



Modern Ruins

A 5-part documentary series

In coproduction with **ZDF/Arte**

5x43/52 min

The series 'Modern Ruins' describes the dynamics of modern times, which is defined by the will for constant progress, but inevitably has to slow down. It highlights visually impressive ruins, which embody the major topics of the 20th and 21st century: Social change and social struggle, colonization, globalization, mobility and the management of limited resources.

The series explores various places shaped by (economic) crisis around the globe, revealing that crisis was and is an inherent part of human history. It visualizes the concept of „Creative Construction“.

The technical term „Creative Destruction“ is used in the economic sciences. It describes the downside of progress and globalization. Every economic development is built on constructive, respectively creative destruction. Old structures are replaced by more efficient solutions and innovations and finally demolished. Thus destruction is necessary and not a system failure, it enables reconstruction.

Only recently Alan Greenspan stated the connection of consistent enhancement of the life quality in the USA through globalization and progress to "Creative Destruction" of working environments in the Western world.

Visiting the bizarre landscapes of the different episodes, the series gives an insight into our contemporary culture and its complex developments on three different continents: in North America (Detroit), South America (Fordlândia in Brazil), Africa (Kolmanskop in Namibia) and Europe (the Norwegian Spitsbergen and the German Lohberg).

Following local protagonists as they move around the ruins that shape their lives, MODERN RUINS provides a very personal and emotional access to the daunting places. Each protagonist has a mission to fulfill, as they try to bring new life to the old ruins or preserve a unique site for future generations.

MODERN RUINS is a 5-part series about the disintegrating modern monuments witnessing rise and fall, economical boom, cracked dreams and utopias, structural and political changes and how nature reconquers living space.



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Episode 1 – Kolmanskop A Diamond Ghost Town in Namibia

A film by Reinhild Dettmer-Finke

In the year 1908 a black worker of the German Reichsbahn found a twinkling stone when repairing the tracks and took it to his boss August Stauch. This was the beginning of an unprecedented diamond rush in one of the most inhospitable regions of Africa. It attracted hundreds of adventurers, entrepreneurs and workers and with Kolmanskop a modern German town developed out of nothing with a post office, a hospital, a police station, a swimming pool, a theater and even a casino. Everything was imported to create European living standards: beams from Germany, floorboards from the U.S. and water from Capetown.

But the rapid boom was followed by a creeping decline. With the shrinking diamond sources the glamour of the bizarre German town in the middle of the desert faded. In the year 1954 the hospital noted the discharge of the last patient, two years later the last families left Coleman's Hill and the formerly wealthy town turned into a ghost town. In the meantime the desert has taken back big parts of the town.

Today, Kolmanskop is in the middle of a "forbidden zone" in the Namibian desert, a strip turned into a national park in 2008. The desert sand has filled up the swimming pool, the hospital machinery is covered by sand. Left behind are colonial houses that tell the story of a long lost grandeur, of adventure and of a discriminating colonial history.



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Episode 2 – Piramida A Soviet Beachhead on Spitsbergen

A film by Markus Reher

At first sight the town seems quick-frozen, a preserved Russian model-town, where its inhabitants might return to anytime. But slowly, in the pace of the Arctic climate, nature starts to claim back the town.

For 80 years Piramida served as a Soviet outpost, a mining town in the middle of the hostile arctic. Spitsbergen technically belongs to Norway, but an international agreement from the 1920s allowed the young Soviet Union to mine on the archipelago. Almost anything that can be seen there today had been built by the Soviets after the Second World War.

Despite of the cold, the long polar nights and foggy summers, the people here were well supplied, almost luxuriously. There was a swimming pool with an own basin for children and a civic hall with concert venues, a gymnasium and a cinema, which showed a film at seven o'clock every night.

Until 1998, when Russia abandoned the coal mine. The hotel "Tulip" still was opened for one or two summers for curious tourists, but in 2000 this had an end, too. Nowadays Piramida is one of the most northern ghost towns of the world, waiting to be discovered by a new generation of explorers.



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Episode 3 – Lohberg The Revival of a Coal Mine

A film by Kai Christiansen

This is a place bigger than life: for one hundred years coal was mined at Zeche Lohberg, with shafts as deep as 1200 meters. At the end of the 1950s more than 5000 men were working there. But in 2005 the mine had to shut down and the remaining 1400 workers were sent to work in other mines or retired. Now what?

A huge area is waiting for its destiny, the 70-meter-high popped head towers over its own city made of empty factory halls and machinery which has lost its purpose. It is a haunted place of frightening dimension. Nature is claiming back the site, spreading everywhere. Large parts of the compound have been torn down, are earmarked for redevelopment or put to a new use. Just like a little shop nestled up to the outer wall of the area, a place full of people's memories and personal stories. Workers would do some last minute shopping at the start and end of their shifts, some would secretly send a basket down to get beer.

Some parts have been revived. Today Britta LQL is running an art gallery in the former shop. Passers-by can look at changing exhibitions by different artists. The old cigarette machine gets refilled regularly, for only a few euros people can get a small sculpture, a miniature painting or some other unique art object that was especially designed for this purpose.

Other artists have found a new studio in the former administration building, now called the Creative Quarter. And the former company choir has survived the close-down as well, 50 men still meet every week to practise. They wear their old uniform with pride whenever they perform in public. Each of them used spent his days underground, labouring. The mine has become a second home to many of the workers living in the area, their lives revolving around it.



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Lohberg witnessed two world wars, changing owners and a constant stream of new inhabitants trying to find their luck. Now it is shut down for good and a new purpose will have to be found for the huge site. Small-scale initiatives and projects are a first step, but the struggle for funding to bring about a real transformation is still going on.

Episode 4 – Fordlândia Henry Ford's Jungle Utopia

A film by Christiane von Schwind

Everything started so brilliantly, when Henry Ford chose the Brazilian rain forest in the 1920s to cover the rising demand for natural rubber for the tire production, and to export his version of the American dream. Fordlândia was supposed to become a model-town following the American example – with roofing shingles, bright red hydrants and strict prohibitions. For a short period more than 8.000 people lived in Fordlândia. Streets were asphalted, schools, hair dressers, bakeries and butcher shops opened. There was even a golf course and regular gardening competitions. And since the king of cars from Detroit loved classical music, Waltz instead of Samba were played in the jungle on company festivities.

But the unusual project quickly came to a halt. Despite of a hospital and good medical supply the mortality amongst workers was high, Malaria raged, and already in the year 1930 more than 300 people lay buried on the cemetery.

But the American engineers lost the true battle – against nature. Because they planted the rubber-trees close-packed, which should grow with distance from each



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other, they created an ideal hatchery for parasites such as fungi, bugs and caterpillars. Billions of trees died. Therefore natural rubber never has been harvested in Fordlandia, although in 1941 more than 3,6 billion trees were planted on the plantations.

Today the gigantic water tower – at that time the highest building in the Amazonas – is a far visible symbol of this failed utopia. The remains of the American town are still there, but they are more and more blending in with the surrounding nature. Some descendants of the former workers live near Fordlândia. They know that humans cannot control nature and they tell stories about a rich man who tried to form nature and humans after his model and failed miserably.

Episode 5 – Detroit Hope for the Motor City

A film by Alice Agneskirchner

Detroit became the centre of the American car industry at the beginning of the 20th century. The “big 3” – Chrysler, Ford, General Motors – created a “Motor City”. The economic boom attracted millions of people who fulfilled their parochial ideal of the American dream. Detroit was modern, urban and fast. Here the first city motor way, the “Davison Freeway”, was built, as well as the first production line and the first street with concrete coating.

Later the boomtown with the first Shopping Center became the model for suburbanization – which then was adapted in the USA and the rest of the western world.

The oil crisis in 1973 was the beginning of the end. The “Big 3” closed down their old factories and build new facilities, often in low-wage countries. It was the demise of the metropolis.

Today one third of the entire municipal area is deserted and numerous buildings have been demolished. Altogether more than 4.000 buildings are vacant: abandoned, shut down and walled. In some streets Detroit resembles a ghost town. The population has shrunk from 2 Million to a mere 700.000. To get the dilapidation under control, the city government has started to demolish houses in the centre. Giant wastelands and gaps between buildings are created in the heart of the metropolis.

Every corner tells the story of an urban dream and its slow decay. Joseph Adranga, 85, used to work in the Packard Plant when it was still big, assembling Studebackers. He witnessed the city in its golden age. Today, the empty factory halls are the setting for gloomy music videos.

Mama Pay Ceck runs a bar where writer Steve Hughes is a regular, listening to the many stories of hardship. Drugs, crime and unemployment shape the lives of the mostly black population, who are struggling to find a way out.

Like Olayami Dabls. a black artists who reflects his cultural heritage in his monumental sculptures, using the scrap material that he finds in his neighborhood. Concept artist Scott Hocking discovered the empty factories for his art, building bizarre sculptures in the abandoned buildings. The film witnesses his latest piece of art coming to life: a gigantic egg-shaped sculpture, made from the marble of the shut down Central Station.

Urban farmers use the vast wastelands to grow their own fruit and vegetable - there are many ways to bring new life to the ruins of Detroit. Like no other place, the city embodies both: The disillusionment of economic downturn and the bizarre beauty and creativity emerging from it.

