Ruins are everywhere. In Asia, aspirations for socio-economic development have led to the rapid transformation of the environmental, social and economic landscape. Led by a diverse range of local, national and international actors these transformations have informed the creation of new forms of ruins and ruinations, the disintegration of recognizable forms whether they be material, ideational or institutional. From ruined environmental landscapes, abandoned industrial estates, derelict housing estates, failed infrastructural projects to political disruptions, economic breakdowns and cultural disintegration, ruins are ubiquitous and varied in their manifestations. Ruins produce long-term effects and affect societies and individuals in expected and, often, unexpected ways. Therefore, these ruptures and their afterlife call for a wider conceptualisation of ruins that locates their materiality within wider social, political and economic contexts.

O bjects and institutions generate social effect in their preservation as well as in their destruction and disposal.1 Thus, what we allow to disintegrate, to fall into ruins, is as powerful an assessment of our collective lives and histories as those objects and institutions we preserve and allow to flourish. Although sites of ruin and ruination can be ambiguous, unmoored from their present surrounding, they seldom remain dormant, often giving rise to new spatial and social conglomerations, new networks and infrastructures, or creating yet another ruin. Despite the apparent inertia around ruins, they are dynamic and act as metaphors for the ruptures and transitions at different stages of the socio-political history of a place or a people. Relocating ruins and historical processes of ruination to the past, therefore limits ways of engaging with and understanding the world. Ruins can tell us much about the present, as they can of the past. In the Focus of this issue of the Newsletter we concentrate on the social, political and economic ‘afterlife of ruins’ that have emerged from the structural fallout of rapid cycles of industrialisation and abandonment, urban growth, infrastructural development, modern state building and conflict in Asia where the “present has not moved too far from the past and the future is at best uncertain”.2 Through an engagement with ruins of the past as well as the present, the processes of ruination and their impacts on people living amidst these ruins, we aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of development and change underway in Asia.

Agency of ruins
Ruins can be both objects and/or processes and a deeper understanding of the afterlife of ruins necessitates an interrogation of the wider entanglements and the actors that produce them. This in turn makes ruins and ruinations an important, albeit often neglected, vantage point through which to explore the various temporal and spatial interconnections between political/economic institutions, the cultural/historical structures that enable its proliferation and the people living and sometimes, creating these ruins. In ruins, the processes of decay and the obscure agencies of intrusive humans and non-humans transform the familiar material order disturbing the orderly, “purification of space”. It blurs boundaries, both spatially as crumbling structures colonise their immediate surroundings and temporally as they articulate the overlaying of temporalities.3 While it is important to consider the function of these ruins prior to the decay and eventual disintegration, the impact of ruins goes beyond the “mulch of matter which profanes the order of things and their separate individuality,”4 to affect people, their lives and their interactions in the world. The afterlife of ruins draws our attention towards the changed socio-economic realities that groups and individuals are suddenly faced with, the different contestations that emerge as a result of scarcity of resources, the new aspirations for the future that sometimes fuel ruinations (see Woodworth in this issue) and the aftermath of abandoned futures. In understanding ruins, the linearity of the past or events is upstaged by a host of intersecting temporalities that collide and merge,5 enabling the emergence of different or conflicting narratives. Thus, while ruins may be a way of reflecting on the past, the failure of political institutions or the breakdown of economic systems, they can also be used to challenge and/or re-consider the ways of engaging with the dominant narrative. Focussing on the afterlife of ruins and ruinations, therefore offers different perspectives into the conditions, negotiations, challenges and vulnerabilities that have emerged as a result of accelerated development in Asia. Furthermore, these introspections can offer insights and can act as either critical counterpoints to complicate and critique received historical narratives or as a platform for alternative, marginalised histories.

Reading space, society and history in Asia through its ruins

Mona Chettri and Michael Ellenberg

Ruins can tell us much about the present, as they can of the past. In the Focus of this issue of the Newsletter we concentrate on
Ruins are ruins precisely because they are considered without meaning, value or importance in the present. They become relevant only when their disintegration affects some aspect of our lives. While some ruins are preserved and refilled for their spatial form and/or history of suffering and resistance, others are abandoned, allowed to decay as simultaneously a reminder of the past and of the impossible future (see Hvenhovens in this issue). However, the ruination of landscape, culture, livelihoods or identity usually re-vegetates in different, sometimes unexpected ways, to affect notions of belonging, history and identity. Ruins can prove especially contentious in terms of the unexpected ways, to affect notions of ‘vital re-configurations’ of the institutions, which reminds us, it is important to see ruins not as mechanisms of the relationships between the “utopian promises and dystopian actualities”. However, modernity can also be understood as a repetitive cycle of ruination and renewal, which usually takes on different forms at different periods of history.

Ruins are always ruins of something and thus, the sites of modern ruins and ruinations discussed here are imbued with histories of former ruination through the assemblage of colonisation, frontier making, capitalist resource exploitation and conquest, war and state-building. As the papers highlight, modern ruins in Asia are often built on the structural and political re-configuration of pre-existing cultural, political and economic dynamics under conditions of globalisation and state-led neo-liberalisation policies. Ruins can be both ‘fast’ (created through abrupt transitions like war, natural disaster or economic crisis) or ‘slow’ (sinking into ruin more gradually, side-lined by socio-economic transitions or incrementally abandoned).

In Asia, ruins and ruinations exemplify how both these conditions can often co-produce one another. Thus, for example, the Partition of India in 1947 led to the creation of a ‘fast’ ruin of the border and border governance, which in turn led to the ‘slow’ ruin of traditional cultural and livelihood patterns of border communities (see Meena, and Lal & Lepcha in this issue).

The contributions

Spanning across different borderlands from Indonesia to Abkhazia in Eurasia, the contributors to this Focus investigate the diversity of ruins in Asia and show how the materiality of ruins also eventually become boundaries themselves; signposts that separate the past from the present; tangible markers between nation-states, cultures and people. The contributions are all the result of extensive fieldwork and focus on modern ruins where agencies of decay and deterioration are still active and formative, and thus bring to light the experiences of ruin and ruination, the aspirations and eventual abandonment and, finally, how people make peace, albeit an uneasy peace, with the ruins amidst which they live.

Thomas Mikkelsen analyses the booming shrimp-farming industry and the active creation of new ruined ponds by both human and non-human actors (mud crabs, in this context) in the frontier landscape of coastal North Kalimantan, Indonesia. The success of the shrimp-farming industry has transformed large swaths of these low-lying coastlines from mangrove forests to a dense network of shrimp ponds. However, the creation of these ponds has led to new forms of economic transactions, demographic changes and the unexpected interaction between people and the salt-water crabs, who too are active participants in the creation of this ruinous landscapes. Through these ruined ponds and the role of the saltwater crabs, Mikkelsen weaves colonial history of Indonesia with the cyclical nature of ruins and new forms of resource extractions and inequality. He shows how “productive ruins” are being co-produced by human and non-human actors and becoming part of larger international supply chains of luxury commodities.

Neha Meena focusses on the changes in the livelihood and cultural identity of nomadic groups in western Rajasthan (India), post the Partition in 1947, the subsequent India-Pakistan wars and the developmental strategies of the Indian state in the early 1980s. The end of cross-border mobility and introduction of settled agriculture has completely reshaped the identity of these groups and Meena traces these ruins of pastoralism through discarded walls and camel markings, which symbolised a culture and a lifestyle that is now on the decline. Like Mikkelsen, Meena illustrates how these new ruins are a by-product of colonial history, state-building and the adaptive abilities of those living amidst these ruins. For example, this similar theme is explored in cultural change and ruptures, Uttam Lai and Charlima Lepcha discuss the abandoned ruins of Charlima Lepcha, which has emerged in recent years as the geography of development and the resultant renewal of political agency in the borderlands of North Kalimantan (Indonesia). Hargyono illustrates how agro-industrial development at the margins of the state, and for making the border the ‘front-yard’ of the nation, have been built on hope and aspirations for a better future that have led to the creation of new ruins.

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Notes
5. Ibid., Edenius, p.318

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http://projects.au.dk/risezasia/about-research/