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THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF ABANDONED INDUSTRIAL SPACES OF BELGRADE: A SEMIOTIC STUDY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

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Abstract:

The spectral existence of abandoned industrial sites has been described by being neither dead nor alive. Yet, these sites will become dead soon, either through willful demolitions or through urban decay. Thus, the study focuses on the abandoned industrial spaces in Belgrade as the examples of modernities in transition. Mainly two study areas are chosen that have marked the development of industrialization starting from late 19th century on the confluence of two rivers (Sava and Danube). The discontinuity in urban development and degradation of initiated projects in Belgrade, throughout the 20th century, could be ascribed to turbulent social and historical processes, radical shifts in political course and ideological changes, which left behind a decaying fabric of built environment, empty industrial spaces with the absence of content, function and programme. In this interplay of absence and presence, floating signifiers between the function and the sign is interpreted through a semiotic approach in reading the signs as the collective products of historical, social and cultural interaction. The dialectical relationship between the absence and presence is the main departure point for the analysis. Yet, unlike the general tendency, this paper tackles with the trace, a Derridian term defining a mark of the absence of a presence, which is absent presence. The industrial spaces stand in ruins without any traces of machinery or interior elements. Whereas, graffiti is a common trace left on abandoned buildings providing another layer of meaning overlaid on the existing one. Therefore the intention is looking beyond the material form, in order to analyze descriptive (synchronic) concepts and how these concepts and their meanings have changed over time and space. Taking photograph as the medium and digging into layers of meaning, the paper strives for identifying the ways in which urban creative changes are perceived and experienced.

Key words: Belgrade, abandoned industrial sites, absent presence, photography, urban imagery.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an approach to photographic imagery by focusing on the temporality and immateriality of ruins that could be read through the layers of symbolic meaning in the urban landscape. The abandoned industrial sites in Belgrade are given as examples to materiality of ruins, which are existent in material form, but non-existent in content. The spectral existence of the abandoned industrial sites in contemporary urban fabric can be perceived through *genius loci* – the spirit of the place inscribed in a context.

The paper starts with a theoretical background on the concepts of trace and memory. This is followed by the contextual overview, which focuses on abandoned industrial sites in Belgrade by reflecting on the dynamics of industrialization and later de-industrialization. Familiarization with the context is a crucial step in order to derive meaning based on the cultural and social codes. Furthermore, “a certain degree of relationship with the place” is required in order to be able to infer the meaning; either through direct physical interaction or through mediation such as photographic image.¹ Accordingly, there are two questions to be answered in this study: 1) What are the ways in which photography serve as an analytical tool to uncover the layers of meanings? 2) How does photography contribute to contemporary imaginary tracing the history and memory of abandoned industrial sites?

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TRACE AND MEMORY

Trace has been translated from Derrida by concentrating on the difference in the meaning of a sign in terms of binary pairs, which is “mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present”². Although Derrida prefers words to images in his deconstructivist approach, he takes account of photography in relation to time through the notion of temporal instant for snapshot (*instantané*).³ The moment the image is taken refers to a moment passed and therefore “photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past”⁴. In Benjamin’s definition of dialectical images, the temporal aspect is linked to the continuous relationship between past and present – “the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent”⁵.

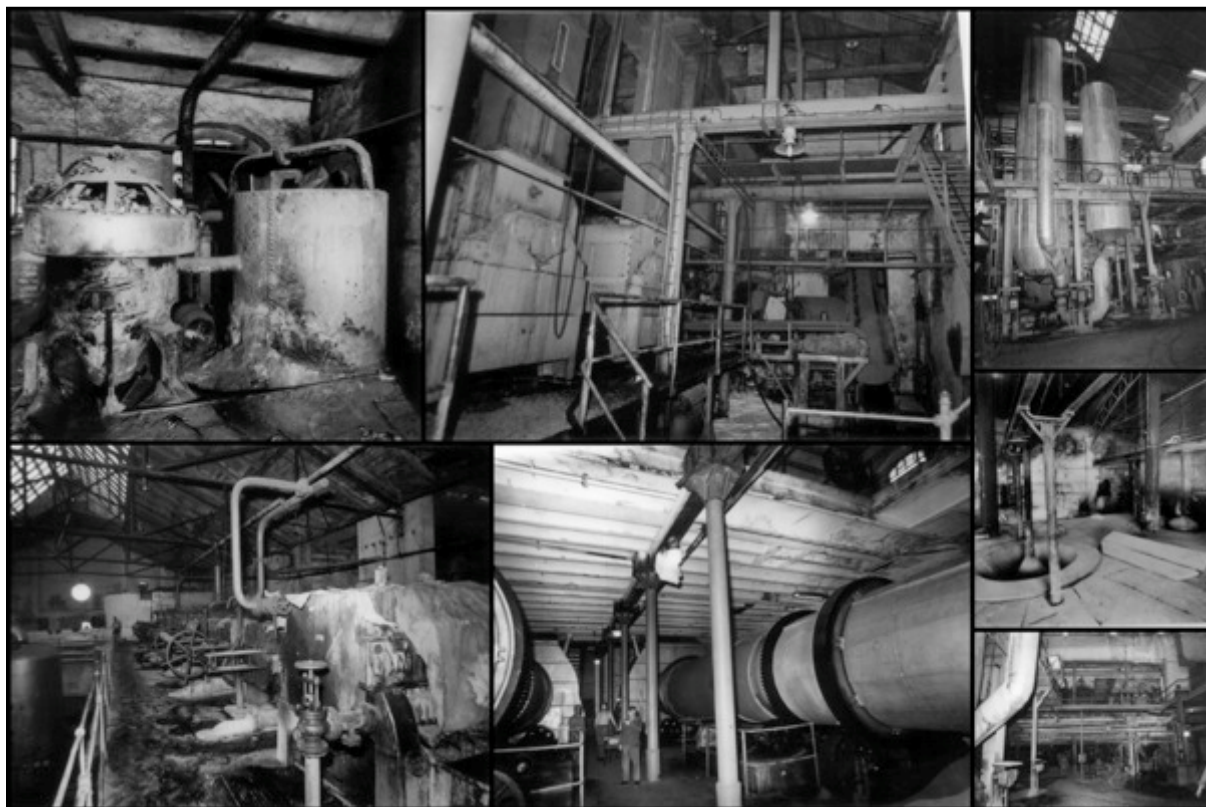
Symbols play an important role on shaping the individual and collective imagery through “attracting all with whom they come into contact, and awakening them to the heritage of the collective unconscious”.⁶ The “wish images” and experiences of the society are stored in the collective unconscious “through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions”⁷. Looking beyond the material is essential in order to analyze descriptive (synchronic) concepts and the meanings that have changed over time and space, instead of applying a linear way of historical (diachronic) reading. Hung suggests that historical account is similar to memory image in its “inherently selective nature” and the restrictiveness of “the linear temporal framework”⁸.

Like personal memory and personal significance attached to happenings in the past, a place has a memory, in the sense of keeping morphological traces. Benjamin establishes a link between memory and trace in which memory resembles excavating the palimpsest city built over the traces of past, constantly erased and re/over-written through new constructions.⁹ The ruins in the material landscape are real traces, whereas the photograph of ruins is an indexical presence as the “suggestive of the past”¹⁰. The urban contemporary experience transforms the voids into willful construction rather than destruction sites by attributing a positive content through the possibility of “seeing something other evolving from nowhere”¹¹. Ruin and/or ruination are usually associated with processes of decay and destruction. Unlike such negative connotations, Hell sees possibilities of new beginnings through the alternative stories and imaginations embedded in the fragments of ruin and traces.¹² Gabor comments on the abandoned places that they represent pieces of history through stories and memories.¹³ Abandoned industrial sites are the places of reified memory that is “articulated and inscribed upon space”¹⁴. The memory of socialist industrial labor continues to be symbolized in the contemporary urban space. In this sense, Rose and Wylie describe the engagements with landscape as being shaped by spatially and temporally specific “tensions between presence/absence”¹⁵.

ABANDONED INDUSTRIAL SITES IN BELGRADE

The industrialization in Belgrade can be recognized as a social process as well as being an economic one, which eventually lead to the urban conglomerations, concentration of industrial sites to certain areas in the city and development of other activities around them, such as housing and transportation. The examples of industrial plants investigated in this study, were built outside the downtown area, in a less developed urban periphery.¹⁶ Yet, as the city has enlarged, the industrial sites possessed a central position due to the changing boundaries as a result of newly developing neighborhoods. Therefore, they are still occupying attractive locations in the urban tissue, however being absent from their function and significance. The well-developed structure and transportation network allowed industrial plants to remain in function until their recent decline brought by the social and economic transition. In this regard, the abandoned industrial sites are the consequences of “collapsed economy, disoriented politics, and loss of social and cultural compass”.¹⁷ Only very few of industrial sites enjoy legal protection, yet without any trace of the old technologies and equipment (see Figure 1 for the interior of Šećerana dating back to 1979). Figure 2 shows the state of old factory in ruins after it became vacant. The machinery and equipment are removed, the floor is full of debris making it uneasy and unsafe to

walk, the windows are broken and the walls are ripped off. The remnants signify the change as a loss, an absent present as well as an absent past.



*Figure 1. Interior of Šećerana, 1979
(Copyright: Courtesy of Belgrade City Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments)*



Figure 2. Ruins of Šećerana, 2015
(Copyright: Photographs by the author)

Kulenović's inventory research on the industrial heritage of Belgrade constitutes the subtext for this study.¹⁸ The railways and water supply system are two important factors that mark the development of industrial areas, which also brought a certain level of concentration in terms of "spatial proximity and connection" between the industrial plants.¹⁹ As a consequence, industrial plants were located on the riverbank due to "transportation advantages, an ample supply of water, wastewater discharge on vacant undeveloped land [...]".²⁰ The focus area of the study covers two early industrial zones on the confluence of Sava and Danube rivers dating back to the very end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (see Figure 1).

The first and the most compact industrial zone under the scope of the research, is the area along Danube, stretching from Dorćol towards Karaburma. This area was also the first industrial zone connected to the railway system.²¹ Six examples of industrial sites (as seen in Table 1) are investigated in this area: BEKO (*Beogradska Konfekcija* - Belgrade Clothing Company), Power and Light (*Snaga i Svetlost* - Old Thermoelectric Power Plant), Bajloni Brewery (Old Beer Brewery), BPK (*Beogradski Pamucni Kombinat* - Belgrade Cotton Factory), BVK (*Beogradski Vunarski Kombinat* - Belgrade Wool Factory), and Ciglana (*Trudbenik* - Old Brick Factory).

The second industrial zone under investigation is spreading along the left bank of Sava river, starting from Savski Venac and extending to Čukarica. The railway line played particular role for the development of industry along Topčider Road in Čukarica. Another triggering cause was the encouragement of capital owners to establish factories on the uninhabited state farms by law.²² Four industrial sites, studied in the second zone, are (as seen in Table 2): Lozionica (Locomotive Depot of Belgrade Railway Station), Milan Vapa Paper Mill, BIGZ (*Beogradski Izdavačko-Grafički Zavod* - Publishing and Graphics Institution of Belgrade), and Šećerana (Old Sugar Factory).



Figure 3. Industrial sites under the scope of the study (Copyright: Author's intervention on Google Maps)

*Table 1. Industrial sites on the riverbank of Danube
(Copyright: Information compiled from Kulenović²³, Photographs by the author)*











		Date of construction	Function	Status
	BeKo (Beogradska Konfekcija-Belgrade Clothing Company)	1931	Textile and clothing until 2002	Within Cultural-Historic Area “Belgrade Fortress”, exceptional importance; Reg. MNT 2007/13
	Power & Light (Snaga i Svetlost-Thermoelectric Power Plant)	1930–32	Production of electric power	Ongoing protection procedure; Reg. MNT 2008/156
	Bajloni Brewery	c. 1850, 1874–88, 1901, 1911, 1924–29	Beer brewery	Ongoing protection procedure; Reg. MNT 2008/156
	BPK (Beogradski Pamucni Kombinat-Belgrade Cotton Factory)	c. 1900	Textile (bankrupt in 2001)	Under preliminary protection; Reg. MNT 2007/12
	BVK (Beogradski Vunarski Kombinat-Belgrade Wool Factory)	1898/9, 1907/8, 1921–23	Textile until 2003	Under preliminary protection; Reg. MNT 2008/157
	Trudbenik (Ciglana-Old Brick Factory)	-	Brick Production	Planned for demolition

Table 2. Industrial sites on the riverbank of Sava
(Copyright: Information compiled from Kulenović²⁴, Photographs by the author)

		Date of construction	Function	Status
	BIGZ (Beogradski Izdavačko-Grafički Zavod - Publishing and Graphics Institution of Belgrade)	1936-40	Printing	Designated cultural asset (SI. list grada Beograda 26/92); Reg. MNT 2008/134
	Šećerana (Old Sugar Factory)	1899-1901	Production of sugar and leavening & alcohol	Designated cultural asset (SI. list grada Beograda 23/84); Reg. MNT 2007/20
	Fabrika Hartije Milana Vape (Milan Vapa Paper Mill)	1921-24	Production of paper, storage, offices	Under preliminary protection; Reg. MNT 2007/1
	Lozionica (Locomotive Depot of Belgrade Railway Station)	1926	depot, repair	Under preliminary protection; Reg. MNT 2008/127

A SEMIOTIC STUDY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

The study sets a hybrid analytical framework, in which the use of photography is threefold:

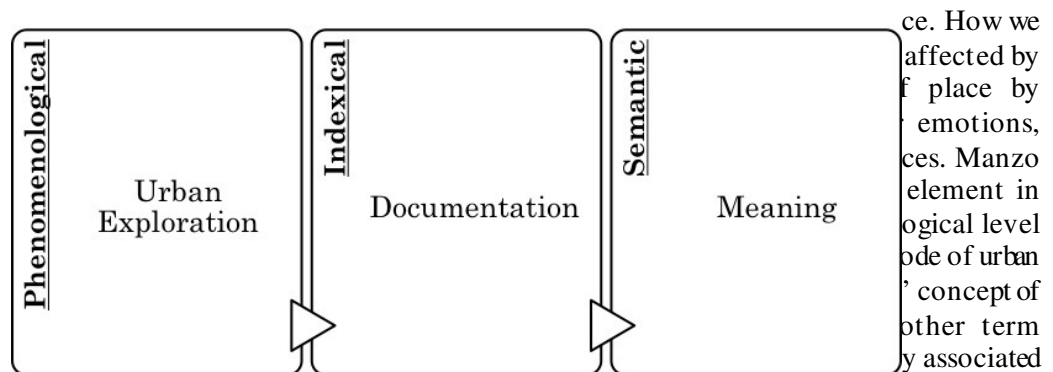


Figure 4. Analytical framework of the study
ce. How we affected by f place by emotions, ces. Manzo element in logical level ode of urban ' concept of other term y associated
experience. Benjamin adopted the concept of flâneur drawing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, and used flânerie as an

analytical tool for social and aesthetic observations in Paris.²⁷ Sontag associates flâneur with the photographer - “an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno”.²⁸ In this framework, my interest in drifting in the old and abandoned industrial sites takes photography as a core methodological and analytical thread. However, walking the place is a planned excursion in this study, rather than an idle action; therefore it is different than flânerie. Yet, urban exploration leaves some room for unexpected and coincidental encounters. The emptiness, death and demolition, and absence of human being in the photographs are depicted like crime scenes, as Benjamin comments on Eugène Atget’s photographs of the deserted Paris streets in the 1900s.²⁹ Accordingly, in this study, urban exploration draws closer to Atget’s photographic documentation of the architecture and street scenes of Paris before their disappearance to modernization³⁰, rather than a detached but aesthetically attuned observation. The justification lies beneath “uncovering a hidden truth, and conserving a vanishing point”³¹.

Photographic documentation process goes hand in hand with urban exploration. Photography can be described as taking notes with light during the exploration of the sites. Photograph’s ability “to isolate specific moments” and to provide details is useful for documentation purposes, as “photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum”³². Thus, the second level is the documentation, which is twofold in this study. Firstly, the current states of the object were photographed digitally. The urban exploration and documentation phase in this study was done in a three months period between September-December 2015. Repeat visits were made around April 2016, to re-photograph the sites and capture what has changed. Due to ownership problems, the entrance was restricted to most of the industrial sites. Bureaucratic issues also made it difficult to get permission for entrance and documentation. Therefore, only the facades are documented, or the interiors only from the broken windows. Photographic documentation is important due to the need for recording the objects before they sink into oblivion and disappear. Besides collecting photographic data, historical documentation is realized through archival research in order to collect past representations. The notion of history is important in interpreting the context in connection to memory and shared meanings. Archival photographs as documents provide “means of preserving, storing and/or representing information”³³. Thus, archival research is carried out in the Belgrade City Institute for protection of Cultural Monuments (*Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda*), and Museum of Science and Technology Belgrade (*Muzej Nauke i Tehnike Beograd*) by collecting old photographs, postcards and documents. Maps and aerial photographs are useful to see the change in the landscape regarding how the urban areas became denser. They offer clues to determine the exact location of the industrial plants when they were built and how the city has grown by the addition of industrial sites into urban economic and social life. Therefore, the shifting meanings in the space can be read through the old photographs, old maps and accounts of history by observing continuities and/or discontinuities.

Third level focuses on the meaning created by the photographic imagery/imaginary. Photograph is composed of many layers - layers of signs, layers of meaning, and layers of memory. According to Peirce, photograph is a form of “indexical sign”³⁴, which means a photograph is formed through contact (physical connection) with what it depicts. This physical connection can be recognized as an evidence of physical presence of the photographer, therefore physically being there. Such physical contact signifies the existence, in which trace is designated as indexical signs.³⁵

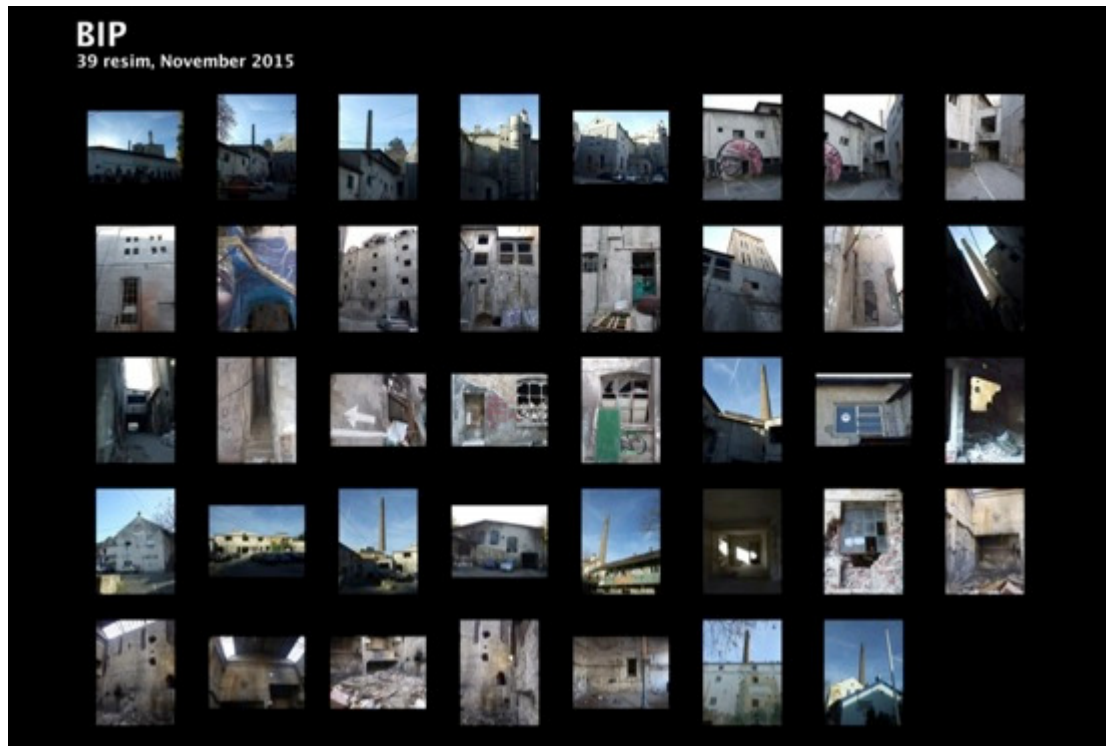


Figure 5. Contact sheet for Bajloni Brewery

If we extend the meaning of the contact, we can talk about contact prints (the film contacts the light sensitive paper). I have prepared a contact sheet for each industrial site (see Figure 5, the contact sheet for Bajloni Brewery), although, the photographs are not literally printed on the sheet. This can be rather called as index or table of contents for each site that is visually documented like a filmstrip or a storyboard. The storyline provides a narrative structure based on the meaning constellations.

The meaning is investigated on two levels – denotative and connotative. The answer to the question of literal meaning is sought on denotative level. The question of latent meanings constructed by socio-cultural and personal associations, on the other hand, is answered by investigating the connotative meanings. Each single image is full of signifiers, however when they are together, they form different meanings arising from this relationship. Photographic images are the code-sheets to seek patterns and derive meaning for the subsequent analysis, in which each image is coded separately and then a general pattern is drawn from the codes. Coding is not just an act of labeling, but a heuristic and exploratory process. Codes merge into themes and form “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations”³⁶.

This study takes the definition of absence and presence as interwoven concepts. In that vein, photographic mashups provide an approach to collage or bricolage by putting together past and present. As the then and now images blend, the signs and codes merge into a single image of the ghostly space. One of the differences between the then and now and overlay images is the blurring boundary between the past-present and/or the memory-trace. According to Derrida “the signified already functions as a signifier”, in which the distinction between the signifier and signified is blurred, challenging the binary oppositions such as presence over absence or matter over spirit.³⁷ The signifiers do not stand-alone as they are not temporally and/or spatially separated from each other anymore. While the lines separating the absence and presence get blurred, this interwoven site allow transformations to be emphasized. The overlay images take the meaning of an indexical sign further by establishing a surface where present contacts the past. This leads to new meanings as social constructs.



Figure 6. Overlay image of Bajloni Brewery (Copyright: Before image - Courtesy of Miloš Jurišić, After image - by the author, photomontage by Evren Dogan)

Composite images are popularly used by artist as well as researchers, blending past and present in order to provide powerful inspirations and imaginaries. Thanks to digital technologies and computer programs used in photography today, manipulations can be made easily by overlaying the two photographs in order to rethink and reimagine past and present. Figure 6 brings together then and now image of Bajloni Brewery, in which layers seem complimentary to each other as there is a clear line cutting the present from the past. The present is built over the past like an unlicensed construction. Whereas, in the overlay image of BEKO (as in Figure 7), the time diffuses between the layers as the layers are highly transparent. The differentiation between the past and present can be done through the main figure of the lady, who belongs to the past, and through the colors as the then image is black and white, while the now image is a color photography. BEKO remains at the background. The shadow like silhouette of BEKO falls on the façade like a ghost of the past. However, the silhouette belongs the present, like a haunting figure of a contemporary ruin.

On the other hand, then and now images suggest a comparative approach for imagining past and present. Then images work towards filling the spatio-temporal gaps by offering clues of the past representations, while triggering a cognitive process towards imagination and meaning making. A comparison between then and now images facilitates interpreting the urban change through the juxtapositions. Some of the examples of photographic works capture the very same image, almost a copy of the past image, from the same vantage point and even at the same time of the year and/or the day by paying particular attention to the light and compositional elements. Admittedly, repeat photography (re-photography) provides useful details to visualize the change in the landscape by carefully studying the photographic records of the past and investigating continuity, or discontinuity. However, in some cases, urban change might have eroded the object of interest or the vantage point.



Figure 7. Overlay image of BEKO (Copyright: Before image - Courtesy of Miloš Jurišić, After image - by the author, photomontage by the author)

Urban demolitions and new constructions could make it difficult for the observer to link the appearances. In this study, “now” images are taken before than collecting and investigating “then” images during the phase of urban exploration. This is so because, the primary step is to get the sense of place in present time on the denotative level, before digging into connotative meanings brought by the memory and the past. Memory work through the old maps, postcards, photographs and documents is the second stage in an attempt to “search for clues, decipher signs and traces, make deductions, and patch together reconstructions out of fragments”³⁸. Photographs represent the past, but “what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday”³⁹.

Figures 8-9-10-11 show examples of then and now images of four industrial sites. In Figure 8, Power and Light stands as a solid structure in both images. However the state of urban decay needs to be observed through close-up images (as in Figure 12). There is a small marina (Marina Dorćol) today, which is the subject of urban transformation projects together with the old power plant. BEKO, which is also on the Danube bank, has been recently sold to a private company called Lamda. It rests on a valuable land area between historical Kalemegdan and the riverbank. Belgrade Zoo is still located in Kalemegdan Park across BEKO. An old image (Figure 9) depicts two women posing to the camera and a giraffe looking at them over the fence. In the background, the façade of BEKO can be seen partially. After the privatization, security measures are taken to restrict the entrance to BEKO. The security camera is looking over the street instead of the giraffe looking over the fence.

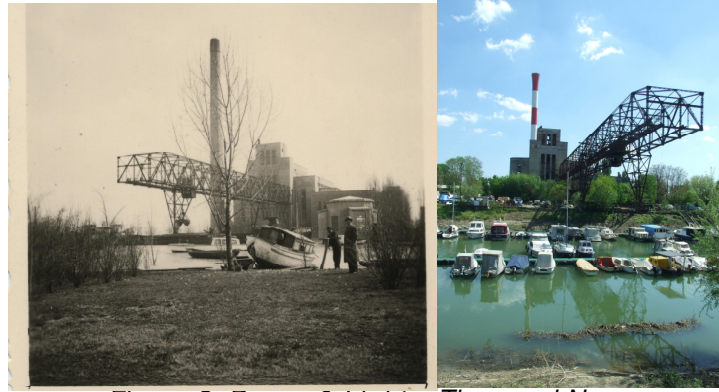


Figure 8. Power & Light – Then and Now

(Copyright: Image on the left Courtesy of Miloš Jurišić, Image on the right by the author)



Figure 9. BEKO – Then and Now

(Copyright: Image on the left Courtesy of Miloš Jurišić, Image on the right by the author)

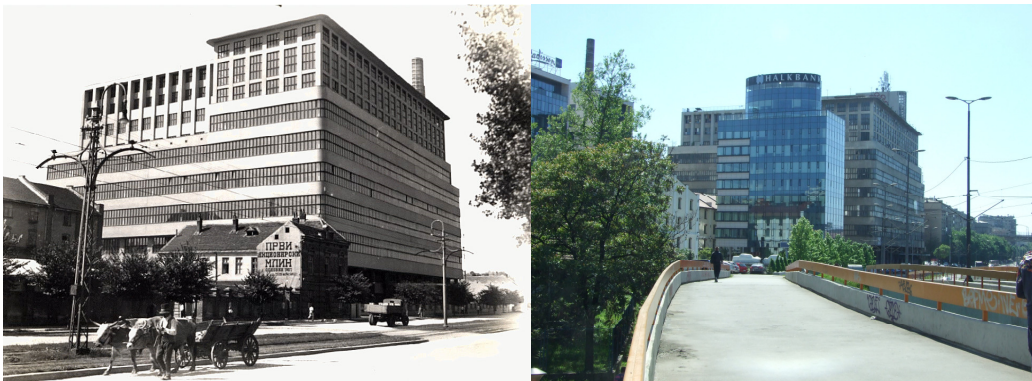


Figure 10. BIGZ – Then and Now

(Copyright: Image on the left Courtesy of Miloš Jurišić, Image on the right by the author)



Figure 11. Sečerana – Then and Now

(Copyright: Image on the left Courtesy of Belgrade City Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, Image on the right by the author)

Figure 10 shows BIGZ standing solid as a landmark building of modernism, while it has kept labels and fragments identifying the building on the façade (see Figure 13). The Old Mill next to BIGZ has been transformed to Radisson Blu Old Mill Hotel. After BIGZ has stopped functioning as the State Printing Office, it became home to music and art industry. Jazz Club Čekaonica was at BIGZ and since 2015 it moved to Šećerana, inside KPGT. The glass edifice in front of Šećerana (see Figure 14) is obviously an extension added later to the building. At first glance, it looks like a café, which is abandoned like the old factory itself. However, when I learned that there is the KPGT Theater still operating in the building, I became eager to explore more about the site, and search for hints of living space; hints of human existence. The old factory became more inviting after all, as it keeps generating stories through its current use. The proliferation of culture and arts industry taking over the old industrial spaces adds new layers of meanings and symbolisms. Ciglane has become home to an art gallery (see Figure 15) and “DEV9T” festival including interactive exhibitions, workshops, performances and music in its programme. Moreover, post-industrial scapes transform into leisure-scapes. New cafes and pubs opening in the courtyard of Bajloni Brewery (see Figure 16) make the old beer brewery the new “Savamala” (a creative and cultural hub, as well as leisure and entertainment scene) of Belgrade in the eyes of the citizens. Klub Dvorišćance has also moved to Bajloni Brewery recently, after its demolishment on the waterfront of Savamala due to the urban transformation project planned to change the waterfront.



Figure 12. Power and Light - close up (Copyright: Image by the author)



Figure 13. BIGZ-emblem (Copyright: Image by the author)



Figure 14. Sećerana – KPGT & Cekaonica (Copyright: Image by the author)



Figure 15. Ciglana – Interior of Art Gallery (Copyright: Image by the author)



Figure 16. Newly opening places at Bajloni Brewery, April 2016 (Copyright: Image by the author)

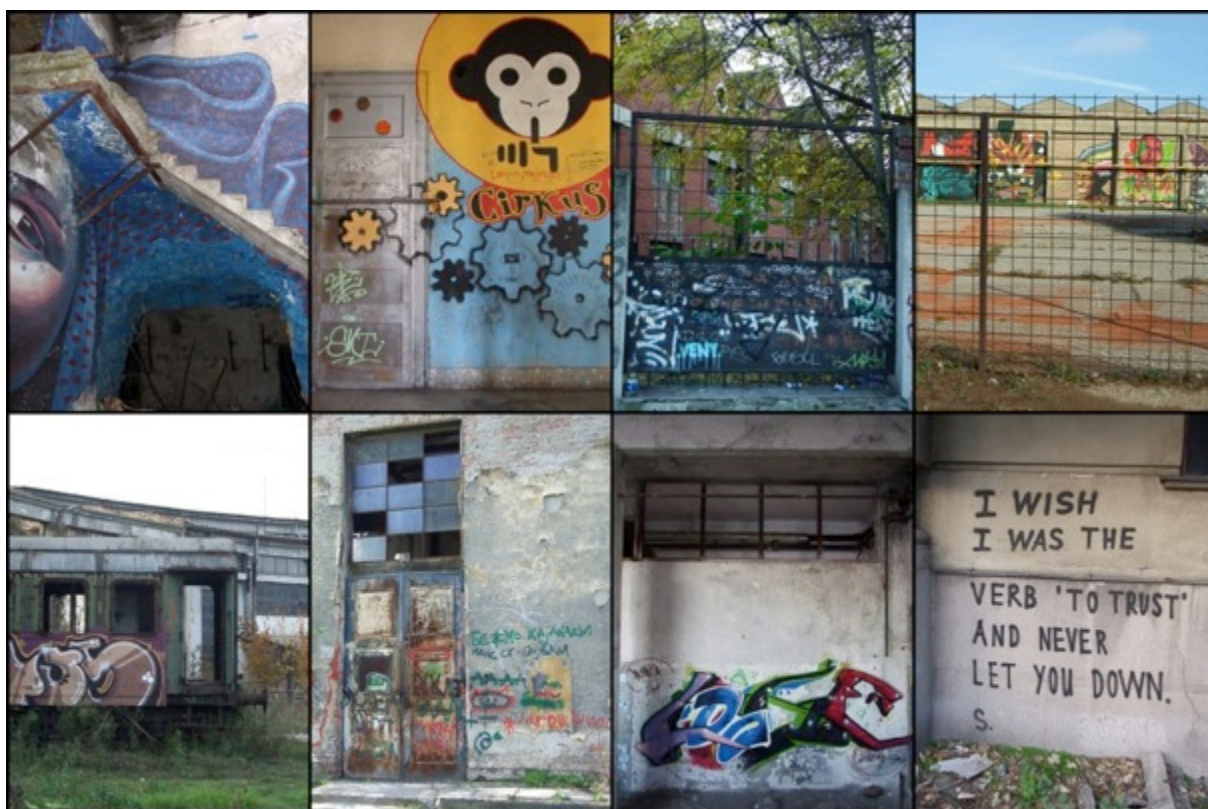


Figure 17. Graffiti as a trace – From left to right on the top: Bajloni, BIGZ, BPK, Ciglana
From left to right on the bottom: Lozionica, Power+Light, BPK, BEKO (Copyright: Image by the author)

There are various overlapping meanings rewritten on each other through the urban/artistic interventions, transformations, expansions, distortions and disfigurations along with the errors and failures of modernities in transition. Thus abandoned sites are not completely empty but another layer is overwritten with the human existence transforming the meaning and the memory of the space. Parallel to the expansion of art industries and occupations, graffiti emerged as a common trace left on abandoned sites, which is another layer of meaning overlaid on the existing one (see Figure 17). Although graffiti was, and to some extent still is, associated with disorder and degraded art form, it has begun to gain acceptance as a “visual, living and ephemeral” cultural form symbolizing the creative presence.⁴⁰ The murals at Bajloni Brewery are notable examples of such artistic expression. Abandoned and empty places offer opportunities for artists to intervene and express their creative works freely. When graffiti is perceived as a practice of disorder, the interpretation of empty places as a crime scene gains a new dimension. Some may see graffiti as a form of vandalism, an anarchic and illegal form of practice damaging the cultural assets. If these industrial objects are already dead, then can we really blame the artist for the murder of the dead?

Another type of controversial visual art practice is “ruins photography” or “ruin porn”, which is often associated with the fascination of urban decay. In this sense, the practice of ruins photography can be linked to ruin fetish in terms of aestheticizing the space and to some extent commodifying it. However taking photograph is an issue, even if you are taking a photograph of “nothing”, of a “non-place”. It is like shooting a dead, but the act of shooting is another association, which is correlated to crime scene. The photographer, who collects the evidence and documents the unofficial realities of a city, can be seen as a “detective”⁴¹; whereas a photographer targeting an object and shooting a photograph is a criminal. When I was questioned what I photograph by the passers on the street, I was replying “nothing”, as there is only emptiness. However, taking a photograph of something/someone is equal to attributing significance and “according value”⁴². Those empty places that nobody really cared about, became suddenly important and something to protect. Some said to me, “it is forbidden to take

photographs of the objects”, and some other laughed and passed by as I was doing a futile job by taking a photograph of nothing - nothing to protect, something buried and forgotten long time ago... Figure 18 shows Beogradski Pamučni Kombinat (BPK), behind the iron door, where our gaze is directed through a small hole – which I call a peeping hole. This photograph is surely not a photograph of nothing; it is full of signs, the graffiti, the frame, the door, the chain, and the hole directing the viewers’ gaze like the viewfinder.



Figure 18. BPK – Peeping Hole (Copyright: Image by the author)

The meaning keeps changing even after the photo is taken. I am no more present at the site but the image is present in my mind and thereon a more cognitive process starts based on the memory of the place. It is no longer disturbed by the physical conditions and feelings of the presence. As the photographer, when I look at the image later on, I see different things, which I did not see before. I might not have noticed so many things, which were already present at the time and place the image was taken. I focus on the object that I want to shoot, I also think of the composition, light and many other things related to photography but I miss many details, meanings which are present at the site but absent in my perception of the site. I explore different meanings when I later look at the image, the blurry background, somebody passing by, the name of the street, the man sitting on the bar stool or the dog lying under the table. All these details make the meaning and that is why images tell different story each time we look at them, or the same image tell a different story to different people, it depends on the eye that looks at the image and how the eye interprets. Moreover, my perception and my sense of these abandoned sites are very different from any people, who is born and brought up in Belgrade. It could have been any place without knowing about its history. Šećerana could have been a factory in England with brick facades. I think that way because of the codes in my mind. The way we read images depend on these codes. It might also be meaningless when there is the absence of codes. These contemporary images show the emptiness. But if you show it to a worker who worked here in the past, he would see something different, something which does not exist but only existent in his memories,

that is not what he sees, that is what he imagines, the image of the past. We tend to fill in the blanks⁴³ with the files of images from our memory and imagine the place in the past.

Berger points out that black-and-white photographs are more evocative on the memory than color photographs, because “less has been given and more has been left out...”⁴⁴ That is why there is an intense relationship between absence and presence. Photography is the absent present⁴⁵, which serves as a medium not only in “reproducing the real” but also “recycling it” through putting things and events into new uses and assigning new meanings.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The built environment can be read as a narrative written by experiences, events and transformations. Industrial plants were aimed to last as “solid structures of production and the symbol of economic development”.⁴⁷ However, nothing is permanent in the built environment as the change is inevitable. Belgrade, as the capital of different states and regimes in the 20th century, has witnessed discontinuities in urban development and degradation of initiated projects due to turbulent social and historical processes, radical shifts in political course and ideological changes. Such transformations have brought built environments in derelict or ruined condition, demolished or unrecorded, and/or neglected or undervalued.⁴⁸ Most of the old factories are left to wear and tear, while some became the subject of transformations either through cultural and artistic initiatives or through urban regeneration projects. Therefore their materiality signifies discontinuity, while their immateriality provides continuity through social relations and values; in the case of transformation projects, profits as well.⁴⁹ The current situation is characterized by unresolved ownership issues leading to large empty spaces in the contemporary urban fabric with limited or restricted access in most of the cases.

Abandoned industrial sites can be thought of faded records of the past. We remember things, places, persons in the way we want or believe them to be. Memory is important in creating shared meanings, yet memory is not something solid and absolute. Memory is not only shaped by imaginations, understandings and attachments to specific places, but also by politics, power, and ideology. Things happen, buildings once existed become non-existent. Depending on the environmental conditions and the building material, as well as the demand for land leading to demolitions or reuse plans make those traces still visible or condemn disappearing. This study opts not to bring any proposition for adaptive reuse for the abandoned industrial sites, which is another area of research. However the different imaginaries play a key role in interpreting the urban transformation and reflecting on the proposals for use plans. In fact, contextual information is crucial for the careful evaluation of meanings attached. Today, this represents an important problematic area in Belgrade’s industrial heritage.

One important thing is to recognize the potential and value of the industrial sites through urban exploration in order to be able to suggest an alternative interpretation of their meaning floating between absence and presence. The contextual specifications require a break from generalizations through the time and space specific conditions in an interpretive study like this one. Thus, photography serves a means of discovery of time and space towards making different kinds of imaginaries possible.

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