

City & Society
Forum

Ruination, Remaking, Return: A Conversation on Re-built Environments

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Introduction

On a windswept peninsula in Southern Iceland, an American naval base is being re-made. First, barracks were tentatively re-branded as apartment buildings. Then, the fast food restaurants built to serve American soldiers found new Icelandic owners, and management, and menus. But soon, weirder and more wildly imaginative transformations took hold amidst the ruins of the former base: a holding company converted the community center into a business incubator; foreign investors reclaimed storage hangars as data centers. And in one of the eerier transformations, a local woman repurposed an arsenal – weapons drops still visible – into a ballet school.

First built during the Second World War as a landing station between the U.S. and European front, then expanded over the course of the Cold War, the U.S. Naval Station Keflavik (NASKEF) was long considered a bastion in the North Atlantic, a pivotal hinge extending American empire. But when the Pentagon’s threat map shifted, it decommissioned the base in Iceland, leaving behind a plateau full of facilities. These leftovers posed an open question to NASKEF’s neighbors, former employees, and administrators. For many living in and near the former NASKEF, this process of transformation was at first cautiously hopeful: a reclaiming of space in the wake of occupation, the emergent promise of something that might be made their

own. And yet, the project keeps stumbling upon setbacks, encountering rough edges from the past that seem to catch.

One municipal planner involved in transforming NASKEF laments, frustrated, that people still call the area “the old base.” “The old cafeteria, the old motor pool – you cannot call yourself ‘the old something’!” he cries. “Doing this keeps you in the past.” But no matter how hard he’s worked to re-brand the facilities, I too notice, during my research in the region, that Icelanders here still call them what they once were. Just as I notice that many continue to move in relation to the base security fence, long since demolished: an echo of military place-making that persists, amidst new developments meant to move past it. By the end of our conversation in his sunny Reykjavik office, even the forward-looking municipal planner has fallen into the very habit he’s been disparaging: using “the old” to refer to the new.

The fraught project of re-imagining NASKEF evokes the multifaceted work of re-building, and the recalcitrance of what remains. Re-building efforts have long been of interest in anthropology, albeit distributed across a range of sites and theoretical conversations. For example, anthropologists have “de-naturalized” disaster, drawing out the systemic inequities and entanglements that channel the impact of [catastrophe](#) and circumscribe specific possibilities of [repair](#). They have interrogated projects of “[urban renewal](#)” and [gentrification](#), elaborating the racialized and classed dispossessions and displacements such processes often turn upon. They have theorized the re-built environment as a manifestation of colonial entrenchment (Rodman 2001), as well as a potential site of decolonial [resistance](#). And they have explored the processes

by which re-making ruins as memorials or “heritage” (Gordillo 2009) gives present weight and prominence to particular stories of the past.

Considered together, these diverse fields of inquiry illuminate a set of questions that this *Forum* aims to further explore: What does it take to render a space available for re-building; what does it mean to make a blank slate? How is the right to re-building distributed, and who is excluded from re-making place? How are potentials for continuity and change materialized? And what is the affective impact of return?

The conversation that follows, *City and Society*'s third *Forum*, is inspired by Elana Zilberg's 2002 article, [“A Troubled Corner: The Ruined and Re-built Environment of a Central American Barrio in post-Rodney-King-Riot Los Angeles”](#). By tracing the contested re-making of one street corner – from a figure of urban destruction post-uprising, to a symbol for local calls for community development, to a zone of intervention for the interlocking logics of privatization and security – Zilberg demonstrates how re-building became a political imperative, but unfolded in a way fundamentally antithetical to neighborhood residents' well-being and requests. Here, we take her prescient article as an opening, model, and motivation for reflecting upon problems of ruination and rebuilding today.

The contributors to this collection do so by performing their own kind of return. In line with the mission of the *Forum*, these authors were asked to engage in a dialogue with an article published in *City + Society* since its inaugural issue in 1987. Whether updating a debate, drawing out a continuity, or complicating the conversation on the re-built environment, the essays presented in this *Forum* reflect upon original research by building in some way on a previously published

work. In doing so, they both illuminate longstanding threads of interest, and intervene in urgent political problems.

Manissa Maharawal's contribution opens the collection with the question of how ruins are put to political use. Considering courtroom practice in the 2017 "J20" trials of protesters demonstrating against Trump's inauguration, Maharawal argues that the "ruined" built environment – here, the broken windows at a BP gas station, a Starbucks, and an Au Bon Pain – is positioned as "the affective site of fear, violence, and chaos." It is then used to widen the net of participants deemed responsible, and repress political action in urban public space. Drawing on Elana Zilberg's analysis, Maharawal suggests that in the context of the J20 trials, the "ruined" built environment was strategically figured as a fragile entity, yet exercised its own destructive power.

Nick Caverly's essay next reflects on the aftermath of disaster, by following activists engaged in the politics of rebuilding in post-hurricane Puerto Rico and post-industrial Detroit. Revisiting Roberta Goldman and Anthony Oliver-Smith's account of reconstruction after an earthquake, Caverly illustrates how, in both Detroit and Puerto Rico, after-disaster efforts dispossess residents and deploy capital along deeply racialized lines. At the same time though, Caverly's account cautions against analyses of aftermaths that foreclose their ongoing possibilities, instead proposing "'remade' built environments as sites for the ongoing production of spatial politics rather than as their accomplished results."

Kristina Lyons also engages with Goldman and Oliver-Smith's article, but extends their insights in a different direction. Following a local call to consider a major disaster in Mocoa, Colombia

not as a flood, a landslide, or an avalanche but as rivers reasserting their “memory,” Lyons explores the role of other-than-human entities in the post-disaster re-making of place. In doing so, her piece charts the “repetitive cycles of construction-deconstruction-and reconstruction,” and corresponding displacements that have shaped Mocoa, and argues that the multiple violences impacting people and landscapes there have been, and continue to be intertwined. Rebuilding efforts then, in order to do justice, must do more than merely “manage” rivers – they must take into account their memories.

Finally, Nayrouz Abu Hatoum’s contribution takes up the everyday, “informalized” building practices of Palestinians living on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Drawing on Asef Bayat’s concept of “survival by repossession,” Abu Hatoum characterizes Palestinians’ building efforts, often disrupted and sometimes demolished by Israeli authorities, as a “constant re-making of their urban space and re-establishing presence in the city in the face of dispossession and displacement.” In doing so, she brings re-building into focus as an iterative practice and sphere of political action, in a context not only of discrete disaster, but of ongoing colonial and neoliberal imperatives.

Taken together, these pieces offer a window into the complicated (material and affective) work of re-building, as well as the multiple potentials of return. As the authors in this forum elaborate, re-built environments are richly layered spaces, where social orders are entrenched and contested, and conflicts of access, ownership, and belonging come to the fore. But as these essays also emphasize, re-building is rarely a bounded phenomenon, with a clearly delineated start and end. With this observation, the following contributions widen the scope of what we

might recognize as re-building as they offer tools for making sense of, and participating in, these processes.

This *Forum* is presented in the spirit of conversation: between field sites, past and present research, and members of our community. We look forward to continuing that conversation with you.

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