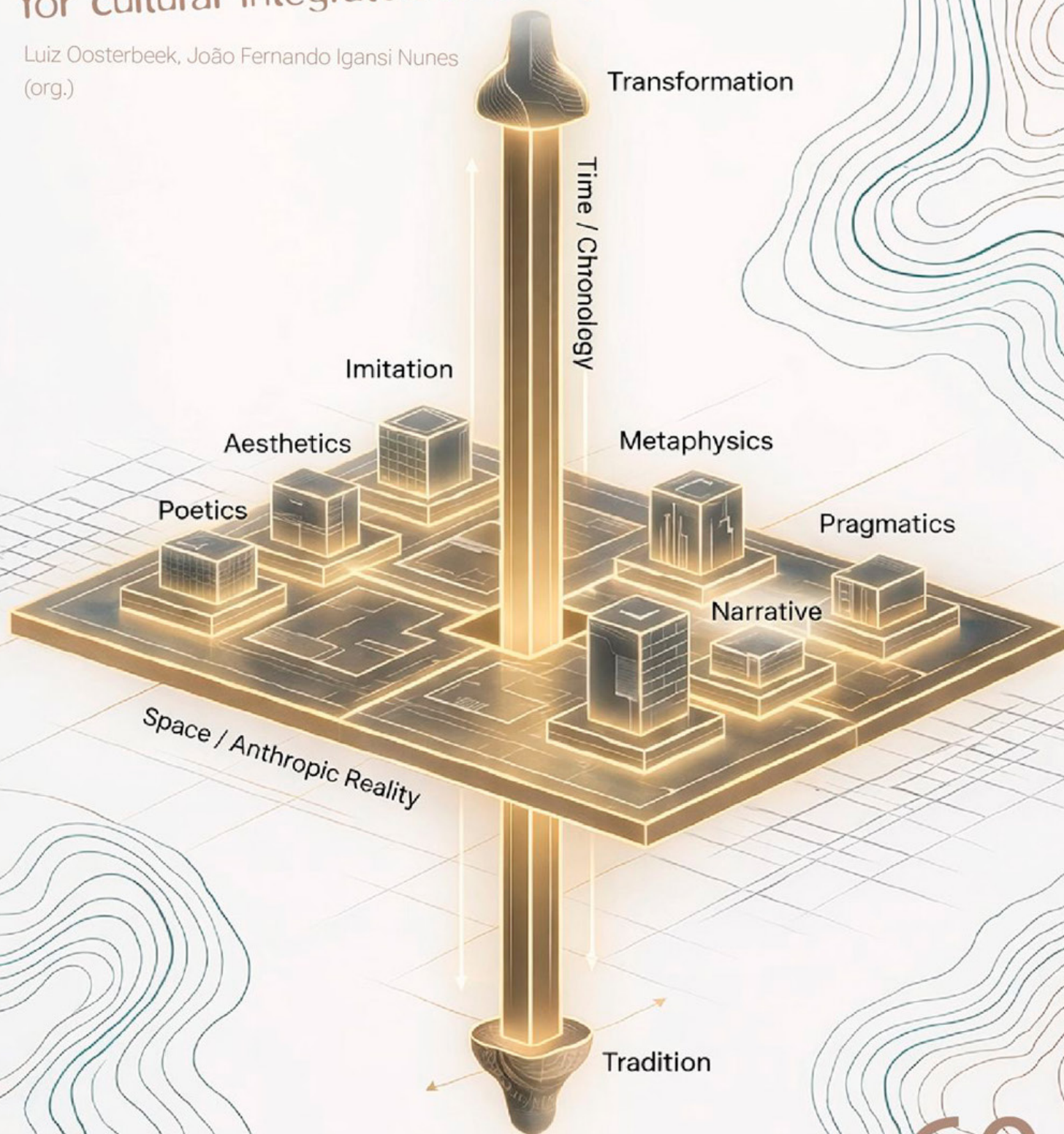


COMMUNITIES IN TRANSFORMATION

Transdisciplinary contributions
for cultural integrated landscape management

Luiz Oosterbeek, João Fernando Igansi Nunes
(org.)



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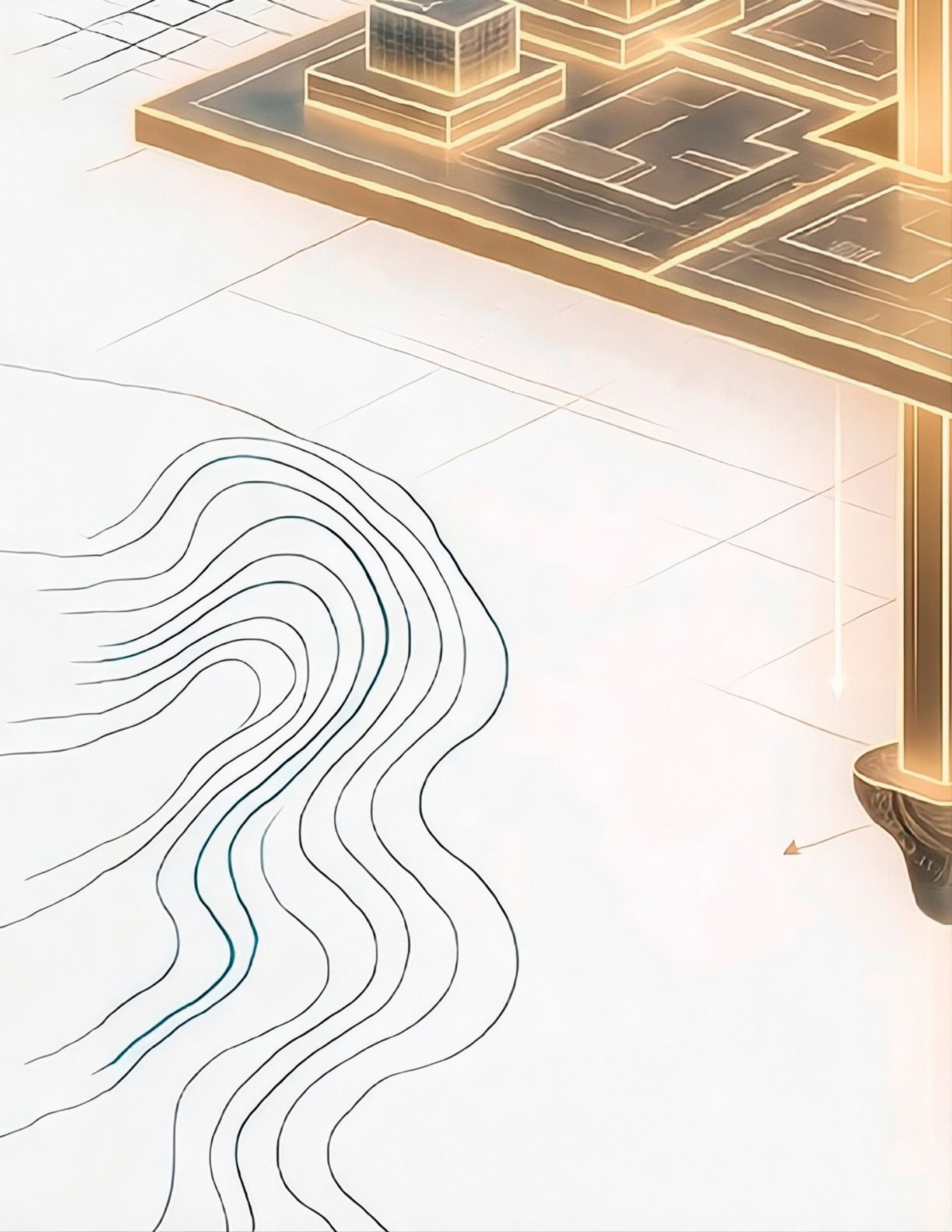
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The productive future of industrial sites. Between heritage museumification and experimental fields

ZOLTÁN SOMHEGYI¹

Factories and industrial sites are among the most controversial, and especially among the most *ambiguous* spaces and places of human culture. This above statement however needs some further clarification, because it already seems to include a controversy in itself too. How to categorise factories and industrial sites within “culture”? When mentioning the concept of “culture”, we normally think of artistic and intellectual phenomena, achievements, objects or products, and not necessarily of factories. In other words, we tend to idealise the category, and it seems impossible to include the industrial sites, of which we often tend to have ideas of being only destructive and dirty locations, unhealthy and disastrous locations in the service of exploitative mass production. This approach is *partly* understandable, for two reasons. On the

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one hand because it is, unfortunately, often quite close to reality, just think of the harsh working conditions in certain factories of which we regularly get reports and documentaries practically from all over the world. On the other hand these opinions are also triggered by some classical cultural phenomena, e.g. 19th century novels and visual representations, 20th century films etc., hence, curiously even if today many factories are not necessarily like that, still we have this cultural inheritance of thinking of them like this. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to make some further precisions in this image, especially because despite all these facts, factories and industrial areas *are* also part – in certain sense – of human culture, e.g. being results of human intellectual efforts, planning, design and organisation. Hence while the words “factory” and “industry” often have negative overtones, especially due to connotations of being places of exploitation, harsh working conditions, environmental degradation, lack of control and security, it can nevertheless be the location of producing something really useful, good, life-saving etc. In this way, the ambiguity refers to these industrial sites’ role and function in, or in connection with human culture. It embeds a doubtful controversy whether the activity pursued in them really serves or makes part of human culture, development and prosperity, or it rather leads to exploitation, inequality and serves the interest of a privileged few.

Getting closer to our present investigations however, these spaces and locations are ambiguous not only while they are operating, but also regarding their *afterlives*. As the global economy changes, more and more industrial sites (e.g. former factories, power plants, manufacturing complexes etc.) are closing and getting decayed, while production shifts elsewhere. These sites can have different fate, therefore there are several possible scenarios what can happen with a former factory, and in one way or another they can all contain some sort of controversies.

What is important to see is that even if the factory and industrial site ceases its operation, it is not a straightforward case, because then we have further ambiguous aspects in connections of the industrial complex with regards to its possible new functions – if any at all. Let’s see these considerations a bit more in detail:

Clearing away

The factory and/or industrial site can be disassembled and *cleared away*, hence preparing the site for possible further usage. In this way however, the ambiguous memory of the former and equally controversial activity can get harmed. If the physical structure is completely gone, also its remembrance gets obviously modified, and can fade. Needless to say, the memory of the place and of the activity that had been formerly pursued in the place is not exclusively connected the physicality of the remnants. To support this claim, just think of the case of the contested monuments, e.g. erected for controversial figures or events in history. Once they are gone, for example due to a sudden change of their evaluation in the society, e.g. because of a revolution or change in the system, their presence is still “felt” and can be influential for future generations. In a similar way, if an industrial site is completely disassembled, its memory can still persist, not to mention the possible environmental consequences that are perhaps not felt through human perception, but through scientific investigations are nevertheless detectable.

Slow decay

A second option that a closed factory can have is the complete and uncontrolled abandonment and *slow decay*. We are quite familiar with this option, especially because they are often documented through the semi-illegal discoveries of the followers of the urbex movement, i.e. of the urban explorers. Those interested in these activities are usually entering these places to scout the place, to take photographs, climb the derelict buildings or even collect decaying material and memorabilia – even if the often-quoted “ethical code” of the urbex is “take nothing but picture, leave nothing but footprints”. The global interest in this sort of exploration is confirmed by the fact that it also has a Japanese version called haikyo.

In this however, the phenomenon of “ambiguity” haunts again. These places are controversial in their being in-between former function and an insecure future, are at the limbo of the formerly imposed rationality and the completely other

form of rationality of the slowly occupying Nature as it continuously destroys the edifices. Important to clarify however that such sites are not (yet) proper and classical ruins. Their aesthetic effect and hence the emotions they trigger are not the same as the ones we can have when visiting a classical ruin, that is characterised by not only the loss of function and gradually increasing proportion of missing elements, but in great deal also by the significant temporal difference between the former construction and the presence of the contemporary observer. We can summarise this difference through the fact that while classical ruins emanate a sort of “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”, to quote the 18th-century scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann, one of the founders of art history, the derelict sites and buildings of industry are rather disturbing and sinister. This eerie feeling is also explainable through the fact that these sites bring the inevitable decay close to us, it makes us understand that dereliction can happen in our life and within a lifetime.

Getting another function

After this, let's see the third fate: it is the option of keeping the original building and perhaps even its accompanying infrastructure, but providing it with *another function*. There are plenty of positive examples of such conversion, reconstructions and procedures of what we normally label as “adaptive re-use”. This process has become very popular in the recent years and decades, and we can actually agree with it for various reasons. First, because in most cases this seems to be the most environmental friendly solution: instead of taking down the whole complex, the physical structure – or at least a large part of it – is saved and re-used. It of course also means that there is no need to take away and throw the old material and no need to excavate and transport new building material for a new building; all this adds to the positive environmental impact. Second, this solution is also cost-efficient, for obvious reasons connected to the ones explained above. All these are also supported when thinking of the highly influential oeuvre of architects working in this direction, including the 2021 Pritzker Prize winner Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe

Vassal, whose work was praised by the jury as: “Through their ideas, approach to the profession, and the resulting buildings, they have proven that a commitment to a restorative architecture that is at once technological, innovative, and ecologically responsive can be pursued without nostalgia. (...) The modernist hopes and dreams to improve the lives of many are reinvigorated through their work that responds to the climatic and ecological emergencies of our time, as well as social urgencies, particularly in the realm of urban housing. They accomplish this through a powerful sense of space and materials that creates architecture as strong in its forms as in its convictions, as transparent in its aesthetic as in its ethics. At once beautiful and pragmatic, they refuse any opposition between architectural quality, environmental responsibility, and the quest for an ethical society.” (Pritzker website)

Within this third option of keeping the former construction with a different function, what I am most interested in however is the aesthetic implications. It is particularly curious because here some of the aforementioned issues of controversy and ambiguity may remain, namely how or how much of the original of the original shall we maintain and what to modify? Connected to these however, there are other crucial questions too, some of which I summarised in an earlier text on the aesthetics of adaptive reuse: “After such modifications, often including the gradual change of a large part of the material of the building, and after functional changes, architectural reconstruction and creative re-purpose, all with effects on the general aesthetic features of the space, is it still the same building? Can it be the same and can it be considered to be the same? Or, in other words, after how much modification is it the same edifice, or when will it be interpreted as a new one? Is there a hierarchy of “importance” or “relevance” between the parts of the construction when establishing a relationship between the old and the new?” (Somhegyi 2022, p. 96). This is the aspect then, where we can again trace the ambiguity of the conversion, i.e. that even despite the completely different function it can maintain an active referencing to the previous complex – and naturally this is not necessarily bad, it can lead architects towards innovative solutions and aesthetic effects of the

building to experiment with. It can also provide visitors and users of the new, converted space with novel experiences, and novel types of experiences. In the following I want to continue along these lines, hence putting the question of experience in the middle when examining other forms of “afterlife” of not-anymore-operating industrial sites and constructions.

Musealising

There is also a fourth option for industrial complexes after the stop of their operation, that could be considered as a special and important sub-category of the above third option of keeping it physically but converting: and this is what we could label as *musealising*, hence transforming it into a museum of the industrial activity itself. Why is this so particular or special? Mainly because of its strong auto-referential nature, i.e. that the object of commemoration is the previous function itself. It thus creates a novel challenge for the architects and designers working on the spot too, because what they need to take into consideration is not the new function (e.g. a block of luxury apartments or a cultural and leisure venue), for which the history of the building is just an additional curiosity, but it is this very history that needs to be highlighted, without losing attentiveness to the obvious needs of educational function through the building. Therefore, as we can see, for the attempt to be successful, creators of such conversions need to focus on what aspects and particularities of the former complex they can use for the dissemination of the information.

Between decay and musealising

From this however we somehow have the impression that there is an overt emphasis on the intellectual aspect of such musealising projects of the former industrial sites. In other words, it looks that if we look at the proportions, there is a stronger focus on knowledge than on experience. Therefore, in the following I would like to propose a fifth option as a possible fate for closed factories and industrial sites, that is somewhere between letting it decay and musealising. This would mean keeping

the derelict site and former industrial spaces for the memory of the history of the activities pursued there earlier, and designate it as a heritage area, but at the same time not transforming it entirely for a classical museum dedicated to industrial history. Why would this be important, and especially, what actual benefits may all this have? Again, the argumentation needs to be developed on several levels.

First, this is useful for the particular *experiences*, hence something that I emphasised above too, namely that besides theoretical knowledge on the history of the space, non-cognitive impulses, including aesthetic experiences are just as important to get a full picture of the place. We can remember Tim Edensor's extensive research and precise analyses of the different forms of experiences what one can have in these locations. Following his considerations, summarised among others in his article titled *Sensing the Ruin* (Edensor 2007), we can list, besides the obvious visual particularities, the peculiar smell of the rotting building materials and leftovers of the earlier industrial production. Or the special sounds that are heard both of the derelict material, but not only: certain animals that are not typical in urban contexts can take over the place. Another sonic quality: unlike in the bustling town that is full of harsh sound, in these sites a surprising silence dominates. Concerning the sense of touch: the uneven contours, the rough surfaces, the tangible difference of decay in the texture of the materials can also be very rewarding. In all these visual, sonic, olfactory and tangible sensations we may experience something aesthetic, also in the original sense of the word, deriving from the Greek "aisthesis", hence sense perception. And many of these experiences can make a particular impulse exactly through their novelty, through the fact that they are normally excluded from our regulated, often even over-regulated urban spaces. Or, as Edensor claimed in another article: "Because materials are usually situated according to regimes of ordering, in ruins the appearance of an apparently chaotic blend can affront sensibilities more used to things that are conventionally aesthetically regulated." (Edensor 2005, p. 321). Therefore, similarly to the comparison between the derelict factory and the well-curated city, also in this case such aesthetic qualities can only be felt when

these places and spaces is not over-controlled and over-regulated. If these spaces are “properly” converted in a museum, then also these sources of experiences are limited or excluded.

There is however another set of experiences that such semi-curated transitory spaces can provide the visitors with, and this is regarding the nature of the space in general. Here my considerations are close to the well-known Spanish architectural theoretician Ignasi de Solà-Morales, who analysed the category of “terrain vague”. With this term he described such urban spaces that are abandoned, out of use and hence out of the normal circulation of the towns, that are characterised by organisation, productivity and security. In his words: “The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city’s *terrains vagues*. Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation. (...) In short, they are foreign to the urban system, mentally exterior in the physical interior of the city, its negative image, as much a critique as a possible alternative.” (Solà-Morales 1995, p. 120)

From this however it is obvious that in Ignasi de Solà-Morales’ opinion, that I also agree with, such *terrains vagues* are not necessarily and only negative. They can provide us with novel insights regarding the holistic functioning of our urban environments. (see more on this in: Somhegyi 2023) Despite their being out of the normal, productive activities of the city, they are full of potentials, and one of them is precisely the observation of the constantly changing nature in the relationship between human and natural habitats. And it is exactly this feature why the concept can be important for our present investigations too. These characteristics are what we can – what’s more, what we should – experience, observe and understand in the decaying former industrial sites too. This is why I argue that the abandoned factories and industrial spaces could be considered as a demonstration and observation site for various processes and interactions, and the possibility of this observation of the processes are obviously jeopardised once the site is converted

into a well-maintained museum.

The importance of the centrality of the concept of process is what also Laurajane Smith emphasised in her influential 2006 book titled *Uses of Heritage*: “(...) ‘heritage’ is not a ‘thing’, it is not a ‘site’, building or other material object. While these things are often important, they are not in themselves heritage. Rather, heritage is what goes on at these sites, and while this does not mean that a sense of physical place is not important for these activities or plays some role in them, the physical place or ‘site’ is not the full story of what heritage may be. Heritage, I want to suggest, is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate, but are not necessarily vital for, this process.” (Smith 2006, p. 44)

Concerning the actual conservation practices, the above considerations by Laurajane Smith are also in parallel with Caitlin DeSilvey’s approach that it is important “to understand change not as loss but as a release into other states, unpredictable and open. (...) ...what I am most interested in is how these identities can remain unfixed yet still productive.” (DeSilvey 2017, p. 3 and p. 18)

Here is how we arrive to the actual recommendations how these places and spaces could be treated and managed. I think they – or at least some of them – could remain in such *transitory state*. They could be designated as an industrial heritage site, but without too much control, preservation, safe-guarding. Buildings should not be totally reconstructed, renovated and converted into museums. Structures should not be overly repaired and secured, and only minimum intervention should be processed for safe-guarding visitors, but, as mentioned, without transforming the site to an over-controlled leisure centre. Of course, it is not easy, especially because of the respecting of the many, and otherwise rightly required and implemented safety regulations. It thus means that there will have to be changes of policies too, in order to allow such spaces to operate. “Spaces to operate” therefore does not mean being operated, but let them to operate on their own. Hence these

will be ambiguous spaces in ambiguous states. And it will be precisely this that is crucial. This ambiguity is essential, because the ambiguous state of these ambiguous spaces and places will represent the former ambiguity of the locations, hence the very character with which I started my present investigation. As I mentioned, already while operating, these factories and industrial sites are among the most ambiguous spaces and places of human culture. This is why I think that finding a similarly ambiguous status as heritage sites could be the most adequate and proper form of commemorating them. They are thus not only heritage sites, but sites where heritage happens, in line with what also Hanna Katharina Göbel argued for: “a renewed understanding of performativity, combining memory-making with inhabitation in the process of valuing ruins.” (Göbel 2021, p. 416)

The possible establishment of these kind of places will also be similar with what Þóra Pétursdóttir and Tim Flohr Sørensen have recently analysed. Let me quote their important considerations a bit longer:

“(...) what we find necessary is a revitalization of the traditional archaeological encounter: attending to things themselves, to object agencies, formation processes, vulnerabilities and vanishing, only this time under the mark of the Anthropocene, where we have to learn things anew, precisely because ‘there has been no biological adaptation and no cultural learning or transmission to prepare us for the kind of environmental/geological changes that loom’ (Hamilton et al. 2015, 5). Hence, in this new era we cannot remain content with the arrogance of assuming we know in advance what things are, how they emerge, where they come from, or how they should be named, categorized and embedded in our pre-existing systems. Instead, we need to start with undecidability (following Derrida) to invite alternative ways of knowing and making sense of the material, patiently, perhaps hesitantly, as a means of questioning the human monopoly on having a voice, inviting other ways of storying others.” (Pétursdóttir and Sørensen 2023, p. 60-61)

Based on the above, I want to suggest that with such transformation of these sites, or at least some of these sites, the final result, if achieved, will be a sort of an

industrial experimental site or urban laboratory in flux. A place and space that is never stable, organised and fully controlled, but constantly changing, letting the visitor observe the slow disassembling of our culture, e.g. by the taking over of our industrial zones by Nature. But this also confronts us with the need to fine-tune our concept of culture, especially with regards to Nature. The novel concept of culture should not only include the achievements of art and the human intellect as opposed to Nature and/or when dominating it, but a mode to collaborate with it better. Hence it is neither abusing and exploiting Nature through heavy industrial activities nor putting it in vitrine through musealising projects. It is more about the observation of the mutual processes during the co-existence of natural and artificial that may lead to novel understandings of our present environments. And this is what will lead, just to refer to the title of my present investigation, to productive futures of the former industrial sites, producing not actual objects, but insights of essential importance regarding our future.

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