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# TERRITORIES IN CRISIS

Architecture and Urbanism  
Facing Changes in Europe

C. Bianchetti, E. Cogato Lanza, A. Kërçuku,  
A. Sampieri, A. Voghera (eds.)

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# PRODUCTIVE PLAYGROUNDS

Giulia Setti

A study of the territorial implications produced by the crisis in industrial contexts in Europe reveals not only phenomena of abandonment and emptiness, but also the potential and transformative processes induced by contraction: a complex web of density values, rights, and resources as part of an evolution in the traits of industrial fabrics. These conditions transform big industrial platforms into a sort of unexpected playground (in the very physical, material sense intended by Isamu Noguchi), but one that is ready to welcome multiple “games.” Productive platforms become places where different, multifaceted projects can be tested; places in which a productive territory can still be a resource.

This concept is a far cry from the nineteen-eighties, when in Europe dismantling became an important design topic within the framework of a much more defined approach: during that period, the magazines *Rassegna* and *Casabella*<sup>1</sup> clearly described the importance of the dismantling phenomena in Europe as well as the potential that the ensuing empty space seemingly created for ongoing urban transformations. Expectations often betrayed or left unfinished.

After these recent crises, industrial and other kinds of dismantling processes express and assume *different conditions*: as a result, it is useful to study a radical example (due to its size and other factors), such as Aubervilliers, north of Paris.<sup>2</sup> This example reveals an important conceptual rather than spatial evolution compared to the effects of early dismantling.

At the time, dismantling left large gaps in the consolidated urban fabric; now it leaves minute fragments, interstitial gaps and indistinct spaces displaying situations of instability, fragmentation, but also freedom of movement. There is permanent abandonment, but also transformation, recycling, maintenance, infrastructure construction and review of the land occupied by industry. All this obviously has an enormous impact on architectural design; it forces a rethink of the relationship between new forms of industrial production, urban spaces, and architectural shapes.

## Conditions

The sprawling industrial land—where in the mid eighteenth century development began in Aubervilliers—is located on the other side of the Boulevard Périphérique, north of the urban fabric of Paris; *new uses* of abandoned or underused spaces next to the ruins of the industrial past and empty and discontinuous spaces. The *vivacity* of Aubervilliers is the key to understanding the diverse effects sparked by recent forms of dismantling.

The industrial area of Aubervilliers north of Paris is part of the agglomeration known as Plaine Commune in the Senna Saint Denis department. It is a territory that, “after thirty years in the largest industrial area in Europe, became the largest industrial wasteland due to the crisis of the 1970s” (Angeon and Lauro 2006, 20–21). This is how Aubervilliers was described by a social survey carried out by *Espace et Sociétés* in 2006. The industrial belt of Aubervilliers, with a surface area of roughly 400 hectares, currently hosts 1,800 businesses.<sup>4</sup> Between the Boulevard Périphérique and the Stade de France, this sprawling industrial territory is dotted with the episodes of abandonment and dismantling that have taken place in the last twenty years. However, this fragmentation is not recent: the progressive *densification* of the plain during the eighteen-seventies, and the construction of several productive, primarily chemical plants, had already created a discontinuous and fragmented landscape without links or ties between the industrial buildings. Today this *fragmentation* has increased drastically due to the complex processes, economic contraction, and discontinuous uses that have modified industrial production.

## Forms, History, and Duration of the Dismantling

To understand the issues raised by Aubervilliers, we need to thrust aside the classic examples of abandoned or underused industrial sites illustrated in traditional urban planning imagery. To understand the signs left by abandonment and propose new design solutions, we need to abandon our melancholic approach and fascination for industrial ruins. Aubervilliers is much more than just a mass of industrial ruins: it is a *territory in crisis*, an ensemble of unconnected fragments. It is, first and foremost, an abandoned, degraded and unusable space; polluted and fragmented land corroded and sapped by underuse. The effects of the recent economic crisis reveal how instability is created by interrupting or suspending productive activities; not only do buildings stop producing, but firms die and the production cycle is disrupted. This slowly corrodes platforms and infrastructures.



1 Aubervilliers, Paris, 2014 © Giulia Setti



The temporal variable is the lens we choose to study the ongoing trends in the Aubervilliers area: forms, history, and duration are different, not consequential. First comes abandonment, places where dismantling has been severe and possible forms of conversion almost impossible; later on, obsolescent buildings and extensive decay prefigure forms of *permanent dismantling*. Their state of conservation makes new use unthinkable and fosters processes of rarefaction and demolition to free the ground. Often abandonment is surgical and interstitial. Or can be more complex. Buildings and factories linger next to these empty spaces: recently dismantled sites wait to be reused thanks to processes of *partial consolidation* in which selective demolition can be implemented together with recovery and conversion.

These modification and regeneration processes involve more or less radically transformed sites. Some buildings have been recovered and reused thanks to new entrepreneurs not previously present in this area. Elsewhere, there are cases of progressive rarefaction of actors, uses, interests, and processes. Industrial activities have been partially replaced by tertiary activities involving trade and storage of goods or scientific research activities—in other words, multiple uses requiring the construction of residential structures to encourage a return to certain forms of *mixité* in a territory with a long-standing, monofunctional matrix.

While several existing structures and buildings have been converted for new productive activities, other areas have been surgically earmarked for new residential or public housing settlements. These surgical inserts coexist with the area's industrial past. The Wholesale Market in Aubervilliers, for example, has been recovered and converted; several Chinese entrepreneurs now use the premises for other productive activities. New housing units, schools and public gardens are all part of these transformation processes.

In Aubervilliers, several solutions have been adopted to fill the empty spaces left by dismantling. Current interventions bear witness to the dynamic nature of the area and to the need to consolidate the surroundings by encouraging recovery processes and new projects after the demolition of abandoned structures. Demolition frees the ground compromised by dismantling; in particular, this land is an additional resource that can create new platforms for the ongoing changes in Aubervilliers.

Generally speaking, these niches and segments of different activities seem to be gradually increasing in number. The nature and quality of these processes are very different from the changes caused by previous periods of dismantling. For many years, “doing business” involved boosting productive capacity and structures trying to base spatial structures and company activities on the concept of dimensional growth. Aubervilliers is a perfect example: here, the big business model became the norm. Today there is a new *productive activity-space* relationship. Embryonic territorial platforms have sprung up in the sprawling productive areas in Aubervilliers; row upon row of different businesses, difficult to classify using the usual categories of small and big enterprises.

The season of dismantling described in the eighties has nothing more to teach us given that both dismantling and development have gone their separate ways. Production systems have evolved and with them the request for different, more flexible spaces merging different activities; heavy industry is replaced by businesses that produce commodities, services, and networks. This is the evolution in progress in Aubervilliers; it takes up the gauntlet thrown down by a territory trying to reshape the relationship between production, spaces, and existing activities.

The crisis has compromised traditional forms of industrial production and led to the disaggregation of platforms and buildings; nevertheless, the productive identity of these contexts continues, quite apart from the crises and processes of contraction. A different kind of production will dictate Aubervilliers' future. "New derelict industrial sites" (Lanzani 2013, 198)—made up of empty, underused, or abandoned warehouses and industrial buildings—represent the current ruins of industrial production. The crisis has changed the structure of capitalism; short supply chains and local networks have disintegrated and broken down, leading to different and currently more flexible and shared forms of production.



2 Aubervilliers, Paris, 2014 © Giulia Setti



**3** Aubervilliers, Paris, 2014 © Giulia Setti



4 Aubervilliers, Paris, 2014 © Giulia Setti



## New Platforms: Scenarios of Change

The *land* in Aubervilliers is a fragile platform, severely compromised by forms of heavy industry and by the incessant processes of abandonment. Dismantling affects the platforms and infrastructure networks that can ensure the continuous presence of productive activities. It is not only buildings that have to be recovered and reused, but the land itself: the land is not a surface but a stratification of necessary networks and services, during both transformation processes and new interventions. In Aubervilliers, renewal and remediation are decisive moments in the creation of new productive scenarios, because in order to guarantee several life cycles, the *land* needs to be properly *equipped* to accommodate energy networks, infrastructures, and services.

The land appears as the stratification and juxtaposition of several energetic, infrastructural, and technological requirements; it is a basic, fragile resource that needs to become permanent and stable. What emerges forcefully in Aubervilliers is the deep-rooted and essential *integration* between buildings and their *platform*; an industrial building cannot be considered an island unto itself, but as part of a complex system. Soil *thickness* is an issue affecting dismantled industrial contexts and relative recovery interventions; technological



and energy platforms are buried deep in these soil layers and become part of the ongoing recycling processes. The *fragility* of the soil involved in dismantling processes is another issue that still remains to be solved, as part of the ongoing processes of recycling and reuse; prolonging the lifecycle of decaying industrial buildings means considering soil duration as a decisive factor in the continuing transformation processes.

“Today, the condition of risks seems inevitable. Any territory is fraught with localized or global risks. Safe places and, consequently, places addressing the risks we do not want to share no longer seem to exist” (Giannotti and Viganò 2012, 11). Finally, no place is safe from environmental, economic, and social risks; likewise, all places are fragile. Consolidating and making fragile contexts safe ensures forms of urban continuity capable of mending the fractures produced by industry.

Aubervilliers is an interesting case study, because it shows how industrial fabrics can be recycled and transformed and yet maintain their productive nature. We can imagine scenarios of change in which *degrees of rarefaction* and *consolidation* merge and establish new ground for development. As outlined by Kevin Lynch and Michael Southworth (1990), rarefaction processes (necessary to eliminate unusable structures) are combined with consolidation and densification interventions envisaging new volumes and interventions on individual architectural objects. The decline and abandonment so commonplace in these industrial contexts can be viewed as one phase of a building’s lifecycle; this cycle can be overcome thanks to the transformation and recovery of existing structures. Finally, this raises questions about the upcoming new approach to industrial heritage that no longer involves mere conservation, but focuses on the new boundaries created by dismantling processes. A more uncertain approach is emerging vis-à-vis dismantled heritage—an approach ready to accept new perspectives vis-à-vis the fragments and minute spaces left by dismantling.

These very complex dismantling processes encourage us to envisage different kinds of interventions on the already compromised and polluted territory. Reuse processes have to deal with a very unstable situation: dismantling of uses and sites is accompanied by gradual *energy decadence* caused by deteriorated infrastructure networks, and this complicates reuse processes. As mentioned earlier, the building is considered part of the productive fabric; as a result, land is a key element in possible reuse processes. We need to create *equipped land* that can ensure the presence of an infrastructure network and services, and encourage interventions that will prompt incisive changes in these degraded fabrics. The industrial platform provided in Aubervilliers highlights the *interstitial substitutions* (implemented in unstable conditions) that try to tackle the gradual disintegration of the soil.

One of the most difficult problems involved reshaping the relationship between productive space and the city during these years of crisis. This case study is a remarkable workshop we can use to test the architectural project; it involves careful deliberation as regards the

complex, open ways energy topics have to be tackled, not only when linked to consumption and transition, but also when they can solve problems in several sectors (supply, but also reconstruction of the platforms and the redesign of sites). We need to change our design tools; we no longer have to design unitary figures, instead we have to work together to insert fragments and small units in dense, stratified platforms. We need to reshape the architectural project based on new uses, values, and rights that merge in these contexts and determine new spatial configurations.

We should also reflect on the broader meaning of the concept of platform and infrastructure, on the radical transformation of settlements associated with production and its mobility; carefully consider the opportunities created by these new conditions and meticulously rethink certain paradigms of modern design—first and foremost, the paradigms involving size and duration.

## Notes

- 1 In particular, “L’architettura del piano,” *Casabella*, 487–488 (1983) and “I territori abbandonati,” *Rassegna*, 42 (1990). The history of the problem of dismantled areas in Italy—including their limits and possible potential—is discussed at length in literature, see Bianchetti (1985) and Dansero (1993). The debate on this issue is also extensively reported in French literature, see Association Renaissance des cités d’Europe (2002), Boucher-Hedenström (1994), and Daumas (1980). The extent and history of the dismantling process in France is also tackled in Bianchetti (1988). Finally, as regards the processes of modification currently underway in France, see the magazine *L’archéologie industrielle en France*, which provides extensive documentation regarding the evolution of the processes of dismantling and transformation of industrial fabrics.
- 2 Aubervilliers is located north of Paris in the Senna Saint Denis department, commonly known as Plaine Commune; the territory described in the research covers an area of approximately 400 hectares, stretching from the Boulevard Périphérique to the Stade de France. The study focusing on Aubervilliers is part of on-site research performed from October 2012 to March 2013 as part of the doctoral dissertation at the Politecnico di Milano. Doctoral degree in Architectural and Urban Design, XXVI cycle, title of the dissertation: “Oltre la dismissione. Strategie di intervento architettonico per la modificazione e il consolidamento di trame, tessuti e manufatti industriali.” Tutor, Prof. Ilaria Valente; Co-tutor, Prof. Cristina Bianchetti.
- 3 Translation by the author. The original text: “Après avoir été durant trente ans la plus grande zone industrielle d’Europe, se voyait en devenir la plus grande friche industrielles avec la crise des années 1970.”
- 4 The figures concerning the number of businesses currently present in Aubervilliers (January 2015) were taken from the website: <http://www.aubervilliers.fr/rubrique110.html>. The number of businesses in the whole Plaine Commune in the first half of 2014 was 21,482; see *Le bilan de l’immobilier d’entreprise*, premier semestre 2014 [http://eco.plainecommune.fr/uploads/media/immo\\_entreprise\\_1er-semestre\\_2014.pdf](http://eco.plainecommune.fr/uploads/media/immo_entreprise_1er-semestre_2014.pdf).

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