“Allegory is the armchair of the modern”¹

Postulating the city as a dynamic, imaginative site where the primal, archaic and the “new” experience slide around each other in utter indistinguishability, “Allegorical Cities” suggest that these experiences may be negotiated through the “ruined” condition generated by the allegorical way of seeing. The “ruined” condition is a dialectical and critical perception of the transformative potential of objects and experience beyond their visual and immediate content.

This dissertation first endeavors to map out a framework of the inherent mechanisms of allegory which when traced over the nature of commodified space reveals the second framework, the otherside – the “ruined” space of commodity. It is in this mental “ruined” space that the inhabitant gains an ambivalent perception of the archaic with the “new” effaced as the modern experience in the city. With this second framework, it gains a foothold of reading multiple “layers” in the city, which subsequently challenges certain notions about the mental perceptions of architecture in the city.

For this reason, the “city texts” of Baudelaire and Benjamin are scrutinized and dissected in this dissertation, so as to assimilate the capacity of the “ruined” perception on the nineteenth-century Paris, which was deemed as the modern capitalistic city of that era. In the ensuing polemic, certain contextual urban spaces from which they derive their writings are noted as potent in provoking such perceptions. The ultimate purpose of this exercise is to re-trace the limits (boundaries) of this second framework wherein certain relationships between the “ruined” condition and the architecture of the city are perceived as reciprocal. Consequently, Giambattista Piranesi’s architectural plan of Rome is used to overlay, interweave the “city texts” of Baudelaire and Benjamin. Through this collision, the second framework draws out the architectural potential in the “ruined” spaces of commodity. This same framework is then hypothetically used to test the possibilities and limitations of the “ruined” condition in today’s city context.

In doing so, this dissertation submits to the reader that the term “ruined” condition should not, in any way, sound as if to condone a nihilistic inclination. On the contrary, the endeavor is to reveal a positive affirmation in the ability to perceive the many varied and often at times contestory relationships within the city and thereby challenging certain notions about architectural production in the city and what it means to live within it as inhabitants. Herein lies the strength of the “ruined” condition in relationship with the city. This paper concludes by presenting the “ruined” condition as a fissure, which opens up the imagination to multiple other narratives in the re-conception of urbanism.

¹ Walter Benjamin, “Central Park” in “New German Critique No. 34, Winter 1985; pg, 32.