RUIN REVIVAL IN ANTIGUA GUATEMALA:

THE INTERPRETATION, INTEGRATION AND ADAPTIVE REUSE OF A FALLEN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MASTERPIECE

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ABSTRACT

The city of Antigua Guatemala, founded in 1543, was the seat of Spanish colonial government for the Kingdom of Guatemala, which included present day Chiapas (southern Mexico), Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The full title bestowed upon the city was Muy Leal y Muy Noble Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Goathema1a, that is, the "Very Loyal and Very Noble City of Saint James of the Knights of Guatemala." Built 1,500 meters above sea-level in an earthquake-prone region, the city was largely destroyed by a series of earthquakes in 1773, although its principal monuments are still preserved as ruins. It is these ruins and its preserved and carefully restored Spanish colonial public and private buildings which create a particular style of baroque colonial architecture unequaled in the Americas.

In the space of under three centuries the city, built on a grid pattern inspired by the Italian Renaissance, acquired a number of superb monuments. One such monument, the Church and Monastery of La Recolección, is a massive complex dating from 1717 today preserved as a ruin. Plans for its presentation to the public are underway, and the Consejo para la Protección de Antigua Guatemala, the council in charge of all restoration works within the city, has contemplated the construction of an art museum on the site. The museum is intended to exhibit works from the Guatemalan Contemporary Art Movement—which includes the so-called Grupo del 20, the Grupo del 40 and the Grupo Vertebra—as a response to the recent status of the city as the nation’s most prominent cultural and artistic hub.

This led to the following thesis question: How do you interpret and integrate a ruin through additions? The challenge was applying these findings and incorporating them into the design of the museum. For my thesis research, I analyzed different case studies in order to represent the various ways in which additions address ruins, integrating them, changing their original use and reinserting them back into the urban fabric while maintaining their importance and revealing their history. Case studies include the Mill City Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Hedmark Museum in Hamar, Norway; the Castelvecchio in Verona, Italy; the Tea House at Montemor-o-Velho, Portugal; and the Restaurant La Centrale in Beirut, Lebanon. The significance of the Church and Monastery complex of La Recolección was examined, first of all providing a description and detailed history of the City of Antigua Guatemala, analyzing its urban design, its stylistic periods, its methods of construction and its destruction. Secondly, a descriptive history of the complex was elaborated, alongside a thorough analysis of the site and a conditions survey of the existing structures. The importance of the complex to the city and the need for a Contemporary Art Museum in the area was evaluated. The primary goals for this research were to help me develop a solid design concept as well as a successful method of approaching and engaging the ruins through additions, giving them a newfound use while emphasizing their aesthetics, meaning and history.