

George Simmel's Ruin, Death and Immortality of Architecture*

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Abstract—The main distinction in the conceptualization of space in George Simmel's work is the opposition between the activity of the spirit and nature. Nevertheless, the work of art, as the result of the activity of the spirit, uses the material borrowed from nature, but in most cases makes it indistinguishable in itself. Architecture, on the other hand, is a special kind of art, in the sense that the material in it begins to act according to its essence. As a result of this fight between nature and the spirit, nature prevails and the building collapses and turns into a ruin. The Simmel's ruin is a turning over of the relationship that is familiar to the aesthetic object: nature, not a man, is endowed with creative power. The tragedy of Simmel's ruin shows that the aesthetic dimension of architecture reveals itself to us in the absence of human dwelling, which invariably turns out to be finite, opposing the infinite and immortal nature.

Keywords—Simmel; architecture and nature; work of art; ruin; death; immortality; material; dwelling

I. INTRODUCTION

Georg Simmel creates the conceptualization of space very important for architectural theory. The main differentiation in his description of space is the confrontation between the activity of the spirit and nature: the things that man creates are different from those that nature produces. The ultimate form that demonstrates this opposition is the difference between the boundaries of an artwork and those of natural objects: "In the case of the natural entity, boundaries are simply the site of continuing exosmosis and endosmosis with everything external; for the work of arts they are that absolute ending which exercises indifference towards and defense against the exterior and a unifying integration with respect to the interior in a single act"[1].

An important feature of a work of art is the emergence of an aesthetic dimension, which is characterized by the integrity of the work and its independence from the real world. The aesthetic object is endowed by Simmel with impermeable borders, not in line with those in nature. The

*Fund: The Reported study was funded by Government Program of the Russian Federation "Development of science and technology" (2013-2020) within Program of Fundamental Researches of Ministry of Construction, Housing and Utilities of the Russian Federation and Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, the Research Project 1.7.2.

pleasure of contemplating a work of art becomes possible only if it is transcended – "retreated" from the world of daily life. "It excludes all that surrounds it, and thus also the viewer as well, from the work of art, and thereby helps to place it at that distance from which alone it is aesthetically enjoyable"[2].

Nevertheless, as Simmel notes, a work of art uses material borrowed from the world, but in most cases, it makes the matter invisible: it radically transforms it and gives it a different meaning. "In poetry, painting, music, the laws governing the materials must be made dumbly submissive to the artistic conception which, in the perfect work, wholly and invisibly absorbs them". [3] The situation is different with architecture: the building itself tends to come to an agreement with the surrounding forces of nature, and the material begins to act according to its internal essence.

If Simmel manages to keep the belonging of the artistic creation to the activity of the spirit in his discourse on architecture, it is difficult to do so in relation to the ruins. The Simmel's ruin is a turnaround of the relationships that are customary for the aesthetic object: "The ruin of a building, however, means that where the work of art is dying, other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown; and that out of what of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity"[4]. It is nature, which is endowed with creative power in the ruin, not a man. The essay on the ruins shows that the relationship between nature and the spirit in Simmel's work is not simple and unambiguous. The boundaries previously formed by the activity of the spirit are now created by the "continuing exosmosis and endosmosis", that is, by external forces of nature.

The possibility of turning over shows that, in thinking about the ruins, Simmel cannot draw a clear demarcation line between the ruin and the picturesque rock. The view of the ruin as a work of art that Simmel is undertaking with an aesthetic perspective is limited. In this text, an attempt to develop an approach to describe the ruins and architecture with the involvement of Simmel's theoretical apparatus, especially the ideas of death and immortality with regard to natural and non-natural objects is made.

II. THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN NATURE AND THE MAN

Simmel says that the defining human quality is the ability to connect the divided, and to draw boundaries in an undivided space, in other words, to erect bridges and build walls. The connection arises from a previous operation of separation: the bridge connects two banks that were previously conceptually separated: "Because the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating, that is why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two river banks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge"[5]. Only human beings have the ability to connect and separate, which distinguishes them from nature. The man is able to cut out, imagine the separated fragments of reality (places, things, himself), mark and distinguish them, and then he gets the opportunity to connect them.

By differentiating, a person creates the boundaries for things and as well as in space. But if the construction of a wall divides space into "here" and "there", "inside" and "outside", the door is necessary so that the boundary can be overcome: "By virtue of the fact that the door forms, as it were, a linkage between the space of human beings and everything that remains outside it, it transcends the separation between the inner and the outer. Precisely because it can also be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall". [6] The door for the wall, in this case, plays the same role as a bridge for the river does — it connects the "inside" and the "outside" as a bridge connects two opposite banks. Simmel's crossing of the border and the connection of the divided are the same gesture, and there is no fundamental difference between the river created by nature and the wall erected by a man.

The situation is different with works of art. For Simmel, the borders of aesthetic objects are impenetrable, independent of reality, and this radically distinguishes them from the borders of natural objects. The creation of a work of art, in contrast to the simple production of forms and boundaries in human activity, takes place in a completely different dimension. Simmel says that "the essence of the work of art, however, is to be a whole for itself, not requiring any relation to an exterior, spinning each threads back into its own center"[7]. So, the main properties of a work of art will be the inner unity and the fact that it is surrounded by a sphere separated from its real environment.

A key example of such a tactical retreat of the artwork from the world of immediate life is the Simmel's description of the frame of the painting. The frame not only excludes the work of art from reality, which surrounds it but also distances it from the viewer, who is also a part of the reality. Simmel says that the picture can be contemplated, but one cannot touch what is depicted. The picture is a closed world, and it exists on the other side of reality. Aesthetic dimension in a work of art arises due to its exclusivity, the ability of the work of art to transcend, through which it is only possible for the work of art to be "aesthetically enjoyable" [8].

The laws by which the work of art exists, as well as the requirements that we as spectators can address to it, emanate from the work of art itself. "It is the unique formation that allows the "idea" which is its perfection, the form with which it satisfies all demands, to shine forth from itself and only from itself - even when its reality does not correspond to these demands ideally inscribed in it. But when this reality does satisfy them, the sense of the artwork as such is achieved - the self-sufficiency that does not permit the will of the beholder to raise value-claims other than those innate in the work itself"[9]. We can conclude that the world where artworks live is a world of ideas.

Architecture occupies a special position among the arts. It is a specific example of the work of a spirit that reveals nature in itself: "If in the other arts the spirit bends the forms and events of this nature to its command, in architecture it shapes nature's masses and inherent forces until, as if of their own accord, they yield and the artistic conception is made visible"[10]. But the forces of nature in architecture remain hidden, subordinate to the idea. They show themselves only when a building collapses, ceases to be able to embody its original idea – when it becomes a ruin. The encounter of the spirit and nature always, and therefore naturally, ends in the same thing – nature wins. "This unique balance between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward – breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature". [11]

But in the ruin Simmel does something strange – he endows nature with an agency. Nature in the ruin escapes from the oppression of the ordering spirit and avenges him for violence: "... the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image"[12]. Moreover, nature's vengeance is not just a resistance to the activity of the spirit: nature creates new integrity, a new work of art. According to Felix Murchadha, the boundary and form in the Simmel's ruin are no longer created by the spirit, but it is nature that makes it: "But what we can see in the ruin is a new unity, which comes from the energy of nature and shows the common roots of nature and spirit. In that can be seen its charm: nature shows itself as if it were spirit"[13]. The ruin in such an interpretation does not differ from the rock: its form is defined by the forces external in relation to it. How, then, does an aesthetic quality different from the beauty of a picturesque rock appear in the ruins?

III. THE MATERIAL OF THE RUIN AND THE RUINS MISSING DWELLING

Architecture has earned its special place thanks to its way of handling the material. While in other art forms natural materials are absorbed and their significance is leveled out, architecture retains a strong dependence on them: "Although architecture, too, uses and distributes the weight and carrying power of matter according to a plan conceivable only in the human soul, within this plan the matter works by means of

its own nature - carrying the plan out, as it were, with its own forces"[14]. The material in architecture has its own strength, given from within, to act according to its essence. Thanks to the material, architecture protects itself from alienation and maintains a connection with the surrounding material reality.

Due to this correlation with the material, only the building (not sculpture, painting, music) may disintegrate, creating a new aesthetic object – the ruin. Nature is present in architecture through the material reality legally, so destruction is a process inherent in the existence of the building, not an accidental one. "In its material, its given state, it has always remained nature, and if now nature becomes once more completely mistress over it, she is merely exercising a right which until now has remained latent but which she never, so to speak, has renounced"[15]. Material is the component of the architecture that makes it an object of nature. The same forces that give a mountain its shape through weathering, erosion, faulting, growth of vegetation, here do their work on old walls". [16]

Another important feature of the architecture is its strong dependence on the surroundings in which the building is located. Forces of nature collide with the building and eventually absorb it, turning it into a ruin. "Expressing this peace for us, the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together with it like tree and stone-whereas a palace, a palace, a villa, even a peasant house, even where they fit perfectly into the mood of their landscape, always stem from another order of things and blend with that of nature only as if in afterthought"[17]. But Simmel interprets the environment or context in which the building is located only as a set of active and impersonal forces of nature, inevitably opposing the building. Murchadha, in his study on the phenomenology of the ruins in the works of Simmel and Heidegger, directs to this point: "Rather, the relationship to the material is different in the case of architecture because it not alone uses material, but relates directly to nature as its surrounding. The building encloses a space and, in that way, sets the boundaries of a place that is human, against nature" [18].

The material of the ruin is specific, which creates a fundamental distinction between the ruin and the rock. The material that nature uses in the work on the creation of the ruin is the creation of human hands. "Nature has transformed the work of art into material for its own expression, as she had previously served as material for art"[19]. For Simmel, ruin is not a human creation reduced to shapeless matter – it must include the traces of the past, the image of the work of art, it must include the former life as the work of art. The ruin points to the absence of a human dwelling.

Simmel speaks of the of architecture's former existence, which the ruin indicates, whose remnant and reminder it is. But in the ruin, the expediency present in the building is replaced by another – natural expediency and the strength of the spirit and the power of nature are equalized in their creative activity. "To be sure, from the standpoint of that purpose which the spirit has embodied in palace and church, castle and hall, aqueduct and memorial column, the form in which they appear when decayed is a meaningless incident.

Yet a new meaning seizes on this incident, comprehending it and its spiritual form in a unity which is no longer grounded in human purposiveness but in that depth where human purposiveness and the working of non-conscious natural forces grow from their common root"[20]. But in a destroyed building, nature is unable to create similar meanings that man articulates in his activities, the ruin does not exist for service and human dwelling. The Simmel's ruin being an aesthetic object must be abandoned and uninhabited, not simply destroyed by human activity or passivity. He considers the participation of man in the destruction of the building to be a contradiction "the inhabited ruin loses for us that sensuous-supersensuous balance of the conflicting tendencies of existence which we see in the abandoned one. This balance, indeed, gives it its problematical, unsettling, often unbearable character. Such places, sinking from life, still strike us as settings of a life. [21]

Aesthetic does not arise from nostalgia for the past, for the integrity of the idea that was embodied in the building or life that took place within the walls of the building. But at the same time, the ruin represents an aesthetic different from the beauty of a rock. The man contemplates the absence of life, which is not there anymore. It is a question of the contemplation of the absent dwelling, which is indicated by an abandoned building. "To be sure, we may well be inclined to ascribe this peacefulness to another motif: the character of the ruin as past. It is the site of life from which life has departed-but this is nothing merely negative, added to it only by thought, as it is for the countless things which, once immersed in life and accidentally cast on its bank, are by their very nature capable of being again easily caught by its current. In the case of the ruin, the fact that life with its wealth and its changes once dwelled here constitutes an immediately perceived presence". [22]

Thus, the ruin by its material embodiment indicates the absence of dwelling. It is not a natural object due to the properties of the material that it consists of – its materiality only indicates the "broken unity"[23] has lost the battle with nature. The ruin shows not the dwelling that was once carried out here, but only that there was once a dwelling here. "But a ruin is not a ruin of a past building as a picture of it is. The ruin does not represent the building as it once was. Above all the ruin does not represent the past world: such a world made possible the action of human beings with one another shaped by the buildings in which they lived. Ruins, however, embody the impossibility of action. They do not belong to the past world, but show the loss of that world".[24] The ruin demonstrates the victory of all-absorbing forces of nature over the embodied creation of the spirit, the tragedy of the death of architecture. The ruin finally points to the finitude of human dwelling, to the mortality of the man himself in the face of infinity and immortality of nature.

IV. DEATH AND IMMORTALITY OF ARCHITECTURE

Simmel points out that only living can possess the ability to die. Unlike the inanimate, it contains its temporal and spatial boundaries in itself and does not need anything external for this purpose. The inanimate does not contain its own mechanism of death, it is unlimited in time, and its

spatial boundaries are subordinated to external forces. "The inorganic body is distinguished from the living one above all by this: the form that defines it is determined from outside - whether in the most extreme sense that it ends because another body begins, by reacting against its expansion, bending or breaking it; or through molecular, chemical, or physical influences, as when rocks form through weathering or lava through solidification"[25].

Although only living things can die, Simmel introduces the second criteria of the ability to die – the individuality. The more individual the being is, the more things die with it, thus the more it is able to die. The man in Simmel's reasoning is more mortal than a frog because the frog is related to its kind), its life continues in its offspring. Death is the ultimate event only for what is individual and irreplaceable. A rock or lava does not have individuality, so they are immortal, as well as the kind to which the frog belongs to. Thus, Simmel's death is relative: "...the individual is mortal, but the species is not; looking farther, the individual species is mortal, but life is not; life is mortal, but matter is not. Ultimately, matter may disappear as a special case of being, but being will not disappear"[26].

Thus, only individuals have the maximum ability to die. If an inorganic object (e.g., a work of art) is endowed with individuality, it also becomes mortal to some extent. Simmel compares a broken flower pot with a broken statue. The shape of the pot can be easily repeated, and the kind of pots can be continued. A statue, however, possessing an individual form in its only incarnation, is felt as an irreplaceable loss or death when destroyed. But we are still talking about the loss of an individual material embodiment, not the death of an idea: "On this account we feel the annihilation of the individual as a loss (to speak Platonically) in the realm of ideas, even though naturally the latter (i.e., form) cannot be lost, but only its sole possibility of being realized; and death is thus more fundamental for an entity the more individual that entity is, since this is the real definition of individuality" [27]. Nevertheless, death overtakes the statue only to a certain but not ultimate extent. The shape or idea of the statue is immortal.

The destroyed creation, even if it has not been reproduced after its destruction, remains immortal, as its influence is not limited in time: "the world is enriched for all time by and on account of this element appearing in it at some time or other; the world is (as a whole, and whether known by a consciousness or not) thenceforward that much more valuable than before; and if all its forms of existence should collapse tomorrow, the fact that this now actual thing has occurred, was thought, or were created cannot be made not to happen; it remains a transtemporal, incontrovertible value addition to the totality of existence" [28]. The enrichment of the world takes place not only at the level of the influence transmitted from generation to generation, but here we are also talking about the enrichment with new content that takes place at the eternal level in the realm of ideas, which has already happened.

Thus, Simmel has two types of the immortality of material objects – the "immortality of the kind, matter, life

and being, and another – "supra-historical" - immortality of the ideas and forms embodied in individual works of art, which can themselves be destroyed. Both of them are connected with the definition of mortality as individuality but belong to different worlds – the world of ideas and the world of nature. The ruin as a material object, the form of which is conditioned by the external forces of nature, and not by the activity of the spirit, claims to be immortal of the kind, matter, and being. On the other hand, the material from which the ruin is made is an individual artistic creation, so the destruction of the ruin to an extent of the "unrecognizable handful of stones" leads the ruin to lose its essence, which Simmel assigns to it. Thus, the ruin turns out to be a paradoxical figure. It contains the mortality of the individual and human, but at the same time – the immortality of the idea of artistic creation and the matter of nature. As Coyne Ryan concludes, "The ruin is present and past, living and dead, a product of making and in the process of decay, a sign of mortality and a claim to immortality". [29]

Simmel calls death or destruction of a building under the influence of the forces of nature – a tragedy. Destruction does not come from the outside; it is the realization of the intention, which is contained in the inherent qualities of the destroyed building itself. "For this reason, the ruin strikes us so often as tragic – but not as sad – because destruction here is not something senselessly coming from the outside but rather realization of a tendency inherent in the deepest layer of existence of the destroyed"[30]. The destruction of a building is not meaningless, it is inevitable and therefore the tragic fate of architecture. The ruin is the potential for the future development of architecture and demonstrates the dimension of architecture that is "supra-individual", "supra-historic", "inhuman". It places the essence of architecture in its non-utilitarian use, demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of architecture as a collision of individual death and natural immortality.

V. CONCLUSION

Georg Simmel defines architecture as the art form in a special relationship with the material and environment. It is a specific example of the work of the spirit that reveals nature in itself. This position of architecture conditions its special destructive ability, which is lacking in natural objects such as frogs and rocks, but which also lacks in such works of art such as sculpture or painting. As a result of the abandonment, the building disintegrates and becomes a ruin. It is not the human spirit that has the creative power in the ruin, but nature. The boundaries of the aesthetic object, previously formed by the activity of the spirit, are created in the ruin by "continuous exosmosis and endomosis", i.e. external forces of nature.

The ruin is an excellent way to explore the aesthetic dimension of architecture, as there is no mortal human dwelling in it. Simmel regards architecture exclusively as the work of art, which is created by spirit and nature. Simmel almost completely takes the use of the building by humans out of the scope of his consideration. Murchadha, comparing the Simmel's and Heidegger's approaches to the analysis of space, says that Heidegger's consideration of the ruins from

the point of view of habitat or dwelling gives it a perspective that goes beyond aesthetics. "While Simmel starts with architecture, Heidegger explicitly undertakes the attempt in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" to think building not from the point of view of architecture. In this way, the possibility is opened up to consider ruins from a viewpoint which transcends the aesthetic".[31] But as we have tried to show, the Simmel's ruin is aesthetic precisely because of the fact that at the center of its existence the gaping absence of human dwelling, inevitable death and destruction remains. Architecture is thus an attempt to overcome human death and finiteness of dwelling, but this attempt always ends in failure, defeat in the battle with nature – it ends with the ruin.

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