

**EXCAVATIONS OF URBAN-
CINEMATOGRAPHIC RUINS: images of defunct cinemas between
ruinophilia and technostalgia¹**
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extinct cinemas between ruinophilia and technostalgia**

TALITHA FERRAZ²

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Keywords: Urban ruins 1. Street cinemas 2. Technostalgia 3.

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on initiatives to produce and share photographs—whether professional or amateur—of the ruins of defunct street cinemas on the social media platform Instagram. These records capture the *decaying remains* of these spaces, now consigned to oblivion, technological obsolescence and the obliteration wrought by capitalism and the media industry. We analyse how these photographic perspectives document the effects of time, human neglect and urban transformations on neglected cinematic heritage.

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These images are created in contexts in which collective cinematic leisure facilities are disappearing for reasons which, whilst appearing specific to each case, form part of global mechanisms linked to changes in the technomedia, commercial and urban role of the cinema, as well as to the reorientation of its role in the everyday sociocultural life of audiences in the 21st century.

We refer to the experiences studied as *works of photographic excavation*, in reference to the way in which Walter Benjamin (2012) elaborates the notion of ‘excavation’ in the fragment ‘Excavating and Remembering’, from the work **One-Way Street**. From a Benjaminian perspective, excavation means turning over the soil of memory, meticulously sifting through it to unearth fragments and traces of a buried past. The aim is not to restore them to a whole or simply to catalogue them, but rather to examine them under archaeological scrutiny in the present. These excavations take place through the interaction of *photographer-explorers* with ‘urban-cinematic ruins’ (FERRAZ, 2025), a term we have previously used in earlier publications to refer to ruined buildings that were once associated with the screening and viewing of films and with the forging of social bonds marked by cinematic elements.

We shall therefore highlight the excavation work undertaken by three photographer-explorers. The images of disused, ruined cinemas they have captured are shared on their Instagram profiles – accounts linked to the growing popularity of artistic, academic, tourist and media initiatives, amongst others, centred on ruined spaces that are now being scrutinised and depicted due to the allure and fascination they evoke.

The subjects of our investigation are the profiles ³ : 1) “Days before the cineplex” (@beforethecineplex), by amateur photographer and enthusiast of the architectural preservation of cinema palaces, Michael Reischmann; 2) “Cine Maghrib” (@cinemaghrib), by photographer and visual artist François Beaurain, a researcher into the historical cinematic heritage of

³ For the sake of providing a broader overview, we mention here other relevant examples: the work of photographer Philip Jablon (@phil_jablon), author of the book “Thailand’s movie theatres: relics, ruins and the romance of scape” (River Books, 2019), the result of 10 years of research into cinemas in Thailand; the Instagram profile Chasseur de Cinemas (@chasseur_de_cinemas), run by Patrick Levieux, who photographs cinemas in European and Asian cities; the documentation of abandoned cinemas in India by Hemant Chaturvedi (@sankidude.cinemas); and the photographic series by Stephan Zaubitzer (@stephanzaubitzer), author of the book **Cinés Méditerranée** (Building Books, 2022).

Morocco; and 3) “After the final curtain” (@afterthefinalcurtain), by photographer Matt Lambros, a specialist in abandoned cinemas in the USA.

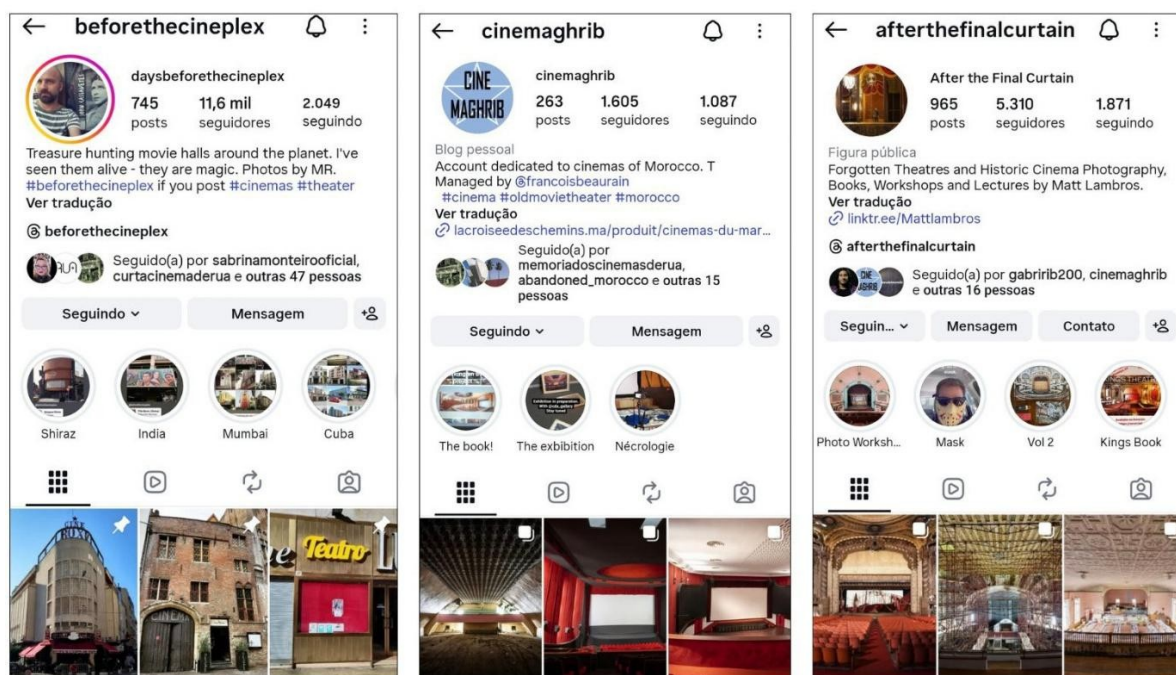


FIGURE 1 – Instagram profiles of the photographer-explorers analysed SOURCE – INSTAGRAM (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/>)

These works are similar in their archaeological and documentary orientation, which guides the creators’ approach. According to their own accounts during conversations we had via email, WhatsApp and Instagram chat, their work generally involves active searching, careful exploration and a meticulous approach to the spaces they visit. In this sense, the works echo what Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (2014) refer to as ‘photographs of ruins’, that is, visual representations of decaying sites that mediate our direct engagement with the materiality and temporalities of things.

Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014) draw a parallel between ‘photographs of ruins’ and archaeological photography, arguing that they are not merely passive documentation but rather an interaction that emphasises the ‘self-presence’ of objects and the sensory experience that takes place between the site and its explorer. For them, this type of photographic practice is not limited to scientific recording and the treatment of the image as a piece of evidence. On the contrary, it is an interactive performance and an affective investigation, in which the camera does not simply ‘take’ a photograph: it ‘interacts’ with the ruin and its context. (PÉTURSDÓTTIR and OLSEN, 2014, pp. 8 and 14).

Next, we shall discuss primarily concepts such as ruin, nostalgia, ruinophilia and technostalgia to underpin the analysis of these cases. We shall introduce the idea of ‘urban-cinematic ruins’ (FERRAZ, 2025), situating it within debates on post-industrial ruins in the contemporary world. We will then focus on an appreciation of the exploratory work carried out by these photographer-explorers, at which point in the article we will reflect on the particularities of their creations in the light of concepts of memory and nostalgia applied to historiographical studies of the cinema.

2. On the subject of urban-cinematic ruins

What are ruins? Something dilapidated, undoubtedly, something that has collapsed. But not every collapse is a ruin. In our perception of ruins, we sense something that is not there, a guest who has departed: someone has just left when we enter, something still lingers in the air, and something has also remained. (ZAMBRANO, 2016, p.216).

The physical deterioration of a cinema and its transformation into a ruin corresponds, first and foremost, to the erosion of its symbolic vitality. The demise of old cinemas, historically situated on streets and in squares around the world, not only exposes the loss of the architectural presence and integrity of buildings dedicated to film screening, but also compromises a whole range of ‘complex aesthetic affections’ (FERRAZ, 2025, p.92) that constitute the corporeality of these spaces and link them to the production of subjectivities and incorporeal universes, which, in turn, constitute, inhabit and permeate cities and people.

The closure and subsequent ruin of a cinema confront us with *that which still hovers in the air*, as mentioned above by the author María Zambrano (2016), perhaps due to the immediate suppression of ‘(...) its capacity to bring together existential territories, to act in the interests of productive appropriations of urban space, to foster the blending of othernesses, and to create diverse atmospheres, images, sensations and emotions.’ (FERRAZ, 2025, p.92). In this article, we conceive the notion of cinema ruins precisely through their connection to substrates where temporalities, sensibilities, memories and heterogeneous narratives intersect.

When we reflect on urban-cinematic ruins, we enter a realm where decaying materiality merges with virtual strata of unrealised pasts and futures, with the promise of what might have been... but was not. Consequently, it is common for frustrations and ruminations to arise regarding this irreparable loss. This is because, in bygone eras,

such facilities served as landmarks within the built landscapes of cities, playing an important role as spaces for leisure, socialising and the formation of bonds of identity.

This brings to mind the thoughts of Andreas Huyssen (2014, p. 91), when he states that the result of the combination of temporal and spatial desires evoked by architectural ruins is, precisely, nostalgia. Huyssen argues that in the contemporary world we are witnessing the collapse of the promises of modernity and, at the same time, experiencing a ‘fever for ruins’ characterised by an appreciation of, and the proliferation of, representations of the wreckage of past eras. It could be said that ruins evoke a nostalgia not only for the past, but also for an idealised ‘alternative future’ (HUYSEN, 2014, p. 93); that is, a future which, although it never materialised, formed part of modern societies’ expectations of progress.

If modern ruins trigger nostalgia, it is because they bring us face to face with the shards of what has been lived, with traces of past experiences. That which still remains carries within it a temporal dimension that is not confined to the past, nor does it conform to a historical conclusion or linearity that can be grasped in its entirety. Adopting Benjamin’s perspective,

The past can only be grasped as an irretrievable image, suddenly illuminated at the moment of its recognition. (...) To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it ‘as it was’. It means seizing upon a memory (*Erinnerung*) when it emerges like a flash of light in a moment of danger. (BENJAMIN, 2025, p.62)

Against the backdrop of urban-cinematic ruins, the nostalgia associated with encounters with the remnants of former cinemas is capable of provoking a critical inquiry into these fragments, with the aim of reflecting on the mechanisms, constraints, conventions, prohibitions, coincidences and arbitrariness that shaped the past of these screening venues and their socio-cultural, urban, cinematic and commercial contexts. To what extent does this still permeate and shape the present?

Returning to Huyssen’s position on the intimate relationship between architectural ruins and nostalgia, we recall his reference to Svetlana Boym’s (2001) notion of ‘reflexive nostalgia’: ‘We yearn for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our era: the promise of an alternative future. This nostalgia for the ruins of modernity can be called reflexive (...).’

(HUYSEN, 2014, p. 93). We start from the premise that the nostalgia for urban-cinematic ruins embodied in photographic performances excavating defunct cinemas is not confined to an ode to the reconstruction of mythical space-times of the past. It therefore differs from the ‘restorative nostalgia’ conceptualised by Boym (2001):

For the nostalgic restorer, the past is a value for the present; the past is not a duration, but a perfect snapshot. Furthermore, the past must not reveal any signs of decay; it must be repainted in its ‘original image’ and remain eternally young. Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. *Re-flexion* suggests a new flexibility, not the restoration of stability. The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived as an absolute truth, but on reflection upon history and the passage of time. (BOYM, 2001, p. 49, our translation)⁴

We validate the perception of urban-cinematic ruins through an awareness of their historicity, since ruins, far from being a univocal figure, presuppose the interplay of different durations, which arise from hybrid and intermittent space-times.

Indeed, the ruin does not possess a single – clearly defined – temporality or geography; it exists on another plane, a sort of ‘free zone’ composed of various layers, which, once (re)appropriated by those who see or interpret it, begins to take on meaning. A sort of threshold, a zone – both inside and outside at the same time – marked by the tensions between the imaginary and history. What is at stake when one looks at these vestiges of what once was and is no longer, of a fractured world, is the process of construction/imagination rooted in reflection on the remains one has before one’s eyes. (PETERLE, 2016, pp. 243–244)

We understand that ruins confer a character of immanence upon virtual strata of the past, which are accessible through indicatory means, such as the exercises of memory, the imaginary and the vestige– which, for Benjamin, is the ‘(...) emergence of a proximity, however distant that which left it may be’ (1989, p. 226). Ruins are also rooted in the present, where their meanings are (re)organised into discourses, uses and experiences by contemporary generations, who at times extol them and at others neglect them.

⁴ In the original: “The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. Moreover, the past is not supposed to reveal any signs of decay; it has to be freshly painted in its ‘original image’ and remain eternally young. Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. *Re-reflection* suggests new flexibility, not the re-establishment of stasis. The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the mediation of history and the passage of time.”

Furthermore, as discussed above, it is possible to reflect on ruins in the light of impressions of futures that have not been realised, have been postponed or are still awaited, and which remain in a state of latency. There is, therefore, an intrinsic polysemy to the meaning of ruins, which will always correspond to the contexts of the construction and deconstruction of historical, sociocultural and political values in the societies that produce them.

When we situate ruins within the contemporary context, it is pertinent to bear in mind that they call into question the image of a world guided by the prospect of eternal progress, challenging claims that certain spaces conform to conventional models of capitalism or exposing tensions inherent in exclusionary urban planning⁵. They have the power to make us aware of the finitude of large-scale urban-industrial projects, bringing a counter-hegemonic character capable of pointing to both the collapse of the structures of the modern dream and the failure of segregating neoliberal solutions in the production of spaces and forms of social interaction today.

Some authors (SANTOS and SPADONI, 2022; SOUZA and SANTANA, 2022) refer to this type of ruin as *'post-industrial ruins'*, highlighting that they reveal the obsolescence of former productive infrastructure and the transformation of territories into areas of social, cultural, economic and environmental neglect. Contemporary ruins arise from processes of disinvestment and systemic abandonment, in which certain urban spaces are transformed through new scales of urban occupation, socio-economic marginalisation and new logics of spatial planning.

As Mayara dos Santos and Francisco Spadoni (2022) point out, the continuous transformations of cities produce their own ruins. There is an erasure of past experiences shaped by individuals within built spaces as other forms of appropriation take place within the urban fabric, symbolising the transience and finitude of value systems and the original functions of buildings, streets, etc.

In the very same world where settings for accelerated consumption are erected and where social dynamics find a home in algorithmised virtual environments, voids are created in the concrete fabric of cities that capitalism is unable to reabsorb. Following this

⁵ Here, we do not emphasise ruins resulting from wars, natural disasters or environmental catastrophes. We do not draw on authors who address cases of ruins from the Second World War or contemporary conflicts such as the widespread destruction and genocide perpetrated in Gaza by the State of Israel. We focus on the concept of contemporary or postmodern ruins through the lens of the post-industrial landscape, considering urban and media transformations.

In this vein, Santos and Spadoni (2022) highlight two reasons for the ruinification of urban infrastructure:

(...) the first is the transformation of the productive system, whereby a change in the economic profile of the city, or parts of it, causes its dedicated spaces to lose their utility, such as industrial areas in established neighbourhoods. The second reason is the alteration of the political and social structure, which determines management and investment patterns and, consequently, leads to pockets of poverty and the depopulation of urban areas, such as city centres. (...) We build structures and infrastructure in the hope of using them for a long time, yet the opposite happens: economic and social dynamics shift, priorities change, triggering a process of neglect and disregard for what was intended to be regarded as heritage. Ultimately, they become a kind of noise within the urban fabric, increasingly embedded in everyday life and less and less perceived as a territory of exception, thereby creating a dual sense of familiarity and strangeness. (SANTOS and SPADONI, 2022, p.188)

In addition to this conception – which views post-industrial ruin as a *naturalised element of the urban fabric*, with which we habitually coexist – there is also the proposal by Rafael Souza and Ethel Santana (2022), who see in these spaces the material result of the drastic rupture that occurred in the configuration of cities between the 20th and 21st centuries. The upheavals in industrial capitalism led to the systematic abandonment of large structures and landmarks that were previously fundamental, which lost their function with the transition to a decentralised and technologically dependent global economy. Consequently, individuals' perception of public space has also changed; they now experience post-urban realities that are essentially intertwined with electronic devices and hyper-mediatisation, in settings that 'interpellate and numb the individual from their direct contact with the city' (SOUZA and SANTANA, 2022, p.199).

These authors highlight the phantasmagorical and dystopian nature of the environments that emerge in the wake of urban decay in post-industrial cities. For them, the contemporary hyperbolic mode of production creates vast zones of urban and environmental degradation marked by architectural and socio-cultural neglect, where the remnants and debris of unbridled productivism are dumped and left to drift. This whole range of post-industrial ruins emerges as a defining feature of the urban landscape, which profoundly affects individuals in sensory and intersubjective terms, casting '(...) the bucolic nostalgia for the ruins of yesteryear into a realm far removed from an understanding of the ruined spaces of the contemporary world' (ibid.).

What will then engage the observer is the collapse of the structures of the modern world and the uncertain fate of postmodern cities, highlighting the fragmentation of existential territories once inhabited by symbolic and material anchors that served

foster a sense of belonging and connection. We include in this the weakening of individuals' everyday relationships with once-established media and technologies, such as the street cinema, from which manifestations of technostalgia may arise (MENKE, 2017; FERRAZ, 2025), a concept we understand as:

(...) a series of aesthetic, narrative, technological and commercial solutions designed to address the discomfort caused by the discontinuities, transformations and disappearances of media across various sociocultural spheres, particularly in an era in which technical-media devices and the rituals associated with them have entered a process of dematerialisation and obsolescence in the face of new industrial and perceptual ventures and other trends in media culture involving the reappropriation and remediation of the past (FERRAZ, 2025, p.96).

Ruinophilia is another recurring manifestation that we believe is linked to technostalgia in certain contexts of uncertainty and upheaval within 20th-century structures. Boym (2011) situates the phenomenon of ruinophilia historically at the beginning of the 21st century, a period marked by the digitisation of the world, in which, she argues, ruins seem to be becoming an endangered species. According to her, the fascination with ruins is sensual rather than intellectual; it is an enchantment arising from a reversal in our critical perspective: '(...) instead of marvelling at grand projects and utopian designs, we begin to notice weeds and dandelions in the crevices of the stones, cracks in modern transparencies (...) (BOYM, 2011, online, our translation)⁶.

Boym's perspective on ruinophilia views the remains of ruined buildings as a resource for reflective nostalgia, not as an expression of restorative impulses directed towards imaginary pasts:

The ruins of modernity, viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, point to possible futures that never came to pass. But these futures do not necessarily inspire a restorative nostalgia. Instead, they make us aware of the caprices of the progressive vision as such. (...) Postmodern ruinophilia recognises the disharmony and the ambivalent relationship between human, historical and natural temporalities. It reconciles itself with perspectivism and conjectural history, and allows us to frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins — not to discard or demolish them, but rather to engage with them and incorporate them into our own ephemeral present. (BOYM, 2011, online, our translation)⁷

⁶ In the original: '(...) instead of marvelling at grand projects and utopian designs, we begin to notice weeds and dandelions in the crevices of the stones, cracks in modern transparencies (...).

⁷ In the original: "The ruins of modernity, as viewed from a 21st-century perspective, point to possible futures that never came to be. But those futures do not necessarily inspire restorative nostalgia. Instead, they make us aware of the vagaries of progressive vision as such. (...) Off-modern ruinophilia acknowledges the disharmony and the ambivalent relationship between human, historical, and natural temporalities. It reconciles itself to perspectivism and conjectural history and allows us to frame utopian projects as dialectical ruins—not to discard or demolish them, but rather to confront them and incorporate them into our own fleeting present."

From another perspective, contemporary ruinophilia can be discussed in light of the profusion of creations and the sharing of images of ruins, featuring countless aesthetics, themes and purposes for use and consumption. An example of this can be found in the approach taken by Souza and Santana (2022) regarding the global *Urbex* movement—that is, the exploration and visual documentation of abandoned, uninhabited and/or hard-to-access urban sites. Regarding these practices, the authors highlight the playful aspect of ruinophilia related to the way in which ‘(...) the bodies of city-dwellers merge with the architecture, deconstructing paths and materialities, immaterialities, and inverting the hegemonic order of materials (...)’ (SOUZA and SANTANA, 2022, p. 201). They also discuss the counter-hegemonic nature associated with certain ruinophile actions:

The recording and subsequent publication of these images reveal the real city—plural and composed of diverse, fragmented spaces, including ruined ones. (...) In this context, the actions of *urbexers* (...) bring about a profound rupture with the way we understand the city’s spaces and its hybrid landscapes. This counter-hegemonic action brings to the fore and challenges the monolithic narratives that shape cities, whilst also revealing a hidden city that emerges in our mental conception of the city (...). (SOUZA and SANTANA, 2022, p. 203)

They also highlight the plurality of the concept of ruinophilia, which ultimately veers into ‘*ruin porn*’, a generalised term with pejorative connotations:

(...) the ruin becomes trivialised, moving away from a position of immanence, from a place of reverence, to take on an obscene character of voracious consumption. This contemporary attribute, which manifests itself in the obsessive act of consuming ruins, is the quality attributed to the term ‘*ruin porn*’ – pornography of ruins (...). (SOUZA and SANTANA, 2022, p. 202)

Urban-cinematic ruins are post-industrial ruins that connect with the wide range of categories of technostalgia and ruinophilia. Dilapidated former cinema buildings, the rubble of partially demolished cinemas, and traces of artefacts from abandoned auditoriums are indicators of what we call *the loss of technomedia, commercial and urban prominence* experienced by collective cinematic leisure facilities, in both local and global contexts, from the final decades of the 20th century onwards.

3. Excavations of urban-cinematic ruins by photographer-explorers

The decaying materiality of cinemas in ruins can evoke a sense of fantastical aspirations, past moments of conception and intention—whether failed or destroyed—prompting speculation as to what led to this place’s decline. (BERRY, 2016, p.4, our translation)⁸

The photographic excavations of urban-cinematic ruins examined in this study are not defined solely by the tasks of documentation and dissemination mediated by cameras and the Instagram platform. The motivations that lead these individuals to devote themselves to aesthetic experimentation through direct engagement with derelict cinemas are compounded by the underlying layers of histories and memories linked to the defunct screening facilities, where the urban, socio-cultural, media-related, economic, political and geographical dynamics of each local context also reverberate.

The images created through engagement with the ruins share a common thread: access to this ‘sense of fantastical aspirations’ referred to by Vanessa Berry (2016) in the quotation above. Such photographs are not reduced to a mere situational record that creates ‘a certain atmosphere of failure and abandonment; an impression of a post-apocalyptic void that fetishises, rather than critically engaging with or examining these issues’ (PÉTURSDÓTTIR and OLSEN, 2014, p. 10, our translation)⁹. Far from it, they are the result of a deep connection between the photographer-explorers and something that hovers between the present and the absent, which persists, teetering on the brink of total collapse, through the meandering paths of non-linear and dislocated times.

As such, they belong to the realm of ‘haptic visuality’ (MARKS, 2000), which evokes a sensual and affective encounter with space (PÉTURSDÓTTIR and OLSEN, 2014, p. 25). They thus differ from contemplation through optical vision, which maintains a distance from things in order to objectively perceive forms and spatial depth. Instead, photographs of urban-cinematic ruins invite us to traverse the surface of the image so that we may, through our gaze, feel out the extra-visual textures and pulsations. In the photographs, everything seems to communicate, yet also to recede and overlap: twisted metal, façades

⁸ In the original: “The ruined theatre’s decaying materiality can evoke a sense of fantastical aspirations, past moments of inception and intention – whether failed or broken – prompting speculation as to what led to this place’s decline.”

⁹ In the original: “(...) a certain atmosphere of failure and abandonment; an impression of a post-apocalyptic void that fetishises rather than critically engages with or scrutinises these matters.”

decharacterised, fragments of signs, doors and windows set in concrete, broken seats, dusty ornaments... elements that pile up before our perception and lead us to explore the fringes of a supra-temporal duration. According to Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014, p. 25, our translation),

(...) ruin also reveals the city's multiple temporalities. The emergence of the material world seems to occur more rapidly in ruins, as things deteriorate and shift. Photography freezes this continuous flow, but, in itself, bears witness to a moment that occurs within the flow of experience and is immediately superseded by other experiences. This apparent interruption seems particularly pertinent in a setting where change is continuous, devoid of those endless efforts that strive to maintain the world's unchanging appearance and banish entropy. Nevertheless, the photograph of the ruin retains its power precisely because of this illusory stasis, for it is staged against a backdrop where the exact opposite seems to be happening and where the photographer is successively enveloped by a multitude of images, smells, textures and sounds, moment by moment.¹⁰

We suggest that the main contribution of these works of photographic excavation lies in the way they view ruins not merely as symbols of the decay and finitude of high-street cinemas, but rather as manifestations of transience and the residual noises of flows of memory.

3.1. Days before the cineplex (@beforethecineplex)

This is an Instagram profile that the German amateur photographer Michael Reischmann has maintained since 2019 to share photographs of 'single-screen' cinemas he visits on his travels around the world. In the account description, MR (the initials he uses to identify himself) characterises it as: "A treasure hunt in cinemas around the globe. I've seen them in the flesh – they're magical."¹¹ . The profile currently has 11,600 followers and 745 posts¹² , the majority of which show wide-angle shots of street-front cinema buildings. It deals with

¹⁰ In the original: '(...) the ruin also reveals the multiple temporalities of the city. The emergence of the material world appears to be faster in ruins, as things decay and fall out of place. The photograph acts to freeze this ongoing flow but in itself testifies to a moment that occurs within the flow of experience and that is immediately superseded by other experiences. This apparent interruption seems particularly pertinent in a setting in which change is continuous, devoid of those endless efforts that strive to maintain the unchanging appearance of the world and banish entropy. Yet the photograph of the ruin retains its power precisely because of this illusory stasis, because it is staged in a setting in which precisely the opposite seems to be happening and in which the photographer is successively engaged by a multiplicity of sights, smells, tactile sensations and sounds, moment by moment."

¹¹ In the original: "Treasure hunting movie theatres around the planet. I've seen them in action – they are magic." (Our translation into Portuguese in the body of the text).

¹² Figures based on data accessed on: 22 Feb. 2026.

It is a page focused on the photographic and historical documentation of façades, marquees and other architectural details of traditional cinemas.

Among the *posts* are images of projection equipment still in working order, of defunct cinemas now used for other purposes (cultural, commercial or religious), as well as abandoned, disused cinemas (in various stages of disrepair).

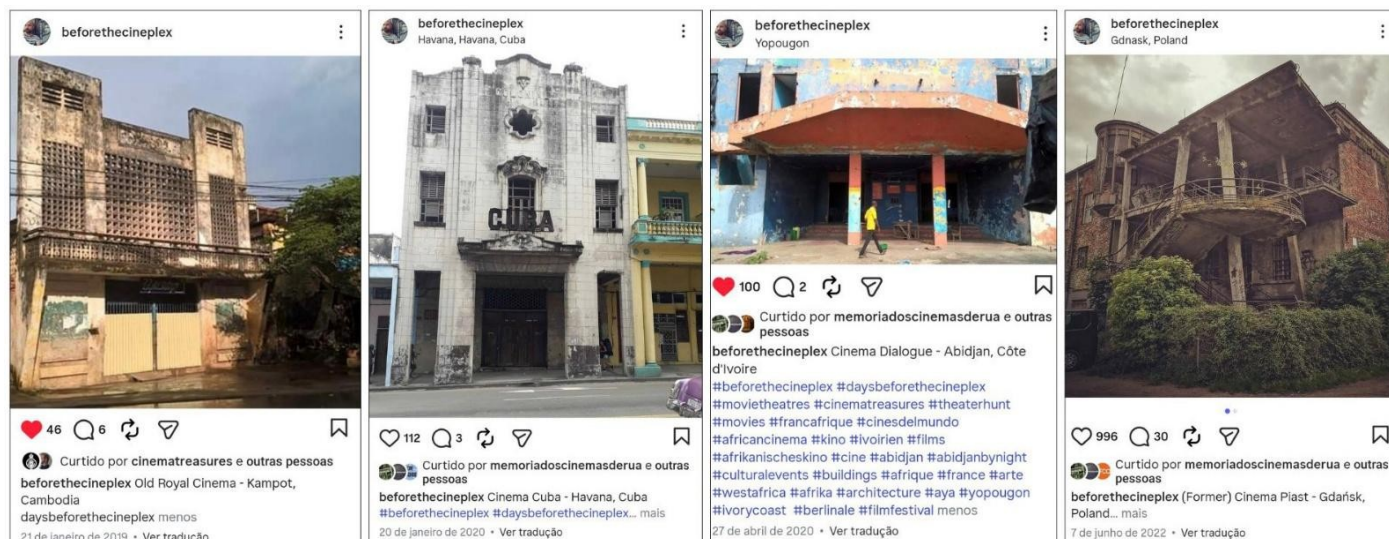


FIGURE 2 – Various posts from the ‘Days before the cineplex’ profile

SOURCE – DAYS BEFORE THE CINEPLEX (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/beforethecineplex>)

In a conversation we had via Instagram’s own *chat* feature in February 2026, MR reported that, over the last two decades, he had visited almost 1,500 independent cinemas located in around 40 countries. He was keen to distinguish these cinemas from *multiplexes*, which house multiple screens. This is precisely the focus of his project, which covers the ‘days before the cineplex’, alluding to the era of *the ‘movie palaces’*. The publications thus refer to types of cinemas characteristic of the period spanning roughly from the 1920s to the 1980s/1990s – that is, the final phase when such grand venues, with over a thousand seats and featuring their own unmistakable architecture, began to disappear from high streets on a virtually global scale.

After visiting many places, the idea arose to document them, and I photographed my first cinema in Angola (Cinema Arco Iris, Lubango) about 20 years ago. (...) For me, it is also a discovery of entire neighbourhoods that once had a vibrant nightlife and a significant cinema scene, but have now changed completely. Such as the centre of Manila, certain places in West Africa, or perhaps Tijuca in Rio de Janeiro, which I visited last year (...). (REISCHMANN, personal communication, 4 Feb. 2026).

The initiative to document local cinemas in various cities around the world arose during the work trips that MR has always had to undertake very frequently. It was whilst searching for cultural events in these cities that he came across the absence and neglect of these cinemas:

Unfortunately, in Asia or Africa, these venues were often abandoned or repurposed (...). In Africa, even after cinemas had been demolished or fallen into ruin, they often still served as landmarks, so you could tell a taxi driver ‘Cinema Benin’ and he would know immediately where to drop you off. (Ibid.)

By photographing vanished cinemas, including those in run-down urban areas, MR highlights what Santos and Spadoni (2022) and Souza and Santana (2022) describe as the deterioration caused by changes in the socio-economic system and the emergence of post-industrial ruins. He emphasises that his images do not seek technical perfection, but rather aim to keep alive the memories of spaces that people from bygone eras never imagined would disappear.

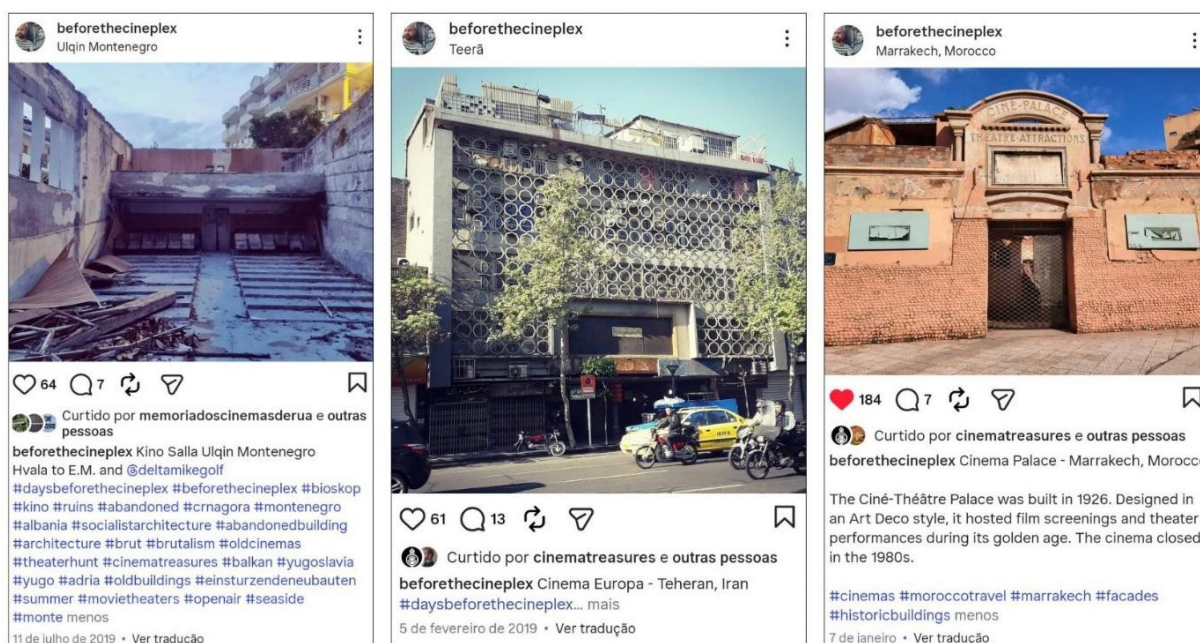


FIGURE 3 – Various posts from the ‘Days before the cineplex’ profile

SOURCE – DAYS BEFORE THE CINEPLEX (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/beforethecineplex>)

The profile adopts a reflective, nostalgic stance as it questions the decline of venues that were once centred on a sense of community, which held great importance both for the social and urban fabric and for the personal lives of their regulars.

I have around 20 photos of cinemas I’ve visited that have since been destroyed and demolished. For that reason, I suppose I’m keeping the memories alive. I’m also

contacted by people who have left their hometowns and tell me that my photos of cinemas remind them of the cinemas of their childhood. So there is definitely a certain nostalgia associated with cinemas. Given that so many excellent films were screened in these buildings, I would even say that they retain a certain spirit within them. (Ibid.)

Through the way the photographs highlight the dilapidated façades, what is revealed is the state of presence-absence of these urban-cinematic ruins in different cities. This makes this profile an archive dedicated to preserving images of the remnants of an obsolete technology: namely, the palaces of cinema.

3.2. Cine Maghrib (@cinemaghrib)

The project forms part of the work of the French visual artist, photographer and lecturer François Beaurain, who, since 2018, has been researching the history of Morocco's cinematic heritage in the Maghreb region of North Africa, where he lives. When sharing his work on Instagram, he uses a blend of documentary photography, digital collage and historical analysis to explore the architectural heritage of the cinemas he encounters across the country. The profile currently has just over 1,600 followers and 263 posts¹³ dedicated to a *cultural geography of the history of Moroccan film exhibition*. Beaurain is an experienced artist, with works exhibited in museums such as the Guggenheim Bilbao. Consequently, the @cinemaghrib account features images of high aesthetic quality, many of which were published in his book **Cinémas du Maroc: Lumière sur les salles obscures du Royaume** (Editions La Croisée Des Chemins, 2021), also released in English in 2022. Over the years, he has photographed around 200 cinemas (both operational and disused) in Morocco alone, and in our interview he also said he is “on the hunt” for more when he travels.

A large proportion of the posts on his profile are in carousel format, featuring series of photos relating to the same cinema. In *the posts*, he adds, through collages, short texts on the architectural features of the cinemas, historical details, and interesting facts about screenings and audience behaviour, as well as images from archive material, such as old photographs, floor plans and film posters; all based on extensive research, which includes consulting collections, fieldwork and interviews with projectionists, cinema operators and former regulars.

¹³ Figures based on data accessed on: 22 Feb. 2026.

An interesting example of this style of content is the feature on the ruins of The Salam in the city of Agadir. In the carousel, Beaurain weaves a narrative about the venue, highlighting aspects of the cinema's history and decline linked to episodes in the city's history and the memories of its regulars. He even points out something quite rare: the reversal of a cinematic ruin in the face of promises of renovation.

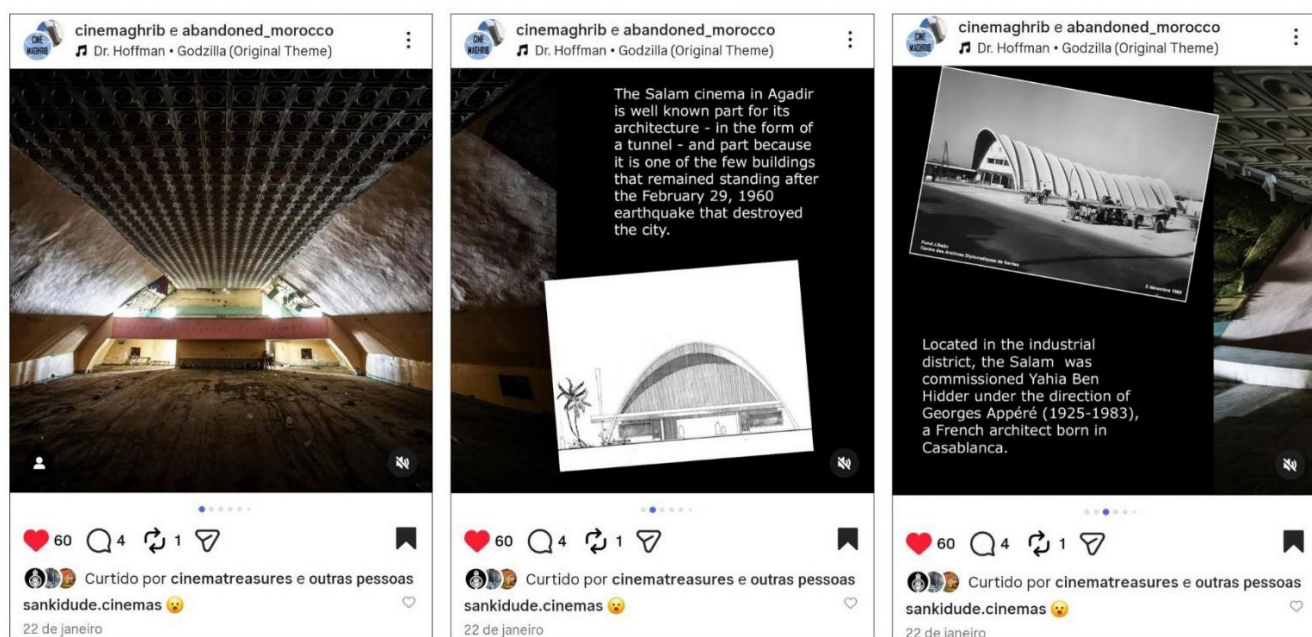


FIGURE 4 – Carousel with images of The Salam cinema – Part 1

SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)

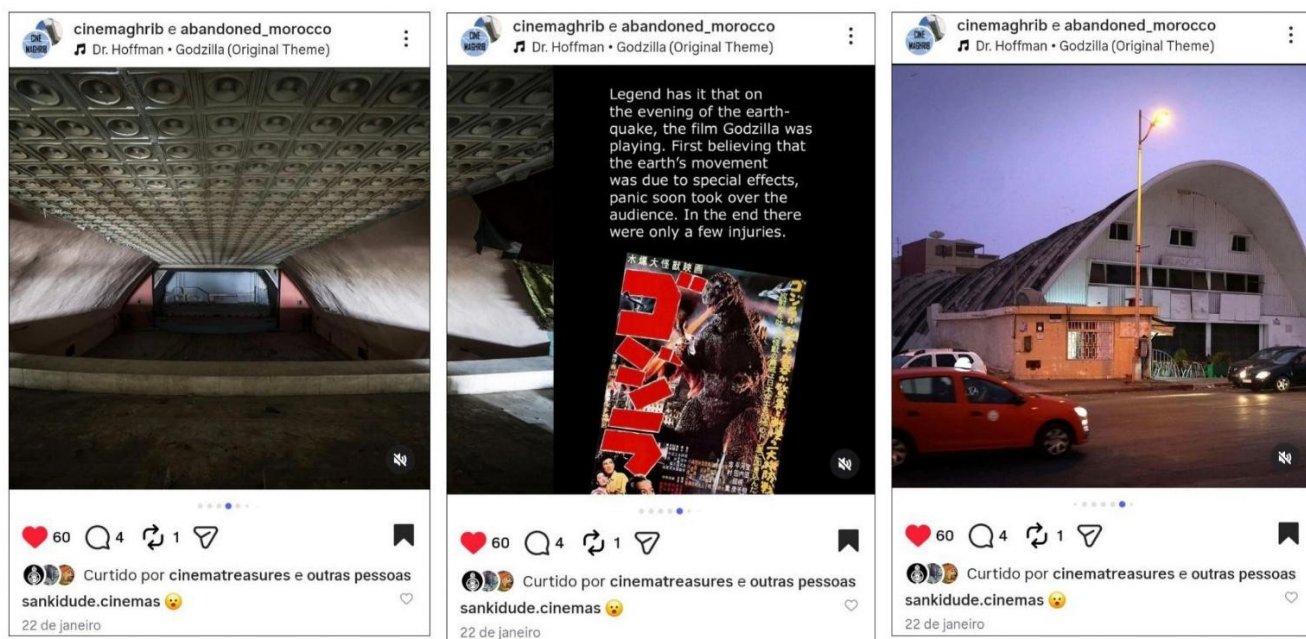


FIGURE 5 – Carousel featuring images of The Salam cinema – Part 2
 SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)

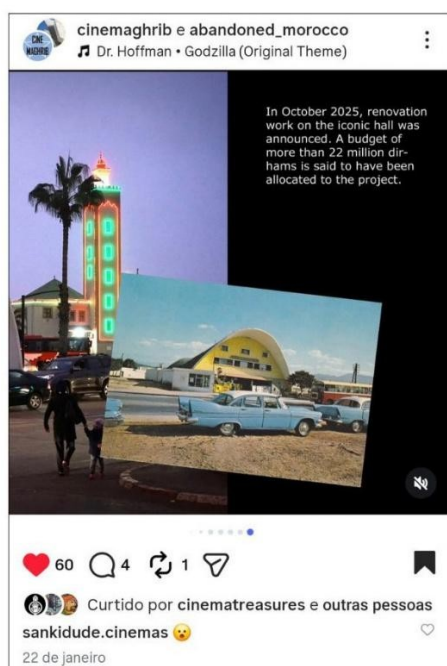


FIGURE 6 – Slideshow featuring images of The Salam cinema – Part 3
 SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)

The photographer's practice is, in a way, akin to the notion of ruinophilia, as many images reveal his intimacy with the '*corpus putrefactus*' state of these cinemas, capturing how decaying materiality merges with the unfulfilled pasts of spaces that were once centres of modernity in Morocco. In Beaurain's work, this ruinophilic character is intrinsically linked to a focus on heritage preservation, drawing attention both to the collective memory of local cinematic culture and to the changing role of the cinema in Moroccan cities and sociocultural dynamics.

I am not Moroccan. (...) I have no personal or nostalgic connection to cinema in Morocco. What fascinates me, rather, is the heritage – the architecture, the traces that cinemas have left on cities, and the central role they played in everyday life. Moroccan cities developed around their cinemas. For a long time, there was no television, no theatres, no concert halls. Cinemas fulfilled all these functions (...). In Morocco, cinemas did not take their names from the neighbourhoods in which they were built. On the contrary, the neighbourhoods took their names from the cinemas – and many still bear these names today, even after the cinemas have disappeared. (BEAURAIN, personal communication, 4 Feb. 2026)

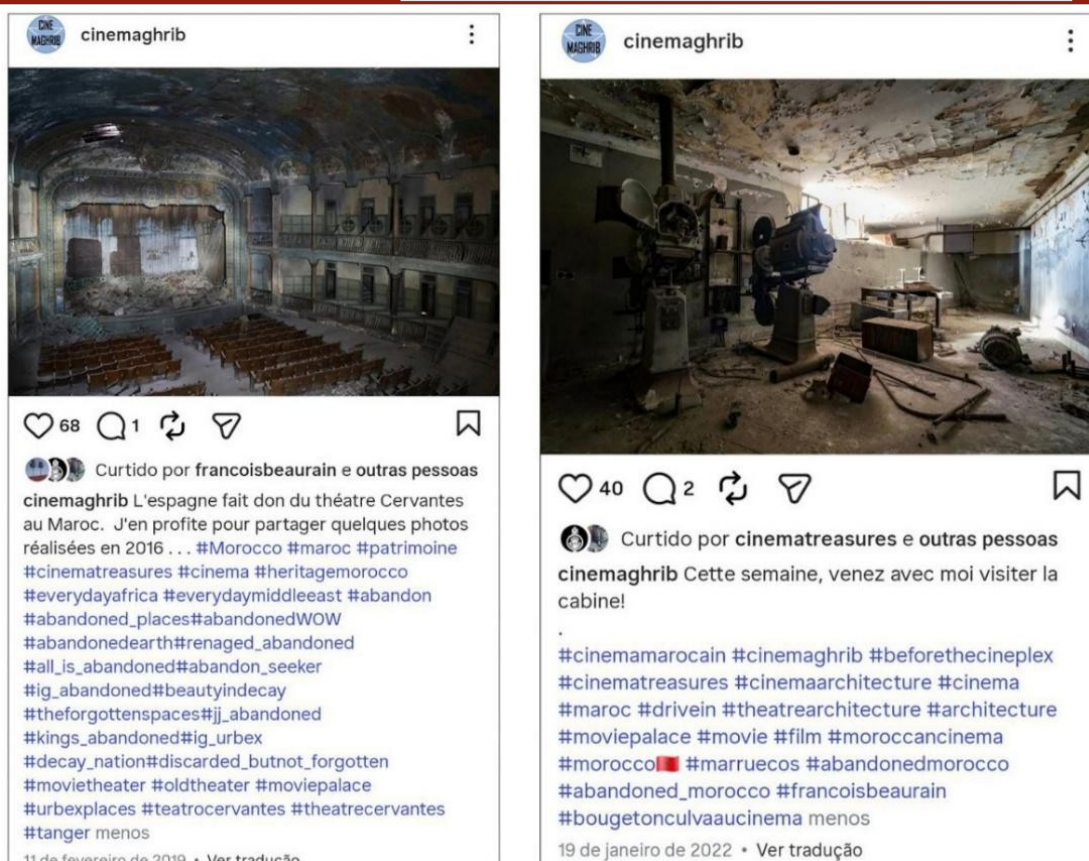


FIGURE 7 – Photographs of the ruins of Moroccan cinemas

SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)

Beaurain's documentary gaze is not passive; rather, it is an interaction that values the sensory experience between the photographer-explorer and the field being explored. The photographs seem to stir up layers of memories that intertwine and pile up.



FIGURE 8 – Carousel featuring images of the Cinéma Atlas

SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)



FIGURE 9 – Carousel featuring images of the ruins of Le Ciné-théâtre

SOURCE – CINE MAGHRIB (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cinemaghrib/>)

It is worth noting that Beaurain's work contributes to the inclusion of African heritage in the global debate on post-industrial ruins and the future uses of former street cinemas.

His photographs shed light on the systemic disinvestment in cinema infrastructure in Morocco, promoting, to a certain extent and in a counter-hegemonic manner, the decentralisation of the conventional axes of representation of history and the collective memory of film screening.

3.3. After The Final Curtain (@afterthefinalcurtain)

This profile, maintained since 2016 by the American photographer Matt Lambros, occupies a critical threshold between historical documentation and one aspect of the contemporary phenomenon of ruinophilia, often characterised as ‘*ruin porn*’. It is a page with around 5,300 followers and 965 *posts*¹⁴, dedicated specifically to sharing images captured during explorations of the ruins of large, disused cinemas in the US. Lambros, in fact, began his career in ruin photography by documenting abandoned mental asylums. His connection with defunct cinemas arose in a curious way, echoing the ghostly and imaginary atmosphere that surrounds these spaces:

The turning point came during a perfectly ordinary night at the cinema. Some friends and I bought tickets to watch ‘Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead’ (). Whilst laughing at the absurdity of the plot, I realised I was paying more attention to the auditorium than to the screen. The architecture seemed out of place, far too ornate for a modern cinema, and I remember thinking that this space had clearly had another life before becoming a cinema. That realisation stayed with me longer than the film itself. (LAMBROS, personal communication, 10 Feb. 2026)

Thus began a long-term project which today encompasses not only the @afterthefinalcurtain Instagram account, but also the maintenance of a website of the same name¹⁵, three books – “After the Final Curtain: America’s Abandoned Theatres” (Jonglez Publishing, forthcoming), “After the Final Curtain: America’s Abandoned Theatres” (Jonglez Publishing, 2016) and “Kings Theatre, The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Brooklyn’s Wonder Theatre” (Theatre Historical Society of America, 2017) – as well as participation in exhibitions and lectures¹⁶.

Although his images possess a visual opulence that might bring to mind the commodification of ‘*ruin porn*’, the artist challenges this aesthetic by engaging our perception

¹⁴ Figures based on data accessed on: 22 Feb 2026.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://afterthefinalcurtain.net/>. Accessed on 22 Feb 2026.

¹⁶ Matt Lambros maintains a second professional website where he showcases other photographic works. There are also images of cinema ruins in the UK on this site. On the site, it is possible to purchase original photographs by the artist, priced up to US\$500, or book workshops (ranging from US\$110 to US\$330, depending on the focus and duration). Available at: <https://www.mlambrosphotography.com/>. Accessed on: 22 Feb 2026.

in light of the contrasts between the vestiges of classical architectural elegance and the advanced state of disrepair of the ‘movie palaces’ depicted.

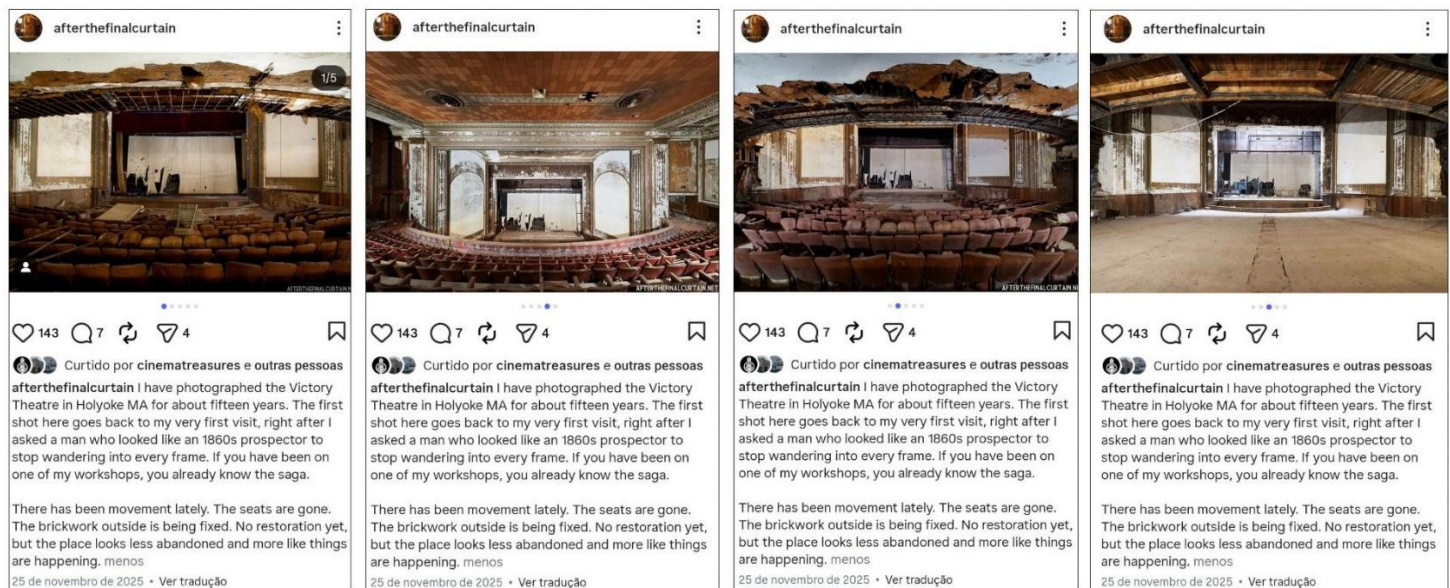


FIGURE 10 – Carousel featuring images of the ruins of the Victory Theatre

SOURCE – AFTER THE FINAL CURTAIN (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/afterthefinalcurtain/>)

Lambros transcends the fetishisation of decay by grounding his photographs in a narrative of social utility, linked to the preservation of visual and heritage memory:

Most of these buildings will not survive, and decades of neglect have already erased many of them. Some no longer even exist, leaving the photographs as the last visual record of their interiors and features. Others remain merely as empty shells, devoid of function and context. The images document the layout, ornamentation, scale and deterioration in a way that architectural plans or written records can never capture on their own. Over time, these photographs often become reference material for historians, preservation groups and local authorities, especially after renovation or demolition has altered the space beyond recognition. (Ibid.)

By capturing the grand palaces of American cinema in a state of limbo and ruin, this photographer-explorer seems to connect with the idea that a ruin is not a dead object, but a place capable of evoking, in the present, multiple interconnected narratives. Within the layers of these ruins reverberate echoes of the collapse of a classic, hegemonic American industrial model of filmmaking, which predominated globally for almost the entire 20th century, materialising the dream world of Hollywood’s grand narratives and operating through the pedagogical shaping of the viewer’s bodies, emotions and perceptions. Although this earlier model has been replaced on a large scale by other technological, industrial, narrative, architectural and political approaches within

the 21st-century audiovisual sphere, these are no less hegemonic in the current era of postmodern capitalism. It is therefore pertinent to examine Lambros's work through the critical lens he employs, using the excavation of the ruins of *'movie palaces'* to explore the extent to which the present remains permeated by the past.

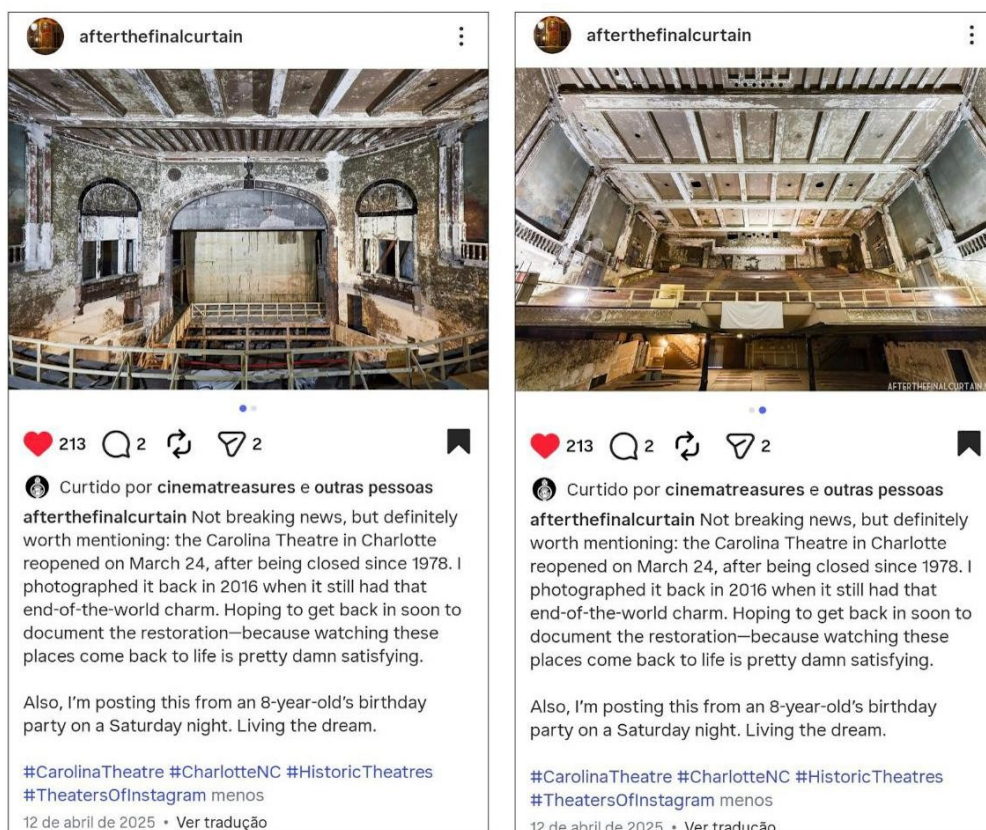


FIGURE 11 – Images of the ruins of the Carolina Theatre and a reference to the cinema's reopening
SOURCE – AFTER THE FINAL CURTAIN (Available at:
<https://www.instagram.com/afterthefinalcurtain/>)

Lambros's work relates to a form of cultural nostalgia and, at the same time, technostalgically values a specific cinematic device of a bygone era that has fallen into disuse and been neglected by both public and private bodies. Both nostalgic aspects of his artistic performance engage with the urban and social context of which these cinema ruins form a part:

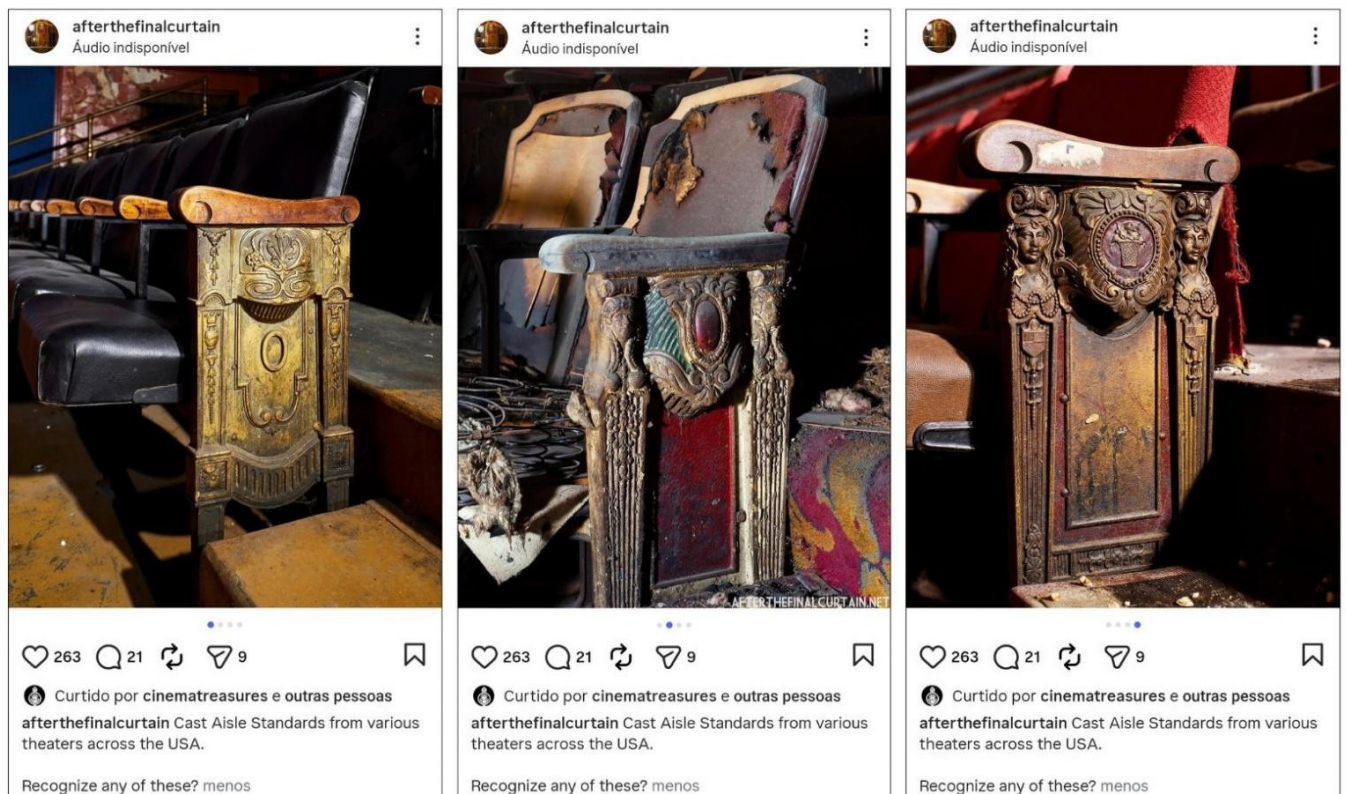
When a city or neighbourhood faces difficulties, these buildings are often the first to fall into disrepair, and when reinvestment begins, they become the first targets for reuse or demolition. (...) There is nostalgia for cinema as a technology and as a social experience, for a time when going to the cinema meant leaving home and entering a space designed to be special. Going to the cinema used to be an event, something you couldn't replicate at home, and I think the industry would benefit from looking back at that model when considering how cinema will survive in cities going forward. (...) I feel a sense of nostalgia for buildings and rituals that I didn't directly experience. It feels more like a

cultural nostalgia than a personal melancholy – an awareness of something significant that existed before my time and has been largely discarded. I do not believe that everything from the past needs to return, and I am realistic about the fact that many of these cinemas cannot function as cinemas again. (...) Preserving the building and its presence in the city, even with a new purpose, is far better than losing it completely. (Ibid.)

Lambros’ photographs are portraits of *lost futures*—spaces designed in the 20th century as temples for heterotopic, aesthetic and noetic experiments facilitated by the experience of film and the ambience of these collective cinematic venues.

FIGURE 12 – Images of dilapidated seats in the ruins of cinemas

SOURCE – AFTER THE FINAL CURTAIN (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/afterthefinalcurtain/>)



Such images evoke the spectre of these atmospheres, which still lingers amongst the remains of their former physical structures. Thus, we are reminded of the notion of ‘hauntology’ developed by Jacques Derrida (1994) and Mark Fisher (2022), which refers to the ghosts of the past (or the future) that haunt the present; to the spectral presence of that which *is no longer* or *has not yet come to be*, but which acts effectively through non-immediacy and virtuality.

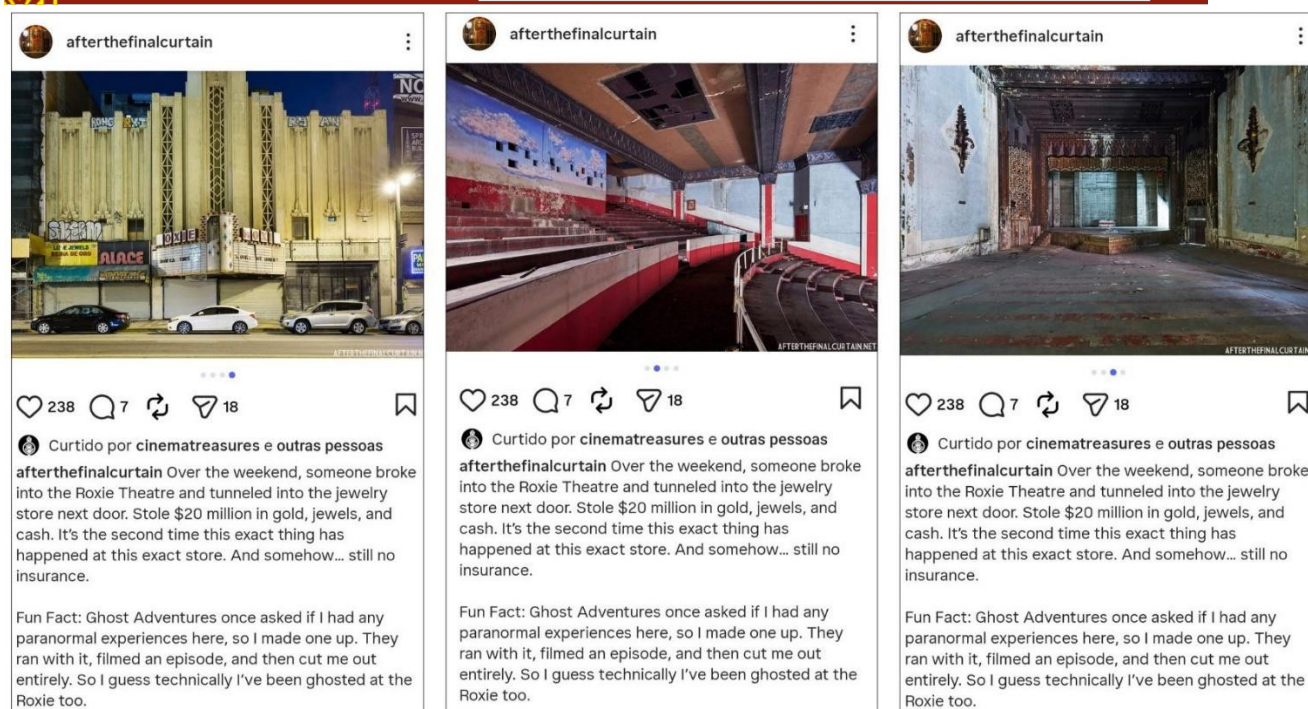


FIGURE 13 – Carousel featuring images of the ruins of the Roxie Theatre

SOURCE – AFTER THE FINAL CURTAIN (Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/afterthefinalcurtain/>)

For Fisher (2022), haunting is like a failed mourning process, a refusal to let go of the ghost or the ghost's refusal to let go of us; it is a matter of persistence. In his words: 'The spectre will not allow us to settle for the mediocre satisfactions we might glean from a world governed by capitalist realism' (FISHER, 2022, p.42). The dialogue with hauntings in Lambros's work, as the caption¹⁷ of the carousel above suggests, does not seek to exorcise them, nor does it reinforce the incommunicability between the various layers of time that interweave within the urban-cinematic ruins this photographer explores.

4. Concluding remarks

We believe that the photographic excavations analysed here point to a sensitive sphere that permeates interactions with the temporalities of urban-cinematic ruins. Beyond the perspective of documenting and spatialising the memory of defunct cinemas, there appears to be a spectral and imaginative dimension to these initiatives. In

¹⁷ The caption reads: 'Fun fact: the Ghost Adventures programme once asked if I'd had any paranormal experiences here, so I made one up. They ran with the idea, filmed an episode and then cut me out completely. So, I suppose technically I was also "ghosted" at the Roxie' (our translation)

In a text on ruins and spirit invocations, Aleida Assmann analyses Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Coliseum' (1833–1845), suggesting something along these lines. She comments that in the poet's verses, "The message of the stones is not particularly informative (...); in the invocation of spirits, the voice as such is more important than what it has to say." (ASSMANN, 2011, p. 340).

The images created by photographer-explorers evoke an infusion of life into what had already become an irretrievable past (ASSMANN, 2011, p. 342), fostering connections with intangible aspects linked to the remnants of cinemas. We realise that within these ruins there may lie a whole wealth of voices still lingering. It is therefore essential to make an effort to perceive them through a *haptic gaze*, amidst the immense voids or confusing overlaps of rubble and debris captured in these images.

The photographs thus serve as a record and reflect a commitment to preserving the traces of a cinematic culture that is fading away in its own way in each location. The photographer-explorers thus act as *mnemones*, that is, 'officials of memory' who, in Greek mythology, accompanied heroes to remind them of the divine order, thereby averting death, or, in the socio-political sphere of archaic Greece, preserved the memory of the past in preparation for a judgement of justice (LE GOFF, 2013, p.400).

In the endeavour to anchor the ruins of cinemas in the present and to safeguard them for the future through their visual documentation and sharing on social media, the activities of Reischmann, Beaurain and Lambros stand as essential tools for the historiography of film exhibition and for examining the historical conditions through which its transformations, obsolescence and ruin take shape. They are thus, in Benjamin's terminology, excavators of ruins who *brush history against the grain* (BENJAMIN, 2025, p. 64).

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