

SOCIETY

REJECTING RUIN PORN

THE SOURCE: “Decay and Resurrection” by Paul Dannels, in *Image*, Winter 2013.

IN A CORNER OF DETROIT’S EATON TOWER, A forsaken downtown high-rise, dentistry had never looked so derelict. The debris-covered patient chair, X-ray machine, and instrument table lay abandoned in a 20th-century time warp.

Photographers stumbled upon the

dentist office in the early 2000s. Web surfers lapped up the eerie images, along with scores of others from desolate parts of Detroit. Nothing catches the eye like ruins.

Writing in *Image*, Paul Dannels, an architect in Ann Arbor, Michigan, admits that the pictures can be arresting: “Grand ballrooms where dancers once twirled and courted are now shown reduced to lonely, haunted caverns. Vast, once productive industrial halls are depicted as empty cathedrals of rust.”



TIMOTHY FADEK / CORBIS

The derelict lobby of Detroit’s Lee Plaza Hotel made an eloquent statement about the city’s plight in 2009. But some buildings in the blighted city have found new life.

But the rubbernecking makes Dannels uneasy. “The aesthetic longing to gaze is too close to the less wholesome impulse to gawk,” he writes. “I find myself wanting to defend our cities from the indignity.”

In truth, abandoned buildings are seldom forgotten. “The provocateur engaging a ‘ruin’ with a camera may feel alone, but he isn’t,” Dannels says. “Practitioners of more settled disciplines are watching nearby as well: engineers, development specialists, code officials—and architects, too.”

Dannels is one of those behind-the-scenes guardians. He spends his days prospecting Detroit’s “abandoned historic buildings, poking into the darkness with a flashlight and sifting through debris-strewn floors in boots caked with damp plaster dust.” His job: to trace the source of a building’s deterioration and determine whether the structure can be saved. Investors and restorers ask Dannels for specifics: What would a rescue entail? What materials would it require?

There’s no shortage of huge sites for Dannels to assess. In Detroit’s manufacturing heyday, the Motor City’s belief in perpetual progress fueled an architectural arms race. “Manufacturers determined to outdo one another with their cars naturally sought to do the same with their facilities.”

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But now comes the reckoning. “The many Detroit buildings that lost tenants a generation ago find themselves facing a make-or-break second generation today.”

If they’re left unattended, nature commences the conquest of well-designed buildings in the blink of an eye. Trees sprout on rooftops in just a few years, their seeds carried there by wind and birds.

Dannels reckons it takes two generations for structures to succumb completely. “The buildings your parents remember from when they were your age, if neglected since then, are now at risk of being labeled ruins. And the buildings your grandparents remember, if similarly neglected, may be damaged beyond hope of being saved.”

Holes in the roof or windows seal a building’s fate. In come the elements, corroding steel and decaying wood. “When we allow water into our buildings, nature proceeds deftly about the business of reducing them to dust of a variety of sorts.”

That doesn't deter Dannels—or a wide range of others. “Skilled observers of all sorts recognize elements of value buried behind the rubble,” he writes. “The value may be economic, social, or cultural, but the watchful eyes of both commercial and civic interests are rarely unaware of opportunities in the shifting cityscape of potential.”

Eaton Tower, site of the deserted dentist office, is now a completely renovated apartment complex known as Broderick Tower. “To have once labeled Broderick Tower a ruin seems off the mark, though the building was certainly at risk,” Dannels concludes. “To an unfamiliar adventurer with a camera, it may have seemed lonely, abandoned, and forgotten, but it never lacked attention. Eventually, attention became care, and care kept at least this one piece of our history off of the path to dust.” ■

OBESITY UP IN SMOKE

THE SOURCE: “The Making of the Obesity Epidemic” by Helen Lee, in *Breakthrough*, Spring 2013.

GREEDY PEDDLERS AND PRODUCERS OF FATTY food, beware: American public health advocates have declared war on obesity. Their battle plan: Ban Big Gulp sodas. Tax Oreos, Fritos, and other foods with empty calories. Most important,

shower low-income neighborhoods, where obesity is prevalent, with farmers' markets and supermarkets full of fresh fruits and vegetables.

It's a progressive foodie's dream. But Helen Lee, a researcher at the New York City-based social policy think tank MDRC, argues in *Breakthrough*, an online journal, that the antiobesity crusaders have adopted a flawed strategy. Public health experts are trying to fight fat the way they fought smoking—by blaming big business and unfavorable environments for a problem that, in reality, starts and ends with individual behavior.

The fat fighters warn that obesity is an epidemic, as if it were an infectious disease. Fudging definitions, they imply that some 60 percent of Americans are obese. The real rate is 34 percent.

Of that group, morbidly obese people run real health risks. But they constitute only four to six percent of the population. “For everyone else, obesity is not a disease but rather a risk factor.”

To rally public opposition to bloated waistlines, advocates consciously mimic the antitobacco model of the 1990s, under which activists attacked cigarette companies for preying on young consumers and blamed the industry for encouraging nicotine addiction.