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Reuse of Abandoned Industrial Buildings in CZ Through Communities

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Abstract. This article summarizes data from the research of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic NAKI III "Active Protection of Immovable Industrial Heritage through New Use" (2023–27). The aim is to obtain data on the state of cultural and creative reuse of abandoned industrial buildings. The research showed that placing culturally creative activities is a highly effective tool for their protection.

A principal factor in initiating and sustaining these projects appears to be the role of communities. In the Czech Republic, community influence on the protection of architectural heritage is underestimated. This also applies to postwar construction, which is currently threatened by discussions about demolitions.

The research uses a mixed methodology, including statistics and the analysis of selected factors. The aim is to describe examples and strategies that can be used by architects, urban planners, public institutions, and others involved in projects of reuse and conservation. Through community effort, it is possible to protect industrial heritage while continuing to develop new social and cultural values.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of the NAKI III research project "Active Preservation of Immovable Industrial Heritage through New Use" led by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (2023–27, the Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Civil Engineering at CTU in Prague; www.prumyslovededictvi.cz, 10).

Its aim is to formulate strategies for the protection of industrial architecture in the Czech Republic (CZ) through adaptive reuse. In the first phase of the project (2023–25), 354 abandoned industrial buildings constructed during the industrialization period in the CZ and later given new cultural and creative uses were documented. After compiling the list, each building was analyzed and evaluated based on selected criteria: location, the original type of industry and production, the spatial type and size of the building, prevailing new functions, the degree of intervention, ownership, initiation, operator, and heritage protection. Part of the sample then concerned abandoned postwar industrial buildings.
The CZ, with a longstanding industrial tradition (including mining, metallurgy, glassmaking, textile, woodworking production), has a tremendous industrial heritage. However, in many cases, it is subject to neglect and demolition. Due to the lack of new public buildings, there is a significant shortage of spaces for cultural and creative activities. Abandoned industrial buildings are precisely the places that can provide space for creative activities.

2. REUSE OF AN ABANDONED INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

The use of abandoned buildings has been associated with the decline of industry in the West since the 1960s. Countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc have faced industrial decline since the late 1980s, and the large number of currently abandoned and neglected industrial complexes poses a significant challenge for the economy. It also leads to social issues such as unemployment, abandonment, neglected areas, and loss of identity.

Generally, the regeneration of abandoned industrial sites today plays a significant role in contemporary urban renewal (Douet 2016, 6; Fragner 2005, 9). Industrial buildings offer many lessons that could be applied to idle spaces due to their often atypical, flexible, and specially constructed nature (Stratton 2000, 30). From the perspective of typology, we divide industrial buildings into three basic groups according to the nature of the original production: multipurpose (universal), single-purpose (special), and combined (transitional). This information is important for future considerations regarding adaptability (Šenberger 2023, 31).

The reuse of industrial space presents a significant challenge, but introducing new, suitable functions into these spaces improves the prospects for their preservation, while also supporting the local economy through employment, tourism, and community engagement (Palmer and Neaverson 1998, 23). Plevoets and Van Cleempoel view adaptive reuse not only as a change of function, but also as a reevaluation of the values and meaning of a place that supports the unique spirit of the place and the liveliness of the community (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel 2019, 24). Douet also argues that industrial heritage is most meaningful when reuse retains connections to local communities rather than being absorbed into purely commercial redevelopment (Douet 2016, 6).

All these authors provide general arguments supporting the philosophy of the NAKI III project, which was then used to create detailed maps of a specific sample of reuse projects in the CZ.

2.1 Cultural and creative activities

Since the 1960s, creative and cultural activities (CCA) in the West have offered a program for abandoned buildings. Cultural and creative industries encompass socioeconomic activities around creativity, innovation, and intellectual property. They are based on the concept of the creative class formulated by Richard Florida (Florida 2002, 8). The European Union estimates that CCAs contribute up to 4.5 percent of the gross domestic product today, with CCAs increasingly recognized as catalysts for the renewal of contemporary cities affected by industrial decline (European Commissions 2023, 7). The potential of the CCA is not yet fully utilized in the CZ and is therefore the subject of current research (Cikánek 2013, 2; Nétek and Bilík 2020, 21; Merta and Pučerová,16).

2.2 Communities

The concept of adaptive reuse also concerns social sustainability, which encompasses equality, engagement, and communities (Dempsey et al. 2011, 5). Heike Oevermann confirms that culture-based community-led heritage initiatives, those that place greater value on participation and integration into the surroundings, would deliver better heritage conservation outcomes than top-down directive initiatives (Oevermann et al. 2023, 22). They support the cultural identity of a place and cultural continuity, both in a material and immaterial sense. In this regard, the Trans Europe Halls (TEH) network is also significant, as it presents community-led heritage initiatives (Corte and Kunysz 2024, 3).

The significance of these activities is studied in connection with theatrical use of abandoned buildings and community centers (Lapšanský 2024, 13; Poláček and Pokorný 2015, 25; Lényi 2014, 14 and 2021, 15; Mírek 2019, 17). These authors highlight the importance of low-cost, flexible, and temporary solutions, which make it possible for these projects to come into being and sustain themselves. The TEH network and Lényi, however, points out the limits of these projects: a lack of coordination and professional leadership (Corte and Kunysz 2024, 3).

Fragner argues that many successful building conversions in the CZ originate from cultural community leaders such as artists, nonprofits, and small civic groups that occupy abandoned buildings to provide

programming and create a base for future creative clusters or cities (Merta and Pučerová 2024, 16; European Capitals of Culture). In the CZ, the importance of communities in protecting architectural heritage is still often underestimated. However, these views, as well as our research, confirm their great significance.

3. NAKI III RESEARCH SAMPLE

The main hypothesis that was tested of the NAKI III project was that cultural and creative activities represent an optimal way of using abandoned industrial buildings. As mentioned, a lack of construction in CZ led to formerly abandoned industrial buildings being used as contemporary galleries, museums, collections, libraries, cowork spaces, workshops, film and recording studios, creative offices, laboratories, schools, community centers and multifunctional spaces. Gastronomic, sport, leisure and touristic activities are significant also. Multifunctional use is better for sustainability.

As statistics show, the success of projects depends on their location (preferably in the middle or on the edge of a settlement) and size (ideally small, easily manageable buildings). Size is related to the original spatial arrangement and significantly affects a building's future adaptability for new purposes. Research shows that specialized buildings (e.g. power plants) can be adaptable under certain conditions, especially for less formal CCAs. Universal buildings (multistory structures and halls) can accommodate almost any function, which makes them suitable for potential use in a broad range of activities. Combined buildings (breweries, dairies, etc.), thanks to a variety of differently sized spaces, can support numerous multifunctional uses (Šenberger 2023, 31).

The NAKI III database indicates that 65 percent of reuse initiatives are managed by private or civic entities, such as nonprofit organizations or cultural associations, while the rest are managed by public authorities (or a combination thereof).

This research shows the important connection that can be observed between abandoned industrial buildings and communities.

In the first scenario, a community or association searches for a place for common gatherings and activities. If there is an abandoned building nearby, the community tries to utilize it. A key condition is accessibility, in every sense of the word—spatial, temporal, and financial. Statistics show that these are often small or medium-sized buildings accessible from the center of a settlement with relatively minimal regulation of construction modifications and manageable financial demands. Frequently, it involves various artistic associations that already have experience with abandoned buildings.

In the second scenario, an abandoned building becomes the focus of interest for its neighbors, for various reasons such as safety and environmental concerns, and due to public interest in unused buildings in the vicinity. A community gathers with the purpose of utilizing the abandoned building for collective activities (a community center, café, library, or other leisure space).

In the third scenario, the project is initiated from the top but still results in community engagement. It can bring to mind the two previous categories (for instance, the ROBOTA project in Zlín, CZ). There are also instances where multiple scenarios are at play at once.

Generally all these projects involve minimal and reversible interventions, ensuring that these sites are flexible to changing needs and retain a higher degree of heritage value. The communities studied often approach building maintenance very informally, through low-cost interventions and temporary use. They often function more effectively than large top-down projects, which bring more complex architectural solutions, greater interventions in building materials, and exclusivity. One of the downsides of the first and second categories is the temporary nature of these projects: These buildings are often only used just before their demolition or at a time when the building's future is unclear. Many initiators see temporary use as a challenge but can easily change their sites of activity.

What the research emphasizes is the fact that communities are highly active in breaking down barriers between industrial areas and their surroundings. This creates the possibility of new, public and semi-public spaces that can also appropriately connect with nearby waterways, nature, and bike paths. Such initiatives tend to create stronger community bonds and support inclusivity. Communities tend to

naturally create local and international networks. Where communities make projects, there is a chance that a future cluster or a creative city will be created.

Communities, by opening a discussion about the values of abandoned buildings, encourage preservation. In our sample, only 34 percent of buildings were protected as historical monuments. For this reason, the use of CCA seems extremely important if the building is not an official monument.

4. SELECTED EXAMPLES FROM THE PERIOD OF LATE MODERNISM

Postwar modernist buildings were documented in the CZ through the Ministry-funded project NAKI II 60s/70s (National Heritage Institute). The resulting list of significant buildings in the national heritage catalog and the Methodology for Protection report define the key values and approaches to this still underappreciated layer of cultural heritage (Vrabelová et al. 2020, 36).

Only minimal attention has been given to industry so far (Popelová and Šenberger 2021, 26 and 2023, 27; The Research Centre for Industrial Heritage, 29). In the postwar period, numerous new industrial enterprises were established in CZ; many remaining in operation today, while others have declined or disappeared. Only some individual buildings are protected, as prejudices against this "socialist layer" persist. Reuse is often the only chance to preserve them.

The text below shows selected examples and criteria, which are analyzed in relation to the success or failure of these projects.

UPPER/ROBOTA (The Baťa Industrial Complex in Zlín)
Location: central
Heritage Protection: yes (part of a heritage zone)
Type of Initiation: public sector in cooperation with the local university
Type of Ownership: private
New Function: digital technology center
Duration: permanent
Other Indicators: exceptional architecture, low level of interventions
Success Rate: high

The city of Zlín was shaped by the vision of Tomáš Baťa, which embodied a progressive industrial concept. It is now a heritage zone, undergoing gradual regeneration. Several conversions have taken place here (e.g., the Municipal Library and Regional Gallery, an innovation center, and housing).

The typical multistory factory building no. 44 was constructed by the renowned architect Jiří Voženílek (1951). Today, it houses the digital technology center ROBOTA, part of the UPPER project (within the Centre for Creative Industries and Business, which since 2016 has mapped and later supported regional creative and cultural activities).

The project is successfully managed by the local university and has a strong social and community impact—providing education and access to innovative technologies for children and young people and maintaining a link to the city's shoemaking heritage (UPPER n. d., 32).

INDUSTRA, Brno
Location: the wider city center
Heritage Protection: no
Type of Initiation: private
Type of Ownership: private
New Function: cultural and creative center
Duration: temporary
Other Indicators: low level of interventions
Success Rate: middle (temporary project)

The private site of the former Zbrojovka armaments factory is being transformed into a new urban district through the Nová Zbrojovka project. The compressor hall, along with Factory Hall no. 76 and the boiler house, are the last reminders of the industrial past.

The cultural and creative center presents itself as an open creative space for visual arts, performing arts, and educational activities. The so-called LABY offers studios, a residency program, and an open workshop for Czech and international artists. Despite the project's success and the creation of a welcoming public space, the building is not currently included in future development plans for the area (INDUSTRA n.d., 12). Therefore, any interventions carried out by the local artistic community are low-cost and temporary, relying on the hope of permanent use through the promotion of their events.

***Výměník** (Karlovy Vary, Tuhnice)*
Location: city outskirts, socialist housing estate
Heritage Protection: no
Type of Initiation: private, later in cooperation with a public sector
Type of Ownership: private
New Function: cultural and creative center
Duration: permanent
Other Indicators: low level of interventions
Success Rate: high

The cultural and creative center "Výměník," housed in a former standardized heat-exchange station is a new public hub. The utilitarian building has been sensitively transformed into a multifunctional space—with a gallery, design shop, café, and workshops.

The community aims to connect adult, children, and youth through creativity, design, inclusive programs, and support for the industrial identity tied to the region's historic porcelain and glass production (e.g. the educational project "Become a Regional Expert"). The project now receives strong municipal support.

It stands as a model example of rehabilitating a small technical structure, including an ecological solution for residual fuel-oil contamination (VÝMĚNÍK n. d., 34). A similar example is Výměník1 in České Budějovice (Výměník1 n. d., 34).

Central Boiler House of the General University Hospital in Prague
Location: central
Heritage protection: no (a valuable building in the register of monuments)
Type of Initiation: private, later in cooperation with a public sector
Type of Ownership: private
New Function: no
Success Rate: without using

The central boiler house (1993) was designed by the prominent Czech modernist architect Karel Prager. Because of its distinctive late modernist form, it has attracted interest from the architecture community and the public but not from its owner (National Heritage Catalogue n. d., 18). It is presented through architectural events such as Prager100, CAMP Prague, and guided tours (Day of Architecture Festival 2022, 4). This is an example of a community trying to protect a valuable building.

***Mazutka (a fuel-oil heating plant)** (Invalidovna experimental housing estate, Praha)*
Location: city outskirts
Heritage Protection: no (a valuable building in the register of monuments)
Type of Initiation: private
Type of Ownership: private
New Function: no
Success Rate: demolished

The fuel-oil heating plant at the experimental Invalidovna housing estate was designed by architect Jan Zelený in the 1960s. Despite opposition from both experts and the public, it was demolished in 2018 after the Ministry of Culture rejected its heritage protection. The building was identified as an exceptional architectural work with a sprayed-concrete shell roof—a technically and formally bold solution (NHC n. d., 19).

Its demolition is a symbol of the failure to safeguard modern industrial heritage in the Czech Republic, like the demolition of Transgas in 2019. The community dimension of its protection emerged ex post—attempts to activate and occupy the building came only after the demolition decision.

5. CONCLUSION

The relationship between CCA and industrial heritage is mutually beneficial, as it helps to maintain abandoned buildings. These interventions can help built awareness, protect, or even save these buildings from demolition. All converted sites also have become magnets for industrial tourism, which is another added function of many projects.

Given the extent of architectural heritage in the CZ, this is an important argument for heritage conservation bodies as well—not all buildings can be protected, but they can be used in a meaningful way. This also applies to a specific layer associated with the history of modernism, which is endangered by misunderstanding.

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Figure 1. Jiří Voženílek, factory building No. 44, the Baťa Industrial Complex in Zlín, 1950s, now the digital technology center UPPER/ROBOTA. © Credits archive open creative workshop ROBOTA.



Figure 2. The former Zbrojovka armaments factory, Brno, now the cultural and creative center INDUSTRA Brno. © Credits Jiří Štěpánek/INDUSTRA.



Figure 3. Karel Prager, Central Boiler House, Prague, 1993.
© Credits Dominik Jansa.



Figure 4. Jan Zelený, Mazutka (the fuel-oil heating plant), Prague, 1960s, demolition 2018. © Credits archive of Mazutka žije, Šárka Těšíková.