

Abstract:

Dixie Square Mall is a contested symbol, representing both an unwelcome reminder of economic stagnation and a dynamic space for unscripted exploration. The structure, particularly in light of its unfolding demolition, possesses abundant potential to generate fresh thinking regarding the value of ruined space. This curatorial project, comprised of an exhibit, catalogue, interviews and essays, will gather diverging perspectives surrounding the contemporary ruin, critique the practice of urban exploration, and decode the ritual of demolition.

Project Proposal:

The razing of Dixie Square Mall recommenced on February 16, 2012. Illinois's governor diverted several million dollars in federal disaster relief money to fund the demolition, despite an absence of concrete plans for redevelopment. The process should be completed by July, leaving the Chicago suburb of Harvey with a sprawling brownfield.

Perhaps the country's best-known dead mall, the 800,000 square-foot structure has lain vacant for over thirty-two years. During that time, it has undergone a dramatic decomposition, attracting a devoted contingent of urban explorers, artists and photographers. As written and photographic accounts of DSM visits have accumulated, its appeal has deepened, luring an even wider range of visitors into its disordered interior.

At the same time, local leaders have been agitating for the redevelopment of the site, and a number of aborted demolitions punctuate DSM's bizarre history. The media have largely echoed the notion that DSM is simply an eyesore symbolizing the economic decline of the South Suburbs, and that Harvey's citizens have endured its presence for far too long.

Because its unique status elicits several opposing viewpoints, Dixie Square Mall and its ongoing demolition provide the impetus to gather current critical thought on the value of ruined space and the nature of the postmodern city. Using the established template of the gallery exhibition, accompanying catalogue of images and essays, and a short video documentary, this curatorial project will function both as a survey of creative work inspired by DSM, and a look at what might lie ahead for the contemporary ruin.

More than fifteen years after Camilo José Vergara proposed that parts of downtown Detroit be preserved as a "skyscraper ruins park," it's time to reconsider policies and prejudices that prevent contemporary ruins from living out their days as dynamic examples of entropic decline. Is there room in the post-modern city for ruined spaces to remain in contradistinction to the scripted, highly ordered spaces that surround them? Underlying this project will be a critical examination of the value Dixie Square Mall accumulated during its life as a ruin: the symbolic roles it served and varied experiences it generated.

Criticism of urban exploration has emerged on the grounds that the profusion and aestheticization of ruin images has fed passive consumption within the genre. If it is possible that the average urban explorer enters such places for the thrill of transgression and emerges with little more than the empty picturesque, then we must actively engage with these critiques. Attempting to avoid the risk of simply fetishizing abandonments, a DSM exhibition will ask how the accumulated cultural capital of ruins could be harnessed to subvert the systems that create them.

Because of its highly publicized nature, the razing of DSM invites a closer look at the demolition spectacle itself. A ritualized marker of progress and renewal, the demolition can be read as an attempt to assuage frustration and hopelessness among Harvey residents. Will the demolition in fact buoy spirits within the community, or will this sentiment prove transient and hollow? By decoding the mythology surrounding the demolition ritual, the project will attempt to sap these spectacular events of their persuasive power.

If awarded, the Edes Prize would fund a DSM exhibition, including the commissioning of essays, the securing of photographs and archival materials, the publishing of the catalogue, and other expenses associated with exhibition. It would represent the artist's first major project within the curatorial sphere and position him as a significant thinker at the intersection of art and urban exploration.

Possible inclusions

Visual material:

- Selections from Brian Ulrich's *Dark Stores* photo series (2009)
- Christopher W. Luhar-Trice's *Dixie Square Project* (2008)
- The Center for Land Use Interpretation's *The Best Dead Mall in America* exhibit (2003)
- Dead malls design competition hosted by the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design (2002)
- Archival materials from the mall's construction and heyday
- Broadcast news clips announcing major developments in the plans for DSM
- The artist's own video work, completed while at the University of Chicago (2008)

Essays and interviews, including perspectives from:

- Tim Edensor, author of *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (2005)
- Steven C. High, co-author of *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (2007)
- Will Foster, Berlin based multidisciplinary artist, curator and co-initiator of *Wasteland Twinning*
- John Cunningham, Author of *Boredom in the Charnel House: Theses on 'Post-industrial' Ruins*
- Kerstin Barndt, Associate Professor, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan

Edes Prize 2012 Work Sample DVD for B. Tracy

Total running time: 5m 20s

The Last Days of Dixie Square

October 2010

2m 30s

Originally a Kickstarter project video. Voiceover has been removed, leaving a backing track recorded inside a disused industrial water tank in Davis, CA. This piece offers a sampling of the artist's documentation of Dixie Square Mall.

AMARG [excerpt]

May 2011

2m 49s

Shot April 20, 2011 at the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group near Tucson, AZ. Audio recorded on location.