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^{*)}This is an interview. It has not undergone the same review-process as the scientific papers.
Photo on the front cover: Shelley Smith. *Relief – plaster and pigment*, Shelley Smith.

TRANSFORMATIVE ACTS THROUGH A CONTEMPORARY LENS – DEVELOPING AND EXPLORING DESIGN METHODS

SHELLEY SMITH AND VICTOR ANDRADE

It is evident that we should think of an environmental image that is both spatial and temporal, just as we must design settings in which the distribution of qualities in both time and space are considered (Lynch, 1976).

Abstract

Within the framework of contemporary urban transformation, work with obsolete industrial sites has intensified, identifying densification and retrofitting as strategies, and the compact living city as a goal (Busquets, 2007). In this situation, *the site* provides a present, physical location for future projects with a set of pre-established givens. Although problems relating to the transformation and densification of urban areas may have some common denominators, post-industrial sites describe a particular situation regarding contemporary interpretation and re-use. These sites are anomalies in their contemporary contexts and site specificity is a decisive factor with this type of urban transformation, raising questions of the spatial and temporal capacities of these sites. Furthermore, methods for dealing with the re-use of post-industrial sites meet with a number of challenges. Among them, and of specific interest here are the following two: 1) the temporal placement of these sites through their history versus the potential for their continued existence in changed contexts; and 2) the physical presence of these sites through their size and materiality versus the perception of their scale and obsolescence. These factors and points from which to view post-industrial areas bring time, space, perception and aesthetic considerations to the forefront of understanding and transforming these sites. Consequently, they become key in developing methods that can lead to transformative acts.

Keywords:

Urban transformation, post-industrial sites, retrofit, contemporaneity, phenomenology, atmosphere, aesthetics, the sublime, design method

This paper explores the specific spatial and temporal features of post-industrial sites as a generator for developing methods to uncover and emphasise the intrinsic potential of these sites. This will be exemplified through the specific case of a laboratory conducted within the framework of a 2nd semester Masters Students' project undertaking transformative acts on the site of the Battersea Power Station in London.

1 Post-industrial landscapes and obsolete sites

The shift from an industrially based economy to a service based economy has manifested itself in a number of ways in the physical form of the city. Vast tracts of land and large built structures – once key in the development of industrially oriented cities and often planned on the outskirts – have in the process of urbanisation become part of the city. Often concurrently with this, they have become functionally left behind: made redundant, deserted and left to decay, now within the confines of the city. Urban development strategies in the 20th century emphasized growth resulting in a dispersed urban form that now struggles with making its spaces both liveable and sustainable. However, if contemporary urban development strives to be based on the creation of sustainable compact and liveable cities, suitable methods for both recognizing and optimising the potential in the existing urban material need to be activated and utilised. How to incorporate the leftovers from an industrially based era in contemporary urban development both methodologically and physically creates a critical problem for contemporary urban designers to address.

Although these obsolete sites are challenging, they are also intriguing, presenting the ability to go on a treasure hunt for potential and requiring a new lens for viewing. Professor Joan Busquets, key architect in the redevelopment of Barcelona, addressed this in his book *CITIES X LINES* from 2007. He framed the role of the contemporary architect/urban designer in the built environment, and outlined possible strategies – methods – that could be undertaken upon encountering different contemporary urban projects and contexts:

We are seeing the development of an emerging urbanistic culture, with emphasis on new problems for the city and the territory, that does not respond to the 20th century model, which apparently accepted a biunivocal relation between urbanization and industrialization and ultimately established relatively precise limits between the disciplines that intervene in the construction of the territory: planning, urban design, landscape, etc. Today new economic processes are appearing and calling for the definition of other concepts and the discussion of new strategies of intervention (Busquets, 2007, p.9).

Busquets emphasises the necessity to develop a stronger urban culture, one that is more attuned to the post-industrial condition and acknowledges its inherent potential for unprecedented forms of urbanity. Busquets calls this the *urbanistic project* (2007).

Professor Gilles Clément, landscape architect of among other projects, the André Citroen Park uses the term *Third Landscape* to designate e.g. post-industrial sites. “Included in this category are left behind (délaisé) urban or rural sites, transitional spaces, neglected land (friches), swamps,

moors, peat bogs, but also roadsides, shores, railroad embankments, etc.” (Clément, 2008). For Clément, these spaces provide the site for an overtaking by nature, “... the sum of the space left over by man to landscape evolution – to nature alone” (Clément, 2008). For him the possibility for transformation that can occur on these sites is provided by their lack of definition – a kind of obscurity that affords change, allows the process of nature to step in and assume control. The potential Clément sees is directly related to the “pair of glasses” he dons as a landscape professional, however. This too is related to the obscurity of these kinds of sites and the potential that lies therein.

For both Busquets and Clément, new types of urban space exist that are obscure and challenging, requiring new ways of seeing and new methods for involvement and transformation. “The qualities of these methods lie in their increased capacity to understand the realities of the working context, but we should not overlook the personal and subjective component of the proposal associated with the aesthetic and cultural value mentioned above” (Busquets, 2007, p.13).

Obsolete sites are complex fragments of urban fabric that both repel and attract. On the one hand, they have garnered neglect and fallen into disrepair over time, are seen as uninviting, obsolete and/or as shadows. On the other hand, they are imbued with historical and/or symbolic value, seen as possessing unique aesthetic qualities, and in the best-case scenario, can inspire the imagination of the contemporary city. Time passed and passing is an important aspect of these sites and key in the understanding of them, but perhaps also something that can be operationalised in the working with them.

2 The contemporary lens

These thoughts about how our environment represents or might represent the past, the present, and the future can be brought into better order if we look at how our bodies and our minds experience time – how time is built into us and yet also how we ourselves have created it (Lynch, 1976, p.117).

Obsolete industrial sites are in a sense “out of time”. Often apparent through the pressing character of their decay, it is perhaps most poignantly observed in their incongruity with their surroundings. They are “post” – after – falling outside of the present in which they now find themselves; their functions no longer current, their time past. With an eye to urban transformation, these sites are viewed from the perch of the present, addressing them as objects for renewal from a distanced vantage point considering both space and time. In particular, the physical structures of these sites are often in focus; however, the temporal

placement warrants as much consideration as the spatial. So, from the vantage point of the present, the notion of contemporariness can be activated and brought into the discussion of site methods as a lens through which to view these sites. These are sites in which incongruity and their presence as anomalies in a contemporary context raises questions of how to work with them and how we can see and realize their potential. The potential found in post-industrial sites occurs not in spite of incongruity, but because of it.

Contemporariness presupposes a relationship we in the present have with the past – a distinction made between the two that effectively breaks time into pieces. Time is thereby not in a constant flow, but instead is a compilation of disruptions and breaks. Lynch (1976, p.120) states that “time is discontinuous and linked with particular events” and it is perhaps this linking with events – an experiential component – that in part makes contemporariness relational. “In time”, in the foreground, the breaks are not seen. It is first with distance that they become apparent, giving way to an awareness of where things don’t fit, where the clashes are found. The intention is not to meld seamlessly these pieces but rather to find methods for transformation that can take clues from the “misfits” of time and space, and make use of this effectively as method.

Figure 1
Battersea Power Station and surroundings. Disruptions in time and space.

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MAI-LINH DOAN

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FILE:LONDON_FROM_ABOVE_MLD_051002_001.JPG



The distanced view allows for observance of the site as object, for a kind of “mapping event” such as Corner (1999a) describes with the notions of *extracts* and *deterritorialisation*. When Corner distinguishes between mapping and tracing, tracing being the registrational inventory of existing elements while mapping is a creative act aimed at finding potential and generating form, one that “unfolds” over time, he also makes a distinction in the “use” of time. Viewing time as an extractable piece from the site development puzzle can open up for its inclusion as a methodological active.

Extracts are the things that are observed within a given milieu and drawn into the graphic field. We call them extracts because they are always selected, isolated and pulled out from their original seamlessness with other things; they are effectively ‘de-territorialized’. They include objects but also other information: quantities, velocities, forces, trajectories. Once detached they may be studied, manipulated and networked with other figures in the field (Corner, 1999a).

In their incongruity with their contemporary contexts, post-industrial sites can already be seen as having been extracted and deterritorialised, but perhaps without the examination. Examination of these sites and their subsequent manipulation and the potential for their (re)insertion into the context they already are a physical part of is an act of transformation that touches these sites both physically and temporally. The methods utilised then to view and work with the misfit of existing built objects in contemporary settings needs also to accept the temporal and the “con-temporal” as both a condition, and a vehicle for change.

In his essay “*What is the Contemporary?*” (2009) the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben also considers temporal proximity and positioning as a relational component. “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism” (Agamben, 2009, p.41).

Agamben maintains that “the present” is a kind of darkness – that seeing the contemporary is not seeing clearly as seeing (the) light – but rather seeing obscurity. He references neurophysiology which indicates that when light is not present, we perceive darkness through the activation of peripheral cells, i.e., that darkness is a particular *type* of vision and that seeing it is as much an activity as seeing light (Agamben, 2009, p.44). For Agamben, activating the ability to see this obscurity is the very essence of the contemporary. Further, the contemporary not only refers to the temporal position, but also to the relationship between the subject as *the contemporary*, and the objects being perceived.

The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present (Agamben, 2009, p.44).

Agamben uses the poet as the vehicle for extrapolating his ideas. The poet writes using “the obscurity of the present” (2009, p.44) as the creative font. But could not the poet also be the architect, the designer, another creator using “the obscurity of the present” as a way to (re)write a site, to “cite history”, to transform? The creative act is important here, and in a sense, is akin to James Corner’s (1999a) notion of the creative act of mapping as opposed to tracing. Returning to Agamben, the notion of taking action also comes into play. From the perch of the present – the contemporary has the vantage point of distance and the creative gift of obscurity. These allow for a transformative act that directly affects the contemporary.

This means that the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who dividing and interpolating time is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to ‘cite it’ according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond (Agamben, 2009, p.53).

3 Responding – Two short transformative stories

Following are 2 exemplifications that aim to explore successful experiences of transforming obsolete sites through a contemporary lens. By working with the notion of contemporariness, the results have the quality of the unexpected. Moreover, they bring a poetic sense to their reshaping of the energy of landscapes seen as ugly and unwanted. The French dancer and philosopher Maurice Béjart writes in the preface of the book *Danser sa Vie* by the philosopher Roger Garaudy “...what if, instead of just building our lives, we had the madness or wisdom to dance it?” (Béjart, 1973). Bringing this question into the urban design context highlights the critical choice available between keeping the status quo or searching for a new way such as the contemporary lens as a way to read and act in the city. The two projects presented here are SESC Pompéia (Lina Bo Bardi, architect) and Tate Modern (Herzog & De Meuron architects). These projects deal in a very sensitive manner with the time and the aesthetics of the site: its past and present; its potential role having a contemporary vision of what a city can be; what urbanity is; and how this can be evoked dealing with what was once considered ugly and dark.

In that context, an answer Rem Koolhaas (2006) gave in an interview can be taken into consideration. When asked about beauty he said, “...Very conventionally, the Pantheon in Rome, for example. Isn’t it remarkable? Talk about beauty and you get boring answers, but talk about ugliness and things get interesting”.

3.1 An abandoned drum factory: SESC Pompéia

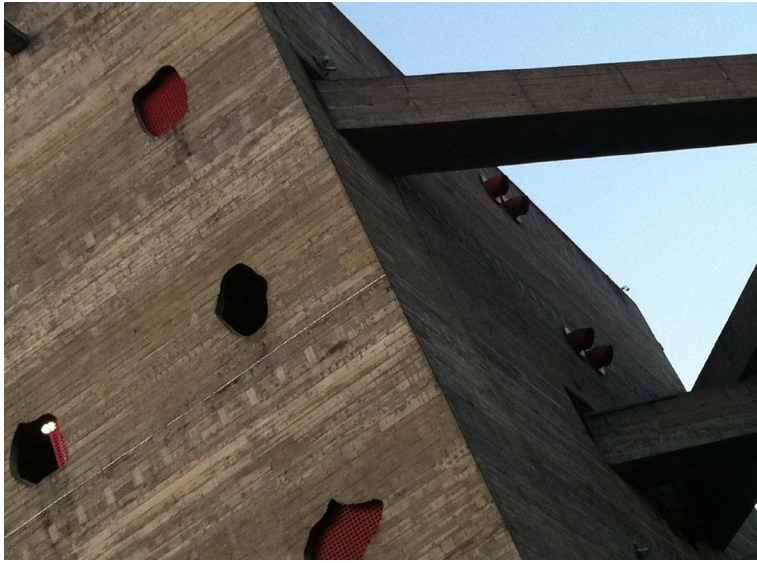
Transgression is a domain beyond accepted boundaries and it can often be interpreted as a contemporary act. In 1982, São Paulo got a new landmark, SESC Pompéia, on a redundant site located in an Italian immigrant community. Designed by Lina Bo Bardi, this project upgraded an abandoned drum factory and converted it into a multi-purpose building.

Having the concept of incompleteness as a major inspiration, Bo Bardi designed a project to make ready for a collaborative occupancy in recognition that the user’s experiences construct the architecture as much as the architect herself. Pompéia became a reference for how to redevelop redundant areas in the core of the city and an inspiration for projects such as the Tate Modern by Herzog & De Meuron.

At the end of 20 years of Brazilian dictatorship, Lina Bo Bardi brought contemporaneity – combining unexpectedness, improbability and refreshment – to Brazilian architecture. Architect Marcelo Ferraz (2012), partner in Brasil Arquitetura, described SESC Pompéia as “...Strange? Ugly? Out of scale? Brutal, but also delicate? It was certainly something that seemed beyond the possible universe, unattainable by the hands of contemporary architects. It was a bomb, a shock.”

Moreover, SESC Pompéia was generous with the city, it enhanced São Paulo’s urbanity. Lina Bo Bardi designed a permeable block, compressing several cultural, educational and sports activities, and creating spaces with the inherent quality of public domain.

Regarding the design process of SESC Pompéia and its result Ferraz says, “This experience holds a key for those who want to reflect on the role of architecture in human life: a key that is contemporary, active, and within reach. It is an architectural experience that combines creativity with great rigour, freedom with responsibility, richness with conciseness and an economy of means, poetry with ethics” (Ferraz, 2012).



Figures 2 and 3
SESC Pompéia. Materiality and the
distanced view.

PHOTO: VICTOR ANDRADE

3.2 A decommissioned power station: Tate Modern

During the 1980s London's South Bank was an unwanted fragment of the city characterized by a grey landscape mainly composed of redundant sites inherited from a glorious industrial past. This was the context of the Bankside Power Station, which was decommissioned in 1981. Several architectural firms submitted proposals for a new museum on its site in a 1994 competition. Among the six finalists, five planned to demolish much of the power plant. Herzog & de Meuron was the only firm that suggested reusing the large expanses of the power plant itself.

According to scholar Caroline Donnellan (2013), the main commendation of the project proposal was that:

...Herzog and de Meuron proposed the least dramatic changes to the appearance of Bankside and, rather than hide or eliminate the qualities of the building, they enhanced and worked creatively with them. The architect's design was praised for being simple, flexible and robust, as well as for its initiative in using the building to its maximum advantage. Herzog and de Meuron's proposal for the Turbine Hall also received unanimous support, which transformed it into a large, open space, which emphasized its monumental proportions.

Figure 4
Tate Modern. The turbine hall of the Bankside Power Station, a space of space.
PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH



The Tate Modern opened in May, 2000. Despite the fact that first-year attendance was upwards of four million, there were many critiques regarding the architectural proposal of Herzog & De Meuron. Schoenberg (2004) said that critics described the museum ranging from “a fraud” housed in a building that “is ugly and intimidating” to a “brilliant realization of current thought about how people use museums and how art is best viewed” housed in a “secular cathedral devoted to the worship of art”.

Herzog & De Meuron used the contemporary lens in the alterations they proposed. Instead of just demolishing the old station, they activated and maximized “the ugliness” and unwanted energy, shaping it in unexpected manners. The massive Turbine Hall was left intact and became a dramatic entrance for the Tate Modern. A powerful space that boasts flexibility in its immense frame and that continues to both dwarf human size and celebrate human spirit. The industrial aesthetics of the building have been an inspiration in all design dealing with post-industrial sites in contemporary settings. Describing the project, Herzog & De Meuron (Moore and Ryan, 2000) said “...our strategy was to accept the physical power of Bankside’s massive mountain-like brick building and to even enhance it rather than breaking it or trying to diminish it”.

The “responses” of both cases mentioned above, the SESC Pompéia and the Tate Modern, despite their differing geographical and cultural situations, share a common theme: the extraction of a post-industrial object from its contemporary context – a context in which it had become obsolete and its successful reinsertion into this very same context by emphasising “time”. Here “time” expressed through monumentality and scale directs a focus to the sublime qualities of the sites.

3.3 The aesthetic experience of post-industrial sites

As noted earlier, for Agamben (2009) the notion of transformation – of reading and writing, of citing history – is the key in his argument leading him from the creative font of obscurity to the necessity of response. This places the onus on the transformer – to both respond and to act – as the examples above indicate. The response itself can take the form of a creative transformative act, but what Agamben describes as not being able to *not* respond, the response can also be transcribed to the emotive responses post-industrial sites evoke and which both of the exemplified projects have exploited. The responses generated by post-industrial sites fall into a specific category based on their temporality, but decidedly also because of their spatiality and materiality. These sites share some factors in a general sense that are key in the experiencing of them as seen in the examples transcending the borders of geography and culture.

The relational aspect of size – that of scale – is a consideration and a challenge in the transformation of these sites. The locus of machines and

industrial processes forms a part of the essence of these sites and is often a source of their fascination experientially. Therefore, the aesthetic significance of these sites is in direct relation to their obsolescence, disuse and abandonment. The need to respond is in part facilitated by the gulf between past and present. It is facilitated as well as by the contrast between disuse and an absolute, overpowering presence as is the case with the scale and extreme materiality of post-industrial sites. Being confronted by the size of the spaces and the existing reality of unused material at this magnitude, the ensuing need to respond is one related to potential re-use in the face of obsolescence. This activates questions of *what, how* and *if possible* posed by the contemporary encountering post-industrial sites. The ensuing need for a response is based on the aesthetic experiences these sites afford. On the one hand, there is the issue of their sheer size: the amount of area they command/have commanded and the extent of their materiality. On the other hand, there is the experiential response generated by these conditions. This can be linked to aesthetic theories of the sublime (Kant, 1790). The sublime is an aesthetic category, not an opposition to beauty but one that engages the faculties in a different way than beauty does.

The sublime overwhelms our senses. In particular, the mathematical sublime as defined by Kant, through magnitude and sheer size, is applicable in the aesthetic experience of post-industrial sites. The sublime is subjective and involves a relation between the subject and object. In the case of the sublime, despite the emotions that are evoked, our reason allows us to rationalise, imagine, overcome and “understand”, also described as the principle of “disinterest” (Kant, 1790), indicating a distance *that* allows us to comprehend. Our relationship to the object evoking a reaction in us that can be categorized as sublime is comprised of both apprehension and comprehension. Our initial response is not actually being able to respond: a confoundedness that arises from an inability to comprehend a totality. We attempt comprehension by apprehending – grasping – the parts in order to make sense of, to comprehend, the whole.

However, “the totality” is not just based on the physical spaces and material of these sites. Our comprehension and perception of these sites – the aesthetic experience of them – is also formed by the unique atmospheres they possess and exude. The German philosopher, Gernot Böhme (1993; 1998; 2005) describes *atmosphere* as “an in between concept” (Böhme, 1998). This concept redefines the relationship between subject and object – as well as between object and object – and the concept is also concerned with what takes place *between* subjects and objects. The subject in the context of Böhme’s concept of atmosphere is a sensing body: the senses of the entire body are activated; the mode of experiencing is not only visual. Further, the object is not an inanimate and dead component, but rather *in ecstase*, exuding a force that has both an effect on the subject, and on other objects with which it enters into constella-

tions with. Böhme's atmosphere is a dynamic concept that operates on a mutual effect between subject and object. In the case of post-industrial sites the atmosphere present is a product of both the spatial and the temporal aspects of these sites. This brings in the possibility of accessing the site-specific atmosphere present. It too can be extracted and examined, responded to and enhanced, reused, reaffirmed in new ways.

But how can this become a method? How can the unique atmosphere and aesthetic experience of obsolete post-industrial sites – their obscurity and seeming refusal to be comprehended as totalities, and their incongruity with their time and setting – be accessed and made operational as a form of inquiry?

4 Urban transformation laboratory – the case of Battersea Power Station

4.1 Description of the framework and methodological considerations

There are essentially two possibilities. One is to be, shall we say, an average architect and do the same thing everywhere. The other is to let yourself be inspired and even changed by the unique qualities of the place where you're building (Koolhaas, 2006).

In conjunction with 2nd semester Masters Students in Urban Design at Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Aalborg University, we took the latter possibility that Koolhaas names as our point of departure, e.g., that of allowing inspiration to come via the site. The laboratory worked with the Battersea Power Station as a post-industrial site of transformation, and of inspiration. This site with its iconic building has laid functionally dormant as a power station, and been abandoned for decades. However, in its contemporary situation it has had another kind of power, one that has attracted filmmakers, musicians and photographers (Baptist, 2013). The emotional responses this site has generated are on a sensory, experiential level and one that opens methodological possibilities for not only exploring its “power”, but also working with its transformation.

The project for urban transformation of this site raised questions not only of *what* kind of spaces were to be designed, the quality and liveability of complex urban areas, but also *how* and *when* these spaces were being designed. In this sense, the notion of the contemporary – the ability to perceive the obscurity of the present, i.e., addressing the discontinuities, ruptures and disjunctions of time, and addressing the incongruity of this specific site as a potential – became the backdrop for a methodological approach.

It was the belief that the site itself may hold the key to transformation and that through the development of a method that could activate site-specificity and diminish a proclivity to predetermination, both regarding the approach and the result, we could explore the link between site and design. The approach was broken into pieces – as time (Lynch, 1976; Agamben, 2009) – activating and exaggerating the notion of disrupts and discontinuities. The method encouraged an openness to discover and make manifest the potential for the site to be a design parameter and an active force by reorganising the steps in the design process. This reorganisation inserted “surprises” into the process of getting to know and develop the site that lead to unexpected observations and that challenged preconception and predetermination.

4.2 Battersea – the past that was: a description of the site

Battersea Power Station was designed in the late 1920s by Sir Giles Scott and Theo Halliday. At the time, the project created a storm of protest due to the location of the power station for reasons of the potential pollution it could generate. However, prior to the Industrial Revolution, the site was an agricultural site on the outskirts of developed London growing lavender, asparagus and pigs. From the late 18th century, the site and the area around it was characterised by industry. Battersea Power Station was built in several phases between 1930 and 1955 when the fourth and final chimney was completed. Scott – designer of the Bankside Power Plant, now the Tate Modern, and the famous red telephone booth – was hired on to bring his design aptitude to this huge project, “to create this first of a new generation of ‘superstations’” (BPSCG, 2011). Despite the initial protests, in a survey conducted by Architecture Magazine in during WWII, Battersea was named as the 2nd most popular building in Britain (BPS Estates, 2015)



Figure 5
Battersea Power Station viewed from
Chelsea.

PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH

The Battersea Power Station is the largest brick building in Europe measuring 160 m x 170 m, with the highest boiler house roof at 50 m and the chimneys at 103 m in height (BPS Estates, 2015). Battersea is in fact comprised of two power stations, Battersea “A” and Battersea “B”, which were united upon completion of the mirror image B section in 1955.

But Battersea Power Station was – and is – so much more besides. Gilbert Scott lifted it from the prosaic into the sublime by incorporating lavish touches such as the building’s majestic bronze doors and impressive wrought-iron staircase leading to the art deco control room... Down in the turbine hall below, meanwhile, the station’s giant walls of polished marble would later prompt observers to liken the building to a Greek temple devoted to energy (BPS Estates, 2015).

The power station is an example in many ways typical to post-industrial sites. In the case of Battersea however, given its iconographical status, its size and its aesthetic and atmosphere, it already is in possession of a certain, albeit obscure, quality that is in part at least contingent on the state it is in. Following its complete decommission in 1983, it lay in disuse – and ultimately disrepair – for decades despite a Grade II listing from 1980. In 2007, this was updated to a Grade II * rating and Battersea now features on English Heritage’s *Heritage At Risk* register (Historic England, 2006).

Already from 1984, one year after its closing, competitions were launched for the re-use of the power station and its surroundings initially as an entertainment centre, later as leisure centre, following that as the home stadium for Chelsea’s football team – the list goes on. However, the common thread has been a lack of success at either getting projects funded, and/or getting them adequately managed, and all the while, Battersea

has further deteriorated. Although the proposed “end result” of Battersea is somewhat outside of the framework of this paper, plans based on a masterplan by Rafael Viñoly will now see the power station refitted as a commercial and residential building that is the “centrepiece” in development of the area around it.

Although the multitude of failed proposals attest to an elusive long-term insertion of this site into its contemporary physical context, this particular monument of industry seems to have been inserted into a contemporary mental consciousness with some notoriety. It was placed most firmly in the consciousness of Londoners, and people all over the world, by its famous usage on Pink Floyd's album cover for *Animals* in 1977. In the cover image, there was an inflated pink pig which was floated above the structure – perhaps referencing its pre-industrial heritage, but surely referencing the figure of speech, “when pigs fly” indicating an impossibility. Battersea had become a star. And it continued to make appearances in music videos, films and fashion photo shoots in which not least of all, monumentality combined with a ruinous condition have made for a contrasting backdrop to the detail of human dilemma, delight and decadence. Despite its star status though, “when pigs fly” has become an interesting footnote to the difficulties encountered in developing Battersea.



Figure 6
When pigs fly. Battersea Power Station on Pink Floyd's *Animals* album cover, 1977.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, PHOTO: BRETT JORDAN
ALBUM COVER CONCEPTION: ROGER WATERS, DESIGN:
STORM THORGESEN

Battersea's placement along the Thames and its relative size and monumentality, have made it a landmark in London and a readily recognizable part of the skyline. The building is often referred to as an upturned table, in reference to the image the four chimneys convey as legs of a table. This is indicative of the occurrence of a curious scale shift that is emphasised by the perspective from, and gaze through, which the site is seen. A landmark, a symbol of industry, a recognizable feature on the London skyline – these are all removed views – views from a distance that allow an overview. However, experienced up close, Battersea overwhelms, through its size and through the jolting contrast between the place it holds in our consciousness and the reality of its decay. Comprehension is only possible at a distance – as an historic overview – or seeing the upturned table. With contact, the object confounds the subject.

5 Comprehending Battersea

The Masters Students' project took its point of departure in the redevelopment of the Battersea Power Plant and its surroundings – a project that accepted the challenges of a post-industrial site in a contemporary situation.



Figure 7
Battersea Power Station and Battersea
Bridge viewed from Chelsea.

PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH

5.1 Description of the methodology

The Problem-Based Learning model practiced at Aalborg University highly prioritises work as a team, so the project was developed by groups of 3 to 5 students. The phases of the design process were regarded as dynamic and interchangeable, and the method applied in the project questioned the stasis that seems to have developed in the ways in which we approach the registration of sites as contextual realities.

The method accepted “the design process” as a series of phases but focused on the in-between of the phases as a reflexive potential for looping back into the process before continuing on. In addition, it sought to exploit the “nature” of post-industrial sites by not only legitimising, but in fact emphasising the use of subjective tools of haptic and aesthetic experience in the process of analysis and through this activating the notion of contemporaneity and the contemporary gaze. For example, the method encouraged dimensional understanding of the site, to later bring this into question through aesthetic experience. By separating these and actively setting them up “against” each other, one of the specific aspects of post-industrial sites was brought to the forefront, namely the dimensional and experiential difference between size and scale. Here we have built upon the use of the concept of the sublime as a way of understanding large-scale industrial and post-industrial sites and how they affect us (Koefoed, 2009). This with an intent to activate the sublime (Kant, 1790) as a methodological apparatus to frame aesthetic experience as a key in transformation.

The use of Battersea Power Station as a particular case was employed in Emilie Koefoed’s thesis (2009), which utilised the sublime as an interpretative tool, and more particularly the technical sublime – a contemporary focusing of the sublime to include functional objects related to industrial invention – in an examination of the specific case of Battersea:

...drawing on theory about the sublime and more specifically on the technological sublime, I will delve into the emotional and sensual response to the evocative landscape of Battersea Power Station. I thus want to explore the direct aesthetic effect of this industrial landscape on the contemporary, urban onlooker (Koefoed, 2013, p.5).

Koefoed’s (2013, p.0) exploration of “the ambiguous reactions to the contemporary post-industrial landscape” is akin to the obscurity Agamben (2009) has assigned the contemporary position. An intent of the thesis to “point to the potential of industrial ruins to provoke critical thought” must be seen as the intended result. Reflection should be an integral part of all design processes. The methodology utilised in conjunction with this laboratory intended to further develop and hone this by working with “the loop”: a device that could be extracted and inserted and that provided the opportunity for comparative amalgamations between objective analysis and subjective experience.

5.2 Loops

Loop:

1. *a portion of a cord, ribbon, etc., folded or doubled upon itself so as to leave an opening between the parts.*
2. *anything shaped more or less like a loop, as a line drawn on paper, a part of a letter, a part of a path, or a line of motion.*
3. *a curved piece or a ring of metal, wood, or the like, used for the insertion of something, as a handle, etc.*

Origin:

1300–50; Middle English loupe window; compare Middle Dutch lūpen, peep, peer (Dictionary.com, 1996b).

The method in this laboratory consisted of 6 loops that started with the initial meeting with the site in a specific way and concluded with a design proposal for the Battersea Power Station and its surrounding context. Following is an illustrated description of the loops in this lab. Each loop contained a place of execution and an activity. The loops were conceptualised as both individual “time pieces” and as parts of an overall progressive action in a complex problematisation.

5.2.1 Loop 1 – Remote – Access

The area of the project site was defined and the registration of the site from a remote and distanced position ensued. This loop encouraged the development of ideas about the size of the site based on remote access, i.e. the activation of historical information and cartographic documents of the specific site of Battersea Power Station and its surrounding area. In this phase, several pieces of information were gained: e.g., the history of the site, political decisions about the site, cultural positions regarding the site and its reception, typographical studies, infrastructure, relational studies of the power station and its immediate context.

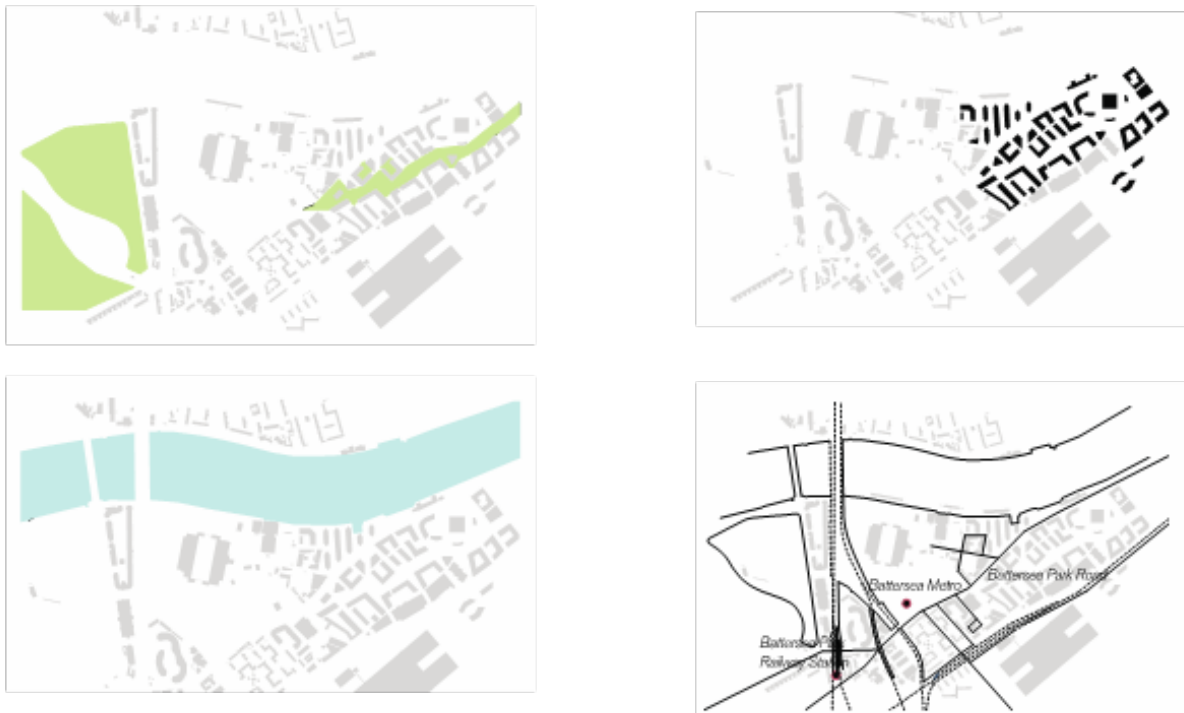


Figure 8
Remote access.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF MATIAS VITTRUP
JAKOBSEN

Implicit, however perhaps not entirely conscious as it turned out, an idea of Battersea based on its dimensions and this portrayed in typographical studies was made, although this was later challenged as it became clear that perceived dimensions at a distance are a rather different matter than the “relationality” of experienced scale and atmosphere.

5.2.2 Loop 2 – Literal – Vision

Based on the remote access and registration of the site, words were utilised as tools for developing a vision of the site. This was achieved by a short descriptive phrase that was forward-looking in character and that sought to encapsulate the “hopes and dreams” for the development of this area. Here the change of medium from the cartographic and drawn to the linguistic and written sought to zoom in on an essence of intent.

5.2.3 Loop 3 – In Space – [Re]Vision

This loop took the form of a workshop that “touched the site” – still remotely, but with a hands-on intention to actually feel it and understand its potential and limitations using densification as a transformation strategy. The workshop utilised a base model of the site at 1:500.

Three inter-dependent exercises were introduced that used external parameters to develop a potential strategy based alone on spatial constellations made with a scalable entity: a 30 x 30 x 30 m cube which roughly translated to a height of 5 stories. The starting point was 1023 cubes which equalled 920,700 m².



Exercise 1 – *Max Density* – instructed the students to use all cubes and develop several iterations. An extreme number that challenged spatiality, site borders, existing structures and the ability to make a strategy.

Exercise 2 – *Max Minus* – instructed the students to reduce the number of cubes they were working with by 25% and then, again through several iterations, to develop a strategy.

Exercise 3 – *Mad Max* – developed at proposal that made decisions based on density along with design intention that revisited the vision: a [re] vision based on an assumed dimensional understanding.

The intention of the workshop was to develop the student's skills in moving from strategy and overall concepts to a design orientated focus that worked with urban architecture and conceptual design. The main goal was to produce a conceptual design catalogue for the Battersea site that investigated potential strategies through urban transformation prototype designs.

5.2.4 Loop 4 – *On Site – Immersion – Confrontation*

When possible, urban transformation projects include site visits and they are most often placed at the onset of the project. In the Battersea project, the developed methodology utilised a site visit as a study trip

Figure 9
Touching the site. Workshop developed at Utzon Centre (AAU).

PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH

which was scheduled well after the initial “meeting” of the site. i.e., the remote access and workshop. The Loops 1–3 had already begun to develop ideas and perceptions of the site, and the placement of study trip sought to challenge this. Most specifically, the site immersion directly questioned the initial imagined “perceptions” by *actual* on-site sensorial perceptions that brought to the forefront the overwhelming scale of these types of sites.



Figures 10 and 11
Bricks in the wall. Photographs taken
at the site where textures, colours and
disruptions on the landscape were
explored.

PHOTO: MATIAS VITTRUP JAKOBSEN, SHELLEY SMITH









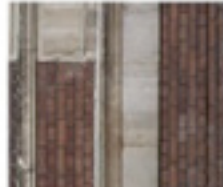
	CHELSEA	PIMLICO	NINE ELMS	BATTERSEA	CHELSEA BRIDGE WHARF	WANDSWORTH
A B O U T	The Chelsea area is one of the more exclusive parts of London with its rich history and bohemian atmosphere. The typology patterns are mostly defined by new mansion houses, with red bricks and light ornamentation of the facades.	Pimlico is a large scale residential area where the streetfront is defined by modernistic high rise blocks of flats, built in the early 1950s. The public spaces created between the housing blocks are large, green areas for children and the local inhabitants.	The current Nine Elms condition is characterized by an unstructured mix of housing and office typologies. But with the arrival of the before mentioned Embassy gardens, the district will have a more green character.	Located south of the site, the district is formed by mostly housing blocks and social housing. The area is more neglected in comparison to the other neighborhoods, by the quality of the pavement, buildings and also public areas.	This post-modernistic 1970s high rise development is a rather prominent feature on the riverfront. Its wide glass and steel construction distinguishes it from the surrounding housing areas. The people living here have their own private backyards and shopping stores at the ground level.	The Wandsworth area is an expansive terraced housing district. Its close proximity to Battersea Park and the river makes it an attractive neighborhood with similarities in atmosphere and community to the Chelsea district.
T Y P O L O G Y						
I D E N T I T Y						
M A T E R I A L						

Figure 12
Site registration. Typologies as material realities.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF MATIAS VITTRUP
JAKOBSEN

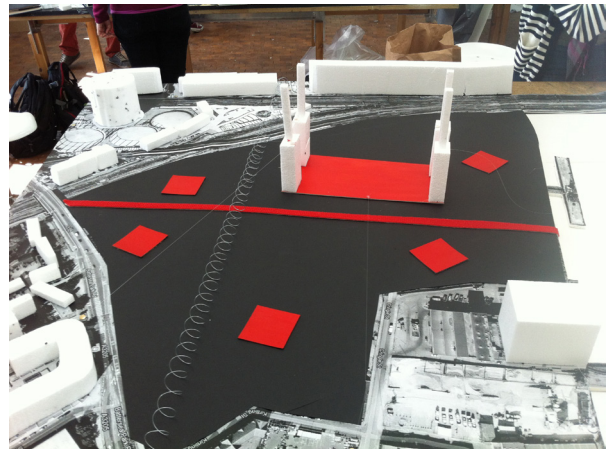
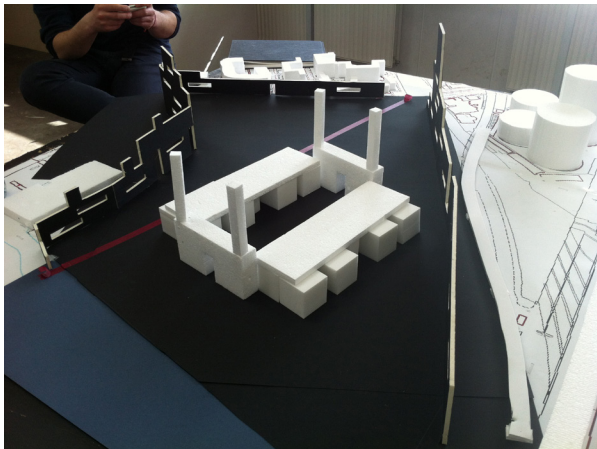
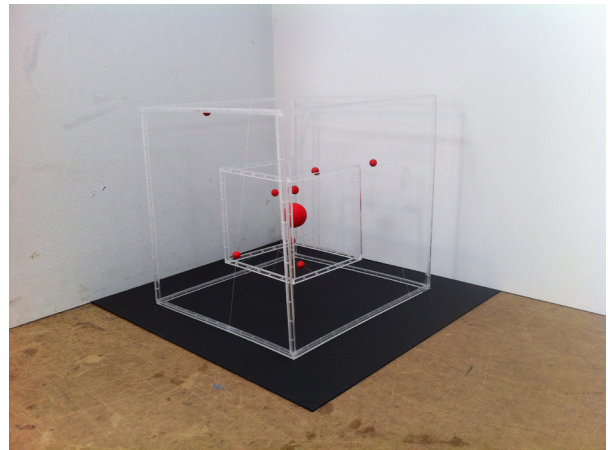
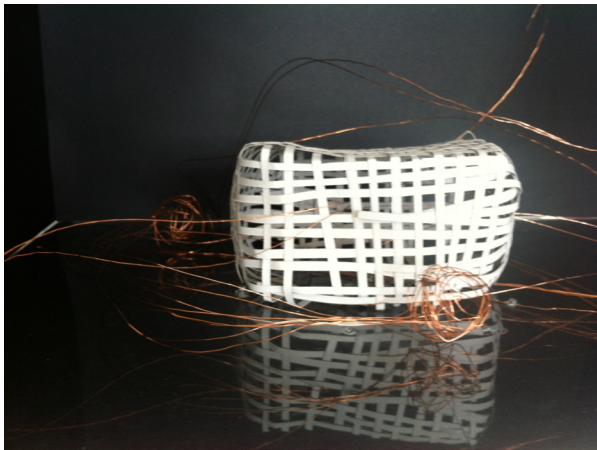
5.2.5 Loop 5 – Removed – Concepts and Gestures

It was first at this point that concepts and gestures for the site – the overall specific intentions and directions – were generated with the clash between remote dimensional (pre)conceptions and aesthetic experiential perceptions still fresh.



Figure 13
A conceptual Battersea discovery box.
PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH

Coming quite late in the process, after spatial considerations and prototypes had been developed, the concept was fuelled by a contemporary and informed gaze. Further, the gesture was developed as an overall defining movement sweeping across the site and providing an embedded physicality with aesthetic intervention that opens for more intense and detailed development. The notion of gesture directly accesses a physical contact in that it stems from movements and positions of the body that express “ideas, opinions and emotions” (Dictionary.com, 1996a).



Figures 14 (left) and 15 (right)
Concepts and gestures.

PHOTO: SHELLEY SMITH

5.2.6 Loop 6 – Beyond – Volume and Form

This final loop developed spatial refinements across scales with a movement from volume to form/space and material. When addressing volume, it was concerned with the amount of space, measured in cubic units, being occupied, taking clues from the workshop in Loop 3 and formally developing this further as the essence of the sites' existence and intervention.

In the movement from design gestures, the form was further refined in a variety of scales and materialities.

5.3 Discussion of the laboratory methodology

Although the changes to the “standard” design process were actually quite small in this lab, the awareness and continued openness they fostered in the process were extremely fruitful. The “standard” design process was understood as a progression of: *site visit, info gathering, vision, concept, spatial planning, and design*. The looping design process developed for this workshop was: *info gathering, vision, spatial planning (revision), site visit, concept and gesture*, and then *design*. When pre-conceived notions were established, they were challenged by other loops and the loops themselves ensured a continuing reflection throughout.

Access to the site was attained in both remote and immersive loops. However, the insertion of the initial design strategy for the site between these loops brought one of the main aspects of post-industrial sites into the forefront – namely that of their *scale*, i.e. the relational understanding of these largely dimensioned sites as opposed to, or in conjunction with, the actual experience of them. The relation between subject and object was questioned; an aesthetic consideration was honed; and philosophical concepts such as atmosphere and the sublime became heightened experiential realities: real sensory experiences against the backdrop of assumed sizes in addition to the confrontation with obsolescence. Immersion in the site, engagement, involvement, absorption – also speaks to the contemporary gaze as one other than the removed gaze of past and present. Contemporariness was activated in this process and as such become a part of the transformative act: one that issues from – emerges from – the necessity of involvement.

6 Concluding remarks

Working with obsolete industrial sites requires a specific spatial, but also temporal approach. To tap into the experiential and aesthetic potential of these sites, one needs a certain sensibility to ascertain and enhance these qualities. The tools “at hand” are not always the tools that should be taken *in hand*. These sites require methodological considerations that address obscurity, darkness, obsolescence and the staggering scale. If contemporary urban transformation is to transform existing

built structure into sustainable, compact and experientially rich inhabitable structures, it needs to do so through transformative acts that invent and develop tools that are specifically suited for the purpose. The toolbox needs to be restocked, and time, space and our own perceptual capacities need to be included in order to mesh the cartographic overview with the perceptual reality.

We are well equipped to perceive succession and simultaneity, particularly by our sense of hearing. We are poorly equipped to perceive data and duration. Although we have internal biological clocks, they are imprecise, subject to fluctuation, or difficult to read. The structure of our brain, however, allows us to learn, recall, foretell, and create a social hypothesis of time. Using this hypothesis, we modify ourselves and our surroundings to act effectively in the present (Lynch, 1976, p.120).

The experiences gained in this studio highlight the relevance of embracing a creative work environment and exploring the contemporary lens as an approach to the intriguing urban conditions and challenges posed by post-industrial sites. This is a constant process in search of contemporaneity and innovation where a reflexive process and openness are the key in developing relevant tools and future architects, landscape architects and urban designers.

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