

**Maura Finkelstein. *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, pp 264.**

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**Introduction**

What narratives can the deteriorating and collapsing remnants of past industrial sites reveal? Once bustling hubs of mass work, these sites now exist as ruins, a silent archive of a vanished world. In what ways can we read these archival remnants? Maura Finkelstein contends that ruins ought not to be seen merely as symbols of loss, but instead should be read as traces that offer fresh perspectives on contemporary urban landscapes. Although the Dhanraj Textile Mill in Mumbai has been shut down for a long period, the book, *The Archive of Loss*, aims to reveal the stories that persist within the remnants of its ruins. In her book, Finkelstein provides a useful conceptual and methodological framework for examining these “living ruins” (p. 6).

Ruins have often been aestheticised as “privileged sites of reflection” and “icons of romantic loss” (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> Finkelstein, however, advances a critical conceptual shift from the notion of ruins to that of ruination, emphasising the latter’s active and processual character. Rather than viewing ruins as static remnants of the past, she conceptualises “living ruination” to foreground the “ongoing, embodied, and material processes through which imperial and industrial debris continue to circulate across temporal and spatial registers” (p. 6). In this sense, ruination is not a condition of decay but a “dynamic process that redistributes the fragments of industrial and postindustrial life, linking disparate moments, sites, and bodies” (p. 20). This analytic framing— from ruins to ruination— opens a generative space for Finkelstein to study the

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 9. Also See, Gastón Gordillo, *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.

legacies of industrial capitalism and imperialism within the textures of contemporary urban existence.

In the book, Finkelstein employs an ethnographic method to examine the ruins of the Dhanraj Textile Mill. The ethnography reveals how the mill's remnants; its machines, former workers and their bodies, and their living quarters, all form a dispersed, multisensory archive. Finkelstein looks at these scattered traces to challenge traditional ways of understanding archives. She shows how ruins can help us understand the lasting connections between the materials and politics of life in post-industrial cities.

### **The Living Archive**

At its peak in the early 1960s, the city's fifty-eight textile mills employed over 600,000 workers and played a crucial role in a global production network that supplied cloth to various parts of the world. Among these, the Dhanraj Textile Mill was a key player. Over time, the textile industry began to decline, particularly in the 1980s, primarily due to a decline in global textile demand. Moreover, the Great Textile Strike of 1982–83 had a severe impact on the entire industry and the operations of textile mills, such as Dhanraj. All this resulted in over 600 acres of the Dhanraj Textile Mill, situated at the heart of Mumbai, being underutilised.

Additionally, the colonial-era zoning laws had left the textile mill land issue unresolved, resulting in an urban planning deadlock. To make better use of the land, the state's 1991 Development Control Rule (DCR-58) proposed a one-third allocation of mill land for open space and low-income housing (p. 10-12). However, a legal dispute limited public access to the mill's land. In 2001, a new law favoured mill owners and reduced public access to just 6-10% of the total mill space. Local activists viewed this as a missed chance to improve Mumbai's population congestion problems and its lack of green spaces. By the early 2000s, mounting real estate prices and ongoing court cases had slowed any further redevelopment efforts.

Today, the Dhanraj Textile Mill is a good example of 'living ruination.' It is a space that is both neglected and functional, stuck between decay and 'latent vitality' (p. 14). For Finkelstein, the ruined building serves as an affective

reminder of how industrial remnants continue to influence the urban experience through unresolved material, legal, and emotional entanglements.

### **Locating the Vitality within the Ruins**

One of the key methodological interventions Finkelstein makes in the book is her treatment of the archive as both an object and a method. She presents the archive as a living, ‘ethnographically constructed assemblage’ as opposed to a static repository of documents. To narrate the story of the ruins, Finkelstein develops a material-affective methodology that weaves together oral histories, spatial ethnography, photographs, and the persisting informal economies within the ruins of the mill. Alongside these materials and tangible remnants, she carefully includes sensory residues, such as pain, rumours, and embodied suffering, as legitimate archival matter. In doing so, she expands the epistemic limits of historical evidence by treating the affective and sensory residues as legible historical evidence. The result of this inclusion is a book that foregrounds absence, decay, and invisibility as constitutive elements of urban memory and historical knowledge production.

Apart from the introduction and epilogue, the book is organised into five separate chapters: The Archive of the Mill, The Archive of the Worker, The Archive of the Chawl, The Archive of the Strike, and The Archive of the Fire. Each chapter functions as a distinct yet interconnected site of inquiry into Dhanraj’s afterlife beyond the mill’s closure. In this book review, rather than summarising each chapter/archive, I focus on three material-affective registers that Finkelstein uses in her book to help us understand the story of Dhanraj Mill. These three registers are in the form of three chapters: the mill building ruins, the worker’s body, and the chawl space. Together, these registers effectively illustrate the central themes of the book, which are living ruination and the vitality of the ruins.

In chapter 1, “The Archive of the Mill,” Finkelstein answers the question of why the ruins are still alive, despite the structure of the mill being demolished. Here, she takes two intertwined yet contrasting narratives—the lived experiences of the mill workers and the narratives surrounding the mill land narrated throughout the city. These two different narratives reveal how absence is produced. Despite the official discourses rendering the mills empty,

this chapter demonstrates how these accounts overlook the labour, memories, and lives that continue to thrive within them. The juxtaposition of the narratives uncovers a “trail of industrial breadcrumbs that vitalises the abandoned stories of the mill” (p. 32). Through these narratives, she contests the processes of erasure that structure Mumbai’s postindustrial transformation and reframes the mill as one of the sites of lively ruination rather than abandonment. The chapter reveals the absence of active social and economic worlds that are often obscured by dominant narratives.

Further, in her effort to trace what endures of Dhanraj, Finkelstein turns from the visible ruins of the mill to the invisible archives of the body, specifically to the former workers’ accounts of endurance, pain, and persistence. In Chapter 2, “The Archive of the Workers,” she shifts from the mill’s ruins to fleshy ruins by locating the archive within the flesh of labouring bodies. Here, the worker’s body becomes an embodied repository where decades of mechanised labour have left their marks as aches, scars, and habitual gestures. The workers have been turned into ‘industrial cyborgs’ (p. 63). Drawing heavily from feminist cyborg theory, Finkelstein conceptualises this corporeal archive as one carried under the skin, where history circulates through sensation, repetition, and muscular memory rather than textual documentation.<sup>2</sup> By attending to these sensory and material continuities between body, machine, and environment, Finkelstein uncovers a subtle, embodied historiography inscribed in the tissues and reflexes of those who continue to carry the industrial past within their bodies and everyday life.

Just as the embodied pain continued to haunt the mill workers, the chawl space where they lived and socialised continued to mark the landscape as enduring traces of the industrial past. In the chapter, “The Archive of the Chawl,” Finkelstein delves into a suspended temporality through the ‘living biographies’ of the workers (p. 88). The chawls, she argues, function as an inhabited archive that stores the sensory memory of the industrial labour and collective existence. Through this, Finkelstein reveals how deindustrialisation produces temporal suspension rather than progress: the rhythms of labour, social ties, and built forms endure beyond the factory’s end. Drawing on her

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<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81.

notion of “queer time,” she frames “chawl time” as an alternative temporality that resists the linear narrative of the modern, rapidly growing city (p. 94). By tracing these continuities, Finkelstein exposes the uneven temporalities of Mumbai’s post-industrial transformation and challenges the linear idea of urban progress.

Across all the chapters, Finkelstein’s core contribution is to help us “learn to see what remains” (p. 26). Her primary objective throughout the book is to identify “vital remnants in the perceived absence of the visible,” uncovering a sense of vitality within the ruins (p. 188). As an ethnographer–archivist, she reads and discovers the multiple forms of archives not just to uncover history but to collide alternate times—linking Dhanraj Mill’s industrial past with the dominant narratives of the city’s present and planned futures—and alternate spaces, from the mill’s quiet interiors to the metropolis’s bustle.

### **An Affective Archive**

Within the broader trajectory of her argument, Finkelstein reimagines the archive as extending beyond a collection of documents, encompassing affective and sensory registers. She does not ignore the ephemeral and the affective traces attached to the textile mill; instead, she considers them as vital, ‘living forces,’ capable of telling alternate stories of the urban landscape.<sup>3</sup> Such a work broadens the scope of historical inquiry and expands where archives may be located and how they can be interpreted.

Her anthropological approach to the archive goes beyond textual analysis by engaging with the sensory and affective dimensions of history. It understands the archive as a social and affective construction that continues to affect the individuals in the present in different forms. Within this view, the past does not end with the construction or closure of industrial sites, but endures in spaces and sensibilities that outlive physical decay.

While Finkelstein does make an essential contribution by expanding the scope of the archive through her anthropological approach, her method has

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22. Here she describes the archive not as a neutral storehouse but as a charged force field shaped by colonial anxieties and affective registers.

limitations. Throughout her book, she engages with both the material and affective forms of archives. However, her traditional archives, such as mill ledgers, colonial documents, union reports, and municipal plans, remain primarily illustrative rather than systematically in conversation with the affective archive. Such a treatment limits deeper debates on industrial policies and urban changes, which further restricts the historical intervention in the matter. Nonetheless, the work would be helpful for students, especially those working in contexts where formal archives are scarce or fragmented.

### References

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