The Culture of brownfields: The Creative revitalization of industrial spaces in Central Europe

When searching for a new identity and seeking to create new jobs that can keep youth in town, many European cities look at their industrial areas for inspiration. In conjunction with obsolete waterfront docklands, the long-abandoned factories, manufacturing halls, transportation depots and warehouses of urban industrial belts have been at the epicenter of urban regeneration in recent decades. Non-standard spaces can accommodate non-standard activities. This is why – with their generous halls, large ceilings, and high windows, as well as their often impractical forms and dark angles, industrial complexes have been reinvented as spaces for art, culture and creativity.

However, cultural revitalization has unfolded in many different ways. In some cases, local communities invested in their disaffected neighborhood factory building; in others, ministries or municipal departments made decisions that turned unused assets into experimental spaces. Central Europe has witnessed countless industrial regeneration projects of various kinds. Recently, when I visited two former European Capitals of Culture, Hungary’s Pécs and the Czech Republic’s Plzen, I realized that it would be difficult to find two more different examples of revitalized brownfields.

Pécs, inspired by the building boom taking place in Hungary in the mid-2000s, a process generated partly by Hungary’s entry to the European Union, placed its enormous ceramics factory complex into the heart of urban transformation. While the city’s bid for the cultural capital season emphasized the importance of integrating new spaces and services into the context of existing activities, Pécs invested millions of euros into a new cultural quarter of first-class architecture that now lies at the edge of the town’s center, disconnected from the city’s other services and contributing to the municipality’s near-bankruptcy in the early 2010s.

In sharp contrast, Plzen, a few years after the economic crisis, chose another path. Placing its headquarters (DEPO 2015) in a former tram depot at the industrial strip along the town’s river, the city decided to gradually renovate the complex, investing only in those works they deemed necessary while testing new functions in various spaces of the depot area. Accommodating studios, but also a co-working and a makerspace, DEPO 2015 was conceived to become self-sustaining in less than five years, thus removing the burden of maintenance and continuous subsidies from the administration’s shoulder.

The two cases represent two different paradigms: one is based on large investments and aims to create something spectacular, turning community efforts into a top-down development. The other looks into the economic and social sustainability of the program, gradually renovates the space and introduces new activities to the urban public. What happened between these two cases? Did we experience a paradigm shift, informed by the crisis and the ill fate of many large-scale development projects? Did administrations learn from bot-
ton-up urban development projects and their iterative methodologies? In this article I look into the changing forms of industrial revitalization, and explore them from the angles of industrial heritage, community participation and top-down development.

The attraction of the industrial and the use-value of industrial space

The changing relationship to industrial buildings has much to do with the search for a collective past and identity. Industrial museums, local history collections, national heritage institutes and documentary enterprises all work to satisfy the demands of a distinct interpretation of authenticity. Besides the symbolic re-appropriation of industrial buildings as images and stage sets, protagonists of contemporary culture turned towards industrial buildings in their search for spaces of artistic production and display. However, the experimental occupations and temporary investments of art and culture to colonize industrial and manufacturing spaces converged with the interests of real estate developers. As Sharon Zukin evocatively described in her 1982 book “Loft Living”, the myth of gentrification about pioneer artists unknowingly, unwittingly exploring and giving value to the uncharted territories of New York’s SoHo neighborhood is only partly true (Zukin, 1982). While the first artists did indeed move into SoHo’s manufacturing buildings because of their exceptional architectural features and opportunities (and low prices), Zukin demonstrates in detail how the first lofts converted into studio apartments were given attention (and help) from real estate developers — they observed, from up-close, the process in which the familiarity and popularity of lofts grew and helped it with the establishment of a new dwelling type through advertisement and standardization.

The process of “patrimonialization” contributed to the institutionalization of society’s relationship to industrial objects. While the first cultural activities settling in industrial buildings, like Andy Warhol’s Factory, were the manifestations of grassroots, underground initiatives, and required a lot of effort and official support to get stabilized, larger industrial buildings quickly became targets of large-scale, high-prestige investments of state and city governments. With the recognition of cultural industries as vital ingredients of urban development, the 1980s and 1990s saw the cultural re-use of a multitude of industrial buildings in their search for spaces of artistic production and display. However, the experimental occupations and temporary investments of art and culture to colonize industrial and manufacturing spaces converged with the interests of real estate developers. As Sharon Zukin evocatively described in her 1982 book “Loft Living”, the myth of gentrification about pioneer artists unknowingly, unwittingly exploring and giving value to the uncharted territories of New York’s SoHo neighborhood is only partly true (Zukin, 1982). While the first artists did indeed move into SoHo’s manufacturing buildings because of their exceptional architectural features and opportunities (and low prices), Zukin demonstrates in detail how the first lofts converted into studio apartments were given attention (and help) from real estate developers — they observed, from up-close, the process in which the familiarity and popularity of lofts grew and helped it with the establishment of a new dwelling type through advertisement and standardization.

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The concept of revitalizing industrial zones and buildings in the post-socialist Europe was thus lacking any of the socio-historical interests it often had in Western contexts. However, the interest in the cultural reuse of industrial buildings arrived to Central and Eastern Europe through the example of Western conversions. In the late 1990s, many Central and Eastern European cities rediscovered their forgotten industrial areas, not only in their official regeneration schemes, but also in conjunction with the popular imagination and growing interest of the local cultural scenes. The example of Nowa Huta in Krakow, Poland

Exploring the industrial in Central and Eastern Europe

Beyond concerns of aesthetics and the potential use of industrial spaces, the relationship to the industrial heritage is rather ambiguous in Central and Eastern Europe—buildings have an uncommon life in countries of the former Communist Block. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the arrival of market capitalism, many of the social and political values commonly inscribed in buildings suddenly became obsolete, leaving behind anachronistic architectural structures, forgotten or bulldozed by contemporary forces: derelict office buildings containing toxic construction materials, abandoned headquarters of institutions standing for dissolving forms of social organization, or factories representing outmoded concepts of production and economy.

Post-socialist societies’ relationship with spheres of cultural heritage other than the civic monuments of the foundational periods is thus highly complicated. The expropriation of the working class culture by the communist parties of the region resulted in a strong backlash after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Industry, while playing a central role in the socialist economy, had, from the second half of the 1980s, gradually lost its relevance, and weighed on employment policies as well as on the urban landscape as an unsustainable structure, a ghost without any reason of existence. Working class culture, in parallel, was condemned to oblivion, and to refurbish industrial sites to metaphorically emphasize the continuity of production was, for many in the early 1990s, an unappealing idea.

The disappearance of industrial production and the related working class culture was interpreted in a very eloquent art piece by Andreas Fogarasi at the 2007 Venice Art Biennial. In his Golden Lion-winner project Kultur und Freizeit for the 2007 Hungarian pavilion, Fogarasi depicted the post-socialist transformation of Hungarian culture and the gradual obsolescence of certain outmoded cultural institutions, such as the Houses of Culture in Hungary (Tímár 2007). Founded in the 1960s and 1970s, these cultural centers — originally built to educate “the people,” that is, the workers — were gradually deprived of their cultural mission as well as of their audience during the socio-political changes of the 1990s.

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or Ózd in Hungary shows that, bit-by-bit, municipal leaders have recognized the development potential of industrial heritage in the new economic context. In the past decades many cities launched their own art festivals aiming at reinterpreting the industrial environment of their cities, like the Kladno’s Industriální stopy or Zagreb’s Urban Festival.

In the meantime, in most urban regeneration processes in Central and Eastern Europe (due to the specificities of both the democratic transition and the privatization process) the art-driven phase of gentrification has often been skipped as a major player of the real estate market, knowing the fashion and trends along which Western inner cities have regained their appeal, cut short the “regular” cycles of urban development. It is therefore possible that in many Central and Eastern European cities, interest in the industrial building stock arose earlier from the side of institutional investors than from the side of independent, grassroots cultural and social initiatives: when the non-profit and cultural spheres discovered the potential of industrial areas, most of them had already been sold out.

In the gaps of mainstream development, the most interesting cultural productions of Central and Eastern Europe found their venues. Less central and economically less interesting industrial locations accommodated spontaneous processes of re-appropriation, similar to those decades ago in New York’s SoHo. Metelkova in Ljubljana, for instance, was the first post-socialist organization to become member of Trans Europe Halles, an international network assembling independent cultural initiatives operating in industrial complexes.

Budapest and the importance of found infrastructures

Independent culture also played an important role in re-appropriating the industrial landscape of Budapest. During the last decade of communist rule, independent culture constituted a parallel sphere, with its infrastructure and public separated from the places and publics of officially supported culture. Sometimes remaining in the realm of the “tolerated” section of culture, but more often delegated in the “prohibited” section and hiding from the eyes of political censorship, independent productions often found refuge in semi-public, semi-invisible spaces at the periphery of the system’s horizon, such as unused but structurally sound buildings.

One of the most important cultural venues of the Hungarian capital, Trafó, was the first institution to transform an unused industrial building into an art space in Budapest. The electric transformer building situated at the edge of the city’s historical core, built in the style of the industrial art nouveau in 1909, had been abandoned for more than 40 years when the French anarchist artist group Resonance discovered it in the early 1990s and transformed it into a squat, hosting a variety of cultural events, performances, concerts, presentations. After the squat was shut down, it served for years as a storage space for theatre and music groups. In the middle of the 1990s, using the money it didn’t spend on the 1994 World Exhibition, the Municipality of Budapest bought the building to transform it into a well-equipped contemporary art center. The Trafó – House of Arts — opened its doors in 1998 and quickly became an important Central European center for contemporary theatre, dance and music.

Another spectacular conversion following a bottom-up initiative is the renovation of A38. A38 is the reincarnation of a Ukrainian stone-carrier ship. The mission of its private owner to convert the ship into a cultural venue was to bring life and cultural events to the banks of the Danube, which is still isolated from the city by highways running along the river. Building a concert hall and a bar in the ship was a challenge but this challenge was answered with architectural finesse. The resulting composition with a magnificent view over the Danube proved to be popular, as A38 was voted to be the best bar in the world by readers of Lonely Planet in 2011.

Other initiatives had shorter lives. In 2003, a group of young architects and cultural producers initiated Tűzraktár in an abandoned medical equipment factory, in the same street as Trafó. The group rented the 7000 square meter building from its owner for a year at a very low rent, promising the owner the valorization of the building by cultural events and thus an increasing visibility. Tűzraktár opened with minimal architectural interventions in June 2004, and it was an immediate success — thousands of people invaded the factory’s empty spaces and courtyards on the first days. Tűzraktár’s operation had to be suspended due to its popularity; the building and its temporary commercial spaces suddenly became very attractive and the cultural function gradually disappeared behind the commercial activities.

The expansion of commercial uses in industrial heritage

Beyond the question of whose heritage should be preserved, the gradual expansion of commercial uses at the expense of cultural functions is a regular incident in the case of cultural conversion of industrial complexes in Budapest. Millenáris, one of the largest public investments in the early 2000s, is a park and cultural center situated in the former Ganz industrial complex, the largest brown-field site at the time in the central districts of the city. The refurbishment, taking place between 2000 and 2002, received many awards for
its refined architectural solutions and innovative landscaping. The principle of the redevelopment of the Ganz site was to keep the valuable buildings of the complex and turn them into an inspiring environment for contemporary cultural events and exhibitions. The result was a high-quality park that quickly became a favorite among residents of the inner districts of Buda. With time, however, questions concerning restrictions of using the park have been raised. With its special policy, the public park filtered the visitors, not allowing undesired segments of its public (homeless people, for instance) to enter the park. Besides this, it also prohibited certain uses (like drinking alcohol) and thus raised doubts about the public nature of the institution. But it was even more alerting when users of the park suddenly noticed that parts of the park were separated and turned into a construction site. With the raising concern about the plans for the park, it turned out that the gradual transition of certain parts of the park into office buildings was part of the original plan, conceived to help the park’s financing but without really informing the public. After this incident, Millenáris saw a significant part of its park replaced by new office complexes.

Another spectacular example of the commercial expansion in cultural buildings is CET Budapest. Originally a cultural center, CET is a spectacular refurbishment of a former warehouse at the bank of the Danube. The design by Dutch architect Kaas Oosterhuis aimed at keeping the two heritage buildings intact while linking and surrounding them with a large, amorphous steel and glass structure, an unusually fresh appearance in a city with very few significant contemporary buildings that was immediately baptized “The Whale” by Budapest citizens. The 23000 square meter complex was built in a complicated public-private partnership; the cooperation between the city, the developer and the architect did not play out perfectly well. The architect, after judging the developer’s construction methods inappropriate for the complexity of the design, left the process and sued the developer. As a matter of fact, the developer failed to deliver the building in its requisite quality, and to comply with its obligations towards the city, namely to open the center in 2010. Years after its opening, CET is still half-abandoned, forcing the municipality to seek for new functions to animate the building.

**Industrial heritage between politics and commerce**

Former industrial sites are important experimental grounds not only in the way they confront narratives of the industrial past but also in the way these narratives can be further developed, or silenced, by the means of a public or private intervention.

As social sciences and cultural studies inform the architectural profession, architects also acknowledge that unused industrial complexes are not only spaces of potentiality, often situated in very central locations, waiting to find new functions that can revitalize them; they’re also anchors of the urban and historical imagination, sources of strong emotional bonds of affection or dismay. Architectural interventions may enhance, exploit or eliminate these bonds, thus creating spaces of very different natures and allowances. We might consider an industrial building, through the story of its former owner, a narrative of private entrepreneurship, or we may consider an edifice through the story of its workers, thus a narrative of the working class, collectivity, exploitation or emancipation, or through the story of the city or state that bought or nationalized the building, a narrative of employment policies, public functions, education or culture. The different ways to interpret an industrial site, often influenced by political and ideological associations, result in diverse arguments and concepts of revitalization.

If the public interest in preserving industrial sites as remnants of social memory is damaged, it is because the importance of those memories is not acknowledged by a broad consensus. The question of whose heritage, whose culture, and, ultimately, whose city is represented by a refurbished industrial site, is most often decided in political or commercial terms. While small, independent, often temporary, interventions in industrial spaces or investments realized in successive phases tend to have more sensibility to recognize particular cultures and legacies, larger interventions, in need of more funding and more constrained by their required profits, are more likely to apply the most of the available space for standard commercial use, to the expense of any reminder of or continuity with the building’s original function.

In Central Europe, revitalization projects are more reliant on political and commercial support than in many parts of the Western world. The lack of variety in funding turns the cultural scene towards the re-appropriation of found industrial infrastructures, with minimal degrees of architectural intervention. In this respect, NGOs in Budapest, Katowice, Paris and New York are part of the same bottom-up movement — a desire to access spaces of potentiality while building on the existing social and historical proprieties of these spaces. As I attempted to demonstrate in this text, investments that generate long-term and inclusive structural change in the city are often developed by initiatives in this movement.

**References**
