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# Reuse or Abuse? Ethics in Requalification Design

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The "recycling" of the ever-growing amount of abandoned land in contemporary metropolises has recently received much attention. The task of reintegrating these lands into their surroundings is particularly challenging because it requires repairing drastically altered landscapes and, at the same time, generating new activities. Furthermore, their enigmatic emptiness signals great potential.

A primary characteristic of wastelands is a certain indeterminacy of function, program and design. These are territories of transition, whose meaning is derived from association. They are forgotten places, black holes in the mental map of our cities. Yet their presence also invokes memories—real or imaginary. And they embody the inescapable passage of time, both the elapsed time of their past and the urgency of their imminent demise.[1]

In many cases, regional identities are also tied to wastelands. Even when the forces that generated them are no longer viable, remnant structures retain their importance as sources of identity, such as in the bypassed port cities of Antwerp and Genoa.

What does "recycling" these territories mean? Recent design trends emphasize the superficial facelift, "painting" them green and cramming them with new commercial functions. But using old churches for bike storage and turning garbage dumps into sports parks raises questions of appropriateness. Camouflaging an abandoned site with a festive facade merely hides the causes of its abandonment, and fails to reconcile our sense of guilt.

True recycling changes perceptions and restructures judgment. Through provocation, it exposes the hidden value of the obsolete. It engages memory without nostalgia—but with distortion. It is a process that preserves essence without seeking to create a polished new product. Recycling allows inventiveness and creative manipulation. When the underlying strengths of a site are embraced, reuse can involve the most innovative proposals.

The issue of the ethics of recycling abandoned landscapes derives from research I started five years ago.[2] And the model I now propose focuses on process rather than product and welcomes new uses and dynamics while being respectful of the past. Several recent projects help illustrate the issues involved in developing such a framework.

**Above:** Hellenikon airport area, Athens, Greece. Photo by B. Strootman.
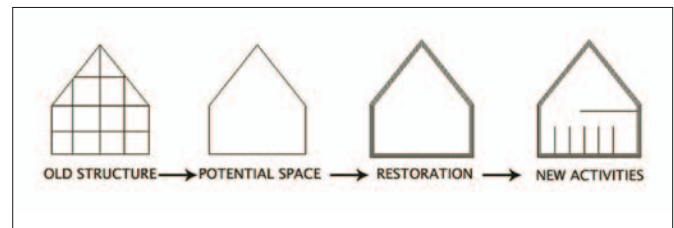
## Product or Potential

Recently, the site of a contaminated gas factory in Amsterdam, the Westergasfabriek, was completely rebuilt. The result of this particular transformation highlights the dire need for an ethics of reuse.

After a fifteen-year planning process, the winning design, by Kathryn Gustafson, transformed the site into a comfortable English-style park.[3] Yet, what is left of the past? The interiors of old industrial buildings at what is now known as Westerpark have been cleared. Instead of enhancing the structures through design, they have been scrubbed of their past so that they can provide efficient, pristine envelopes for future, undefined cultural activities.

Is this truly reuse? Instead of continuation and evolution, all embedded potential has been washed away, removed, or covered up. There is no resilience or adaptability in such a new finished product. To remember here is not to make the past present, but to build anew.

Compare this with the reclamation of the open-pit coal mine of the Brikettfabrik Witznitz on the outskirts of Leipzig. Faced with uncertainty about the long-term ecological consequences of mining and the potential difficulty of attracting new uses to the site, the scheme by Florian Beigel Architects consists of a "mining garden" to enhance the attractiveness of the site for future developers and investors.[4]

The design features a series of activity fields that in their openness to unpredictable uses are the tangible expression

**Above:** Transformation of the old industrial buildings in the Culture Park Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam, 2005.



of the idea of indeterminacy. If development doesn't take place, the city will still have a garden for people to enjoy. This is a process-oriented scheme where at any point the development may stop or continue without detrimental consequences to the original vision.
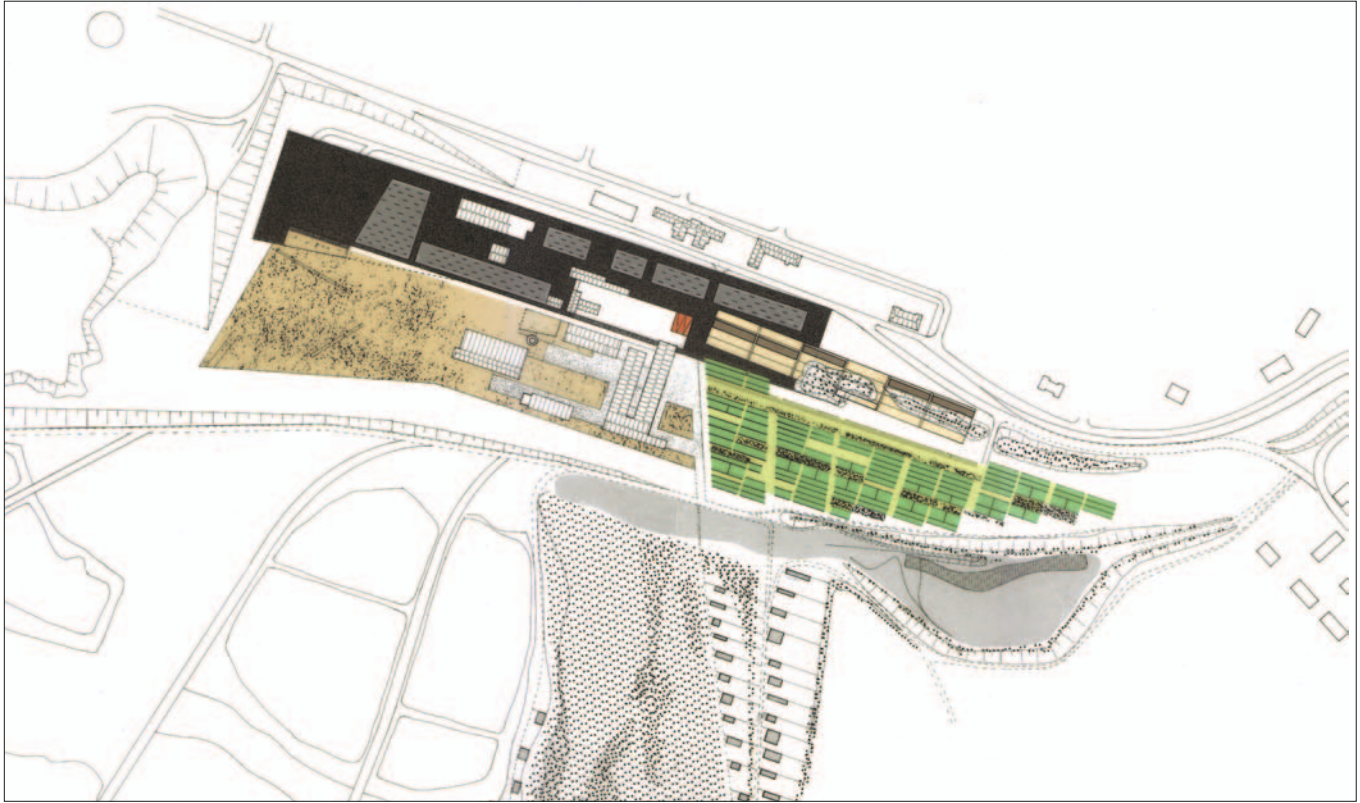
Such designs illustrate the difference between two types of reuse—one that transforms the old into a new product, another that maintains the potential of the old without committing to a predetermined solution.

## Effective Divestment

Such projects also raise issues of "divestment" and "recovery."[5] Recovery implies historical reconstruction based on research on a specific time period. Divestment strategically erases traces of human presence on a site. Depending on the design strategy, divestment can result in a loss of essence, or, if done correctly, reveal new design possibilities. Two buildings in the same abandoned area on the west side of Zurich—Schiffbau and Puls 5—illustrate this fine distinction.

Originally a ship-machinery yard, the Schiffbau has been converted by Ortner & Ortner Baukunst GmbH into a

meeting space and theater hall.[6] Through their design, the essence of the building is preserved, and divestment creates a subtle, revelatory effect.

Elsewhere on the site, a former metal foundry, Puls 5, has been converted into a shopping mall. However, to create extra volume, KGP Kyncl Architecten wrapped the original structure in a milky-glass curtain to create a second building skin.[7] Office spaces and housing have also been built on top of the existing structure. From the outside, the building looks completely new; inside, only a few steel columns remain from the old structure, exposed as entry decorations in an otherwise modern shopping environment.

This represents "dressing-up" of architecture, rather than divestment. Effective divestment implies selective removal of the past to allow introduction of new elements that create distortion and drama, activating the potential of continuing transformation.

### Appropriateness of New Programs

These projects point to an important question. How should the introduction of new programs affect an abandoned site or building?

Consider, for example, the former dock area of Amsterdam, where a project by Kees Christiaanse Architects and Planners creates a "train of buildings" along the water that interlock and overhang three existing warehouses.[8]

From the urban point of view, the placement of the new volumes has destroyed the openness of the area, and the experience of the nearby waterfront is nearly obliterated.

From the architectural point of view, the warehouses have lost their autonomous presence, and their reprogramming (offices, apartments) fails to understand the generosity of space that the old buildings presented a priori. Large spaces have been subdivided into tiny units to gain more rentable space and to maximize profit.

Industrial buildings or abused landscapes are not empty containers or "blank" surfaces where "anything is possible." In dealing with reuse, designers must understand the unique character of the given and how association with new programs should revive or enrich it.

Above: **B**rikettfabrik Witznitz: Plan of architectural landscape of activity fields. Design by f.beigel+architecture research unit. Competition stage two, drawing, October 1996.
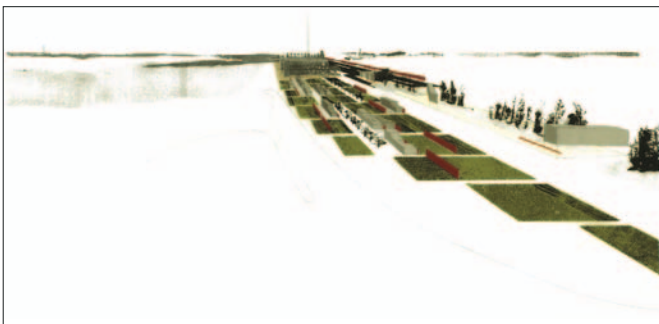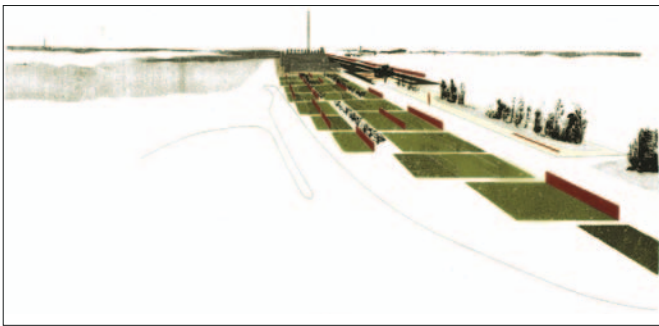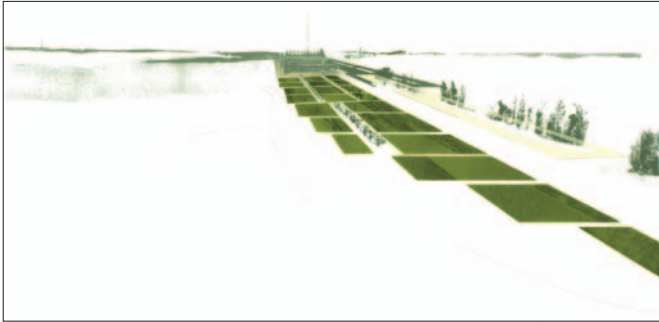
## Pride of Rhetoric

So far I have considered three topics for a code of reuse. One might think of them as planned indeterminacy; the importance of memory (without nostalgia) and changes of perception; and the appropriateness of new programs to old spatial qualities. It is also important not to impose new forms of design rhetoric on the past.

**Left:** Brikettfabrik Witznitz: View of the market gardening field. From top to bottom: short-term scenario with fruit orchards and narrow and long plots for horticultural cultivation; medium-term scenario with narrow and long plots for horticultural cultivation and infrastructural walls between plots; longer-term scenario with narrow and long plots used to build a carpet of patio houses built between long garden walls. Drawings by Marta Bayona Mas, ARU, September 1997.

**Right:** Strijp S: plans call for an existing "pipe street" to be demolished.

The strategically located Strijp S industrial area of Eindhoven was formerly occupied by a Philips Electronics factory. In 2000 West 8 proposed transforming this site, once known as the "forbidden city," into a round-the-clock living place and "creative heart" for the southern Netherlands.[9] The plan features a green avenue as the main axis of alignment for a series of "icon buildings." However, it fails to acknowledge the nature of existing obsolete structures and landscapes, ignoring their potential for reuse. Instead, completely polished surfaces and normalized spaces create typified areas that force a new architectural image onto the site.

Why the need of such a statement that sets up a competition between existing and new? The decay of the old structures, a kind of ugliness we experience as beauty, is not accepted as a quality of place.[10] There is no adaptation, no recycling. Rather than suggesting a free appropriation of place, revitalization seems to proceed according to a kind of amnesia for existing buildings and landscape qualities.

Will the Strijp S project really miss such a powerful reuse opportunity? Designers should not forget how abandoned places hold special qualities of attraction. Incremental design schemes that retain the best qualities of the given while infusing entirely new and innovative elements are the best response.

## A Design Code for Abandoned Sites

The design approaches I discuss may provide a general code, but the designer will always be responsible for interpretation. This means searching for specificity of context, using materials that incorporate the history of place, and recording the past while building an identity for the future.

Above all, the crucial value of design for progressive reuse

lies not in creating new finished products but in a process of elaboration and an openness to diverse interpretations.

Wastelands can be revived and transformed from derelict to desirable, from unsuitable to suitable, from past to future. But this needs to be done without abusing them. We must learn to observe, feel and listen to place. We must see the potential of a site and be careful not to create the garbage of tomorrow.

**Notes**

1. On this topic, see M.S. Roth, C. Lyons, and C. Merewether, eds., *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1997).

2. The research described here was made possible through a Cornell University fellowship.

3. For details on the park, see http://www.westergasfabriek.com/engels_welcome. php. For the design competition, see VVAA, "Een park voor de 21ste eeuw, vijf visie voor de Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam," Uitgeverij Thoth, Bussum, 1998.

4. For details on the design, see Florian Beigel Architects, Brikettfabriek Witznitz, Leipzig, in *2G International Architecture Review* 3 (1997), issue on "Landscape Architecture," pp. 88-95.

5. As in N. Gregson and L. Crewe, "Transformations: Commodity Recovery, Redefinition, Divestment and Re-enchantment," in N. Gregson and L. Crewe, *Second-Hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 143-72.

6. For details of the design, see http://www.ortner.at/sch1.html. Also see http://www.schauspielhaus.ch/www/160_479.asp; and http://www.schauspielhaus.ch/www/160.asp (with downloads).

7. For details of the design, see http://www.kgp-architekten.ch; and http://www.puls5.ch/wohnen_arbeiten/projektdetails/architektur.html.

8. For details of the design, see http://www.kcap.nl/indexfinal.html (see Oostelijke Handelskade, Amsterdam).

9. For details of the design, see West 8 Urban Design & Landscape Architecture, "Definitief ontwerp stedenbouw Strijp S Eindhoven," January 2004 (submission booklet of definite design to Municipality). Also see http://www.parkstrijp.nl/hetplan.htm; and http://www.strijp-s.nl/nieuws.php/downloads.

10. As in R. Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable: In Pursuit of Architectural Meaning* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

Images courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

**Above:** Strijp S: the plan fails to explore reuse of an existing "white spine" of buildings along a proposed new "green avenue."