

An Incubator for Vacant Factory Buildings

What we can learn in Lusatia about the successful remodeling of factory buildings

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In recent years, the change-of-use of vacant factory buildings has emerged increasingly as an essential element of discussion in construction research. Currently numerous multi-national research projects are indicating new directions for the treatment of former industrial regions and their architectural riches. The countries of Central Europe are particularly welcome as partners in such research projects. In those countries a drastic structural change in industry is becoming apparent that, on one hand, specifically demonstrates the nature of the problem, and on the other, hints at potential solutions.

Because of the politically and economically isolated situation of the countries that formerly made up the Eastern block, a gradual structural change within the context of changing markets did not occur there. Thus these countries came under especially strong pressure to change at the beginning of the 1990s. The subsequent ongoing political and socio-economic unification efforts promoted a process of economic recovery, but also allowed for the migration of qualified workers, the selling of entire industries to multi-national concerns and increasing social and economic disparities. In addition, the attraction of Central European industrial locations and consequently their new market opportunities were diminished by the pressure for globalization, the collapse of traditional areas of production, and an increasing tendency to relocate production processes to non-European countries.

West-East-Transfer?

Therefore the economic situation of Central Europe's industrial regions is not a simple one. In places where a few decades ago the engine of industrial wealth fuelled the economy with capital and innovations, today there are clear signs of continuous economic tensions. The funds for a sustainable structural renewal do not exist because the unexpected political change did not free any economic reserves that might have been built over previous decades. For solving these problems, a transfer of experience from the west would seem to make sense. After all, remodeling of industrial regions has been practiced there for a long time. However, the task of rapid economic rehabilitation of entire regions is necessarily complex and, in the European east, conditional on many factors. A quick and thoroughgoing process of recovery is hardly possible. Although insights gained from the west may bring one closer to solutions in the east, a satisfactory solution requires investigating basic conditions, dealing with problems and probing experience on site.¹

¹ Scharnholz, Lars and Aleksandra Witeczek, "Restrukturierung von Siedlungsbeständen", in: *Garten + Landschaft*, 9/2004, pp 21-23. Hundt Tobias and Lars Scharnholz, „Ost-West-Transfer: Stadtumbauerfahrungen im gesamtdeutschen Kontext“, in: Nagler, Heinz, Riklef Rambow and Ulrike Sturm (ed.), *Der öffentliche Raum in Zeiten der Schrumpfung*, Edition Stadt und Region, Berlin: Leue Verlag, 2004, pp 229 – 248.

The INIK Research Project²

The research project by the German-Polish Institute for New Industrial Culture, concluded in July 2007, and the handbook (German/Polish) resulting from the project is intended to offer initial help and inspiration and to suggest methods and a strategic set of instruments.³ The goal was to provide complex answers to issues of history and documentation of buildings, organization and project management, financial options and funding channels, calculation models and characteristics of location as well as institutional carrier and operator models.

The initial location for our considerations was the German-Polish region of Lusatia, a historical coal mining area including additional centers in textile, glass, construction materials and chemical industries.⁴ Currently, a process of transformation is taking place in this region that is characteristic for numerous industrial regions of Central Europe. On the German side of the border the region comprises the southeastern part of Brandenburg and on the Polish side the southern part of the province of Lubuskie.

On the basis of regional planning considerations, the approach of the research takes the form of a direct confrontation with the buildings. The scope of the INIK concepts reveals that the main concern is not at all a simple matter of obtaining a powerful investor. Rather the effort centers on finding new solutions for use and financing as well as project development and institutional support. Concepts of strategic planning are presented that have been designed on the basis of specific locations in the German-Polish border region and that examine the unused potentials of former industrial installations.

The goal of the INIK research project was to attempt bringing together two poles that in practice are often opposed as two strong competitors: the construction business and preservation interests; this intent is based on the observation that the antagonism between the two is not etched in stone, as it is often thought to be. A new approach that will do justice to issues of economy and preservation alike must take the place of the old competing arguments.

This new approach will succeed if the decision makers learn to weigh arguments of sensitive preservation against those of economic feasibility, a task that points to the future. Therefore, the INIK project seeks primarily to strengthen the decision makers of tomorrow: students, young urban and regional planners as well as architects, but also scholars of culture, economy, preservation and sociology. Finally, besides the universities, we would like to address private owners of old factories and institutions of public concerns because they have an immediate influence on the way we deal with industrial heritage.

² Scharnholz, Lars, „Umnutzung stillgelegter Fabrikanlagen. Testfeld deutsch-polnische Grenzregion“, in: Museumsblätter, Potsdam, Museumsverband des Landes Brandenburg e.V., Nr. 9, 2006, 2006, pp 14 – 17.

³ Otto, Markus, Karl Plastrotmann and Lars Scharnholz, Industriebau als Ressource, (Forst (Lausitz), Institut für Neue Industriekultur e.V., 2007.

⁴ Scharnholz, Lars, „German-Polish and other Border Cities“, in: Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA), German-Polish and other Border Cities – Borders as an Opportunity, Conference Documentation, (Großräschen: IBA), 2001, pp 12 – 15.

The INIK -Method

Numerous vacant factories, former company-housing projects and industrial wastelands in the German-Polish border region are signs of deep-rooted structural transformation, which in turn is tied to migration, demographic shifts and economic change. At the same time, these unused buildings and lands represent a potential for future use not to be underestimated and pose questions of potential change-of-use and remodeling strategies.

Within the EU-research project “New Industrial Culture: Border-Crossing Cooperation in the Area of Research and Development,” the Institute for New Industrial Culture along with users and proprietors of factories and housing projects, wanted to reveal the potential of these buildings and present transferable concepts for their change-of-use. During the years 2005 to 2007 the Institute for New Industrial Culture has investigated 30 locations within the region delineated by the rivers Spree, Bober and Neiße and in neighboring cities in Germany and Poland.

A fundamental insight of the research project became apparent: funding and efforts for development can be successful only if the developmental ability of locations is examined in detail. An exact knowledge of the conditions is required in order to decide whether the initial idea for a change-of-use of an industrial site would be a new use, a controlled preservation or an extensive intermediary use. A program for dealing with the old fabric of the building can be provided only after an analysis of the often-heterogeneous interests of all participants in the project, the different funding and financial channels, and possible concepts of operators or institutions. Necessary for an analysis are not purely architectural or economic strategies but rather interdisciplinary approaches, which will rely equally on design and planning and on social and cultural as well as ecologic and economic considerations.

The first part of our research project helped to determine the strategic methods for the development of vacant industrial buildings. At first it is important to exactly define the conditions of an object (analysis), then they should be evaluated (evaluation) and finally the results should lead to a new use (strategy). The recommended approach relies on extensive experience gathered in dealing with old industrial buildings and company-housing projects in past years, that is, internationally successful exemplary models shed light on the effects of the methods presented in practice.

1. Analysis Phase

This includes, besides the description of the condition of the building and its history, the precise investigation of potential financing options as well as identifying the people involved including their profile, motivation and interests.

2. Evaluation Phase

The subsequent evaluation phase should include a detailed and ruthless evaluation of the conditions. What are the possibilities of a change-of-use that result against the background of the initially investigated values? The evaluation phase also sets the goal for proceeding further.

3. Strategy Phase

In the strategic phase individual measures for the revitalization of a building or an industrial site will be introduced. Potential risks will be assessed and strategies identified that are to be avoided. Different costs and financial strategies will be described, models for institutions and organizational structures will be clarified, the substantial first steps of the development of the project will be identified.

The INIK Pilot Projects

Finally, the second part of our research project will be to check the insights gained during the first part by transferring them to practice. Intentionally we selected locations for this transfer that are largely situated within the German-Polish border region because the local starting conditions will provide examples for other European industrial regions. The goal was to plan model solutions, with the help of which revitalization issues in other structurally weak regions could also be addressed.

Thirty locations in the German-Polish region of Lusatia have been investigated, among those subdivisions, housing projects and factories in Forst (Lausitz), Welzow, Cottbus, Burg (Spreewald), Drebkau, Zielona Góra, Lubsko, Żagań, Żary and Nowa Sól. The essential strategy was a border-crossing approach that—all differences aside—also would reveal the particular commonalities on both sides because the structural economic break and the related consequences for factory installations and company-housing projects have unfolded in a similar manner in the Polish and German cities of the border region.

The result of these investigations was the drawing up of plans for measures leading to a gradual remodeling of the buildings. The plans will aid in making decisions for the subsequent realization of the project. The goal is to improve preparations for each project by basing them on a concrete knowledge of and concepts related to the individual locations. In this sense the 30 individual results may be perceived as differentiated recommendations for a successful realization of the project. The early results of some projects have already become evident and can be studied as successful effects of the INIK project.

Outlook

The confidence expressed should not distract from the fact that in regions such as German-Polish Lusatia, in particular, enormous problems are related to the preservation and development of company-housing projects and factories which are no longer economically necessary. The difficulties are known and in past years all too often led to simple hasty arguments for demolition. This is where our INIK project starts. Based on concrete models, we show alternatives and demonstrate that it is indeed worthwhile to dare the balancing act, working between preservation of industrial heritage on one hand and the actual margins of economic conditions on the other. Instead of hastily demolishing factories and approving building permits too quickly, the decision makers should invest more time in strategy and planning. Through the use of strategies that have been well thought through and carefully as well as considerations concerning planning and concept, a successful realization of change-of-use endeavors—free of hindrances and therefore successful in the long run—can succeed.⁵

⁵ Scharnholtz, Lars, "Sustainable Planning in Shrinking Regions", in: *Aspects of Equilibrium*, Wrocław: Politechnika Wrocławska, 2005, pp 214 – 219.