

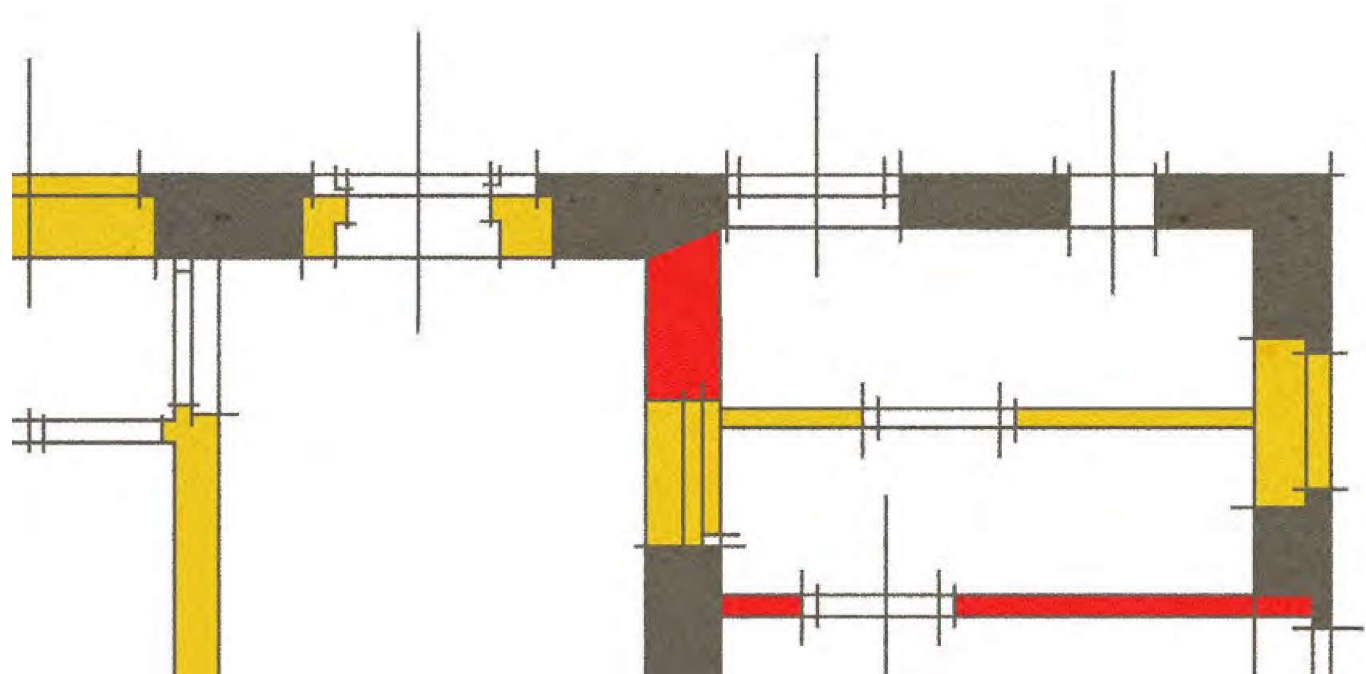
CONSERVATION

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DEMOLITION

Rodica Crişan
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Editors





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Architectural Education**

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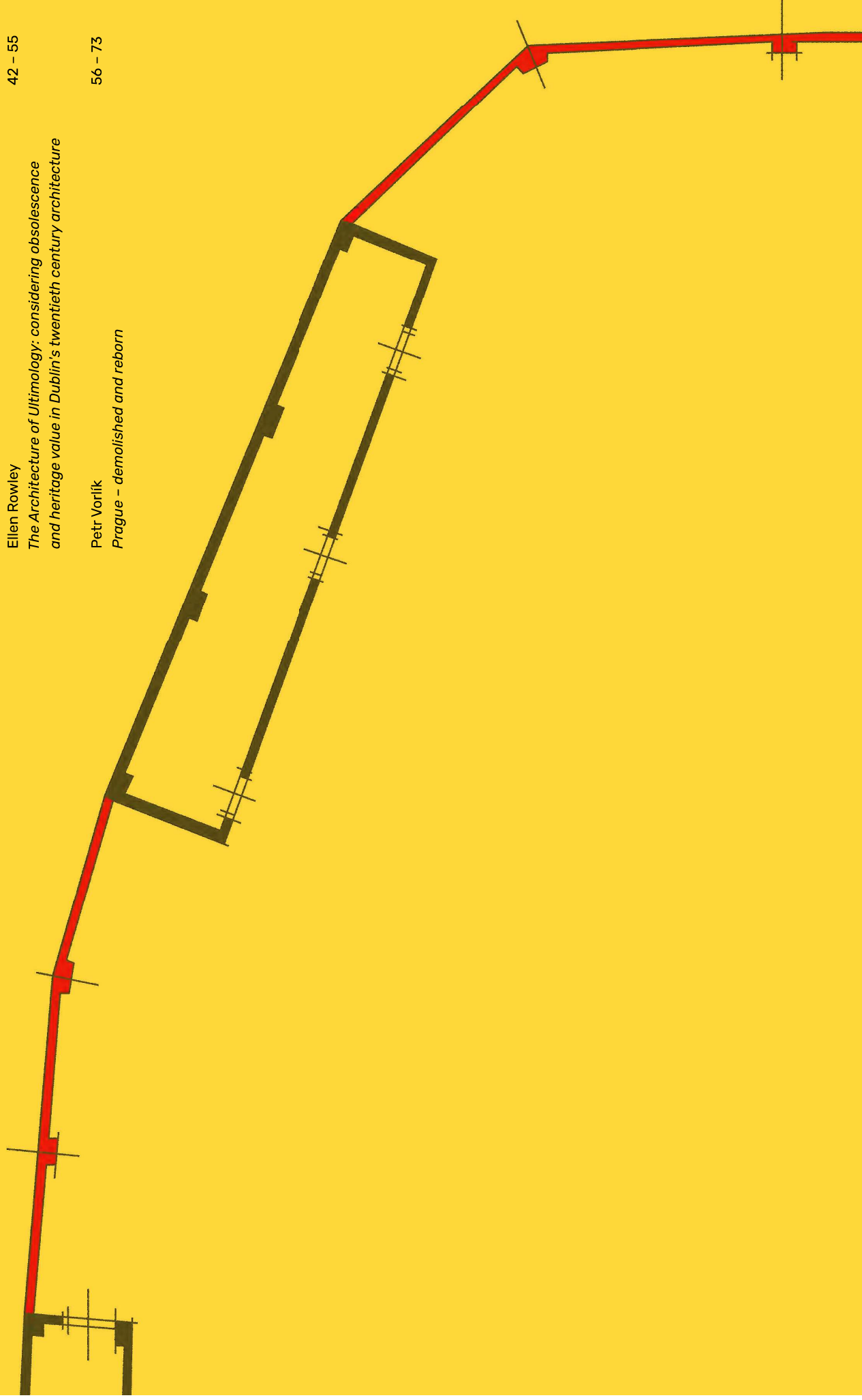
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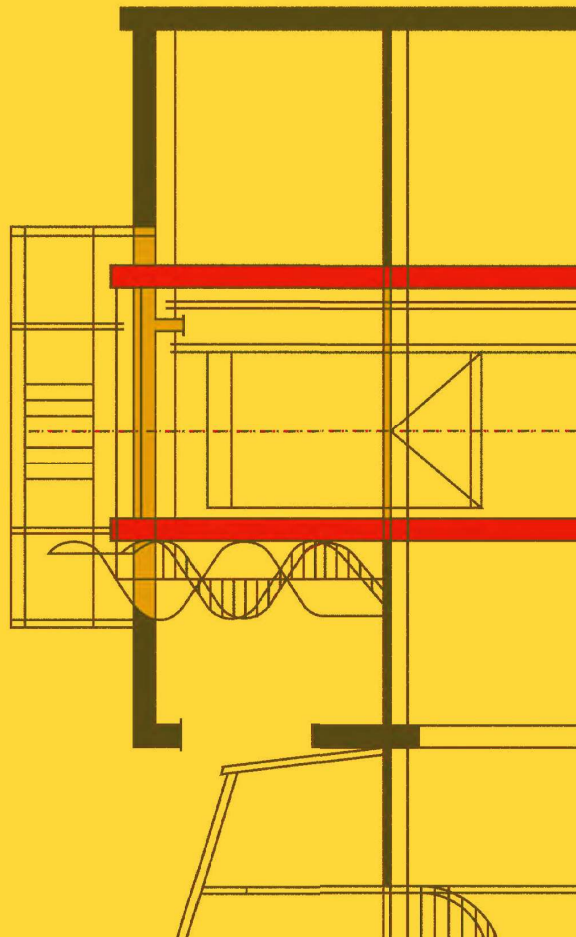
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Unplanned conservation: from Prague to Europe

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A premise

This essay focusses on a particular approach of architectural conservation that derives from a spontaneous attitude to protect existing buildings otherwise condemned to destruction through new ways of living with them. This praxis is normally considered “outside” of theoretical-academic interests regarding conservation. However, this intuitive appreciation of existing buildings influences social activities and has important consequences for architecture. In other words, this appreciation actually is able to “produce” architectural preservation, meanwhile representing one of the more evident ways of social participation in the culture of conservation – two good reasons for analysing the phenomenon more deeply.

The absence of established conservation programs – clearly defined by the elaboration of architectural projects and management plans – or, from the opposite perspective, the contraposition to precise demolition schedules allows us to define this phenomenon as “unplanned conservation.”: As a matter of fact, it essentially represents the result of the people’s special appreciation for the existing architecture – either arising from its being “ancient” and from its particular aesthetic qualities – that can inspire low cost maintenance while oriented to functional purposes.

Above all this unplanned conservation concerns industrial or commercial complexes from the 20th century or the last decades of the 19th century. These complexes comprise big spaces specifically designed for a precise productive purpose, built with masonry walls and iron or concrete floors or entirely in concrete or metal structures, using the “new technologies” of that period. Sometimes, they still conserve inside the furniture and machinery used for the industrial production.

These edifices are not strictly considered as landmarks in themselves, so they are generally not really regarded as objects of conservation. They are rather considered as subjects for technological recovery or rehabilitation design, without paying special attention to their identity as historical buildings, safeguarding of material and structural authenticity, or the possibility of maintaining the evidence of the original spaces and functions with their mutual associations.²

Precisely because of its spontaneous and free character, normally the “unplanned conservation” phenomenon can be transitional, subject to later more stable final adaptations.

These definitive solutions can be also different: involving building demolition – pursued to reconstruct entirely new architectures – or its restyling – radically trans-

forming the existing edifice. Both of these solutions, in our opinion, represent the destruction of the original architectures. They may be legitimate choices – whenever no real values are identified in the buildings – which however has to be declared as such, while a form of ambiguity is sometimes present in the choice to maintain a building with no special value.³

At the same time, in many cases we can also observe unplanned conservation becoming the trigger for a project where the building’s existing values are recognised and promoted. Indeed, this is the more interesting situation, because, as we can observe in some cases, it combines two different factors, the emotional/intuitive and the rational/intellectual one, which together can be followed when dealing with this kind of edifice. Both of these apply in the identification of the human contemporary needs along with the building’s own values; they normally propose to act via different strategies while frequently driving towards similar solutions.

De-industrialisation, empty architectures, researchers and people’s interests

The disposal of industrial buildings started in the 1970⁵ with the shifting of the Western economy from the industrial production to the service-based and knowledge resource industries; this phenomenon has become especially relevant during the last decades, transforming many European landscapes into “industrial deserts”.⁴

The study and the functional conversion of industrial buildings started in the more industrialised areas of the old continent – United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium⁵ – encouraging the development of the so-called “industrial archaeology”⁶ and the realisation of very interesting activities, as for the Ruhr landscape and environmental transformation. The phenomenon has progressively involved the biggest European towns, whose urban expansions had grown up around the locations of the factories in the suburbs.⁷

The new economic and urban conditions in these towns have particularly stressed the alternative between demolition and conservation of existing industrial buildings and this contraposition has been often mirrored in the opposition between private speculation and the public interest in defence of existing heritage.

The general growth in the appeal of industrial heritage has fostered at the same time the development of research on historical and technical topics, the realisation of the first recovery interventions on the factories – most of them initially transformed in museums – and people’s involvement in the future of the buildings. The scientific studies and the design proposals initially prioritised the appreciation of industrial machines as the historic evidence of the technological development of an era over the architectural aspects. In addition, the monumental features of the buildings were considered more important than their being a part of an urban context. Conversely, the communities’ participation soon begun – especially in the case of “minor” urban industrial buildings – to examine the availability of the empty existing spaces for new possible functions, so to explore how to give back life to these spaces through their compatible use.⁸

At the beginning of this millennium, specific urban plans were finally launched to re-vitalise the industrial suburbs of principal towns, for example in Barcelona, Spain, precisely focusing on the possibility of reusing the abandoned factories.⁹

Case-studies

We can begin our overview of European cases-studies of unplanned conservation starting from the Vnitroblok complex in Prague, Czech Republic.¹⁰ (Fig. 1) This factory was built in 1932 to produce beer cooling systems and it was composed of various buildings, most of them still existing. Brick walls enclose internal rooms covered by metallic or concrete structures; a wider space is divided by slim iron pillars and lit by skylights. After the machinery production ended, the factory, one of the many built in the industrial Holešovice district, North of Prague, was occupied by homeless people. Since 2014–2015, thanks to the contribution of young creative people, the place has been completely cleaned and repaired and new activities were hosted inside since 2016, the first among them being a motorbike exposition. Simple painting to protect the iron structures from rust, adaptations of water and electrical systems, the addition of air conditioning, and provision of toilets have left intact the rough physical features of the industrial site without modifying the image of the original building. This “soft” intervention has allowed the organisation of different spaces, used as a cafeteria, dance studio, theatre, conference hall, galleries and shops, also with spaces rentable for special events. Every use is calculated on the precise features of the existing building, as we can see for instance in the “mini-kino”, a small cinema installed in a narrow room simply through the placing of a screen and some informal seating. External electric plants and air conditioning pipes are visible on the naked or partly plastered walls. A few contemporary insertions are clearly recognisable and are well adapted to the spirit of the site, such as the iron and wood stair and upper gallery or the iron and glass showcases in the cafeteria. (Fig. 2)

Vnitroblok in Prague is – until now – an example of bottom-up conservation of an existing building that does not boast of any special architectural values but shows a clear historical identity and an undeniable aesthetic appeal. The success of its respectful reuse seems to lean on the widespread reuse of many surrounding similar buildings, which have contributed to change the industrial district into a locality for shops, restaurants and artistic spaces for young creative people, and on the fluidity of the functions hosted within the buildings, well managed and with minimal and well-studied additions.

Precisely because of the minimal approach, Vnitroblok is very different from other designed examples in the Czech Republic, such as the nearby Centre of Contemporary Art DOX in Prague, the Coal Mill in Libčice (Joint-Stock Ironworks) or the Děčín Brewery Centre in Podmoky.¹¹ In these cases, the intervention choices derive from projects that play with the taste for the contrast between old and new structures, or that want to give a new shape and a new face to the old wall envelopes. These projects seem mainly to derive from an abstract aesthetic assessment and are not the product of a real “listening” to the material, constructive and formal nature of the original buildings. They are “planned” and lacking in conservation intent.

Of course, in the Vnitroblok the conservative solutions are also the most compatible with the low budget available, but can we assert that the special nature of the architectural choices is only the product of lower economic possibilities, or is it

rather possible to consider that it can also testify to a specific sensibility toward the pre-existing?

To give an answer to this question we have to enlarge our scenario. Specifically, we have to consider some past “bottom-up” experiences of unplanned conservation, applied to some buildings in the reunified Berlin after the fall of the Wall, at the beginning of the 1990^s.

The political component of the German situation of thirty years ago was more evident than is the case today in Prague, where we can rather recognise a kind of “pacified” application of an architectural conservation intent, which have however produced quite similar results from figurative and social viewpoints.

The widespread availability of abandoned buildings and the many priority requirements of the reunified German nation delivered many of these edifices into the hands of self-proposed “users”, who offered a new life to the architectures while completely preserving their spatial and material features. This trend prevailed especially in the new capital, where it has been mainly connected with the so-called “technological revolution” of techno-music. The aim of finding locations for people to enjoy concerts and dance was strictly associated with a strong political and urban vision of a town that was recovering with optimism its full history and was looking at a future of big expectations.¹² One of the first locations of this kind was in the remains of a building near Potsdamer Platz, formerly in East Berlin, that lacking any clear ownership after the collapse of the communist system. Here the club *Tresor*, maybe the most successful techno-club in Berlin, was located and its story can be considered representative of the strong relationship established between the spirit of the historical building and its new “transgressive” use. (Fig. 3)

The basement of the former department store Wertheim, built in 1926, was opened in 1991 to host the club after a deep cleaning of the abandoned structures. The discovery of this location is well described by the “inventors” of the club who found it by accident. They narrate how they descended the stairs at the ground floor of an abandoned edifice which had been damaged during the World War II and been demolished in the 1950^s. Going underground they could breathe the air “of forty-fifty years ago” rising up from the basement, and at the end they discovered the old rooms full of rust and ancient furniture, which immediately they loved. Their enthusiasm at this discovery was so great that they ran to the national library to research the history of the place. At that time the town was so different, both from its past and its present. After 14 years of “temporary usage” as place of dance and concerts, during which the organisers perfectly maintained the rooms with their decayed bricks walls and concrete ceilings, new development evicted the occupiers and realised a modern anonymous building for offices, destroying the old structures.

The *Tresor* club found a new location in 2007 in a thermoelectric power station in Köpenicker Strasse, disused since 1997. The managers adopted the same criteria for choosing the site and pursued the maintenance of the existing structures with all the traces of their history, even if the atmosphere of the city is today completely changed due to the pervading actions of real estate investments.



Fig. 1) Vnitroblok complex. Main hall. Prague, Czech Republic. (photo Donatella Fiorani 2019)



Fig. 3) Entrance to the Tresor Club in the remains of the former Wertheim Department Store. Berlin, Germany. (<parkettchannel.it/tresor-club-storia-techno-europea/>).



Fig. 2) Vnitroblok complex. The new upper gallery. Prague, Czech Republic. (photo Donatella Fiorani 2019)

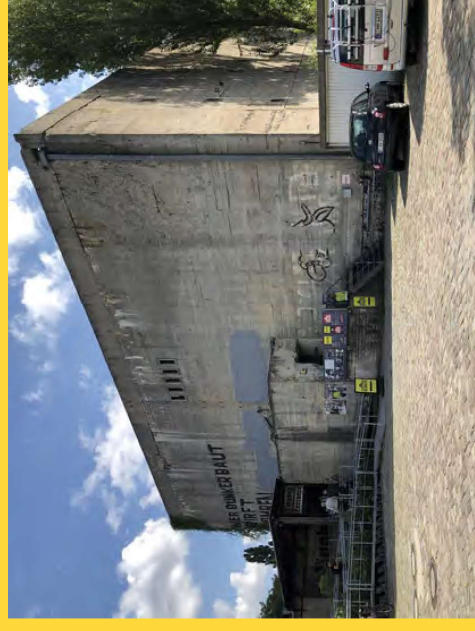


Fig. 4) Bunker Berlin, Germany. (photo Donatella Fiorani 2019)

The appreciation of decayed and incomplete buildings of the 1990¹⁵ as seen in the Berlin example is also evident in the case of some public cultural places, such as the Hörsaalruine, the remains of the former Rudolf Virchow Lecture hall, within the Berlin Museum of Medical History¹⁶ or the Hitler's Bunker, which today hosts an exhibition about the dictator's life. (Fig. 4)

However, most of these complexes can be still used today only thanks to the substitution of the initial social commitment and management with a new kind of economic involvement of private enterprises. This is the case of *Motorwerk*, a big industrial building built in 1921 for the production of electric engines for Zeppelin airships (Halle Weißensee), listed as a protected monument. It was used from 1991 to 1993 as the location for very famous concerts but the continuity of use and its preservation is currently guaranteed only by its being rented for many different kinds of company events.

The survival of buildings like this is today above all fostered by the aesthetic appreciation of the unusual location for official commercial events, while the perception of their historical value and of the specific architectural identity of the site (quite clear in the first functional adaptations of *Motorwerk*) seems to have become weaker in the current commercial perspectives, as we can deduct from looking at the last displays.

The case of Alte Münze, near Alexanderplatz, is quite expressive of the possible conflicts between "bottom-up" participation and centralised public intervention on this kind of buildings. Alte Münze is a former mint built in 1935–1942, partly reconstructed after the war and dismantled in 2005–2006; after its disposal, it has soon become a participative centre for artists supported by the narrative of a dedicated website.¹⁴ Here too, the informal occupation of the complex has favoured the maximum respect for the existing spaces: the functional fluidity has been the key in the selection of compatible use for the building and oriented a project that is very careful towards the features of the complex. The lack of substantial budget is the apparent reason behind this proposal but it goes in parallel with the appreciation of the character of the old mint in the very core of the historic centre. The spontaneous conservation attitude of the first users is now faced with the proposal of intervention sponsored by the Federal State and the State of Berlin aiming to create a jazz centre: citizens and the young creative group working there have proposed a masterplan asking explicitly to ensure a respectful approach to the building.¹⁵

Likewise, there are many cases where private small investors interested in industrial buildings as the headquarters of new commercial activities or restaurants, fancy the proposal of "fluid" spaces and functions allowing the original features of the rooms to be maintained.

Particularly, the trend of using industrial spaces for restaurants is now very common in Europe: we can remember, among the many others, the forge in Friedrichshains in Berlin, the Turbinehallen in Aarhus, Denmark, the beer factory Moritz in Barcelona, Spain, or the ammunition factory (*Pocisk*) in the industrial district *Praga*, on the right riverbank of Warsaw, Poland. This last example is quite representative also of the spin-off effect produced on the urban surroundings. Built in 1920 for the production of weapons and motorbikes, damaged by the bombs of the World War II and used for a long time

as a dumping ground for cars, the building hosted since 2008–2010 a restaurant and other activities (*Soho Factory*). (Fig. 5) Interestingly, the new function as a restaurant was launched leaving intact the evidence of decay on the brick walls and using simple plastic doors; only after some years, new works involved the substitution of the ruined bricks and the replacement of windows and doors with metal components. Recently a new Masterplan related to an Integrated Revitalisation Program (2014–2022) has been approved, foreseeing new buildings in the area, with a more evident business intent.¹⁶

Of course, sensibilities are different between the various European countries: the participative model seem to work better in northern and central Europe, while it seems to be less widespread in the Mediterranean area, such as in Spain or even in France.¹⁷ Anyway, this phenomenon is more and more widely shared and even in Russia a spontaneous and brief people's occupation has attempted to defend one of the famous Marsakov bakeries in Moscow from building speculation and conversion to new and not respectful uses.¹⁸ Furthermore, we can observe that the initial "alternative culture" that inspired this approach has merged in a larger spread sensibility for the conservation of the places' features.

The established conservation Italian model can rely either on the planning of public authorities or on the unplanned conservation. In both cases, low-budget interventions have produced architectural results similar to the previously described ones: in Rome, the Mira Lanza complex at the Ostiense district has been used as the location – together with the eighteen-century Argentina Theatre – for the first Roman theatrical company thanks to the initiative of the Municipality. (Fig. 6) At the same time, the pasta manufacturing plant Cerere in the San Lorenzo district changed the original productive use to one hosting artists and their works thanks to the involvement of the building owners and to the subsequent constitution of a foundation dedicated to the management of the artistic activities.¹⁹ (Fig. 7)

The role played by the artists in the soft recovery of industrial buildings in Italy is particularly important: as building owners (see the case of the Arkad Foundation, hosted within the former forge *della Magona* in Serravezza, Lucca),²⁰ as members of collective Foundations or groups (as in the Headquarters in Daste street at Spalenga, Bergamo)²¹ many artists have promoted very interesting and respectful uses of the buildings thanks to temporary or fixed installations and minimal works. The original interest inspired by the suitability of the industrial sites for creative work and the low cost rentals has been, since the beginning,²² accompanied by a strong appreciation of the aesthetic values of these places. In many cases, spontaneous occupation and artistic activities coincided, as for Les Frigos in Paris or Rote Fabrik in Zurich.

As a matter of fact, the historic and aesthetic sensibility are merged in a single perception in the spontaneous approach of unplanned conservation.

Conclusions

From the various examples illustrated above, we can infer some useful considerations. First of all, dealing with industrial heritage means to combine architectural appraisals with the knowledge of the past and future activities to be carried out. This

represents a peculiarity of the topic compared to what happens with “traditional” heritage, because the shared application of such different perspectives to the same object of interest introduces a much stronger “tension” between cultural and economic implications.²³ The unplanned conservation – as the product of a spontaneous activity of re-functionalisation that involves industrial and productive but not listed historical buildings – offers interesting answers to this problem. The undeniable functional trigger that drives the initial attentiveness of people to this kind of buildings is soon followed by a deeper interest because of their being a part of the urban contest and of the history of the town. The commitment made by the artists themselves in many interventions on industrial heritage also demonstrates the importance of the aesthetic perception on some decisions to conserve.

This interest represents the best guarantee of avoiding the demolition of this kind of heritage and could be more actively promoted in countries such as Italy, which are commonly used to historical heritage preservation.

Surprisingly, also if – starting at least from the collapse of the San Marco bell tower in Venice – we are particularly aware of the people’s insistence on reconstruction “where it was, as it was”, which becomes evident mainly after a traumatic destruction, we do not pay attention to the strong desire for building conservation anyway expressed by common people. This is really strange, because while the former attitude does not care about safeguarding the value of architectural authenticity, the latter is absolutely focused on the material persistence of the places. As a matter of fact, we could modify the tenses of the familiar slogan to properly express this opposite feeling through the statement “where it is, as it is”.

Therefore, this attitude can be considered an important resource for conservation, mainly in dealing with “minor” architectures. Today spaces and structures – generally softly restored due to the lack of budget – of this kind of industrial buildings are deeply appreciated as material legacy of the past. Moreover, this acknowledgment is often sublimated in an aesthetic appreciation for the wide volumes, strong structures, rough material surfaces. In the last decades the so defined aesthetic appreciation created a sort of “trend” that generally influenced the way of treating these architectures, also when higher budget is available.

The imbalance between social participation and strength of the building investors (see the case of Berlin) let us believe that the efficacy of unplanned conservation is transitional and that the architects have to make an effort to support immediately this popular commitment with their projects.

By complying with this spontaneous trend – adverse to the demolitions and favourable to respecting the existing buildings, the selection of compatible functions, the sustainability of the maintenance also referred to in the global urban contest – architects can strengthen their choices derived from the deep study of these buildings, (Fig. 8) getting at the same time a more stable success for their restoration projects.

Notes

- This definition evokes the well-known theoretical refer to the “planned conservation” (see, among the latest contributions, Della Torre 2020) focusing on different aspects of the conservation attitude.
- Among the others, see the approach followed in Spósito 2012.
- There are a lot of well-known examples of radical transformation of this kind of buildings, such as the Caixa Forum in Madrid, the Lingotto plant in Turin or the Tate Modern in London. The interest of these cases as “new” architectures is not in discussion here, but these experiences has nothing in common with the phenomenon of the unplanned conservation we are analysing, because it mainly derives from an architectural research by design, oriented to create new buildings embedding existing structures.
- Real 2015.
- Buchanan 1989.
- Many studies of different productive sites are gathered under the umbrella of the so called “industrial archaeology”: they deal with mines, rural factories, quarries, power stations and also the more ancient historical structures, such as mills, tanneries, furnaces, lighthouses etc.
- For a general overview of the study and the praxis on heritage conservation in Europe, with special attention to Spain, see Del Pozo, Alonso González 2012.
- It is interesting to note that the English-language scientific literature has been the first to show interest in the historical importance of industrial heritage and also the first to underline, at the beginning of this century, the importance of the everyday-life presence for the survival of these structures (see among others Leary, Sholes 2000).
- Duarte, Sabaté 2013.
- This focus on Vnitroblok in Dělnická street derives by the experience of the EAAE workshop in Prague (25–28 September 2019) about *Conservation/Demolition*. See also <<https://vnitroblok.cz/>; <<https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/z-polorozpadych-budov-v-praze-7-se-stala-utociste-umeicu-40016395> > [Accessed 22 July 2020].
- Fragner, B., et. al., 2014: 54–59; 188–113.

- <<https://www.redbull.com/de-de/berliner-clubbs-geschichte>> [Accessed 22 July 2020]. See also the documentary: *Sub Berlin – The Story of Tresor*. [online] Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6GA3a_8Cr8> [Accessed 22 July 2020].
- The building in the Mitte district was bombed during the World War Two and not integrated, since the middle of last Nineties it hosts a cultural centre.
- <<https://alte-muenze-berlin.de/>> [Accessed 24 July 2020].
- <<https://www.rbb24.de/kultur/beitrag/2020/01/berlin-alte-muenze-molkenmarkt-jazz-konzept.html>> [Accessed 28 July 2020].
- <<https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/754420,22164634,soho-bez-plotow-i-aut.html>> [Accessed 22 July 2020].
- Del Pozo, Alonso, González 2012; Real 2015.
- Shikhatova 2018. About the strong difficulties for defending the industrial heritage from the economic interests of private speculators see also Shigljits, Vallye 2008.
- The Mira Lanza complex was built at the beginning of Twentieth century for the soap production and it was restored in 1999–2000, maintaining the existing structures with few new additions (a new roof, doors, a stage and a wooden structure for seats). It is today used as a covered theatre and an open air site of entertainment.
- The Cecere pasta factory, built in 1905, worked till 1960 and became an art centre since 1973; recently the building has had new restoration. See <<http://www.archidiap.com/opera/fabbriche-mira-lanza/>; <<https://www.pastificioecere.it/>> [Accessed 11 August 2020].
- Giusti 2018.
- <<http://beyondindustrialarchaeo.altenvista.org/a-storia-delele-central-e-tomata-vita-larte/>> [Accessed 22 July 2020].
- The phenomenon already occurred in New York in the last Fifties (Real 2015).
- See Forgan 1992 and the contraposition between the aim of the “target markets” and “legitimate public”.



Fig. 5) Soho Factory in Warsaw, Poland. (photo Stefano Francesco Musso 2013)



Fig. 6) A performance played in front of some empty industrial buildings next to the India Theater, Rome, Italy. (photo Donatella Fiorani 2018)

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Fig. 7) Pasta manufacturing plant Cerere, Rome, Italy. (<pastificicerere.it/>)

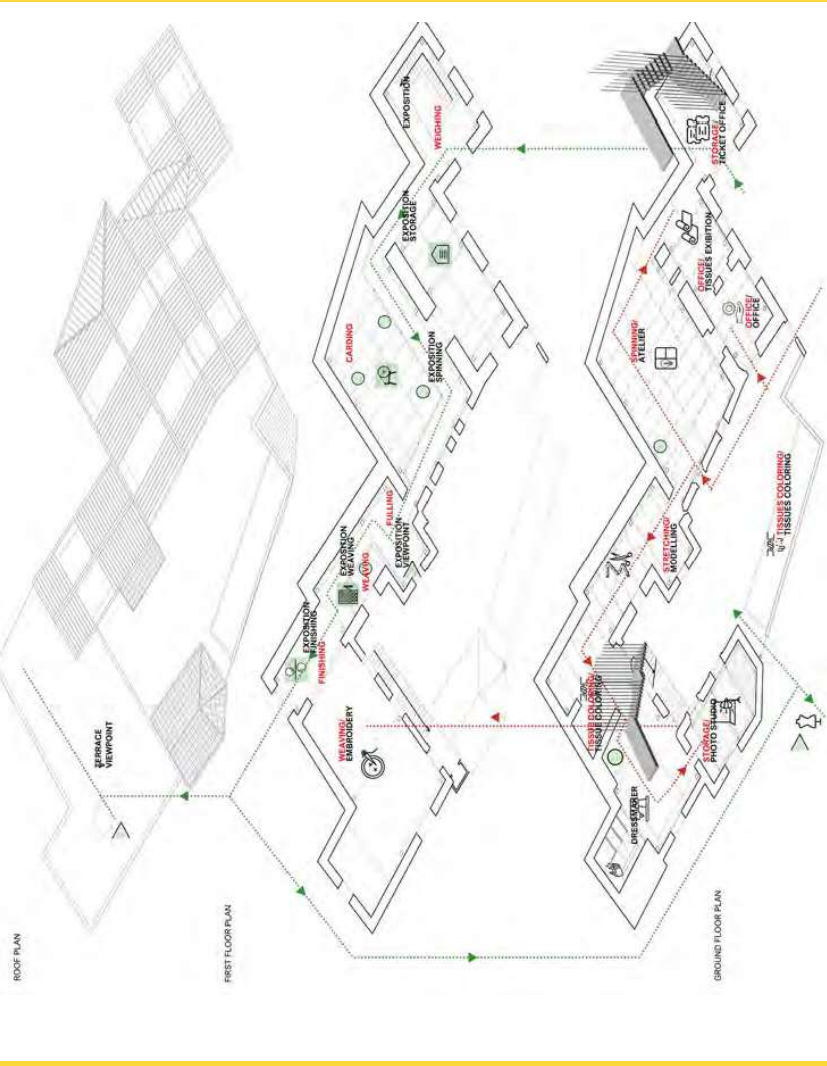


Fig. 8) Plans of the restoration project of the woolen mill Florindo Martino. The choice and the distribution of the foreseen function (as laboratory for dress makers and exhibition halls) derive from the understanding of the ancient functioning of the building and the will to conserve as much of possible of the existing edifice. Sepino, Campobasso, Italy. (drawing by Giorgia Ioana Simion, Roberta Vecchio, Carmine Vincelli, Luciaconcetta Vincelli, Carmine Vincelli).

Conservation – Demolition

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