Ruins in Sir Walter Scott’s Historical Novel: A Case of Diachronic Interpretation of Architecture

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Abstract
In cultural studies of architecture the terms “place” and “performance” suggest a need to consider its particular scope that is not often discussed in architectural history and criticism. As David Leatherbarrow observed in his recent book, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, “So much writing about architecture tends to evaluate it on the basis of its intentions: how closely it corresponds to the artistic will of the designer, the technical skills of the builder, or whether it reflects the spirit of the place and time in which it was built.” We do not require a reminder from a Poststructuralist like Michel Foucault to realize an architectural “place” often outlives its designer and supporting zeitgeist. This postulates a way of thinking on the basis of “performance,” that is, how architecture participates in the meaning of life for subsequent inhabitants and observers.

Architectural ruins present exemplary cases with which to consider questions concerning the diachronic interpretations. While the 1970s’ application of semiotics discussed the architectural multivalence, this paper is not concerned with the change of meaning through time. Nor does it build a Deconstructionist argument for deferral. Instead it will focus on a specific nature of architecture, that which assists in realizing the life’s infinitesimal occupation within the time’s continuum. Architecture then participates in the meaning of life, diminuitizing human existence but at the same associating it to a larger entity of which it partakes.

Each year all over the world tourists flock around ruins from Acropolis to Jerusalem and from Angkor Wat to Machu Picchu, fascinated by the lives of the people who are long gone, displaced for political, cultural, or unknown reasons. The state of ruins clearly presents the distance from the past, while by appreciating ruins one feels close to the bygone era. Architectural ruins then present diametrical relationships between the past and the present: identification and distanciation, to use Paul Ricoeur’s terminology. This paper will trace this function of architecture and identifying its pedigree in the nineteenth century, in which literary authors, artists, and stage managers incorporated buildings’ depictions to feed the historical imagination. In particular, it will discuss the role architectural ruins played in Sir Walter Scott’s historical novel, referring to his *Kenilworth: A Romance*.

Firstly, Scott used actual buildings as the setting, restoring them to the time of the events. The specific names of the building and their parts and their spatial relationships substantiated the story. Secondly, Scott narrated the building’s history, referring to the associated individuals and events, or creating his own nomenclature to give a genealogical meaning. He also described the building’s ornamentations, both actual and imagined, referring to the past. Thirdly, Scott described the architectural styles, in order to give specificity of the time to the story. Architectural descriptions helped Scott bring the story vividly to life. The details of the buildings in which the story’s events take place and the states of the buildings with which to remind the passage of time earned Scott the popularity, and enticed many readers to visit these buildings.

Architectural Ruins
In cultural studies of architecture the terms “place” and “performance” suggest a need to consider a particular scope that is not often discussed in architectural history and criticism. As David Leatherbarrow observed in his recent book *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, “Forces beyond the architect’s control affect architecture’s concrete reality, regardless of what was intended in design. What is more, unforeseen influences also bring about the end of the building’s freestanding individuality.” It is important then to develop the architect’s awareness and interests in the building’s “unscripted performances” beyond what is intended. We do not require a reminder from a poststructuralist like Michel Foucault...
to realize an architectural “place” often outlives its designer and supporting zeitgeist. This postulates a way of thinking on the basis of “performance,” that is, how architecture participates in the meaning of life for subsequent inhabitants and observers.

Architectural ruins present exemplary cases with which to consider the performative nature of architecture. While the 1970s’ application of semiotics discussed the architectural multi-valence, this study is not concerned with the change of meaning through time. Nor does it build a Deconstructionist argument for conflicts of meanings. Instead it will focus on a specific nature of architecture which promotes the observers’ and inhabitants’ interpretation, in which the interpreters understanding the piece of architecture, reflecting on their world and self. Such interpretations are to be distinguished from the type that aims to arrive at the original meaning by the designer and the culture to which the designer belonged.

Each year all over the world tourists flock around ruins from Acropolis to Jerusalem and from Angkor Wat to Machu Picchu. They are fascinated by the lives of the people who are long gone, displaced for political, cultural, or unknown reasons. Ruins entice the visitors’ imaginations because of their physical and metaphysical incompleteness – missing roofs, decayed stones, or the lost way of living that once kept the buildings alive. While some historically significant ruins are designated for preservation by law, some are turned into hotels or other tourist facilities. New buildings also are constructed that mimic the ruins’ appearance but use newly available materials and technology, arguably corrupting the significance of the original building. The physical state of ruins entices the observers to contemplate on the lives of the people who are long gone, displaced for political, cultural, or unknown reasons of the bygone era. The state of ruins clearly presents the distance from the past, while by appreciating ruins one feels close to the bygone era. Architectural ruins then present dimetrical relationships between the past and the present: identification and distanciation, to use Paul Ricoeur’s terminology. It ultimately draws the observers’ attention to their own world and the self, to their infinitesimal occupation within the time’s continuum. Architectural ruins then, diminutize human existence but at the same associate it to a larger and greater entity of which it partakes, associating the observer’s present to the past and the future.

By examining the ways in which architectural ruins contributed to the understanding of the world and the self, this paper will introduce a theoretical stance rarely taken in architectural history and criticism, namely that of diachronic interpretation. The discipline of architectural history always has been comfortable with studying synchronic interpretations, in which the meaning in discussion is of the time of the object’s fabrication. The diachronic interpretation in case of architectural ruins involves meta-history; that is, there are at least two and often three layers of the past – those of fabrication, destruction, and appropriation. As a consequence, a study such as this does not intend to yield further knowledge of the past. The ultimate goal is, however, to understand, first and foremost, the type of architectural interpretation that is a manifestation of cultural creativity.

The performative nature of architectural ruins which connects the observer to his/her past and future is not exclusive to modern times. Throughout history people have made use of the remains of buildings from a distant past, giving a new purpose to what had become obsolete. The reasons for doing so vary from political, religious, and philosophical, to economic and pragmatic, and even to hedonistic. Buildings in ruinous states allow viewers to distance themselves from the political or religious implications of history and at the same time entice them to identify with an imagined and often idealized past. This paper, however, will focus on a case of the nineteenth-century Romanticism, identifying it as the pedigree, in which literary authors, artists, and stage managers incorporated buildings’ depictions to feed the historical imagination. In particular, it will discuss the role architectural ruins played in Sir Walter Scott’s historical novel, referring to his *Kenilworth: A Romance*.

In order to understand the performative nature of architectural ruins, it is helpful to refer to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) and his discussions on “The Hermeneutical Function of
Distanciation.” Ricoeur began the article by rejecting what motivated Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), that is, the opposition between “alienating” distanciation and participatory belonging. For Ricoeur, distanciation is “positive and productive,” and as such not an obstacle but an essential condition of communication. In order to demonstrate this, Ricoeur discusses the nature of the text. He characterized the discourse as an event, as compared to the language as a system. When a discourse turns from speech to a written text, it gains autonomy, away from reference or context that may otherwise give primacy to the original meaning either by the author or the society. What must be interpreted of the autonomous text then is not the original meaning hidden behind it but is “the world of the text” in front of it. Ricoeur goes on to say that such a world of the text is something that “I [the interpreter] could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities.” As such, the text is self-reflective of the interpreter. A third kind of distanciation, while the first being Gadamer’s distanciation to be overcome between the interpreter and the author, and the second being Ricoeur’s own notion of productive distanciation between the author and the text, then is that between the text and the reality, in the sense that through the interpretation of the text, the everyday reality is “metamorphized by what could be called the imaginative variations which literature carries out on the real.”

Architectural ruins promote “positive and productive” distanciation in at least three ways. Firstly, just as the text fixed by writing, architectural ruins like any other built objects have textual autonomy, which separates them from the original meaning. Secondly, architectural ruins carry in their physical properties what Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905) called “the age value.” To compare with his “historical value,” “age value” is based first and foremost on the signs of age by way of natural, or intrinsic representation. It does not rely on the significance of its original purpose or context, on which the “historical value” is based, nor does it require such knowledge from the viewer. Age-value therefore is accessible disregard of the viewer’s education or taste. Ruins’ features including missing parts of the buildings, decayed stones, and growing vegetations indicate the time passed. This is a special quality of architectural ruins, although there can be other non-ruinous building that have the similar value by way of patina or weathering on the building. Thirdly, the obvious lack of any use or purpose of architectural ruins further emphasizes the distance. These three aspects promote distanciation between the original context that necessitated the building on the one hand and the interpreter on the other.

Sir Walter Scott: Historical Fiction
Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), a Scottish poet and novelist, was the most successful writer of his day, both in popularity and critical acclaim. A prolific writer, he invented the literary genre of historical novel, riding on the great wave of the nineteenth-century historical consciousness and demonstrating the understanding of one’s nation through its genealogy. Scott’s novels are different from the earlier, “so-called historical novels of the seventeenth century” including Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto, for which the past was an unfamiliar setting to entice the reader’s curiosities. To compare, Scott’s works provided a “new sense of history and a new experience of historicity,” by incorporating the actual historical events and characters with those imagined for the purpose of exuding the essence of a historical epoch being portrayed. If anything, Scott’s works brought the past closer to the reader.

Familiar from the childhood with stories of the region, Scott published in 1802-1803 Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, a collection of ballads. His original works were first in the form of poetry, beginning with The Lay of the Last Minstrel (1805). Scott then moved onto the prose romance. Scott produced more than two dozens of works drawing from Scottish history, now called the Waverly novels, which include Old Mortality (1816), Rob Roy (1817), and The Heart of Midlothian (1818). Some of his later works deal with English history, of which Ivanhoe (1819) portrays the enmity of Saxons and Normans during the reign of Richard I, and Woodstock (1826) is set in the year 1651 during the English Civil Wars and revolves around Charles II’s escape from the country. Scott was the most successful and greatly admired author of his day, and his works were also great sources of
inspiration in other artistic forms – operas, plays, and paintings – up to 1890s.

In 1821 Scott published Kenilworth: A Romance. It took only four months since he began writing the first words. The story evolves around three historical individuals: Queen Elizabeth, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Queen’s favorite, and Amy Robsart, Dudley’s wife. The first half tells about Amy Robsart staying at Cumnor Place. As Amy decides to visit Dudley at Kenilworth Castle, the story also shifts its place in the second half. Shortly after Amy’s arrival, Queen Elizabeth makes her royal visit to the Castle. Amy encounters the Queen but cannot tell her what she really is because the marriage between her and Dudley is kept secret from Elizabeth in order to advance Dudley’s position in the court. Amy eventually is taken back to Cumnor Place, and there she is murdered by the order of Dudley, who suspects her disloyalty to him. Contemporary reviews, both Scottish and English, praised the work for the “brilliant and seducing” (Edinburgh Review) or “vivid and magnificent” (Quarterly Review, London) characterization of Elizabeth. The book had a great appeal among general readers, popularized the Elizabethan age, and ushered in nationalism.

Kenilworth belongs to the literary genre of historical fiction because it incorporates historical figures and events with imaginary ones. Scott cited a number of antiquarian and historical documents. For example, he identified in the novel Sir John Harrington (1560-1612)’s Nugae Antiquae (London, 1719) as a source of Elizabeth’s character. For the entertainment at Kenilworth Castle, the story also shifts its place in the second half. Shortly after Amy’s arrival, Queen Elizabeth makes her royal visit to the Castle. Amy encounters the Queen but cannot tell her what she really is because the marriage between her and Dudley is kept secret from Elizabeth in order to advance Dudley’s position in the court. Amy eventually is taken back to Cumnor Place, and there she is murdered by the order of Dudley, who suspects her disloyalty to him. Contemporary reviews, both Scottish and English, praised the work for the “brilliant and seducing” (Edinburgh Review) or “vivid and magnificent” (Quarterly Review, London) characterization of Elizabeth. The book had a great appeal among general readers, popularized the Elizabethan age, and ushered in nationalism.

Kenilworth Castle

The information of the building which Scott used for the novel came both from his first-hand experience at the site and from the past documents. Scott visited Kenilworth Castle in 1815, not for the first time, five years before Scott began writing the novel. At the site Scott asked searching questions and spent a couple of hours in contemplation. The Castle of 1815, however, appeared differently from that of 1575. The Castle lay in a ruinous state after the slighting of the mid-seventeenth century.

Scott cited for sources concerning the building in the text Kenilworth Illustrated (1821), and a “curious ground-plan” shown to Scott by Richard Badnall. Although Kenilworth Illustrated was published in 1821, Scott would have had an opportunity to see the plates – there were “fine plates individually dated from 1 February 1820 to 1 December 1821” – prior to the publication, since he is listed among the subscribers of the publication. As to the “curious ground-plan,” the first appearance of the reference to the ground plan is in the 1837, posthumous, edition.

In addition, there are common sources, although not cited by Scott, for the descriptions of the building as it stood in 1575. William Dugdale’s Antiquities of Warwickshire (1656) has three distant views of the castle and a ground plan. Dugdale visited Kenilworth Castle in September 1649, knowing that the slighting is eminent, and there made sketches of Kenilworth.
Wenceslaus Hollar engraved the illustrations in the publication based on Dugdale's own sketches (figure 1). Dugdale's ground plan (figure 2) is the oldest known plan of the building. The second source is *Concise History and Description of Kenilworth Castle* (first edition 1777; second 1781; third 1790, and fourth edition, 1798), whose second and subsequent editions have a ground plan slightly different from that in Dugdale. The “Magnum Opus” edition (1831) of *Kenilworth* also included a similar ground floor plan (figure 3). In fact, the naming and numbering of the buildings that make up the castle complex are identical to those of Dugdale's.

There is a drawing “Kenilworth Castle as it stood in the reign of Queen Elizabeth to illustrate the romance of Kenilworth, 1575,” now in Walter Scott Archive at the University of Edinburgh (figure 4), to which Scott could have had an access. The drawing is extracted from an anonymous work, *Account of Kenilworth Castle: With A Key to the Novel of Kenilworth* (Warwick: H. Sharpe, [182-?]). The drawing is a reproduction of a fresco, which existed in Newnham Paddox, which now is lost. Henry Beighton made a copy of the fresco in 1716, titled “Kenilworth Castle as It Appeared in 1620,” which is now at Aylesford Collection of views of Warwickshire seats, Birmingham Reference Library Archive.

In the eighteenth century, the Castle descended through Hyde successors to Thomas Villiers, who became the first Earl of Clarendon of the second creation in 1776. The Castle remained with the Earls of Clarendon till 1937, at which time it was transferred to the state. By the later part of the eighteenth century tourists began to take an interest, and the first guidebook, *A Concise Guide and Description of Kenilworth Castle* (1777) was published, which was issued in twenty-five editions by the 1840s. In August 1817, just after Scott's first visit (the second one is in 1823) and before *Kenilworth* publication, 30 tons of stone crashed down from the northwest turret of the keep.

The ruinous state of the Castle at the time of Scott's visit can be seen in other documents. A number of drawings show the state of the ruin of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. “Caesar's Tower Kenilworth Castle” included in John Nichols's *The Progresses and Public Processions ...* (1788 edition; figure 5) shows the view from the east, including Leicester's building to the left, the keep to the right, and the Great Hall in the center far ground. *Kenilworth Illustrated* (1821) and *A Guide to Kenilworth* (1825). Additionally, a ground plan figure 6) of the ruin is included in John Britton's *The Antiquities of Great Britain*, vol. 4, 1814, as well as a textual explanation of the state of the building.

### Three Traits of Architectural Ruins

Architectural ruins played a great role in Scott's construction of historical novel, providing means to mark a clear distance between the past and the present and at the same time to give a clear sense of the real to that distant past allowing readers to identify themselves with the past. Scott used two modes in the narrative: one, of the “tale-teller” who portrayed the events, and the other, of the antiquarian who historicized the past. As Scott oscillated between these two modes, architectural ruins supplied a stark difference and the long passage of time between the now observed by Scott the antiquarian and the then portrayed by Scott the storyteller.

Firstly, just as protagonists in his stories were actual historical figures, actual buildings provided Scott with the setting of the novel. The ruinous buildings prompted Scott to restore them the time of the events, which Scott responded by referring to historical documents and his own imagination. The names of the parts of the building are specific, and the spatial relationships between them are concrete, which give substance to the story's events. He referred to the specific names of the parts of the building and the spatial relationships between them, sometimes restoring them to the time of the events and other times describing the state of ruin. For example,

> We cannot but add, that of this lordly palace, where princes feasted and heroes fought, now in the bloody earnest of storm and siege, and now in the games of chivalry, where beauty dealt the prize which valour won, all is now desolate. The bed of the lake is but a rushy swamp; and the massive ruins of the Castle...
only serve to show what their splendour once was, and to impress on the musing visitor the transitory value of human possessions, and the happiness of those who enjoy a humble lot in virtuous contentment.\textsuperscript{16}

Secondly, like that of the monarch and the nation in the narrative, the genealogy to the building helped Scott to imagine the past, by way of the names of historical individuals and events associated to the parts of the building. Scott came up with his own nomenclature to a certain parts of the building, treating the building as a trace of past events. The building’s ornamentations also motivated Scott to relate the building and its past occupants and events, and even to come up with his own to support his imagined story. An example is Saint Lowe Tower, referring to the historical Saintlowes who once tenanted the Castle. Another is Mervyn’s Tower, referring to a figure of Scott’s own creation, whose murder in the Castle foreshadowed Amy’s. Scott also described the building’s ornamentations, whether actual or imagined, that referred to the building’s past occupants and events.

Thirdly, just as manners and costumes of the story’s personalities, the architectural styles of the buildings gave Scott the specificity of the particular time of the story. For example his description of the Castle’s Great Hall reflected the typical style and furnishings of the day:

\begin{quote}
... the Queen … found her way to the Great Hall of the Castle, gorgeously hung for her reception with the richest silken tapestry, misty wit perfumes, and sounding to strains of soft and delicious music. From the highly-carved oaken roof hung a superb chandelier of gilt bronze, formed like a spread eagle, whose outstretched wings supported three male and three female figures, grasping a pair of branches in each hand. The Hall was thus illuminated by twenty-four torches of wax. At the upper end of the splendid apartment was a state canopy, overshadowing a royal throne, and beside it was a door, which opened to a long suite of apartments, decorated with the utmost magnificence for the Queen and her ladies, whenever it should be her pleasure to be private. \textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

In all these instances, both what was present in the architectural ruins and what was missing from them helped Scott imagine and portray the vivid story, lending his work the power to allow the reader identify with the past. The concrete details of the buildings in which the story’s events take place, and the concrete states of the buildings with which to remind the passage of time – these two modes in combination earned Scott the popularity, and enticed many readers to visit these buildings. The weaving of the building’s glorious past and its forgotten present must have been highly effective in enticing the imagination of the nineteenth-century readers.

**Conclusion**

The discussion on architectural ruins has a wider application to that on architectural design in general. While architectural ruins drew the nineteenth-century literary authors and their contemporary readers, there are other types of architectural designs that encourage participatory interpretation in different ways. With Tadao Ando and Peter Zumthor, for example, the observer’s attention is drawn to the few carefully selected and superbly constructed forms and materials. Either through distanciation or minimalism, architecture’s physical properties engage the observers and inhabitants in the participatory interpretation. Thus architecture has a way of contributing to the contemplation on the meaning of life.

**Illustrations**

\begin{center}
Fig. 1: three distant views of Kenilworth Castle, William Dugdale, Antiquities of Warwickshire, 1656.
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Fig. 2: site plan of Kenilworth Castle, Dugdale, Antiquities, 1656.

Fig. 3: ground plan, Scott, Kenilworth, "Magnum Opus" edition, 1831.

Fig. 4: "Kenilworth Castle as it stood in the reign of Queen Elizabeth to illustrate the romance of Kenilworth, 1575," Sir Walter Scott Archive, University of Edinburgh

Fig. 5: John Nichols, The progresses, and public processions, of Queen Elizabeth ..., 1788.

Fig. 6. John Britton, Antiquities of Great Britain, 1814.
The progresses, and public processions, of Queen Elizabeth. ... Now first printed from original MSS. of the times; or collected from scarce pamphlets, &c. Illustrated with historical notes. ... 2 vols. (London: Printed by and for the editor, 1788). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 29 July 2009 <http://0-find.galegroup.com.library.unl.edu/ecco/informark.do?contentSet=ECCOArticles&type=multipage&tabID=T01&prodId=ECCO&docId=CW100450051&source=gale&userGroupName=linc74325&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. Kenilworth Illustrated: or, the history of the castle, priory, and church of Kenilworth, with a description of their present state (Chiswick, printed by C. Whittingham for Merridew and Son, 1821. 11 Edinburgh edition, p. 473. 11 William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* illustrated from records, leiger-books, manuscripts, charters, evidences, tombs, and arms: beautified with maps, prospects and portraitures (London: Printed by Thomas Warren, 1656), Wing/D2479, Early English Books Online http://0-eebo.chadwyck.com.library.unl.edu/search/full_rec?SOURCE=var_spell.cfg&ACTION=ByID&DID=12269225&A-CCO=undefined&FILE= ~session/1248885128_3433&SEARCHSCREEN=CITATIONS&DISPLAY=AUTHOR&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWOR D=param(HIGHLIGHT_KEYWOR D) accessed July 29, 2009. 1730 (second edition): *The antiquities of Warwickshire illustrated; ... with maps, prospects, and portraitures. ... 2 vols. (London: printed for John Osborn and Thomas Longman, and are sold also by Robert Gosling; and William Ratten, in Coventry, 1730). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 29 July 2009 <http://0-find.galegroup.com.library.unl.edu/ecco/informark.do?contentSet=ECCOA%3C%3EArticles%3C%3Etype%3Dmultipage%3C%3E%26tabID%3DT01%26prodId%3DECCO%26docId%3DCW125429304%26source%3Dgale%26userGroupName%3Dlinc74325%26version%3D1.0%26docLevel%3DFASCIMILE>&. The second edition has only the ground plan, and does not have three views of Kenilworth Castle. A concise history and description, of Kenilworth Castle: from its foundation, to the present time. (Kenilworth : printed by S. Thornton, MDCCCLXXVII. And sold by the booksellers in Coventry and Warwick, and at Thornton's printing office, and the principal inns in Kenilworth, 1777). Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 29 July 2009 <http://0-find.galegroup.com.library.unl.edu/ecco/informark.do?contentSet=ECCOA%3C%3EArticles%3C%3Etype%3Dmultipage%3C%3E%26tabID%3DT01%26prodId%3DECCO%26docId%3DCW100065639%26source%3Dgale%26userGroupName%3Dlinc74325%26version%3D1.0%26docLevel%3DFASCIMILE>&. The first edition does not have a ground plan, but the second and subsequent editions do.

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8 Edinburgh edition, p. 473.
9 Robert Laneham, "A Letter: whearin, part of the entertainment, unto the Queenz Majesty, at Kilingworth Castl, in Warwik Sheer, in this soomerz progress, 575, iz signified," (vol. 1, pp. B1-56) and George Gascoigne, "The Princely Pleasures at Kenilworth Castle" (vol. pp. BS6-89) in John Nichols,