HISTORY 9835
Rot and Ruin:
History and the Downside of Material Culture
Winter 2025
Instructor: James A. Flath
Office Hours: By Appointment

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Course Description:
This is a graduate course in history intended for students who are interested in material culture.

Prerequisites: none

Antirequisites: none

Graduate Course Level Learning Outcomes/Objectives
By the end of this course, students should be able to:
Analyze material culture from a historical perspective,
Understand and discuss major debates in the field of material culture,
Appreciate how diverse cultures understand and manage historical remains,
Design and produce a major research project on material culture.

Course Timeline and Format
The course materials and discussions are not restricted to any time period or to any individual culture. Weekly readings and discussions are arranged thematically, and classes are discussion based with minimal lecturing.

Enrollment Restrictions
Enrollment in this course is restricted to graduate students in History, as well as any student that has obtained special permission to enroll in this course from the course instructor as well as the Graduate Chair (or equivalent) from the student’s home program.

Course Syllabus:

This is a course about things – rotten and ruined things. More importantly, it is about how history has been shaped by loss and decay, and how we understand the past in terms of what it leaves behind as fragments and remnants of objects and collections, decomposing matter and ruined spaces and places. Finally, we will question how we structure the past by managing what it leaves behind.

Course Materials:

All articles and book chapters will be made available on the course website. See weekly readings for specifics.

Methods of Evaluation:

The expectation is that students will be thoroughly prepared on a weekly basis, that they will conduct themselves professionally in debate and discussion, and that written assignments will be polished and completed according to disciplinary standards.

Seminar Participation: 25%

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absence and failure to actively participate will result in a reduced participation grade.

Final Paper Proposal 10%

Due February 14

Conference Paper and Presentation: 15%

Final Paper: 50%

Due April 11

Late assignments will not be accepted, except by permission of the Graduate Chair.

Course Schedule and Readings

*Readings are subject to change.

1. Introduction
2. Theory of Things


3. Materials and Materiality


4. Crumbling Heritage

Pétursdóttir, Þóra. ‘Concrete matters: Ruins of modernity and the things called heritage’. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 13 (1) 2013: 31-53.


5. The Dead

*please note that material covered this week is viscerally disturbing. Participation, therefore, will be optional and an alternate assignment will be made available upon request*


Websites:

http://www.yale.edu/cgp/

http://sallymann.com/selected-works/body-farm

6. Urban Wastelands


7. Ghost Towns and Empty Places


Stewart, Kathleen, A Space by the Side of the Road, Princeton University Press, 1996. (chapter 4, Chronotopes)

8. Disasters and Catastrophes


9. Ruin Film and Fiction


10. Ruin Art


11. TBA

12. Conference Day

Each student will have 15 minutes to present a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor, presumably the same topic that has been chosen for the final paper. Papers will be organized into sessions, with assigned chairs and commentators.

**Additional Statements**

**Health/Wellness Services:**

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support at https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/index.html for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html

**Accessibility Options:**

Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program. Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education Western (AEW), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AEW and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy
instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction. Request for Accommodations/Medical
Issues

Students are entitled to their privacy and consequently they do not need to disclose personal information
to their course professors. In the event that students feel the need to discuss personal information, they
should see the graduate chair. Unlike undergraduate students, graduate students cannot be referred to
Social Science Academic Counselling to have their medical or non-medical circumstances evaluated and
to receive a recommendation for accommodation. Those facilities are for undergraduates only, and there
is no process beyond the department to secure recommendations for accommodation. Our process is that
faculty should deal with routine requests for extensions. However, a student’s request for
accommodation (on medical, non-medical, compassionate grounds) should go to the graduate chair,
Prof. Francine McKenzie (fmckenzi2@uwo.ca) who will consult and communicate with faculty.
Additionally, faculty and students should communicate with the grad chair about any case in which
work is not submitted before grades are due. In the event that the graduate chair is also the course
professor, then a request for accommodation can be taken to the department chair.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI):

Artificial Intelligence is not going away, and we must learn to work with it. Noting that AI is constantly
evolving, we will discuss the appropriate uses of the technology in class, and we will work as a group to
set the parameters for its use.

Academic Offences:

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy,
specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual Course Outlines similarity review to the
commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism.
All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database
for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the
service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and
Turnitin.com (http://www.turnitin.com).

NOTE: See Policies and Statements on the Graduate section of the History Department Website,
https://history.uwo.ca/graduate/program_information/graduate_policies_and_statements.html. This
includes additional information on academic support services for health and wellness and gender based
sexual violence. You can also find information on other academic policies, including copyright,
plagiarism, and accessibility.

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence:
Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts at the following website: https://www.uwo.ca/health/student_support/survivor_support/get-help.html. To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca