I’m interested in the idea of a de-sublimated ruin. That is a ruinous building whose scale and time span are not beyond the human but intimately connected to it – a form of ruin that has recently been termed as a ‘modern ruin’ (1). It is this type of material that engenders my practice. In relation to this I wish to test the proposition that: **modern ruins’ have the potential to facilitate an insight into the remoteness childhood.** This proposition is alternative to the existing Romantics reading of the ruin as a manifestation of the sublime that engenders an atmosphere of awe, and the Gothic encoding of a confrontation with death (2).

The proposition grew from a by-practice MPhil project completed in 2007 at the Royal College of Art. Entitled ‘The Unstable Sign’, it was a semiotic inquiry into the slippages in signing engendered by Décollage – the tearing away from poster surfaces, so as to reveal the layer or layers underneath.

‘The Unstable Sign’ proposed an application of semiotic theory in relation to Cubist Collage – specifically that of Christine Poggi (3) and Rosalind Krauss (4) – toward Décollage. Poggi and Krauss discuss the potential for the newspaper fragment to circulate amongst a range of significations, even to traverse the Piercian definitions of the icon, index and metaphor.

‘The Unstable Sign’ was in opposition to the existing and polemical theoretical fields surrounding Décollage, which understands it as either a form of painterly abstraction, or as an act of resistance to the received image of the city. The new proposition was a multi-signing model that embraced both existing theoretical poles. It also proposed a consequent connotation of instability, and reasoned that when Décollage was at its most potent, a non-hierarchical aspect to the multi-signing is present.

Concurrent to the written thesis was the practice element of the submission. The practice was not an illustration to the text, and the text didn’t explain the practice. More, they alerted me at different times, to different aspects within the project. They also nourished each other, and at various moments occupied similar territory, and interestingly, when full momentum in the project was achieved, ‘behaved’ similarly to each other.

The practice element specifically alerted me to my attraction of not only ‘distressed’ material, but also defunct material, and what this in turn might sign - I had come to realize the constancy that was emerging in the type of objects that engendered my practice, typically something that connected to my own life span. This coincided with reading Robert Harbison’s 1997 ‘The Built, the Unbuilt, and the Unbuildable’ (5), and in particular the following two paragraphs:

“At any given moment there are historical blind spots, which is to say bits of the past which have no character we can detect and therefore look like nothing at all. The 1950s are just emerging from this kind of non-existence, and doubtless in the last ten years many big 1950s artefacts have disappeared without anyone’s really noticing their departure. There are still a few remnants of the Festival of Britain lurking not very conspicuously in Battersea Park, probably safer for not looking like much of anything, a series of shallow pools dotted with flagpoles and framed by viewing pavilions like bus shelters.

Animated spaces exist nearby, while this is deserted, which makes it look as if it is happening a long time ago, like Pompeii. One has to think hard to recall how short a time has passed since it was the last word in newness, so crumbly are all the concrete edges, so mottled the light blue paint which smacked of fresh sea breezes. Here the poignancy is that modernity has so fallen into irrelevance of those who live in a different age. One thinks the Battersea relics are mainly amusing, and doesn’t work out that it is one’s own childhood which is now infinitely remote, a historical fact on the verge of extinction.”

I’m curious as to how buildings and ‘modern ruins’ (specifically) can be considered to operate in this way. Is it to do with a displacement of empathy? That is, an object, a building, which is inherently linked to the proportions of the body yet is not the body, enables the reception of insights connected to oneself.
Battersea Park, circa 1990

Also, the threat to the apparent permanence that buildings represent, and a building that was only relatively recently constructed to boot, might remind us how we once thought of ourselves not so long ago? Further, I wonder if the aspiration to recurring youth that modernism embodies, doesn’t add even greater poignancy to the encounter of its breakdown?

It is anticipated that the present economic climate will lead to a proliferation of the raw material. Some of this will merely reverberate with the economic predicament and be regarded as redundant, awaiting either demolition or revamping. But others will pass into the wider canon of ruins, and engender meaning to us.

At present I understand the proposition as most closely linked to the Gothic understanding of a confrontation with death, in that, to the middle-aged, the remoteness and unattainability of youth can be understood as analogous to death, and the characteristics of the emotion engendered by the modern ruin akin to mourning.

I read once and somewhere the speculation that we experience things only once in our lives, in childhood, and everything else is a processing of the memory of those original encounters. This idea continues to intrigue me and I suspect a further, more informed reflection in this area has its place in the project.
During the MPhil inquiry the form the written element took was a core preoccupation. I eventually submitted a text that held a number of 'voices'. There was an academic element, but there was also the first person, sat in a studio looking at and thinking about making and its wider context. Also included were some on-the-spot, unpunctuated notes, taken whilst looking at key artifacts in relation to the project.

These various elements were partitioned into different chapters, which, whilst they displayed their cut 'n' shut character, were placed in an order that had some thought toward unfolding. If this project is to be advanced under the auspices of a PhD, then it is crucially important to me that the text authentically reflect how, as a practitioner, I engage this type of material when practicing.