ABANDONED HERITAGE: AN APPROACH TO CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years an interest for abandoned places has surged. Ranging from photography projects of abandoned industrial sites, dilapidated governmental buildings and military remnants, to activities of trespassing properties at night for a rush of adrenaline, a new type of heritage has surfaced. Deemed Abandoned Heritage, it extends to the fringes of traditional heritage places, those that are controlled, clean and marketable, by including areas that are left to their own fates, unkempt and truly becoming ruins through the effects of nature, vandalism and the passage of time and which now stand without a clear purpose. At a first glance it gives the impression of wasted space, areas that could be developed through urban projects but this heritage is also seen as useless and meaningless, for an obvious question arises: if these places have any value, why does anybody care for them?

Yet because such places are derelict, it does not mean that they are irrelevant. In fact, many of these sites hide rich and unique cultural significance due to the mere fact that they have been ignored or overlooked, giving them an aura of mystery and uncertainty. By approaching and better understanding the cultural significance and values of such places, one can establish discussion and debate channels where this Abandoned Heritage can be appreciated and properly addressed, and perhaps even provide solutions for preserving these sites.

ABANDONED HERITAGE

Being very extreme, one could argue that a big part of cultural properties spread through the world are abandoned, such as archaeological sites, castles or out of use facilities. Although being abandoned does not mean that these places are without people, as many sites now serve a different purpose than originally conceived: some are museums, other are touristic attractions. But it does not take long to notice other sites, those that seem to be forgotten, purposely left to wither away. Neglected by people, some of these places eventually fell to ruin and have be erased, and those that still stand now carry negative connotations as areas of crime or danger. Furthermore, upon closer look a trend is noticed: most of these abandoned buildings are from a not-so-distant past. They are remnants of buildings from the late 19th and most of the 20th century, usually of the industrial or modern style, and become main components of the so-called Abandoned Heritage (Forbidden Places, 2015).

The term Abandoned Heritage, as pointed above could technically apply to any heritage from history, is more equated to sites from recent times that have been abandoned and for which nobody seems to take responsibility. These are places deserted during the 20th century for different reasons: economic and work evolution, social and urban changes, or simply outdated technology. Built with either distributions, styles or materials no longer relevant or desired, they stand as silent witnesses of past decades and ways of life now outdated, yet with no clear destiny. Their state of decay and short history allow for oversight and bad reputation as places to be avoided. One reason can be due to their relatively recent history, judgement on these sites cannot be properly done since the time factor has not allowed for a more complete assessment of their values (Jokilehto, 2003, pp.108-109). Another reason is that their closeness to our own realities are reminders that we somehow allowed this to happen, that there has been some failure in our society enabling such outcome, but also these derelict places can be seen as a reminder of our own mortality, our transience (Tschumi, 1994, p.72).

In many cases, Abandoned Heritage is

Beelitz-Heilstätten, Beelitz, Germany. © Nicole Franceschini, 2015.

not seen as heritage at all but more as a nuisance: something not worth investing resources to care and for which its disappearance would not leave any negative effects. But this could result in a loss of unknown cultural significance, one that because it has been ignored and abandoned will never be discovered. Abandoned Heritage has recently become a popular topic, especially through the practice of Urban Exploration. Urban Exploration refers to the act of "discovery and exploration of unseen parts of the built environment, usually with a focus on derelict places." (Garret, 2011, p.1048). This becomes a unique way of experiencing and appreciating sites since it normally involves illegal means of accessing and trespassing the limits of places, which in turn is an essential component of the excitement, understanding and recording of neglected locations. The main purpose is to discover how different places are remembered and cared for in different ways, and by establishing a unique character to each place it truly gives a unique perspective and view of historic and cultural layers previously not considered or overlooked (*Ibid*, p.1050).

To many, this Abandoned Heritage proves an important challenge as they consider them visual contamination of the urban or rural landscape. These are sites seen as a stain in an otherwise clean, controlled environment and conservation tradition, and so different approaches are proposed to "deal" with such sites, but these are not easily decided and applicable. On the one hand demolishing them can prove to be a taxing task, both in time and resources. On the other, leaving them to rot simply perpetuates the *status quo* of neglect and negative connotations. Both options ensure the loss of cultural significance, and in a time where land is highly coveted for development projects, a rash decision that could later be regretted can take place, simply leaving fingers pointing and nostalgic comments. But

what if in order to explore the cultural significance of such places, we shift for a third option?

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ABANDONED HERITAGE

Before exploring the third option for Abandoned Heritage, one must first understand cultural significance in general terms, which refers to the set of values embodied in the site and that are of relevance for past, present and future generations. This concept was made more visible and consistent by the Australian ICOMOS Chapter known as "The Burra Charter" and includes values such as aesthetic, social, historical, spiritual and scientific ones which are subject to change with time and use. Thus, a site can hold a different cultural significance for each community through different time periods; it will mean something different to different people. Furthermore, this significance can be seen as integral to the place, the associations, or even the fabric (Australia ICOMOS, 2013, Art. 1.2). What is important to gather is that cultural significance varies and should not be forcibly anchored to a single narrative or layer of history while dismissing or ignoring the others.

This view of a rigid set of cultural values and significance has been a matter of debate in past years, as it has been perceived that external judgements would expect certain requirements to be fulfilled to consider a conservation approach appropriate, potentially overlooking the views from those directly connected to a site. This has been extensively discussed and criticized through the notion of "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD), which refers to judgement and evaluation, and perhaps even imposition, of a set of cultural values and significance by an external entity deemed expert in heritage, and which in turn dismisses or misunderstands the perspective

of those in direct contact or interaction with a place (Smith, 2006, pp. 3, 11, 26-30). The criticism established by the AHD has given way from a material-based and fabric-centered approach and evaluation of heritage, towards one that also considers associations, meanings, uses and settings. But although there has been a shift in this perception of cultural significance, some habits seem a bit harder to let go. In some cases, the traditional approach towards materiality and heritage remains latent, as seen in the many statements of value from heritage sites around the world (Labadi, 2013, pp.70-73).

With this in mind, analyzing the cultural significance of Abandoned Heritage presents a unique challenge in itself. These are places that being abandoned for years have no immediate community and in some cases suffer from an "everyday effect", as when a building becomes so commonplace that it is simply assumed to always be there. Additionally, many Abandoned Heritage places refer to industrial or modern buildings devoid of a monumentality understood in a traditional sense of heritage[1], which furthers the criticism and questioning as to why such a site should be of interest. Finally, their recent history seems to disable the idea that a place from not so long ago has less value because it lacks the "seasoning" of old age, either shown through its fabric or by the *positive* historic events attached to it. The emphasis on *positive* is crucial as it denotes a comfortable narrative which time seems to have helped mould: a colonial fortress could be preferred over a

[1] Such as presented by the ICOMOS *Venice Charter* of 1964, in which special attention is given to the material component of a site, highly valuing authenticity and integrity (ICOMOS, 1964, Art. 9), is in some cases still used as a reference but deemed Westernized by its critics (Smith, 2006, pp.19-24; Labadi, 2013, p.14)

Beelitz-Heilstätten, Beelitz, Germany.
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1950s social housing project, ignoring that this fortress most likely served as a death machine for those defending or attacking it.

Cultural significance of Abandoned Heritage does not require to be monumental or ancient. In this case, the purpose and approach of cultural significance takes that of narratives, meanings, uses and associations beyond the scope of fabric and traditional integrity values. But in order to understand and discover such significance, there must be exploration, openness and dialogue. Abandoned retail stores could represent the founding of a neighbourhood, derelict factories might represent the working hours of not so past generations, and neglected social housing projects could bring memories of childhood and a long gone lifestyle. Yet, these memories might not be happy and exciting, as they can be reminders of economic, working and social injustices or mistakes. They can be memories of political turmoil and instability, and because of this those affected would like nothing else than to see such places in ruins or demolished. And here is where perceptions on Abandoned Heritage get mixed up.

Places take a negative connotation without being discussed and studied, potentially being subject to the loss of values that might be treasured by some sectors of society. But this does not mean that such values should be preserved unshaken since, as mentioned before, cultural significance changes with time and uses. In a way, one could see cultural significance as re-appropriation of places by stakeholders, having people from a local neighbourhood attaching new cultural values to an abandoned park, or a group refurbishing an old factory for cultural activities, or even simply leaving the place abandoned as it is, as a testament of the evolution and development of the country, city or district. And perhaps this last option can prove to be the most complicated to understand and follow, due to the fact, as previously mentioned, leaving a place abandoned and falling apart can be perceived as irresponsibility, neglect or denial. Additionally, it feeds the excuse for developers and authorities to quickly get rid of such places in order to begin urban development, as an answer to economic and market benefits. Yet, in recent years and by efforts of local stakeholders Abandoned Heritage has taken a renewed interest for the sake of itself, as can be seen in trends like Urban Exploration, or new ways in tourism such as underground or dark heritage.

THE BERLIN AND BRANDENBURG CONTEXT

Abandoned heritage sites can be found in abundance within the German context and of particular interest for the analysis of this phenomena are the Federal States of Brandenburg and Berlin in which, after the political, social and cultural transformation of World War II and the Cold War have generated a consistent amount of abandoned sites, many of which are today listed and protected as historic monuments under the Heritage Protection law. The constant transitional phases that have accentuated Brandenburg's and Berlin's history have also created a constant recycling of buildings that, up to the end of the German Democratic Republic, or GDR, (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik – DDR*) have been used for different purposes and have but then been abandoned after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the creation German Federal Republic, or the *Deutsche Bundesrepublik – DBR*.

Many abandoned military buildings of the Nazi and the Cold War times can be found in both Brandenburg and Berlin. The two Federal States host a variety of bunkers and shelters for military and civilian purposes and many buildings associated with these two political and social backgrounds have also been dismissed as a sign of distancing from the ideologies behind their construction. Among the many monuments and sites, it is worth to mention the abandoned military and space testing ground of Kummersdorf, the small dismantled airport of Sprenberg, the 1936 Olympic Village, the Flak tower of Humboltain and the Iraqi embassy. These places all have in common the appurtenance with Berlin's and Brandenburg's negatively perceived historical time, such as the aforementioned Third Reich and Cold War.

However, despite many places were and still are totally abandoned, others are today used for different means than their original function. One of the most striking examples of the re-use of buildings in Berlin are the *Boros Sammlung* and the *Tempelhofer Feld*. The first example, the *Boros Sammlung* (the Boros Collection), consists of a bunker built by the Nazis in 1942 for the protection of civilians. Once the city of Berlin was conquered by the allies the bunker fall under the control of the Red Army, which used the construction as a prison for war criminals and afterwards, in the mid-1950s it became a sort of giant refrigerator for the conservation of fruit and vegetables. In the

1990s the story of this place has a twist and, with the end of the German Democratic Republic the bunker was used as a disco for Berlin´s worldwide (in)famous techno-parties. The bunker was then closed and sealed until the early 2000, when Christian Boros bought the entire structure as a place where to put his collection of contemporary art, making it a 3 000 m^2 surface art gallery (Boros Sammlung, 2016).

Another interesting example is the case of the *Tempelhofer Feld*. Today, the site is a dismissed airport, in the heart of the city of Berlin, which has been converted into a green park with the participation of the local residents (Abandoned Berlin, 2015). Built in the 1920s and expanded by the Nazi in the 1930s, the airport was captured by the Red Army in 1945 and as stipulated in the Yalta Agreement, the airport became part of the American sector of Berlin (U.S. Secretary Office, 2011). Originally used for military purposes the airport mainly served as a military station and as a corridor for the delivery of supplies for the inhabitants of West Berlin[2]. In the 1960s commercial flights started to operate and in 1971 the airport flew over 5 million people (Flightglobal, 2011). In the 2000s the municipality started considering the possibility of collecting all flight in and to Berlin in one airport as a more cost-effective measure for the public expenditures of the city. After a failed referendum the city decided to shut down Tempelhof and on November 24 2008, the last flight was occurred (Der Tagesspiegel, 2008). Since 2009 the ramp and the green open spaces are used as a city park and part of buildings of

[2] Between June 1948 and July 1949, the Soviet Union blocked all land accessed to Berlin. The Allies in order to save the inhabitants of West Berlin from starvation created an airlift to provide the population of West Berlin and the militar-ies stationed there with food and other supplies (U.S. Department of Defence, 1953).

the former airport have been used to host fairs and concerts. However, the 2015 "refugee crisis" has opened a new discourse on abandoned building and the re-use of already existing structures for living purposes. At present the site offers shelter to over 1200 refugees from the Arab and the African regions (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

The re-use of these buildings has undergone a long process of understanding the site's significance not only as self-standing buildings but also as memory treasures to be kept and preserved not as a pristine site but rather as a place of memory with high cultural, social and political meanings. One could argue that this willingness to preserve and to further develop the story and significance of a place could be one of the keys for the further urbanization through adaptive re-use projects based on value mapping and assessment of attributes of cultural significance.

THE CASE OF THE MEDICAL COMPLEX OF BEELITZ HEILSTÄTTEN

The site of Beelitz-Heilstätten, also referred as *Beelitzer Heilstätten*, is located near the small town of Beelitz. The town is set circa 20 km away from Potsdam and a little over 50 km from the German capital of Berlin. The construction of this medical complex was commissioned by Berlin's Regional Insurance Institution (*Landesversicherungsanstalt Berlin*) and it was originally built as a sanatorium for tuberculosis and a hospital for lung diseases, started in 1898 and over the first thirty years it quickly expanded and by the beginning of the 1930s the complex consisted of 60 different buildings. Its extension and chirurgical facilities soon made it become the second hospital for the city of Potsdam, and during World War I the sanatorium was converted into a military hospital with the aim of supporting the German Imperial forces employed in the conflict. During the last months of 1916, among the many wounded soldiers sheltered and treated

at the Beelitz-Heilstätten, one name stands particularly out for his future engagement within the German politics. In fact, between October and December 1916, Adolf Hitler, at that time a young honoured soldier injured during the Battle of Somme, stayed at Beelitz to recover from his wounded thigh (Die Beelitzer Heilstätten, n.d.).

In 1920 the military hospital was reconverted into a Sanatorium and further works for its extension were carried out. However, the precarious situation of European politics and the consequential outbreak of a second world conflict had the site re-converted into a military hospital for the army of Hitler's Third Reich. During World War II, the site suffered major damages by bombing incursion of the Allies leading to a complete abandonment of part of the site. With the conclusion of the conflict and the decisions of the Potsdam's Conference that divided Germany into four military occupied areas, Beelitz-Heilstätten became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and became a medical facility for the Red Army. In 1949, with the creation the

Beelitz-Heilstätten,
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GDR, the Beelitzer Heilstätten became the biggest Soviet hospital outside the borders of the USSR and it remained so until 1994, when the last former Soviet inhabitants, soldiers and medical staff left the site to return to their home countries one year after the final dissolution of the Union (*Ibid.*). Yet in these years another prominent character of German politics will find cures and shelter in this facility, Erich Honecker, who led the GDR from 1971 until its end in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell (Henze, Chalk, Malmgren, 2011).

After 1994 the site was immediately inscribed under the protection of the German Heritage Protection foundation. Despite this, the company in charge of its management was dissolved in 2001 because of financial difficulties and the site found itself abandoned once again. In recent years various development plans have been carried out within the site, different owners have purchased and developed different sections of the site. Part of the site has been re-used for the construction of a neurological clinic, another section has been redesigned and hosts now 30 apartments that will be open in spring 2017 (Refugium Beelitz, 2016). A third section is now under development with the aim of adaptively re-using the site for the creation of design studios and further habitations (Von Jens Steglich, 2014). Lastly in the fourth section of the site there is now an elevated platform created to allow visitors to see part of the original structure from above and it is used for historic and touristic tours of the site.

Despite the current division and the different development plans, the site itself still retains great value for the history of Brandenburg and Germany itself. The quick and radical evolution of the German political and social background from the end of the 19th century until today has contributed considerably in characterizing Beelitz-Heilstätten as a unique multifaceted

significance for the site. In the case of the complex, every historical phase and modification of its original use has added additional layers of values and significance contributing in making this site an outstanding example of heritage of the 19th and 20th century in Eastern Germany. Its architectural features collect elements from the styles of late 19th century houses, *Jugendstil* and German architectural Expressionism (Lemburg and Volkmann, n.d.). The change of uses and the multiple expansions of the complex at different times, have brought a combination of different elements. Together with it, the difference in architecture and in decorations also highlights the diverse social ideals that each historical period has brought with it (Lemburg and Volkmann, n.d.).

Lastly one could argue that an additional level of values and significance can be seen in the modern post-abandonment utilization of the site. With the raise of Urban Explorers and aficionados of abandoned places, sites like Beelitz-Heilstätten are often subject of visitation, sometimes legally through tours, other times illegally as they require trespassing fences and walls. This interest by a wide public, which is also testified by the considerable amount of digital literature and visual documentation, underlines not only the significance of the site but also its potential as a mean for the further development of the area through the enhancement of its heritage component. Currently, the heritage-related value of the site can mostly be found in the "*still abandoned*" areas where the buildings with their original features have not been restored, reconstructed or re-used.

CONCLUSIONS

Adaptive reuse appears as a third option for a possible answer to dealing with Abandoned Heritage. It offers the possibility of using historic buildings for a new purpose, while still retaining some of their features (Joachim, 2002). Adaptive reuse brings forth many benefits such as using empty space, or developing cultural matters such as archaeological and identity (Ibid), but reusing can sometimes as costly as demolishing and building anew. In many cases, old buildings require much additional work on sanitation and reinforcement of its structure, due to using toxic or unstable materials. Additionally, most old structures require to comply with up-to-date safety standards, which again can increases the costs. But such matters can also prove to be a reasonable sacrifice by locals and the general public.

With the ever increasing relevance of sustainability and eco-friendly actions, Adaptive Reuse can provide an option to simultaneously address cultural significance awareness, conservation and sustainable behavior. By reusing a large part of the fabric, massive movement of new materials, which in turn leaves a footprint not only for their transportation but also for the extraction or production, can be avoided or minimized (Schöpfer, 2012, p.168). Additionally, most adaptive reuse interventions include contemporary materials and designs which create a discussion between the old and new not only on the building itself but also on the interacting community. People can feel their presents being included into their pasts for their futures as a way of integration into the various layers of history; they become active participants and connected to these layers (*Ibid*, pp.163-164). But if we actually stretch this idea of Adaptive Reuse, we could also argue that leaving sites as they are can also be considered a type of reuse. The original purpose — that for which it was built on the first place — is not being reinstated by "reviving" it with new lively activities, contemporary action — inaction — is figuratively placed on the site, and the historic features of the building are preserved — including

those that have come after the abandonment, such as street art, graffiti or vandalism. One could deem this a "Radical Adaptive Reuse", but it is important to know that such actions are taken by being aware of the cultural significance that such place has been harnessing during its lifetime. Leaving to rot because it is the easy solution, without any sort of action such as at least photographic documentation, awareness and exposure, benefits no one.

In the case of Beelitz-Heilstätten, the recent redevelopment plans could be seen as a form of addition of new layers of significance to the site itself, which one day might be considered part of the site as a representation of our current societies in their whole. Despite all this, the site has undergone a clear fragmentation, in which it no longer retains any overall sense of place but it is now divided into four respective sections with separate projects planned and foreseen or current uses. At present, this fragmentation has created some difficulties in understanding the overall significance of the place and its values, as some of the redevelopment plans have been rather invasive and have considerably dominated the previous existing layers of the site. In order to be able to retain the site's value and significance it is important to undergo a process of adequate documentation aimed at assessing the site's significance and values. This allows the understanding of the place and a more accurate planning of future development and projects. The site of Beelitz would have benefited from a previous assessment of it as a site through mapping of values and significance at the site. If done, this would have allowed the creation of an overall redevelopment plan conscious of the needs of the site and its surrounding communities.

Adaptive re-use of buildings has a strong potential for improving environmental (Langston, 2008) and economic sustainability of its surrounding spaces and communities, using the ex-ample of replaced structures one must underline that the dismantling of previous structure and the creation of new buildings brings a set of issues related to the production of solid waste and their disposal. Moreover, taking into consideration the present political situation and the presence of armed conflicts in many parts of the world, one could also argue that the current challenges connected to the "refugee crisis" and the arrival of thousands of people fleeing their countries has also created the need to broaden the discourse on the re-use of historic building as new living spaces.

Thus, in a way, Abandoned Heritage does not require to be touched but understood. It can live on its own and if desired people can leave it to wither if that is their will, or it can be readapted for a new life while still manifesting parts of its history. It does not have to adhere to traditional tenets of integrity and conservation, since leaving it "as it is" is already a radical conservation in itself, an "aconservation" if you will. On the other hand, by allowing an informed and conscious modification and evolution of its fabric, Abandoned Heritage becomes the carrier of new cultural significance, perpetuating the purpose to serve past, present and future generations by giving them the opportunity to imagine, craft and create their own narratives and experiences. •

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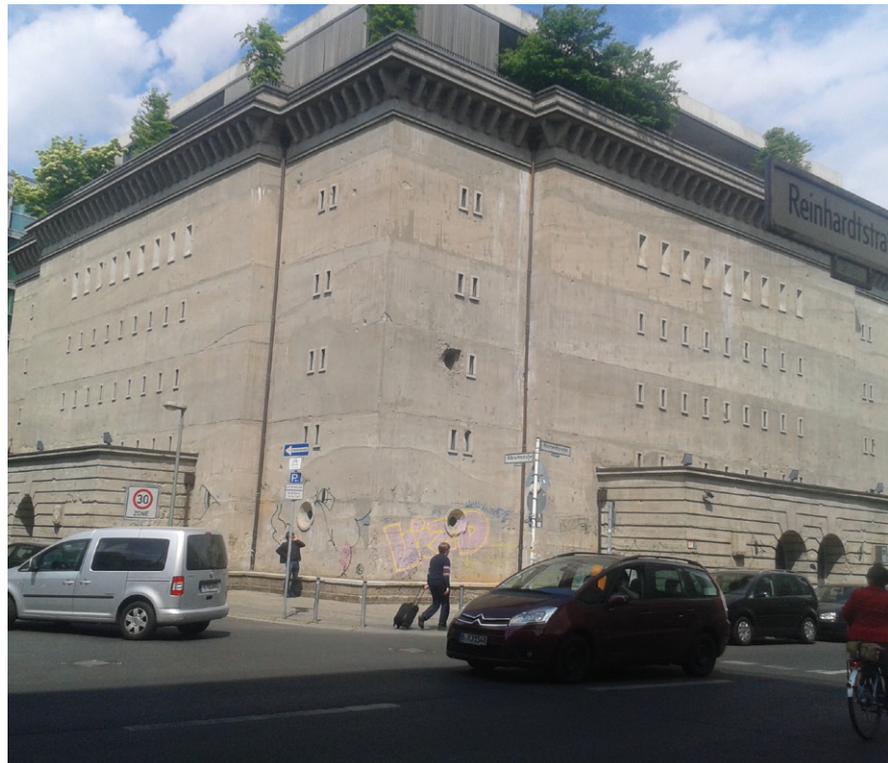
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