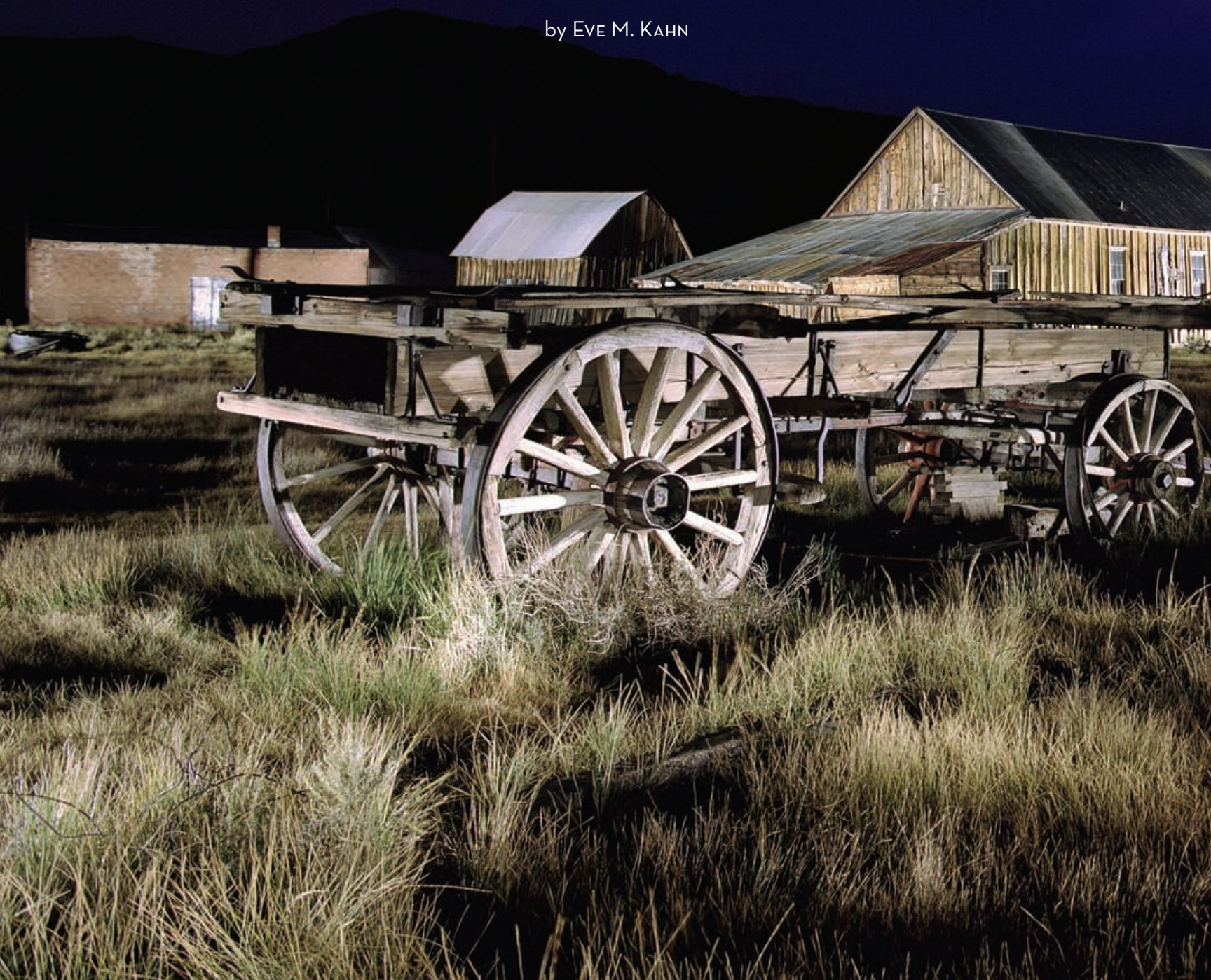


ARRESTED DECAY

Curating a Moment in Time

by EVE M. KAHN



Ruins form every time technologies requiring vast architecture go obsolete, or civilizations abandon remotest edges of settlements or deplete land beyond habitability or give up on streets devastated by war or natural disaster. The sheared and eroding walls used to be considered stockpiles of building materials: much of ancient Rome, after all, was assembled from chopped-up fragments of ancient Greece.

Not until the Renaissance did artists and poets start pointing out the poignant thrills of leaving ruins intact and in view. As the French historian Michel Makarius points out in *Ruins* (Flammarion, 2005), a survey of changing attitudes towards decayed architecture, fifteenth-century humanists discovered “the picturesqueness of ruins, which affords a species of delectation that neither nature left to its own devices nor human ingenuity can arouse in isolation: coming across a heap of once proud dross, where ivy and bramble vie with crumbling stone, in which a tree, a hill, and the sky

beyond peek through holes in a dilapidated wall, we sense a surreptitious whiff of the genius loci.”

The twenty-first century has given rise to a new and especially evocative species of ruin: one that has been permanently frozen in mid-disappearance. High-tech mortar and waterproofing potions now enable field crews to prop up walls bereft of plaster or roofs, and preservation dogma encourages such delicate interventions rather than costly, Disney-esque replications of lost monuments. Tourists are flocking to the snaggletooth, heart-stirring result: a moment in history’s march, writ large, in limbo.

Some of these ruins have found their way into WMF’s working portfolio before the needed preservation work has been carried out; each presents its own set of challenges. We asked five caretakers of stabilized ruins worldwide to describe why and how they maintain their landmarks, as well as how they keep visitors from taking home temptingly loose parts as souvenirs. ■



1998 Watch Site

CHUCK FELL, PARKS MAINTENANCE SUPERVISOR

Bodie State Historic Park, California

OVERSEES: Bodie, Calif., an abandoned 1860s mining town with stores, offices, and homes, all full of abandoned artifacts

ON BATTLING DECAY: “From May or June to October every year, we send out crews who live at a campground or in converted old houses near the site, they’re called permanent intermittent employees. A lot of them are just enthusiastic kids in their teens and 20s, led by a skilled person. The goal every year is to keep things from falling down, and to start and finish something in a season. We’ll focus on one structure at a time, or break up the crews to take on smaller projects. We use some modern materials, like pressure-treated lumber and concrete, and we’ll create foundations where there weren’t any. Often we leave the historical material visible beneath the repair. We’ll scab on or sister on an identical board for a structural member. For sheathing,

we just put on a whole new layer, or else you’d end up with too many layers of patches. We have a huge supply of rough-sawn pine with the same circular-saw kerf that was used originally at Bodie. And the original roofs here were mostly either cedar shingles or flattened three-gallon tin cans. We can replicate the shingles fairly easily, and for the cans we take the same gauge sheet metal and crimp it into the pattern of the cans. This past season we focused on finishing the Wheaton-Hollis Hotel, putting on a couple of new roofs, and building a new wooden storage structure tucked away to protect some artifacts that aren’t displayed. The 2004 winter was a real bear, we had hard damage. Like any state agency, we never have enough money, enough people, enough time, but we’re as effective as possible within those limitations.”

ON SOUVENIR HUNTERS: “Sometimes they take pieces of broken glass, or try to pry out the old cut nails. You never know what tourists will want. But most of our visitors are pretty respectful.”



2004 Watch Site

VICTOR SHMYROV, DIRECTOR

The Gulag Museum, Perm, Russia

OVERSEES: Perm-36, a 1946 Soviet prison camp-turned-museum in the Ural Mountains

ON BATTLING DECAY: “There were 25 wood or concrete buildings here originally, and 22 remain now, and we also have the barbed-wire enclosure. Two buildings are used now as administrative offices for a hospital, they’re in relatively good condition and we are in the process of reclaiming them. Some of the others are in very poor condition, but none of them needed reconstruction from foundation to roof, just refurbishment. The museum’s building brigade has restored ten buildings so far and it makes repairs year-round; volunteers started working here in 1997, when most Russians still did not want to know or remember what had hap-

pened at the camp. Our staff has 38 people now, including nine researchers. Visitors are shown all the buildings, whether survived or destroyed, and there is a museum devoted to the history of this camp and the whole history of the Gulag in the U.S.S.R. We plan to reconstruct the larger and more important buildings first—the workshops, the administrative headquarters—and save the smaller ones for later—the checkpoints, the exercise grounds. We also have to take care of some of the original workshop equipment and some beds and tables in the barracks. Our budget is \$300,000 a year. Half comes from the government regional administration, and half comes from donors. It’s not quite enough—if it were a bit bigger, we could enlarge the museum, expand our programs, and make repairs more quickly.”

ON SOUVENIR HUNTERS: “It is forbidden, and there are guards that would stop you.”

THOMAS MEYER, ARCHITECT

Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota

OVERSEES: Washburn A Mill, a National Historic Landmark abandoned in 1965, burned in 1991, converted in 2001 into a flour-milling history museum run by the Minnesota Historical Society

ON BATTLING DECAY: “The city had just started looking for redevelopment ideas before the building burned down, and no developers were showing interest because the interior was so deep and dark. The fire created a kind of atrium. We helped advocate for the shell to be preserved as a ruin. We showed city officials pictures of partly occupied ruins in Europe, going back to Piranesi. There’s a real melancholy charm and fascination to them. We think ours is the only occupied ruin in the U.S. It’s supported on all sides: by a new building where our offices are, plus some small, attached, old lean-to buildings that didn’t burn, a massively strong grain silo, and a new internal

steel support. The ruin walls are quite a soft limestone, and the freeze-thaw cycle here is murderous on them. We removed the softest stones from the top, put down a plastic layer, and then replicated the removed stones in cast concrete, which covers the top of the wall and binds it together structurally. On the rest of the masonry we used conventional tuck-pointing. Every ten years there’ll be a need for a cycle of maintenance, a close examination, and a lot more tuck-pointing.”

ON SOUVENIR HUNTERS: “The most reachable part, the interior of the courtyard, is only accessible when the museum’s open, so there are eyes on it, and there’s nothing easy there to break off anyway. It’s an acoustically wonderful space, as it turns out, and it’s become quite a popular place for jazz concerts, parties, weddings. Adjacent to the ruin is a classroom in a former boiler room. We tried to leave peeling plaster and lath there, but it kept shedding, and the kids kept picking at it, so we had to strip it back to a more stable condition.”



MICHAEL MORRISON, CONSERVATION ARCHITECT

New Zealand Antarctic Heritage Trust

OVERSEES: Sir Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod Hut at Cape Royds, Antarctica, a 1907 timber prefab at the foot of a 4,300-meter-tall active volcano, near ruins of a latrine and pony lean-to

ON BATTLING DECAY: "The fir timbers got saturated in saltwater during the trip over in 1908, and now they're eroded by fungi, fiber defibrillation, UV rays, and 30-kilometer-an-hour wind blasts of salt spray, ice crystals, and volcanic ash. Shackleton's men stacked provisions all around the walls for insulation, it was two years' supply for ten men in plywood boxes of tins: beans, sugar, salt, brands you'd recognize like Tate & Lyle Golden Syrup, Colman's Mustard, Bird's Custard, plus some nasty chemicals—stove oil, motor fuel, carbon chloride. The boxes are made of an Estonian plywood called Venesta, and the external ones are pretty seriously perished. When the temperatures rise above freezing between December and February, the uppermost tins get wet enough to corrode. If they end up freed from the permafrost lump, they simply blow away, a long, long way.

They can endanger wildlife. Inside the hut we have to deal with hundreds more artifacts: books, clothing, papers, timber bunks, a cast-iron stove, bits of an Arrol-Johnston motorcar.

"The U.S. Navy made some temporary repairs with tarps after World War II, they recognized its iconic status, and later work was done by volunteers at the Scott Base nearby. In the early 1990s a pale gray rubber roof was put on—it's inappropriate and looks terrible. We're figuring out how to replicate the original coal-tar roofing felt. We're not going to rebuild what's gone, we won't recreate the latrine or put in a restored motorcar. Consolidating the artifacts we have is going to be a fantastic palaver, and jolly expensive. We may set up a temporary generator-powered conservation lab on skids at Scott Base that can be dragged over sea ice to Cape Royds, and maybe we'll take the really problematic pieces to a lab in Christchurch."

ON SOUVENIR HUNTERS: "Fortunately, it's extremely difficult to get there, and visitors are closely supervised. There was some souveniring long ago, mostly for museums; there are Shackleton artifacts at the National Maritime Museum in London and New Zealand's Canterbury Museum in Wellington."



2004 and 2006 Watch Site



PETER ROMNEY, DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority

OVERSEES: An 1830s Australian timber station turned isolated penal colony, shuttered since 1877 and savaged by fires twice in the 1890s

ON BATTLING DECAY: “This was designated a historic site and came under government control in 1916, which was very early for preservation in Australia and in fact early for the preservation movement anywhere. But by that point a lot of material had been removed by locals building their own houses—the government and the public wanted to pretend the penal colonies had never existed. The fires had left everything with a haphazard outline, and whatever buildings that had more or less survived the fires—a number of houses, an asylum, a model prison—underwent a fair bit of reconstruction early on. Now the emphasis is on conservation; the philosophy is, do as much as necessary, and as little as possible. We cap the ridges of the ruins with low-cement mortar, to prevent water penetration and to keep vegetation from getting into the mortar joints. We will report,

and if a brick gets to the point that it’s only fragments, we will use another brick. And our largest building, a penitentiary, which is basically a shell, was braced with a steel and timber internal structure in the 1970s. We’re planning to put in a new steel architectural solution, possibly with sound and projected images—it’ll be unmistakably a contemporary overlay. In the longer term, we may have to place roofs over some of the roofless structures. Roofs like that are tricky to design, they do tend to overwhelm the ruin, but it’s something we may have to come to terms with as an essential protection.”

ON SOUVENIR HUNTERS: “People pick at the surfaces, they’ll take home fragments of wallpaper. It’s inevitable that you’ll get some damage with 270,000 visitors a year. In fact we’re thinking about opening an exhibit of returned material—bricks and stones that people took years ago and felt at the time they weren’t causing any harm, but as the profile of the site has risen as a cultural icon, they’ve realized they’d removed something important. We get a steady trickle of pieces in the mail. Sometimes people tell us they’ve had terrible luck since they’d taken it, and feel liberated from a curse upon returning it.”