

Reinterpreting Urban Space in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

The most impressive buildings leave behind magnificent ruins. The physical remains of abandoned factories, damaged or still functional but in an advanced state of decay, turn into unique objects, laden with history, difficult to place within a timeline, which don't actually belong neither to the past, as they still linger materialized in the form of ruins, nor to the present because their existence is not justified in the absence of production, ambiguously located in the current economic and cultural dynamics. These places are reminiscent of a distant past, bringing forth the possibility of adaptive reuse of the industrial spaces through conversion, which may seem strange considering that they do not only symbolize exploitation and social control, but also the economic inefficiency of a bygone socialist system. This is an open subject and I tried to investigate the possibility of a different approach, the communist/post-communist deconstruction, and the ways in which a designer, whether artist or architect, can go beyond the art of grievance. The deindustrialization is an economic and cultural phenomenon, at least to the extent that it stimulates artistic expressions, revamps of urban spaces and social practices. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, artists, through painting and photography, have immortalized the scenes created by new technologies. Beyond mere documentation, these works have revealed attitudes towards the scene and the changes imposed by modernity, all of that with the social side in focus. Like art, the architectural rehabilitation of industrial buildings opens new paths towards form and space.

Rezumat

Cele mai impresionante clădiri lasă în urmă ruine magnifice. Rămășițele fizice ale fabricilor abandonate, deteriorate sau încă funcționale, dar aflate într-un stadiu avansat de degradare reprezintă obiecte unice, încărcate cu istorie, dificil de plasat într-un interval temporar, neaparținând în totalitate nici trecutului, atâta timp cât ele încă mai sunt materializate sub forma ruinelor, nici prezentului, întrucât prezența lor nu mai este justificată în absența producției, situate ambiguu în dinamica economică și culturală actuală. Aceste locuri amintesc de un trecut îndepărtat, oferind posibilitatea reutilizării, adaptării spațiilor industriale, prin conversie, care poate părea stranie în condițiile în care acestea simbolizează nu doar exploatare și control social, ci și ineficiența economică a sistemului socialist, apus. Acest tip de abordare e o interogație deschisă, așa încât am încercat să investighez problema alterității și deconstrucției comuniste/postcomuniste și modul în care designerul, fie el artist sau arhitect poate depăși cultura deplângerii. Dezindustrializarea este un fenomen economic și cultural, cel puțin în măsura în care aceasta stimulează creații artistice, revitalizare urbană și practici sociale. Încă de la începutul revoluției industriale, artiștii, prin pictură și fotografie au imortalizat peisajele create de noile

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tehnologii. Dincolo de simpla documentare, aceste lucrări au relevat atitudini față de peisaj și schimbările impuse de modernitate, totul implicând latura socială. Asemeni artei, reabilitarea arhitecturală a cladirilor industriale deschide noi căi spre formă și spațiu.

Keywords: architectural rehabilitation, arts, industrial buildings, remembrance.

1. Introduction

If the nineteenth century industrial revolution extended over a long enough period of time that people had the possibility to get accustomed to the new values and the new way of life, today, the accelerated rhythm of technological expansion and development does not allow for the necessary adjustment time. The effects of this growth lead to a new interpretation of the context, which is perceived as a superimposition of the very distinct aspects of the urban territory, on different levels and on different scales. This evolution can cause, within the urban environment, a powerful shift that can ultimately lead to chaotic reactions. In the past, each developmental stage lasted for long enough that the economic entities were able to absorb the abandoned urban spaces. Today however, the changes that take place inside the city happen so fast that these natural mechanisms do not have time to assimilate the growing number of abandoned land and real estate. We can therefore talk about a post-industrial era, or an era of the new industries, and about a space that is dominated by the effects of this new reality. The term “post-” presupposes the existence of a “pre-“; one reality cannot shape its development without an understanding of previous urban phenomena and their consequences and products, without understanding what caused some of these phenomena to become successes and others to be seen as failures. The re-evaluation of the status of the industrial spaces is necessary if we are to combat the negative image associated with them.

When a project for an ideal city is juxtaposed upon the existing one, with the purpose of improving the urban and social environments, a purification dynamics takes shape, within which entire areas and locations are eliminated or hidden and small fragments of history run the risk of disappearing. The study is based on more than one interconnected concepts: industrial sites and culture, the formation and the perception of images, the importance of remembering spaces. The beautification, reuse, and intervention play a key-role in urban revival and the social challenges, and a simple progression summarizes this process: *Abandonment – Disintegration – Adaptation – Reuse – Culture – Memory – Society.*

2. The image of de-industrialisation

In Henri Lefebvre’s view, the city is a present and immediate reality, an architectural and practical, material fact, while the urban is a social reality built on relations that are conceived, constructed or re-constructed through thought [1]. The identity of a city represents the product of a visual culture, constantly created and re-created through the plurality of the citizens’ experiences and representations, with their personal perspectives on things, their way of speaking, making, and thinking the city.

According to architect Christian Norberg-Schultz, each lived space has its particularities, a *genus loci* that already exists within a space that we want to build on or that we can create if it does not already exist. In both cases, the character of the space can be amplified or complemented; however, it is not attributable to an actual, immovable state, reified in time, but to a series of attributes connected to change. Just like, for Heidegger, the process of remembering covers simultaneously the past, the present, and the future, a certain space can evoke and open, through a profound and unflinching focus on things. People who love music do not listen to a certain song or musical piece

in order to get lost among their memories, but to have an immersive experience, to inhabit the music [2].

The deindustrialization is both an economic and a cultural phenomenon, at least from the point of view of its stimulation of the artistic manifestations, the transformations of the urban space and the social practices. But we might say that industrialization is more than just an economic or a social matter. Deindustrialization and the post-industrial spaces have different meanings for different groups. For architects, artists, archeologists, and patrimony specialists, former factories are stripped from their productive function, acquiring aesthetic dimensions. For those in the creative field, the factories and the industrial ruins represent a new source of innovation for their visual discourse, attaching new meanings to the history of technology and treating it as a source of art and diversity. The production and re-production of the social space, which hosts structure, architecture and urban form in continuous evolution, represents a challenge for artists, given that they can choose to interpret it as a sort of palimpsestic structure, composed not only of spectacular, spatial and temporal strata, which are also visible, material, but also of invisible layers, laid on top of each other. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, artists have captured the landscape created by the new types of technology through painting and photography. The portrayal of factories appeared on the scene of the industrial landscape, through drawings and paintings, at the beginning of the eighteenth century. One example of the sublime portrayal of the industrial space is captured, during the British Romantic Age, by Philip James de Loutherbourg: *Coalbrookdale by Night* was painted in 1801, Fig. 1. In the current portrayals of industrial platforms, the classical historical motifs of industrial art, like factories harmoniously integrated within the natural landscape, smoking chimneys as a symbol of prosperity, and heroic workers are totally absent, like *Tate Moss* painted by Jock McFadyen, Fig. 2. Beyond the simple documentation, these works of art have always revealed the artists' attitudes towards the changes brought by the technological development; therefore, the social aspect was very much involved. The purpose of our study on these images is to examine the perspectives of the industrial landscape and the way in which these paintings can integrate or be integrated in a representation medium that reveals the systemic nature of those landscapes, more than their simple visualization.



Figure 1.
Philip James de Loutherbourg
„Coalbrookdale by Night“, 1801.



Figure 2.
Jock McFadyen
„Tate Moss“, 2008.

The British Geographer Tim Edensor claims that the remains of the abandoned industrial space enter the norms of the urban space. The decaying matter offers new possibilities of interaction with the material world, just like industrial ruins are places open for experimentation. Ruins are made to speak, and the episodes of their destruction are recreated. When taken out of use, the ruins of a former building start emanating a field of significances that have been structured in time and have

been conserved in a state of latency [3]. At the same time, these lifeless areas offer an alternative universe, one with new sources of inspiration, new visions and processes that may take place during artistic creation. The universe of the artist owns a sensation similar to the one generated by these sites; no longer useful, these areas exude freedom, hope, expectations for a better future, as they are spaces of the possible, a utopian possibility that the artist embodies through his work. Within the classical spaces, the ability to express yourself is limited and sometimes, the synergy between the form of art and the place where it unfolds is not fully exploited. Here we find an extraordinary source of unusual juxtapositions, which offer the mind the possibility of an unconscious game with residual objects and forms. In the absence of someone overlooking the spaces, they can be explored, becoming a source of inspiration and generating improvised installations. It is no wonder that we have seen situations in which twentieth and twenty-first century artists have deliberately used trash to create their works of art. Attracted by the different textures and varied forms, by the symbolical features of garbage, artists like Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Fig. 3, Tom Deininger and others have brought trash art to the forefront and have proven that garbage can have a second life, Fig.4.



Figure 3.
Tim Noble and Sue Webster
„Wild Mood Swings“, 2009-10.



Figure 4.
Tom Deininger
„Self Portrait“, 2012.

Sanda Iliescu, artist and professor of art and architecture at the University of Virginia, states that the recycling strategies and the attempts to re-incorporate waste and debris within new installations can form a common ethical and aesthetic ground for contemporary art and architecture [4]. The meaning deriving from the works of art and that of the relics taken from an abandoned site change through their being juxtaposed: objects that were meaningless and had no value originally are upgraded to a new level of meaning and importance through their association with more valuable works of art, while the works of art become less pretentious and more accessible to larger audiences when exhibited in a less conventional, slightly degraded space. The ability of artistic forms to engage architecture in a common language becomes evident here; all that is left for the audience is to discover this language and the different meanings of the architectural space that surpasses its initial, utilitarian function.

In Halbwachs' opinion, memory depends on space, being a lasting reality. The collective's understanding of the present, as well as the past is generated within the places that it inhabits [5]. Due to this quality, capturing the past becomes possible through the ways in which it is preserved within our physical, material midst. During the past few years, some artists have gotten involved in this discourse of the memory, carving new ways of seeing and reading history. Art is very good at reflecting history, presenting changing geographies ideologies and violent revolutions, from the perspective of the artistic mind; the essential goal of what we call cultural memory is to fill the void

between anthropological exploitation of memory and traditional history. Through the method of restoration, we get a new perspective on the artist's image, leading to a better understanding of history's hypostases, whether they have been collectively experienced or solely by the artist. John Berger wrote that a drawing does not show what you saw, but what you have become. The past and the present co-exist in the space of the ruins, in the narrative discourse of destruction and decline. Ioan-Augustin Pop's exhibition, *Industrial Archeology 2011*, is the image of the socialist inheritance. The landscape is made of rust and concrete, frescoes and uncovering, conservation and pre-emptive digging, nostalgic, hypnotic, and historical objects, and, most of all, objects that are taken from a re-activated memory [6].



Figure 5.
Ioan-Augustin Pop
„Industrial Archeology“, 2011.

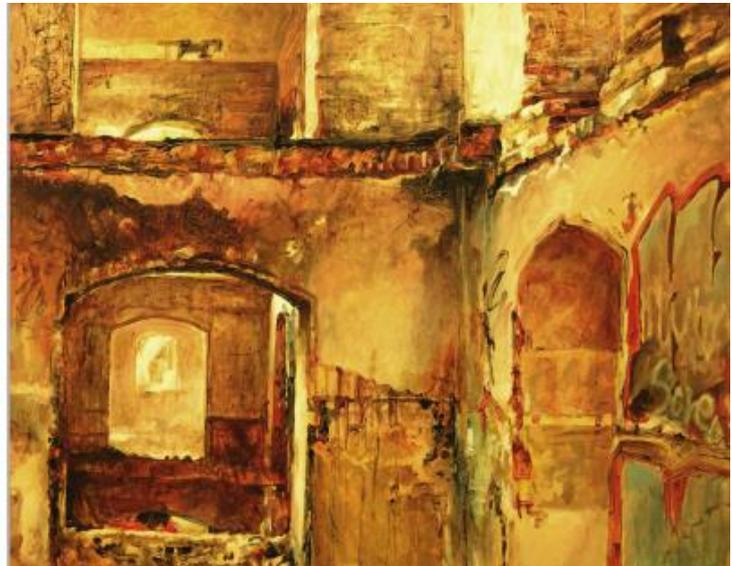


Figure 6.
Nicolae Comănescu
„Damaged ceiling. Assan's Mill“, 2011.

Romanian artist Nicolae Comănescu has the same perspective on ruins, a special project of his, titled *DNA: Dust Narrative Analysis* or *ADN: Analiza Narativă a Prafului*, Fig.6. The author conceives his paintings as sequences from an urban expedition, a process that is closely connected to the process of re-enchantment of industrial artifacts. The tension between the the mystery of these abandoned places and the exhilarating feeling you get when entering a forbidden place seems to be the reason so many people are attracted to abandoned spaces. These areas are visited and described as *terra incognita*, after being thrown outside societal norms, which promote the search for shiny things, neon lights, and consumerism. Marcel Proust was right in saying that the real journey is not about looking for new places, but about looking with new eyes.

Sometimes, the psychological nature of these landscapes generates attitudes and feelings that affect the social domain. The past plays a very important role in shaping up the personal and the national identity. The reconfiguration of the social, collective memory during communism in Romania meant a progressive transformation of national history through methods and processes established by the party. Many researchers see nostalgia as a reaction to the rapid social and cultural changes that take place at present. American historian and cultural critic Christopher Lasch insists upon the distinction between nostalgia and the simple remembering of past days, which simply serves to connect the two temporal dimensions and to ensure continuity [7]. Going back to happier memories does not imply a negative look on the present; it simply represents a sign of nostalgia. Nostalgia only focuses on certain aspects of communist life, like the stability and the low prices, influencing the objectivity of debate over the past. American artist Anna Held Audette (1938-2013), puts America under a different lens through her exhibitions *Requiem for the Industrial Age 2014* and

Modern Ruins 2012, Fig. 7. Her works do not foretell the disappearance of the industry, but simply present it from its hollow perspective, showing its symbols of revival and hope and a Requiem of the industrial era. Everything is presented as though to recreate the emotional environment of the many lives that existed there, in an apparently stable ideological frame.



Figure 7.
Anna Held Audette
Left: „Scrap Metal II“ 1999; right: „Shredder Deck“ 2012.

3. The process of cooperation

The contemporary artist has strayed away from the romantic image that was in place up until the nineteenth century, becoming an active factor who demands an active reaction from those who experience his art. These characteristics can be extrapolated to the interaction between space and art, which has evolved from a classical, neatly organized, traditional format to a more experimental use and a more spontaneous location. Everything here calls for experimentation, creation, interaction, art, and culture. The work of art represents the space of a negotiation between reality and imagination, narrative and commentary. Being the environment for a spatial dance of architecture, art and design, the exhibitions are key-locations in which the present is always re-signified. Space as an experience, creates connections to the past, through familiar coordinates, the expectations send us towards a future in a continuous expansion towards the unknown.

Another role of the art manifested in a post-industrial space is that of social coagulator, through events and the promotion of spaces that are temporary and ephemeral in nature, resulting in newly activated public spaces. These alternative spaces connect diverse social geographies, the heart of the city and the peripheral, industrial areas, resulting in that geometrical and symbolical area that appears as a manifestation of the city's personality. Bringing the present (through art) and the past (through space) under the same roof allows for new aesthetic perspectives, new organization and interpretation methods for these temporal layers, for the space as an experience and as an expectation. These spaces have inherited the socio-political contradictions of the predecessors, developing a time and history conflict within the mind of the audience. Another feature of this phenomenon is its temporary nature. It takes place at a certain time, according to the presence of the public. Their revitalizing nature is the third characteristic of unconventional public spaces. It is all about the intensification of the activities, no matter what kind they are, of the anonymous spaces which become locations in the memory of a group; it is about the intensification of the ability to

mark one's belonging to a space like this through spontaneous ways of expression and creation of new symbols. As for the individual consciousness and the personal time of the art consumer, many temporal axes can be created through memories, this process being able in the end to generate a big number of personal histories. Co-presence means that the then and the now can be made to coexist within one space.

But art is a meeting state. It is a game between all the people that ever lived, like Duchamp used to call it. The act of reconstructing memory allows for the creation of new events and, in the past years, this method becomes more and more pervasive in art. Going back into the past is not done for its own sake, but in order to extract the meaning out of past events that can influence the present. Therefore, these reconstructions and processes of going back do not become a confirmation of the past, but rather questions from the present, which are looking for the origins of their echoes into the past, into the historical events that are now part of the collective memory, Fig. 8.

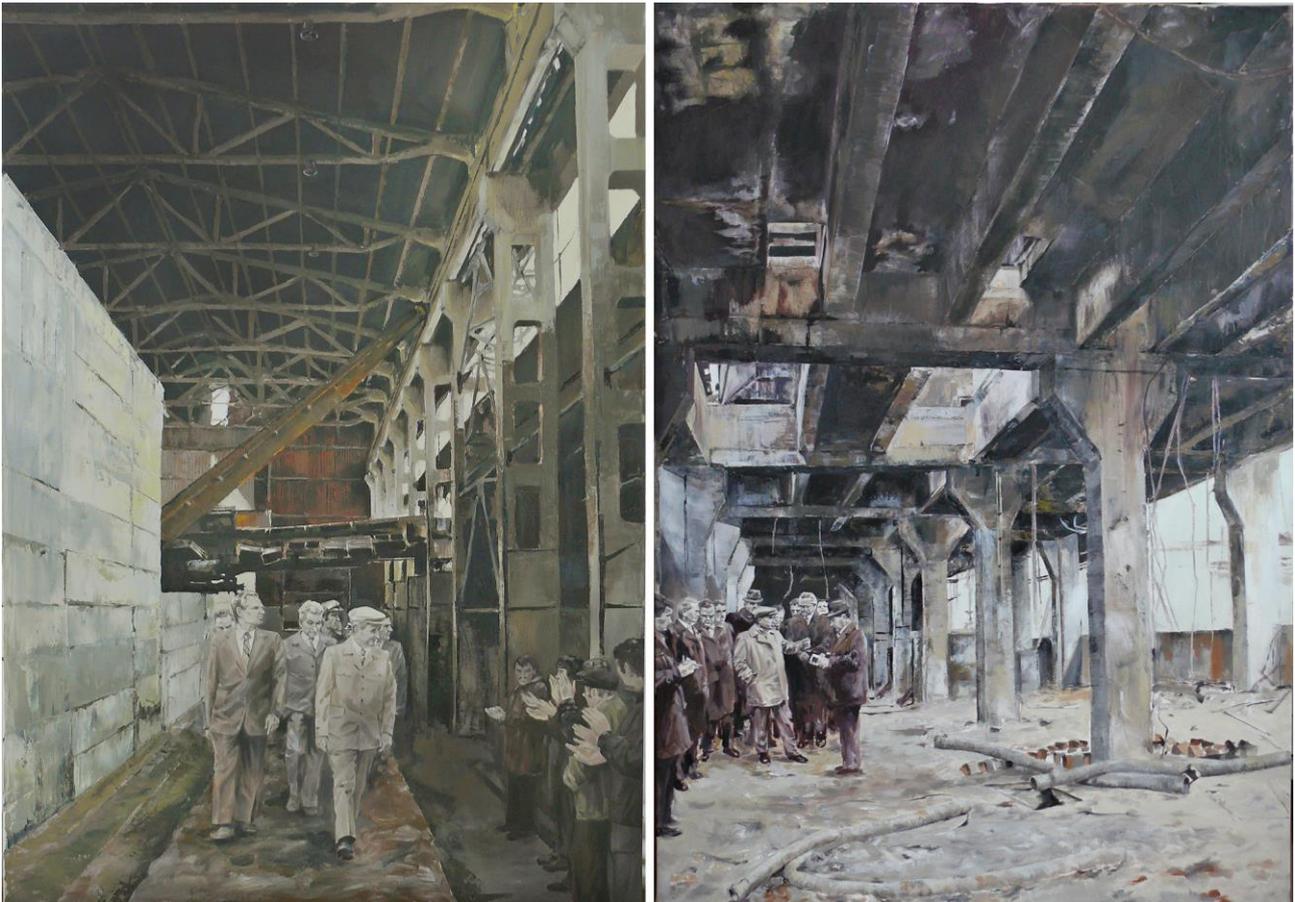


Figure 8. Ana-Maria Rusu, 2014; Carbochim 70x100 cm, Oil on canvas.

This is possible due to the fact that technical advances have made it possible to extract past events not from subjective memory, but from more objective mass media sources. In this context, history seems to be present simultaneously in all ages, in all locations; still, a great and deep feeling of uncertainty arises related to the authenticity of these images and data. Each observer of these works of art can easily identify himself with strategies of self-staging, self-hiding, and simultaneously learn to consciously manipulate images on both sides of the situation: in the purpose of the work as a disembodied activity and in the industrial, real space. However, the reconstructions in the media do not call into question the veridicity of the images, instead focusing on the impact they had on the people, states the curator of the Berlin Contemporary Art Institute, Inke Arns. Thus, the reconstruction eliminates all the time obstacles and the space barriers, transforming a passive observer into an active witness, replacing the experiences of the collective memory with direct,

sometimes physical experiences of history [8].

4. Conclusions

As Boris Groys used to say, artists become active companions of time and they intervene and change time, making it fit the historical meta-narratives from the social spaces [9]. The short-circuit between past and present make it possible for the past to be experienced in the present, eliminating the differences between abstract knowledge and personal experience, then and now, self and others. Just like in the urban environment, the memory is confronted with different configurations of the architectural frame; some fields and abandoned industrial sites emphasize a domain of residual memories, of some of the most intimate reactions to our totalitarian history. It becomes an intensifier of each story and also a stable point of memory. The building stabilizes these large narratives – both at an individual/family level, and at a national/collective level. This theoretical study can be understood and perceived as a research in the archeology of contemporary space exploration and the exploration of current cultural practices. I am not looking at the practical side deriving from the theoretical one as an object, but as an unpredictable multitude of circumstances, an archive, a box containing numerous situations, which have happened or are yet to happen, within the hidden space, determined by events that may take place due to the meeting between viewer and work of art. Reclaiming the city must start with reclaiming our collective subjectivity. We must rebuild the notion of the collective, of the common, again and again, in different ways, in different spaces and times. Therefore, we must rediscover and value the forms of solidarity, the lost abilities, the behaviors, and the traces of a lost language that are hidden under the ruins of the abandoned spaces; we must uncover them just like an artist would recover the layers of a palimpsest. Taking into consideration the aspects mentioned above, we must conclude that a place becomes a place only when it has creators of culture, meaning people who live there and offer that space meaning.

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Figure 2. photo Jock McFadyen <http://spitalfieldslife.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/TateMoss2.jpg>
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Figure 3. photo Tim Noble and Sue Webster

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Figure 4. photo Tom Deininger

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Figure 6. photo Nicolae Comănescu <http://dustnarrativeanalysis.blogspot.ro/2012/12/9.html> accessed Nov.02.2015

Figure 7. photo Louis Audette <http://annaheldaudette.com/> <http://theartspaper.com/2012/05/17/an-artist-appreciated/> accessed Nov.02.2015

Figure 8. photo Ana-Maria Graur (Rusu)