

The Poetry in the Ruins of New York

By RANDY KENNEDY



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Because New York City is so efficient at consuming its own past in the name of progress and profit, its ruins tend to

Unintentional art in the city: A wall of the St. Patrick's Old Cathedral cemetery on Prince Street.

hold the allure of rarities. Rome it will never be: a handful of abandoned subway stations; the crumbling [old hospital buildings on Ellis](#) and Roosevelt Islands; the Parachute Jump in Coney Island; Admiral's Row at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which will join the roster of ruins extinct when most of it is leveled this year to make way for a supermarket.

I understand the attraction to these things, but I've always found myself drawn to a slightly different and even more endangered category of urban wreck, the kind that somehow manages to stagger around bravely and haphazardly in the netherworld between failure and functionality. It's the type of place the artist [Robert Smithson](#), one of the 20th century's great connoisseurs of decay, seemed to be thinking of when he spoke about "entropic architecture" or "de-architecturization."

"Ruins melt and merge into new structures," Smithson said in an interview in 1973, the year he died in a plane crash, "and you get this marvelous and energetic juxtaposition occurring — with accident a large part of the whole process."

De-architecturization comes to mind every time, in my job as an art reporter, I head to the New Museum,

walking east along Prince Street toward the Bowery. Suddenly, between Mulberry and Mott Streets, there it always is again, dominating the entire north side of the block: the Wall. My body feels it almost before my eyes see it. The grid of Manhattan is thrown into stark relief because here the grid takes a strange, brief break, torquing and twisting, looming and leaning, like a [Richard Serra ellipse](#).

The wall, of weathered red brick reaching 10 feet high, divides the street from the cemetery of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, and over the many decades since it was erected by the church in the 1830s, gravity and the elements have done more to try to pull it down than any of the 19th-century Nativist mobs it was designed to withstand ever did. I've watched people, as they stroll along its length, teeter unconsciously toward it or away from it, depending on where they are in what the cathedral's pastor, Msgr. Donald Sakano, calls the wall's "weaving nature."

The great comic twist here is that this wall was declared a landmark along with the church in 1966, and so, at great expense and care, the church has worked to buttress and preserve [the old bricks](#) in all their majestic un-straightness, frozen in the act of falling.

Most of the other places on the list of functional ruins I keep in my head have no such guarantee. Just down the street from where I live in Park Slope, there's the [Brooklyn Lyceum](#), a bona fide heap of a place, an old public bathhouse reborn in 2001 as the kind of cultural center a Fluxus artist would have loved, with serious concerts, baseball batting cages, experimental-film festivals, children's birthday parties, Shakespeare, dog shows, roller skating.

Walking by it for years on my way to the subway, I've seen plywood flapping in the wind where windows should be, and shrubbery sprouting from cracked cornices near beautiful old terra-cotta medallions in the form of Neptune's trident. A while ago a colleague of mine played Mozart wind octets there with his classical music collective before a good crowd. When I passed the other day, the chalkboard near the front door shouted: "Warriors of Wrestling! Tonight!"

There is really no place like it. It reminds me of a line from a Denis Johnson short story, in which the narrator works in a nursing home and says of one of the worst-off residents: "He was completely and openly a mess. Meanwhile the rest of us go on trying to fool each other."

Though the building itself has been declared a landmark, the Lyceum now faces foreclosure because of millions of dollars in liens. The space's proprietor, Eric Richmond, trying to rally support, has [cannily wielded](#) two words as a specter of the building's possible tidier future: Duane Reade. In other words, another same-old chain store. And the disappearance of another place probably too crazy for its own good, but good for a city that, like all truly great cities, must have a measure of craziness to continue to feel alive.

My feeling about the disappearance of such places is not based on nostalgia or a moral aversion to the dominance of money in New York. It's about interest: the fear that my mind and eye will stop being interested, stop expecting the unexpected, the weird, the things that make the city jump, if too much of it blends into a uniform retail blur.

The importance of the unintentional was brought home recently when I went to see "[After Affects](#)," an exhibition organized by the [New York Foundation for the Arts](#), featuring pieces by artists whose studios and homes were hit heavily by [Hurricane Sandy](#). Instead of throwing out all their water-and-mud-damaged work, these artists kept some of it and declared the ruins completed works or made new pieces from them — not as mementos of their perseverance but as things made more interesting by entropy, chance and life.

"I don't want to say this for others, because I know people lost houses and loved ones," said Ryan Foerster, whose house in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, was flooded with three feet of water, soaking years' worth of his photographic work, "but after a while I started looking around the house and thinking, 'Oh, my God, this is a gold mine now.'"

The show, which runs through Sunday at 303 10th Avenue, between 27th and 28th Streets in Chelsea, includes large photographic prints that were once images of Mr. Foerster's friends but that now look like Gerhard Richter squeegee abstractions rescued from a saltwater swamp.

"I'm interested in things that are out of my control but maybe not completely out of my control," Mr. Foerster said. "At first I thought about them as ruined, but now I'm not sure that's what really happened. It's just one way of looking at it."