countries (Figure 1; 9/11 Memorial, 2019a). On the official website, the memorial is treated as a separate spatial, communicative and cultural unit from the ‘official’ museum. We subsume this functional split between the ‘museum’, whose official name is *9/11 Memorial Museum*, and the *Reflecting Absence* ‘memorial’ in our investigation, following James Young (2016: 328), one of the jury members to select the architectural design for the site, who urges to acknowledge the inseparability and interdependency of history and memory. We explore the political and ruinous potential of thinking the memorial *as* museum, the memorial-museum *as* ruin, the ruin *as* museum – briefly, the overall spatial arrangement as ruined museum. Young (*ibid.*) compares the mandates of *Reflecting Absence* and the 9/11 museum with the Holocaust *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin as ‘both commemorative and informational, a site of both memory and

of history, each as shaped by the other.’ Framed by Young (2016: 325) as ‘counter-monument’, which sets out to ‘break the conventional rules of the monument’, *Reflecting Absence* is unassertively positioned as an ‘exceptional’ site.

Since all the debris and destroyed materials have been cleared, one might wonder whether we can speak of a ruin in the context of this memorial at all? *Reflecting Absence* surely is not a ruin in the narrower sense of the term (i.e. a left-over architectural form, a skeleton of a formerly solid building). However, in line with our ruinous ontology outlined above, we consider the memorial as an ‘object minus’ as elaborated above. The object minus includes a minus/lack in its objecthood, thus revealing its inherent incompleteness, lack, or simply the impossibility of full presence. The hauntological dimensions of the memorial foreground history not as something that happened exclusively and definitively in the past, but as something leaving traces in the present (and in the future, too; cf. Sternfeld, 2018). While traces attempt to present some of the lingering present of the past, they also indicate the absence of present or presence. So, whatever happened in the past is not gone or done with for good, but lingers and conjures affects in the here and now. Hence, we mobilize the memorial museum as a ruined museum.

While distinctions between memorial museums and memorials remain ambivalent, if not redundant, we argue that, in the particular case of *9/11 Memorial Museum*, including the *Reflecting Absence* site, the uncontested presence of a ‘real’ museum leverages a radical understanding of socio-spatial structures. The ruined museum commemorates history in the museum, memorial, ruin or the hybrid form of any or some of these in the ghostly trope of the ruined museum.<sup>4</sup> With regards to *Reflecting Absence*, Karen Wilson Baptist (2015: 3) argues that there is an ‘ephemeral presence of the deceased on the memorial site’. She highlights that ‘the victims of 9/11 may remain tangibly present, for they are dispersed throughout Manhattan as DNA in the earth, dust on a windowsill, flotsam pulverized beneath a scientist’s

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<sup>4</sup> The proposal of an International Freedom Center (IFC) was even more controversial, which would have taken an explicitly normative stance on advocating for ‘the human struggle to secure, protect, and exercise freedom’ (Watts, 2009: 413).

instrument' (*ibid.*: 6). Matter-of-factly, some unidentified human remains are stalled in the bedrock next to the memorial plaza, so that traces of the people and buildings who died at the attack still linger on the very site of terrorism. In addition, more than 10,000 everyday objects have been gathered in the museum to commemorate the 2,977 casualties of the terrorist attacks.

In her essay *aesthetics of absence*, Maria Sturken (2004) reflects on the implications of the immense amount of dust which arose from *Ground Zero*, and the vanishing of a large variety of larger and smaller-scale material objects and debris. Unlocking Yaeger's (in Greenberg, 2003) understanding of 'rubble as archive', Sturken evokes both the documentary and logistical dimensions of dust and rubble. However, beyond potential 'functions' of dust, the actual material rem(a)inders on site are much more complex, and potentially escaping any clear purpose or meaning. Objects are present in their absence, literally absent because they have been disposed as rubble, but they are also still whirling around. Maybe, the commemorative matter (i.e., destroyed office equipment such as computers, chairs, desks and uncountable stacks of paper, as well as steel, concrete, glass and aluminum) still lingers in modes of absent presence, present absence, or present past. The particular spatial (dis)embeddedness or hauntedness of the site is two-fold: First, there is the (dis)connection between heterogeneous matters, using heavy, imposing materials like bronze, metal, marble and glass for the memorial and museum architecture, and more ephemeral matters such as air, trees and water. Second, there is the (dis)connect with the everyday, re-emergent uses of the neighborhood as commercial areas in downtown New York. Because the memorial is partially located at street level, the official 9/11 Memorial website (2019b) argues that it:

allow[s] for its integration into the fabric of the city, the plaza encourages the use of this space by New Yorkers on a daily basis. The memorial ground is not be isolated from the rest of the city; they will be a living part of it.

While this description emphasizes the 'integrative' and 'vitalizing' elements of the museum memorial complex, in our reading of the museum through the ruin (and vice versa), the lines between absence and presence, life/vitality and death, human and more-than-human elements become ambiguated. In short, the specters of 9/11 are still haunting the site, either as corporeal remains or

traumatic memories, unfinished or untold stories. In psychoanalytic terms, the site could be read as a place where ‘the repressed’ constantly ‘returns’, finding its way (back) into everyday life. Put differently, the ghosts on site are ‘alive’ and well. *Reflecting Absence* has a strange, even uncanny, contemporaneity to itself – every-busy New Yorkers rushing through and by during their daily commutes; tourists dwell and pass-by, gaze, commemorate. Ultimately, as Steve Pile (2005: 253) puts it, ‘New York remains haunted by the events of 9/11, and this matters.’

Based on this, we could argue that *Reflecting Absence* unlocks a topological notion of space. Instead of unfolding a topographical order, the memorial museum itself folds into a complex spatiality. The intertwining of over- and underground exposure and space to commemorate and experience absence and presence, the tension between exterior and interior elements, the mixture of visible and invisible spaces, accessible and inaccessible parts – all these spatial considerations make it impossible to obtain a neutral or fixed standpoint, a solid ground from which it would be possible to view the memorial as a ‘whole’. Parts of the memorial are ‘on’, others ‘off’. The site itself stands by between modes of activity, activation and passivity. While the memorial commemorates the former solid grounds of the World Trade Center, once 415 and 417 meters tall (1,368 and 1,362 feet), the memorial also stands in contradiction to this former impressive height, which expanded into the sky, creating an almost phallic spatial exterior or outside. Instead, the museum, but more visibly the memorial site ungrounds its own former grounds, it pulls, ‘swallows’ its visitors, passers-by, standers-by into its own negative ground, into the void. The structure shoots into the ground, goes inside and visualizes only a fraction of its former height of 10 meters (35 feet). The memorial is the ultimate spatial inversion of its previous use. The black marble pools flowing into the ground are designed as emblematic of the towers’ ‘footprints’, somewhat fetishizing the desire to mark the spatial leftovers of the Twin Towers (Sturken, 2003: 319). While the suggestion to incorporate old ‘shells’ or ‘skins’ of the towers were ruled out, the terminology of the ‘footprints’ not only humanizes the towers’ ‘feet’, but also creates an understanding of their structural anchorage and groundedness.<sup>5</sup> In sum, the

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<sup>5</sup> Heath-Kelly (2018) has powerfully drawn attention to the problematic implications of the anthropomorphization of the trees at the memorial site.

monument quite literally represents a void, ungrounds assumed former grounds, opens a wound falling into an ungroundable ground of pain and loss.



Figure 2: Original steel beam of the former World Trade Center inside of the 9/11 Museum, Photograph: Author

The museum, which opened almost three years after the memorial was inaugurated in 2011, explicitly aims to document the history of the terrorist attacks and its contemporary impacts in ‘monumental spaces’ (9/11

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Critical of a revitalizing and vitalist account on the commemoration of human loss by non-human actants, Heath-Kelly points to the symbolical endowment of vegetal matter with an ‘ability to speak’ and a ‘capacity to heal’, which might (over)responsibilize non-human matter. In light of the prominent presence of water at the memorial, it might be worth exploring the blurring lines between nature and culture in memorialization via a hydro-feminist lens. Taking water as matter that remembers and evokes memory (Neimanis, 2017), which is excessive and lacking at the same time might unlock an antagonistic account on ambivalent, ruinous matter. Understanding this matter as viscous and porous (Tuana, 2008) might further saturate the hauntological and topological hinges of a post-foundational approach to space.

Memorial, 2020). You enter the museum via an overground entry pavilion designed ‘as a bridge between the memory of past events and the promise of renewal through reconstruction’ to descend to the underground exhibition space (ibid.). You literally enter the museum via an empty space, the museum being situated in the spatial void of the former World Trade Center (Figure 2). The museum contains conventional features such as ticketing (26 US dollars for adult admission), and the museum’s overall self-presentation in many ways reminds of classical museum settings of exhibition-making and knowledge communication. Yet, there is also something persistently unsettling about the museum. It resembles what Adrienne L. Burk (2007: 952) calls ‘counter-hegemonic monuments’, which are ‘designed to unsettle social relations, rather than provide closure.’ The museum ‘recognizes the power of place’, which both implicitly refers to its solid, topographical notion of space, but also points to the ungroundable, topological physical and discursive location of its site. In short, the museum presents itself as both a conventional museum and a site destabilized by its inescapable and present past, its ruinous character. Because it is open to its own historically contingent character for both the commemoration of the past and the future, the site is open and vulnerable to contested understandings of how and where and based on what remainders to commemorate the loss and death that occurred at the site. In sum, the museum memorial complex has shown itself as a socio-spatial structure that it ‘is’ neither fully a ruin nor ‘is’ it a just a museum in however conventionally defined terms. It is precisely the double negation which qualifies the site as an empirical example of a post-foundational approach to spatiality. Moreover, by deducing from this real-life spatial structure, we have grounded our conceptual speculation about the intricate interrelations between museums, memorials and ruins under the term of ruined museums.

### **Outlook: Ghosts dancing in ruined museums**

To conclude, the ruined museum does not function as a stable container of ‘History’, ‘Truth’ or ‘Time’, but a leaking space of sedimented conflicts. It is full of unresolved struggles such as disharmonious interpretations of historical events and narratives. The ruined museum is neither fully grounded nor definitively established. It hovers between absences and presences with regards to both contemporary and historical occurrences that transform a

museum into a museum, but also exceeds reified notions of 'History', 'Memory' and 'Time'. The ruined museum leaves the narrow realm of politics behind and instead heads towards the ungroundable realm of the political. The ruined museum is a contested place, articulated from ontological negativity and incompleteness, haunted by multiple temporalities and differently situated human and more-than-human agencies. The ruined museum is not one unitary place with solid foundations (now less than ever, although it also never has been), it is no object we can easily enter, possess or master with a prescribed function or use (let alone use value). The ruined museum is probably not even a very visitor-friendly environment, to be honest, as these museums prefer dis-organization over order, excess over systematicity, ghosts over money, absence over presence. If the ruined museum constitutes an object at all, it is an 'object minus' (Dolar, 2017) or an 'impossible' one (Marchart, 2013). We close these reflections by looking back on the ways in which the notion of ruined museums might provide possible approaches to politicize understandings of space. We mobilized two interdisciplinary discourses on the spatial infrastructures of museums and ruins to conjure the notion of the ruined museum, which attends to the haunted and contested materialities, spatialities and agencies of absence. Maybe, the concept of ruined museums will backfire, in a non-violent manner, to re-think both approaches to museums and ruins, and their respective understandings of haunted time, topological space and the politics of space and memory.

We hope that the conceptual advance of the ruined museum is beneficial and instructive for a variety of interdisciplinary debates in spatial, political and museum theory. With regards to museum research and practice, we might have unleashed some ghosts into the dialectics of presence and absence to be negotiated in museums to advance the acknowledgement and critical engagement with history, politics of memory and memorialization as inherently conflicted. We are aware that the seemingly binary positioning of museums as spaces of politics, and ruins as spaces of the political, might have withheld more speculative and experimental approaches to 'other' museums, such as possible museums, or post-museums (Steiner and Esche, 2007; Watermeyer, 2012). However, in line with radical museologists such as Bishop and Perjovschi (2014) or Nora Sternfeld (2018), we hope that the notion of the



museum as a ruined place might motivate museum scholars and practitioners to make, quite literally, more space and time for polyphonic and necessarily antagonistic positions about exhibitions, politics of (re)presentation and (re)collection. With regards to the spatial framework of ruined museums, we have aimed to challenge the museum's seemingly topographical position, which primarily offers space for organized and hegemonic knowledge (e.g. strategically targeted educational, diversity, outreach and community programs). We have worked towards an understanding of museums as topological spaces which endure, encourage and exhibit the complexity and chaos of historical pasts and meanings. Ultimately, since the definition of the museum is currently undergoing transformation – revealing deeper-seated conflicts about what a museum is actually assumed to 'be' (Landau, 2021a) – which has subtly revealed mindfulness about the role of social conflicts and struggles, we hope that the notion of ruined museums contributes to conceptualize museums as contested public spaces. With this paper, we wish to bring forth some preliminary conceptual tools broaden our understanding that both ruins and museums are to be sensed and theorized not only in the most obvious places of their assumed place, form and function, but beyond, besides and below themselves – briefly, to look for museums not only in museum buildings and for ruins not only in ruined places. Ultimately, with this perspective, we hope to initialize a debate about the multiple opportunities that lie within post-foundational political thought to conceptualize the antagonistic nature of space.

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