

Ruins and Reels

The Kelenföld Power Station in Budapest as an Emblematic Case of Immaterial Adaptive Reuse through Cinematography

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Abstract

The Kelenföld Power Plant, located in Budapest, stands as an emblematic example of industrial architecture which, although decommissioned since 2005, continues to hold symbolic and cultural significance. Despite the building having lost its original function as an energy production facility, its presence has been revitalized through cinema, appearing in films such as *World War Z*, *Chernobyl Diaries*, *Spy*, and *Terminal*. In these contexts, the plant is not merely a backdrop but a narrative element that contributes to the construction of cultural and historical meaning. The reuse of Kelenföld is not a physical recovery in the traditional sense, but a symbolic reactivation that grants the structure a new value. The architecture of the building, even in its state of abandonment, becomes a “site of memory”—to use Aldo Rossi’s terminology—a place that retains its meaning not through practical use, but through collective memory and its reinterpretation. The reflection on industrial architecture as a symbolic space has also been explored by other thinkers such as Richard Sennett and Umberto Eco, who have addressed the relationship between buildings and cultural memory. The power plant becomes a fragment of a city that no longer exists in the same way, yet still manages to live on in the present through forms of adaptive reuse that reinterpret its significance. In this sense, adaptive reuse is not merely an architectural intervention, but a cultural practice that allows abandoned buildings to preserve a new vitality, integrating into the contemporary urban landscape as tangible testimonies of the past.

Keywords: Industrial Heritage; Adaptive Reuse; Intangible Reuse

Introduction

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings is most often conceived in material terms: an existing structure is physically converted to accommodate new functions (for example, a factory becomes housing or a museum). Within this paradigm, architecture intervenes directly on the material fabric in order to render obsolete buildings operational once again, assigning them a new programme and, frequently, a new balance between form, distribution and performance. In recent years, however, scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognised the relevance of less tangible forms of reuse, in which the “second life” of a

building does not necessarily depend on structural transformation or on a stable change of use. This paper addresses one such approach, here defined as immaterial adaptive reuse, by which an existing building is reactivated through cultural practices, interpretations and representations rather than through construction. In this perspective, reuse does not coincide with material conversion, but with the capacity of architecture to function as a device of meaning: the building continues to “operate” in the cultural sphere, generating narratives, images and experiences that renew its contemporary relevance. Such an approach aligns with broader shifts in heritage discourse, which increasingly acknowledge intangible values and social uses of historic places, while also raising critical questions concerning authenticity, preservation and the role of architectural design in shaping memory. The Kelenföld Power Plant in Budapest is adopted here as a paradigmatic case study. The complex offers a particularly instructive example for two complementary reasons. On the one hand, it is legally protected as industrial heritage due to its exceptional architectural quality—most notably the iconic oval control room, illuminated by a glass skylight and characterised by Art Deco control panels. On the other hand, it has remained suspended between formal protection and the absence of a stable redevelopment plan, a condition that has favoured the emergence of an unplanned and largely immaterial second life. Following the cessation of operations in the early 2000s, the site entered a phase of gradual decay: safeguarded from demolition but not reintegrated into a material reuse programme, Kelenföld has slowly deteriorated while persisting in the urban landscape as an infrastructural ruin and as an artefact of a bygone technological era.

Within this interval of suspension, the complex acquired an unexpected function. It periodically opens to the public through guided tours, allowing access to an early twentieth-century industrial interior that appears as a “technological cathedral” coated in dust, where the patina of time becomes part of perception and experience. Even more visibly, Kelenföld has been used as a stage set for visual media—fashion shoots, music videos, films and television series—capitalising on its atmosphere of “beautiful decay” and on the scenographic quality of its spaces. In other words, the function of the site has shifted from generating electricity to generating images and narratives. It is precisely this displacement that allows us to speak of immaterial adaptive reuse: the building’s form and space are appropriated almost without alteration to host imaginative “programmes”—scenes, stories and experiences—without permanent structural intervention. This inquiry is situated within the field of architectural design and urban heritage, adopting a critical-theoretical stance that interweaves collective memory, narrative and the socio-cultural role of architecture. A central reference is Aldo Rossi’s notion of the city as a locus of collective memory. In *The Architecture of the City*, Rossi argues that certain buildings outlive their original functions to persist as urban artefacts whose value lies in their formal permanence and symbolic capacity rather than their utility. Infrastructure, in particular, may undergo a transformation from functional object to monument, becoming a stable reference within the mental image of the city. Kelenföld, as an infrastructure turned monument, exemplifies this condition: its identity is no longer defined by utility, but by iconic presence and accumulated memory. From this perspective, immaterial reuse can be understood as a way of mobilising such mnemonic potential. Through films, images and visits, the building continues to “work” in the cultural realm, transmitting meanings to new generations long after its machines have fallen silent.

This dynamic also intersects with Umberto Eco's reflections on hyperreality. Eco describes the modern tendency to fabricate simulations that satisfy the desire for the real, often replacing direct experience with intensified replicas. In the case of Kelenföld, a particularly instructive inversion occurs: rather than a fake imitating reality, a real historic site is used to fabricate fictional worlds on screen. The control room can "become" a nuclear reactor, a villain's headquarters or a dystopian command centre. The result is a simulacrum in which material authenticity is placed at the service of other narratives, and the historical presence of architecture is overlaid with multiple cinematic identities. This situation raises a critical question: does such treatment enhance the cultural value of architecture by increasing recognition and desire, or does it risk reducing it to an interchangeable backdrop, detached from its own history and transformed into mere scenery?

The tension between authenticity and narrative appropriation thus emerges as a key lens through which immaterial adaptive reuse can be interpreted. On the one hand, it appears to preserve material integrity through the absence of permanent intervention. On the other, it generates a form of reuse that operates through representation, and therefore through a potential rewriting of the site's memory itself. It is precisely within this ambivalence that the Kelenföld case becomes particularly productive for reflecting on the relationship between industrial heritage, visual media and contemporary architectural discourse.

Immaterial Reuse of Industrial Heritage: Concept and Context

Immaterial adaptive reuse can be positioned, at a disciplinary level, as an innovative, yet inherently ambiguous, strategy within debates on the conservation and reactivation of industrial heritage. Unlike conventional adaptive reuse, which relies on material transformation to guarantee continued use, immaterial reuse leaves the physical fabric largely untouched, intervening instead through interpretation, temporary use and cultural circulation. This approach offers evident advantages in terms of authenticity and integrity: minimising physical change preserves material substance and patina in situ, allowing industrial sites to be read as tangible traces of historical and technological processes. In this sense, immaterial reuse aligns with conservation principles that privilege minimal intervention and legibility of stratification, particularly relevant in industrial complexes where value often resides in the persistence of machinery, technical devices and spatial configurations. The literature on industrial heritage reuse has increasingly highlighted the role of temporary and reversible uses in activating new forms of social and cultural performance without imposing irreversible transformations. Studies examining industrial buildings employed as film locations demonstrate that superficial and temporary interventions, precisely because they do not erase historic character, can enhance visibility, attractiveness and public engagement. Kelenföld exemplifies this condition. Controlled access for tours and film productions has kept the complex remarkably intact, offering visitors an environment that feels almost "frozen in time", closer to a historical capsule than to a sanitised monument. The perceptual power of the site—inactive machines, accumulated dust, filtered light, becomes an integral part of its value, paradoxically reinforcing the presence of heritage through decay. Another potential benefit of immaterial reuse lies in its capacity to generate public interest and new narratives around heritage sites. In the absence of financial resources or political will to undertake full architectural conversion, keeping a site in use, even episodically, may prevent abandonment from turning into oblivion. The circulation of

images of Kelenföld through visual media has projected its form and atmosphere to a wide audience, inscribing the site within contemporary imaginaries well beyond the local scale. Such exposure can stimulate curiosity, civic pride and, in some cases, cultural pressure for more robust forms of protection. From an urban-theoretical perspective, this unexpected second life may also be read through the notion of openness and adaptation through practice rather than rigid planning. In a view that values urban porosity, a decommissioned industrial plant does not necessarily constitute a dead void; it can become a creative resource, a space in which unplanned uses generate cultural resonance. The cinematic reuse of Kelenföld demonstrates how the obsolescence of a programme does not exhaust the symbolic energy of architecture. From the standpoint of architectural form, the case raises a further critical issue. Once its original programme has ceased, architecture may acquire a form of cultural autonomy grounded in spatial, aesthetic and atmospheric presence. Turbines, switchboards, Art Deco details and technical monumentality become objects of contemplation, experience and representation. The site is appreciated not despite the loss of function, but through that loss: decommissioning releases a surplus of meaning that can be activated through cultural practices. In this sense, immaterial reuse reveals a poetic survival of architecture, stripped of function, yet persisting as form and memory, as mental image and narrative space.

A critical reading, however, must also confront significant risks. One concerns the possibility that immaterial reuse becomes a pretext for avoiding material conservation. If a ruin “works” culturally because it is photogenic, owners and institutions may be tempted to preserve it in a state of picturesque decay, since decay itself generates media value. This tendency borders on the fetishisation of ruins, where the aesthetics of deterioration are consumed symbolically without translating into maintenance or community benefit. Yet time is not a neutral stage device: without structural stabilisation, decay may reach a threshold of inaccessibility, extinguishing even the immaterial life of the site. A paradox thus emerges: the very images that sustain immaterial reuse may ultimately consume the material resource on which they depend. A second issue concerns the evaluation of the cultural significance produced through representation. Traditional heritage criteria assess integrity and appropriateness of use; the impact of repeated cinematic appearances is more difficult to quantify and inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, circulation through media constructs a contemporary mythology around the site: Kelenföld becomes a symbol of dystopia, retro-futurism or technological secrecy. On the other, such narratives risk obscuring the site’s specific historical and social context. Viewers who recognise the location may not learn anything about Hungarian industrial development, labour history or the urban role of the plant. The danger is that heritage is reduced to a generic symbol of decay or technological nostalgia. This leads to a third issue: the necessity of interpretive and curatorial devices capable of reconnecting representation to history. Guided tours, for instance, can incorporate the site’s cinematic career not as a detached anecdote, but as a contemporary layer within a broader palimpsest grounded in the building’s real history. In this way, the experience of the image does not erase history but becomes a gateway to it. The challenge, in other words, is to govern immaterial reuse so that it does not eclipse material heritage and specific memory.

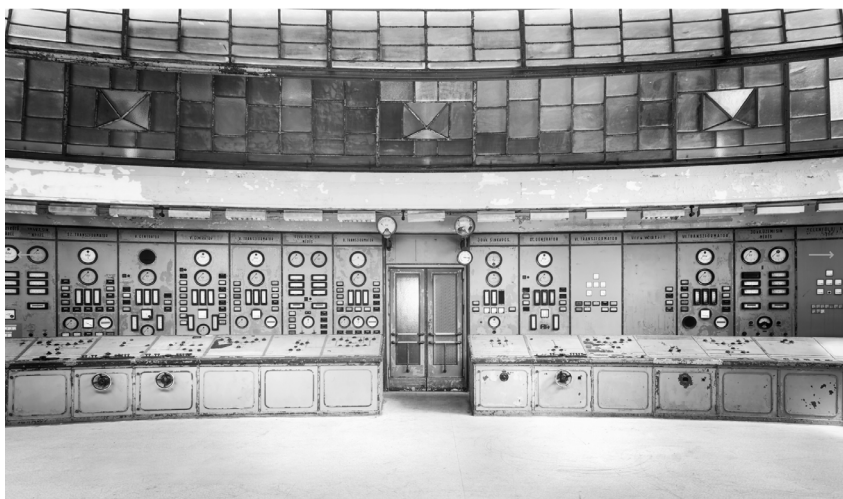


Fig. 1. Control room of the Kelenföld power plant, Budapest, Kálmán Reichl with Virgil Borbíró (photo by the author)

Kelenföld: From Utility to Narrative

Returning to the specific case, the Kelenföld Power Plant—inaugurated in 1914 in Budapest’s XI District, was a symbol of the industrial age and of urban modernisation. Its architecture reveals a level of formal intentionality uncommon for infrastructure: engineering efficiency is accompanied by aesthetic ambition, culminating in the control room built between 1927 and 1929. This oval space, defined by metal panels and a stained-glass skylight, embodies the optimism of early twentieth-century technology and design. For decades, the plant contributed to the city’s electricity supply, playing a tangible role in the material construction of modern Budapest. With the transformation of energy systems and technologies, however, the historic sections gradually became obsolete, leading to the definitive decommissioning of the control room and main halls in 2005. Heritage protection prevented demolition but did not ensure a material reuse project. Kelenföld thus entered a grey zone familiar to many industrial heritage sites: too significant to be destroyed, too large and costly to be easily converted. It was precisely within this suspension that the site’s immaterial potential emerged. Images produced by photographers and urban explorers—often focusing on the contrast between technological sophistication and spectral stillness—generated an initial wave of recognition. The site appeared as a temporal palimpsest: dials, levers and indicators, once animated by labour, now covered in dust and silence. This imagery, in turn, was intercepted by the audiovisual industry. Location scouts identified Kelenföld as an exceptional set, capable of offering scale, texture and atmosphere difficult to replicate artificially. Throughout the 2010s, Kelenföld featured in numerous international film and television productions, often uncredited, assuming variable narrative roles: nuclear plant, secret laboratory, dystopian command centre, technological “other space”. Here, the logic of hyperreality intensifies. The real ruin becomes a device for constructing fiction, and fiction feeds back into reality through notoriety and the desire to visit. Visitors enter

the control room carrying a double memory: a historical one – however mediated – and a cinematic one. The phrase “it feels like a movie set” is ambivalent: it is a set, and yet it is also an authentic historical interior. This coexistence generates a specific aura that constitutes one of the most significant values of immaterial reuse. Local institutions have gradually acknowledged this narrative capital. Guided tours now weave together technical history, architectural analysis and cinematic references, allowing visitors to move between factual knowledge and imaginative association. In this way, popular culture can function as a vector of access to deeper content, broadening the audience for industrial heritage and strengthening its presence within contemporary memory.

Critical Reflections

The Kelenföld case demonstrates that adaptive reuse does not necessarily coincide with material transformation. It can also occur in the realm of ideas, images and practices of experience. Through cinema, photography and visits, the building has been re-anchored within urban memory in a new form: no longer an engine of modernity, but a ruin of unexpected contemporaneity. In Rossi’s terms, the building confirms itself as a persistent urban artefact, capable of continuing to produce meaning beyond its original function. This reactivation, however, must be approached critically. The risk of reducing heritage to consumable imagery is real: architecture may become a fungible backdrop, and ruin may be exploited as an aesthetic of decay. Without material care, the apparent success of immaterial reuse would remain fragile. No narrative can indefinitely replace the maintenance of an architectural body. The crucial issue is therefore balance—between image and matter, between temporary use and long-term project. The most productive outcome can be envisaged as a hybrid condition. Visibility and modest revenues generated through immaterial use—tours, film productions—may be channelled toward stabilisation works and, gradually, toward a compatible material reuse scenario. Partial musealisation of key spaces such as the control room, cultural or educational uses, could coexist with the site’s continued role as a cinematic location, without erasing the quality of a “living ruin” that has made it culturally operative. In this framework, immaterial reuse functions as an intermediate phase: a way of keeping the site present and active while preparing the ground for a more stable future.

Conclusions

The story of Kelenföld—reuse without adaptation, or adaptation in immaterial form—offers fertile ground for rethinking adaptive reuse within heritage discourse. It invites an expansion of the concept beyond the axis of function and transformation, to include the cultural afterlife of buildings as carriers of meaning, memory and imagination. In an era in which visual media constitute a primary cultural currency, the survival of a site may depend not only on what it materially does, but on how it circulates as image and narrative. Kelenföld thus becomes a form of cultural infrastructure: it no longer generates electricity, but produces stories and experiences. Immaterial adaptive reuse, as a strategy, emerges as both opportunity and provocation. It is an opportunity because it engages new publics and prolongs the cultural life of heritage even when immediate material conversion is not possible. It is a provocation because it forces conservation and architectural design to confront how representational processes can be ethically guided, ensuring that narratives



Fig. 2. Control room of the Kelenföld power plant, Budapest, Kálmán Reichl with Virgil Borbíró (photo by the author)

enrich rather than eclipse the specific histories of places. The current chapter of Kelenföld, written in images and traversed in visits, suggests that the dialogue between past and present can be powerfully staged without drawing a single new line on a blueprint. The remaining task is to transform this immaterial vitality into an argument for material care, so that the light, figuratively and perhaps one day literally, may continue to remain on at Kelenföld for future generations.

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