

Strategies for the transformation of abandoned industrial sites in Romania

Motivation and historical context: the decline of industrial heritage post-1989

Post-communist Romania harbours a little known reality: its dilapidated industrial sites. (Ioan, Otoi, and Chelcea 2007). Especially tragic are the traces of deindustrialisation in areas that have developed around industrial centres dating back to antiquity.

One such example is the Transylvanian small town of Hunedoara, whose entire *raison d'être* hinged on an iron and steel industry dating back to the Roman Iron Age. A site of roughly 500 hectares, framing the northern border and defining the skyline and horizon of the town, has all but disappeared since the early 1990s. Along with the destruction of the last chimneys of the C.S.H. Industries, collapsed an element of local heritage that has accompanied the lives of the local population over generations. A historic symbiosis between industrial production and individual identity has been erased over the span of a few decades. The now barren site's future remains uncertain. (Wicke 2018) (Hunedoara 2014).

Such histories are repetitive and define Romanian urban and peri-urban landscapes. The uncontrolled decay of urban industrial sites, especially of ones located within or in the immediate proximity of metropolitan centres, has catalysed the emergence of idle and uncontrolled loci, as well as the systemic erasure of industrial and cultural heritage. While transformations of derelict industrial areas have become an established practice in Western Europe, as well as the academic interest in the aesthetics of urban and industrial ruination, in Romania, these pursuits are few and far between.

The Romanian state and Romania's institutional culture contribute massively to the problematic handling of its industrial heritage. "Until recently, heritage designation was mainly granted sites pertaining to faith, the Romanian nation, and historic and prehistoric pasts. Industrial and mining heritage registered at the Ministry of Culture (...) listed nothing production or labor-related." (Kideckel 2018)

Excluding economic and political factors, an argument can be formulated to make sense of the general population's reticence towards a positive approach of its post-1989 industrial patrimony. This decline must be contextualised within the broader socio-cultural framework of local cultural identity.

An explanation can be found in post-war psychotherapy, as illustrated by Chris Gerbing in "Sie bauten eine neue Stadt": "*Die in dem für unmöglich erachteten Leidensdruck entstandene Betäubung sei verantwortlich dafür, dass in der Umgestaltung der Städte eine Abkehr von der Szenerie zu sehen sei, in der die Schrecknisse sich zugetragen haben.*"

Industrial sites in Romania have flourished during, and served as a backdrop for a tremendous historical trauma: the rise, and perhaps even more significantly, the abrupt fall of communism. After 1989, consensus seemed to be a public and radical refusal to acknowledge any association with our socialist past, positive or otherwise. The systemic ignoring of Romania's industrial heritage can be traced back to this aggressive cutting of the cord that linked us to a shared past, perceived to be devoid of any cultural historical merit. Yet this memory is imperative and necessary for the creation of a fully fledged cultural identity.

"Trauma and discontinuity are fundamental for memory and history, ruins have come to be necessary for linking creativity to the experience of loss at the individual and collective level." (Settis, 1998)

Aim

It is thus important to investigate whether strategies can be developed in order to formalize the morphological, functional and social disparities of decaying industrial territories. The final aim should be to actively obstruct the practice of erasure and replacement of cultural and industrial heritage.

Case Study Context: Sibiu

The city of Sibiu can be used as an exemplary operating field to test viable courses of action for the preservation of its industrial patrimony: its intra-urban industrial sites can stand in for similar territories in cities where local identity is closely intertwined with its pre-1989 industrial heritage, and where active, design-based preservation of the modern patrimony can yield viable results.

Other prerequisites for sustainable rehabilitation, such as the sites' connection to local utilities, a strong human resource, a surrounding landscape that holds value for tourism, and funds that could be accessed through the European Union (Pusca 2015), are also met. The city's cultural landscape is exceptionally vivid relative to its size and regional character: it ranks second in Romania by "Cultural Vitality Index" (0,88 according to a study commissioned by "Centrul de Cercetare și Consultanță în Domeniul Culturii, in 2010"). (Cosmescu 2016). It is home to various international art festivals, most notably the yearly ten-day "Festivalul Internațional de Teatru Sibiu" (FITS), founded in 1993 by the local theatre company "Radu Stanca".

The small size of the venues available for the festival, coupled with the absence of an opera house or other large stages, has forced the participants to claim a significant portion of public space: circus tents have been erected in parking lots, gyms and government buildings and most open public areas have been assimilated as performance sites.

Case Study 1: Fabrica de Cultura

With my "Wastelands" project (Uni Stuttgart, 2012) I examined the plausibility of using the site of the concrete prefab company "S.c. Constructii S.a." in Sibiu as a retention pool for cultural activities during the FITS theatre festival, and as a functional hybrid for the rest of the year.

The roughly 20 ha wide area was at the time still operational, the production facilities occupying 3/4 of the site, the rest having been left deserted since the late 1980s. Its position within the city was initially peripheral, yet by 2012 the city had come to grow around and encircle the site.



The underlying argument for the project was the preemptive reactivation of a declining industrial site, before its acquisition and erasure by real estate developers.

The design focused primarily on the reconversion of a structure that had been dubbed “the virgin ruin”, a skeletal concrete structure that had never been used, yet had remained on the site as the area was not needed for fabrication and the cost of demolition would have outweighed any immediate economic benefits.



fabrica de cultura - the “virgin ruin” - photos by the author

While the structurally viable ruin was to be reanimated with minimally invasive architectural devices in order to preserve and incorporate the qualities of the derelict landscape, the development of the rest of the plot would be phased along with the downscaling of the fabrication areas over the span of twenty years.

Method

Four main design strategies were employed:

the programmatic transformation of the main structure (aided by parasitic components like new circulation elements or intermediary galleries), the use of materials and processes found on site (Heatherington 2017), the addition of a new building (a tower that would serve as a signal and an attractor to the site), and the curation of the interstitial spaces by carving walking paths, designating urban gardening allotments and defining spaces for open-air stages.

The initial project focused on the architectural intervention within the “virgin ruin” with its particular geometry - small parasitic buildings of standard story heights, latching onto a main hall, 37x10m and 8m tall. The challenge proved to be controlling the depth of the main hall, while maintaining its proportion and architectural characteristics (such as beams of horizontal cranes, skylights, other visible structural elements etc.). It was also imperative not to add any buildings to the existing cluster, so all functional requirements of a playhouse had to be met by existing spaces, such as an entry foyer, back- and side stages and auxiliary rooms. The main use as a theatre and assembly hall was to be complemented by a hybrid mix of programs such as studios, rehearsal rooms, gastronomy and rental workspaces.

As the chosen design playground was located at the back of the site, the path towards it was led by the space under another set of horizontal cranes, the area around it left mostly untouched, the palimpsest landscape used to incorporate time layers (Lynch 1972) and natural edges.

Between 2012 and 2014 this project has served as a conceptual framework for the conversion of another fabrication hall on the same site into a theatre space, designated specifically for the play "Faust" by director Silviu Purcarete for the "Radu Stanca" theatre.

The initially envisioned rehabilitation of the "virgin ruin" at the back of the site had proven problematic: in a sense, the conceptual decision to first operate on the ruin was based on a desire to underline what Kersten Geers calls "tautological survival" of buildings, the structure's claim to survival was simply it having existed for so long. It was, in Geer's parlance, a building that "negotiated its own uselessness"- and failed. Therefore the strategy to reprogram the ruin proved unfeasible and another hall of similar proportions was chosen.

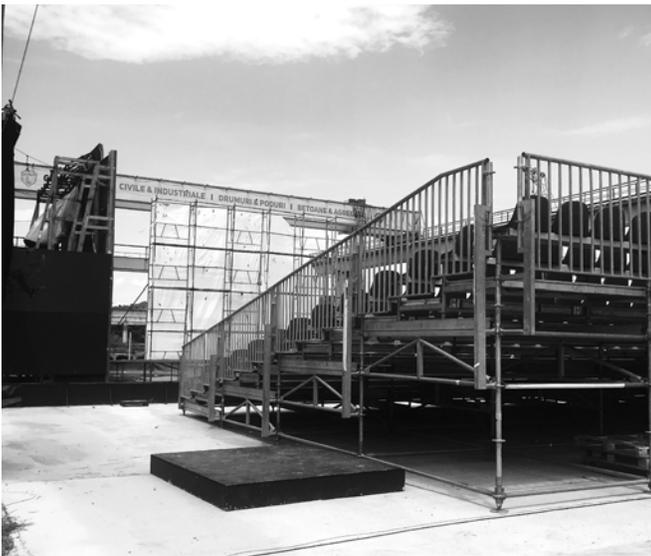
Similarly to the previous building, the difficulties of dealing with the depth of the new space were met with innovative stage design solutions rather than architectural interventions: the stage opens successively into a roughly curated back stage, allowing the entry and participation of the public. Similar to the initial project, no new buildings were added to the cluster of fabrication halls, the only interventions being the cleaning of the space, the adding of raked seating rows, a circular stage and the backdrop for the play.



Despite difficulties with site access and management, rudimentary and low cost interventions, and insufficient spaces for public assembly or waiting areas, "Faust" is an ongoing production in Sibiu and sold out over its entire playtime. The site has been renamed into "Fabrica de Cultura" and now hosts numerous large scale events during the FITS.

After an adjacent hall underwent a similar reconversion in 2016, no other interventions to the "FDC" site have been planned. The main issue is the management of the uncontrolled spaces around the two "playhouses". While the play "Metamorphosis" is often staged outside in summer, for the majority of the year the landscape surrounding the transformed factory buildings is still left in a state of neglect, denying the initial intention of curating the aesthetics and reviving the memory of the former industrial site.

Such qualities have been successfully explored and used by the stage design within, yet there is little incentive from the theatre company or the city to reanimate spaces of more vaguely defined use: the site has proven too big to be disciplined by small interventions, without adding new buildings or intense landscaping efforts, which both carry with them costs that cannot be immediately amortized.



Preliminary Conclusion

The interstitial landscape has proven harder to control than the architectural object, threatening the successful reanimation of both.

The boundary between the pragmatically useable object and an emancipatory appropriation of “wiggle space” (Venturi and Scott Brown 2007) had not yet dissolved. This can be partly attributed to programmatic “monoculture” and the lack of functional hybridization, as no synergies developed between the performance space and its surroundings. The theatre and the concrete factory (where production was still ongoing) each claimed and used what they needed, depleting the site of an intrinsic vagueness which rendered it so intriguing at first. In a conterpreservation heritage practice, any “attempt to find balance between continued process and planned use” (DeSivey 2017) must negotiate the dichotomy between intent and action.

Something essential was therefore missing in order to assure the sustainable survival of the intervention. Or something had been omitted during the conceptual and planning process.

Research Question

The question my research now poses is what further insights can be gathered from the practical experience with “Fabrica de Cultura”, while reflecting on the driving initial design process and its effect on the materialization of the project and whether these observations can be used to define methods for approaching other similar sites.

Exploring two projects, the aforementioned “Fabrica de Cultura” and “Fabrica Independenta”, both linked by location and regional identity, can lead to a new way of knowledge (Prominski 2019) : production about design processes, in a “paleoteric way of knowing (retrospective, working with knowledge)” - “Fabrica de cultura”, as well as a “neoteric way of knowing (forward looking, working with designing)” “Fabrica Independenta”. (Buchanan 1998).

Case Study 2: Fabrica Independenta

This research site is located on the northern border of Sibiu’s old city centre, between the outermost belt of the medieval fortress wall and the river Cibin, its silhouette clearly visible amongst the tiled roofs of the old town. The former industrial sector of the “Uzinele Rieger” (a manufacturer of agricultural machinery) founded in 1896 and consisting of 19 buildings on a site of roughly 9 ha, has halted production starting with 1992, and has now lied dormant and dilapidated for the better part two decades. (Pavăl 2014). Exceptionally, a few of the fabrication halls have been declared “historical monuments” (Pavăl 2014), preventing the demolition of the site.



However, despite some tentative studies by students of Universitatea de Arhitectura si Urbanism “Ion Mincu”, and the site’s intriguing and atypical character, no further action was taken to rehabilitate the former “Rieger” factories, even though opening the site and reanimating it might potentially catalyze the restructuring of the entire surrounding urban tissue. (Cina 2009)

Method

My approach to a design oriented handling of the issue of “Independenta” starts with an initial intuitive experiencing of the site. The aim being to appropriate and distort classical empirical methods of architectural and urban analysis. Leaning on a theory of “ludic thinking” (Rötzer 2013) and “playful design” (Kania-Feistkorn 2019), the aim is to interrogate the site beyond the confining norms of standard feasibility studies.

One first such act was 'breaking into' the site. As access into the buildings was limited, the field unknown and precarious, this "urban exploration" unveiled "an indeterminate space; a place outside the circuit of the productive structures of the city, an internal, uninhabited, unproductive and often dangerous island, simultaneously on the margins of the urban system and a fundamental part of the system." (Edensor 2008) The field appears not as something to be operated on but as a 'terrain vague' and an "active participant" (Kien 2016) to the design process that should follow.

"The Zone wants to be respected. Otherwise it will punish." (Tarkovsky 1979)

The "necrotic" (Comaroff 2013) topography of the wasteland imposes its own parameters on the planner: walking across the precarious ground, a "strange and disruptive space" (Edensor 2008), allows one to experience the landscape away from the urbanist's sterile bird eye view, and influences further actions.

The immediate contact with the site revealed three main actors and their relationship with the surrounding area: the enclosing wall, a tall administrative building flanking the main entrance, and the buildings within the site.

The wall is of particular interest as it acts as a territorial barrier between the picturesque old town and the uncontrolled topos of the wasteland. Other studies suggested the removal of the wall as a first step towards rehabilitation (Corina 2016), yet this should be treated with care, as it also appears to have assimilated part of the old town wall and a medieval defensive tower in its perimeter. The unreflected lifting of such an important barrier would lead to a disruption of the balance between two ontologically opposing environments. One would "leak" into the other, the already decaying site dissected, and "inappropriately opened" (Comaroff 2013). On the north side of the plot, the river (and a riverside street) acts as an impediment to the site's sprawl, the wall becomes redundant; perhaps is it here where a permeability of the site can be tested before tackling the south border.



The entry to the site is marked by the aforementioned administrative building, flanking a "square" (currently a parking lot) - these elements are interesting as they form a definitive halt to a circulation artery flowing up from the main square of the old town. The street connecting a series of plazas within the city terminates here and penetrates the site - this serves as another argument towards a very delicate manipulation of the buffer zone between the living city and the dormant industrial zone.

The landscapes within the enclosure seem promising. As opposed to the "Fabrica de Cultura"/s.c. Constructii s.a. site, the scale of the buildings as well as the interstitial spaces appear smaller at first sight, appropriately human. It is here where the main interventions should take place.

Conceptually, the site has set a few parameters for these further operations, yet the main aim is to avoid a common practice of heritage conservation: maintaining the ruins as a “ceremonial hide”, “where the remains of non-viable buildings are stretched across the surfaces of newer and larger assemblies” (Ker-Shing 2013).

A fourth defining element of the site is the presence of nature: an array of agents in animal, vegetable and chemical form, slowly reclaiming the abandoned buildings. “Plants generate particular aesthetic effects, as they take hold in disused structures, softening the hard lines of architecture a contributing to its “pleasing decay”” (DeSilvey 2017). This presence is also relevant since it is a symbol of a vegetational island in an urban environment where green spaces are for the most part lacking. From an architectural point of view, this generates tension, as the question arises to what degree “vegetative autonomy” (DeSilvey 2017) is to be allowed in reclaimed industrial wastelands, and what degree of control should be exercised in order to tame but not destroy nature.

Aim and strategy

It is worth arguing that the responsible approach would be to incipiently curate the disrepair by maintaining the “palimpsest landscape” and allowing a visitor to safely meander through the field. Naturally, heritage must connect to issues of daily life, like housing, food or recreation; yet before diving unthinkingly into forced programmatic use, engagement with the space must be mediated.

In the case of the industrial ruin, it is not the architectural device that generates spacial purpose, but the other way around. The next step is the reactivation of public and political interest by small architectural interventions, such as parasitic structures that enable movement (and idling) on the site.

Facing forward, it is imperative to frame the city’s development without demonizing its industrial past, and by reconnecting these sites with the population’s shared regional cultural identity. As these developments have started only recently, it is difficult to foresee a palpable and objective solution; yet the goal is not to forcefully “inhabit a corpse” (Comaroff and Ker-Shing 2013) but to explore the potential of life within it, as “ruination does not signal the absolute annihilation of building and organization but instead opens out to radically different forms of organization and organizing.” (DeSilvey 2017)



fabrica independenta as seen from the city centre - photos by the author

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