RETHINKING RUINS: Exploring Canadian Approaches to the Conservation and Management of Urban Heritage Ruins

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PROJECT CONTEXT

Despite efforts to conserve and maintain Canada's historic urban environments, ruins exist all around us as potentially significant heritage resources. Urban areas are continuously exposed to shifting social, environmental, and economic conditions. Ruins exist as physical reminders of these changes and are by no means exempt from Canadian urban landscapes. Heritage buildings and structures can become ruins through abandonment, obsolescence, or disaster. On the other hand, ruins can also become heritage resources. For example, many industrial ruins have only recieved an official heritage designation decades after their decomission.

The purpose of this capstone is to explore Canadian approaches to managing heritage ruins in the urban envrionment. In doing so, this research demonstrates the breadth of management possibilities currently being applied in the Canadian context and enables a greater understanding of the benefits, challenges, opportunities, and barriers associated with managing ruins in the built environment.

KEY DEFINITIONS

HERITAGE:

Buildings or structures that have been assigned a municipal, provincial, or federal heritage designation.

RUIN:

"A place that currently, through abandonment, redundancy or condition, is disused, …usually no longer maintained, and appears [emphasis added] unlikely to regain its original or a substantive use, function or purpose other than interpretation" (Australian Heritage Council, 2013, p. 9).

Ruins can be either:

Largely intact abandoned or vacant heritage buildings/ structures

or

Fragments of heritage buildings/structures

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Ruins are **not recognized as a distinct type of heritage resource** in heritage management documents. **References to ruins are minimal and scattered throught the documents.**

- **Heritage designation criteria are largely able to accommodate the unique aesthetic, age, historical, and cultural values associated with ruins.** Winnipeg emerged as the only city that does not include designation criteria that is capable of attributing aesthetic value to ruins without being dependent on their physical integrity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1 What approaches have been adopted concerning the management of urban heritage ruins in Canada?

2 What benefits, challenges, opportunities, and barriers are associated with the different approaches to managing urban heritage ruins?

3 To what extent is the management of heritage ruins recognized in (municipal, provincial, and/or federal) policy documents across Canada?

KEY FINDINGS

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- Interview findings revealed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing heritage ruins in the Canadian urban context. Not only can management considerations be contradictory, but interviewees sometimes had differing opinions on management approaches and their associated benefits and challenges.
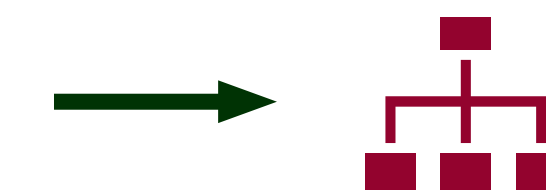
Key Opportunities

- Interviewees noted that ruins may provide an opportunity to re-examine historical and cultural significance of these sites in a manner that is inclusive and respectful of Indigenous and immigrant communities that have been suppressed and/or oppressed in heritage built environments.
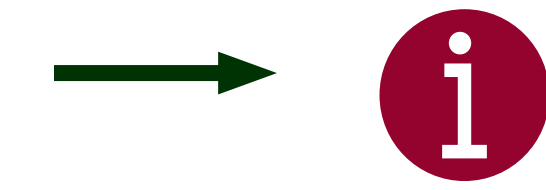
E.g. **Adaptive reuse** and redevelopment in a collaborative and decolonized manner or **complete removal** of traumatic ruins.

- Interviewees suggested traces of age, wear, and decay can be incorporated into the adaptive reuse of ruins when a building's period of abandonment/decline is considered important but leaving a building or structure as a ruin is not possible due to safety, economic, and heritage conservation concerns.
- For ruins earmarked for future development, establishing temporary uses during the time between abandonment and redevelopment offers an opportunity for connections to be maintained and further deterioration to be slowed.
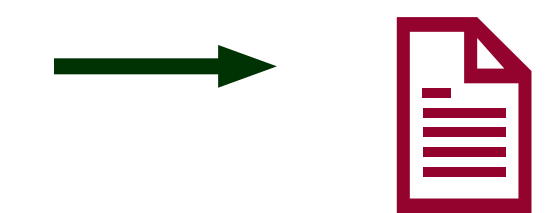
RESEARCH METHODS

TYPOLOGY - A sample of 16 Canadian urban heritage ruins were collected and sorted into management types and sub-types.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS - 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Canadian heritage professionals (heritage advocates, municipal heritage planners, and heritage consultants).

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS - 7 Federal, provincial/territorial, and/or municipal documents were analyzed to determine to what extent heritage ruins are currently included in 1) heritage designation criteria and 2) heritage management documents.

A sample of 6 Canadian cities guided data collection for Q1 and Q3:

- Toronto
- Montreal
- Vancouver
- Calgary
- Winnipeg
- Saskatoon

TYPOLOGY

Considered heritage conservation

Toronto, ON — Transformation

Guelph, ON — Stabilization

Revival through **active management**

Subtypes:
- Adaptive Reuse
- Restoration

- No subtypes

Not considered heritage conservation

Montreal, QC — Continued ruination through **minimal or non-existement management**

- Planned Regeneration
- Neglect

Victoria, BC — Removal from the environment through **demolition**

- Complete removal
- Facadism

- The typology showcases that ruins are abundant in the Canadian context. Although the application of different management approaches may decrease their visibility or alter their state, their existence is not negated.
- Three overarching types of management approaches were identified concerning ruins: **active management**, **minimal or non-existent management**, and **demolition**.
- The management types were further divided into 6 subtypes.

CONCLUSION

Urban heritage ruins are highly complex heritage resources. Managing ruins requires considering various contextual factors that are hard to define and evaluate. Increased guidance on ruin management should be incorporated in heritage management documents. Guidance should include both heritage conservation principles and planning principles. This approach will help ensure ruins are managed in a way that balances the economic, social, and environmental needs of Canada's urban areas.