

The Poetics of Abandonment in Architecture

Aleksandra Pešterac

Sub-Department of Arts and Design, Department for Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, a.pesterac@uns.ac.rs

Abstract

The phenomenon of abandoned spaces represents a significant area of inquiry within architectural discourse, giving rise to a distinct spatial typology characterized by the absence of their original utilitarian function. This paper posits that such spaces can embody a unique form of poetics—an aesthetic and affective dimension that arises not through functional transformation, but through subjective experiential engagement. The poetics of abandonment in architecture are rooted in the capacity of such spaces to evoke memory, introspection, and presence. These qualities often emerge through both deliberate interventions and unplanned processes—such as physical decay, neglect, or temporal erosion—that allow the architectural environment to resonate with layers of historical and emotional significance. As material traces of time accumulate, abandoned spaces become sites of interpretive potential and emotional depth. Within this framework, deterioration is not merely a process of loss but can be reconceptualized as a form of creative transformation that renders space legible and meaningful in new ways. The poetic dimension of abandonment thus does not serve to restore or refunctionalize space, but to animate it—to cultivate a silent, introspective dialogue between place and person. In this sense, the poetics of abandonment may be understood as a specific mode of adaptive reuse, grounded not in functional replacement but in perceptual, atmospheric, and narrative reactivation of space. Accordingly, this paper seeks to illuminate how the poetics of abandoned spaces can serve as a mechanism for revealing latent values, derived not from imposed architectural programming, but from the internal mechanisms of human perception, memory, and imagination.

Keywords: Poetics, Abandonment, Architecture

Introduction

The phenomenon of abandoned spaces in contemporary architecture represents a complex field of research that includes material, social and symbolic dimensions of space. Architecture that has lost its primary utilitarian function is often perceived as degraded or unused, but at the same time it possesses potential for new meaning and poetic influence. It is within the ambivalence between loss and creation, between disappearing and discovery, that one can recognize the potential of the poetics of space abandonment.

This research stems from the assumption that abandoned spaces possess a special kind of poetic value – a value that does not stem from utility, but from absence, from the void, from the traces of time, and from layered spatial memory. According to Walter Benjamin,

a ruin «bridges the past and the present in the non-existing moment of the future» making space a place where historical and emotional remembrance of space intertwine creating new meanings (Benjamin 1999, 177). Adhering to the Greek origin of the word poetics as creation, ruins may be observed, as architectural typology deprived of utilitarian function, through a creative discourse that enables “creative thinking about space as an outcome of the most personal poetic planes, and which represent a standfast for building up and leading new creative processes (Pešterac 2017)”.

Through the analysis of two architectural competition entries, which thematic concepts reconsider and introduce new functions to the ruin – *Embowering Space* and *Embowering Parasite* – this research examines how contemporary spatial interventions can reactualize abandoned locality, while preserving historical layering, interpreting them as poetic palimpsest. Although this research does not approach adaptive reuse primarily as functional reprogramming, it positions poetic reinterpretation as a legitimate dimension of contemporary adaptive-reuse practice.

The theoretical framework of this research is Adolph Speer's theory of the value of the ruin (Speer 1934), applied in the context of the contemporary interpretation of the aesthetics of decay (Edensor 2005; Trigg 2006; DeSilvey 2017), as well as on the concept of poetical influence of a place in which space is understood as a dynamic category in constant intertwining of the material, spiritual and the imaginary (Pešterac 2017, 175).

Instead of observing an abandoned space exclusively through the lens of protection of cultural heritage or adaptive reuse, here an interpretative approach is applied to space, and it begins with personal experience and perception of space. That means that the key categories of analyses in this research can be the atmosphere of space, flow and flux of perception of the space in visitors, as well as the narrative that the space itself produces, that is the impression of space. This kind of approach enables architectural competitions to be read and understood not only as a technical project, but rather as a spatial essay—as a suggestion of how one space which has been forgotten can “tell a story”.

The aim of the research is to show that architectural practice in abandoned spaces does not have to aspire to «fully reconstruct» these kinds of spaces, it can and should rather aspire to carefully listen to them—to fully comprehend the ruin as a place of immense potential, a place of memory and contemplation, with minimal intervention and with a goal of preserving the ruin in as near as possible original state. In this way the poetics of abandonment becomes a tool of architectural interpretation but also sets an aesthetic and ethical frame for creating new meaning of space.

The Phenomenon of Abandonment in Architecture

Abandonment in architecture is not only a mark of the physical state of a building, but rather a relational state between humans and space. When a building's basic function disappears, it leaves the system of productivity and enters a contemplative and aesthetic field. Adolph Speer in his “theory of the value of the ruin” postulated that architecture should be designed in a way that allows it to age gracefully, so that its ruin can one day testify to the spirit that created it (Speer 1934, 27–29). Although this concept was formulated within an ideologically specific, in contemporary interpretation it can be understood as an open call in theorizing and contemplating about the temporal dimension of architecture – about how transience becomes a part of its aesthetic and ethical value. The ruin, therefore, does

not represent the end of any specific architecture, it rather represents its transformation. Contemporary authors Tim Edensor and Dylan Trigg recognize the aesthetic of decay in abandoned places which enables a new type of experience of the world (Edensor 2005; Trigg, 2006). This kind of aesthetic, however, in popular culture is often reduced to a visual spectacle known as *ruin porn*—a fascination with images showing decay that excite the viewer through an aesthetic of doom and post-apocalypse, but they do not offer any sort of real and deeper understanding of the space. These kinds of images are deprived of any kind of context, history, and everyday life of space; these images turn a ruin into theatre décor. According to Caitlin DeSilvey, this kind of interpretation «fetishizes loss and decay, while the true poetics of the ruin rest upon the acceptance of time and change» (DeSilvey 2017, 112), rather than in the frozen moment of photographic representation.

Contrary to this approach, the poetics of abandonment are not only a fascination with decay, but it is also a kind of empathy towards transience. The poetics of abandonment imply slowing down, contemplating, and immersing oneself in quiet spaces, where materiality becomes an intermediary between past and present. In that sense, abandonment can be seen as a place of possibilities rather than an end—a state in which architecture releases its latent potential to tell a story without utilitarian function. Abandoned space is therefore closely related to the notion of “incomplete” space, in which absence becomes a source of meaning.

Additionally, abandonment may be examined through theories of space and place which distinguish «space» as a neutral, geometric category from «place» as a space filled with meaning. In abandoned buildings, it is precisely abandonment that enables the transition from space to place: absence of utilitarian function opens space for memory and imagination, both individual and collective. This can be seen very clearly at locations which are outside of the flow of everyday life—former industrial zones or other abandoned complexes which over time became a training ground for individual and collective memory, artistic interventions, and temporal praxis.

Poetic influence of space may be interpreted as a resultant of relationship between permanence and decline, as shown in research on the transformation of space into place (Pešterac 2017, 21). Space becomes a place in the moment when it can accumulate and carry over experience, that is when its material structure can supplement immaterial layer of meaning. In that sense, a space deprived of completeness becomes an entity that speaks: poetic value emerges from absence, imperfection, and blemish. This kind of space regains expressive power.

The Poetics of Abandonment: Case Study of Two Architectural Competition

Project Embowering Space designed for an international architectural competition at the ruins of the Penaфирme Convent, an ancient Augustinian monastery in Portugal, is located within a dynamic sand-dune landscape. Constantly shifting sand dunes erase and create new terrain establishing a dominant natural narrative of the site. The concept of the project translates this dynamic into spatial language: the ruin is not treated only as a remainder of the past, but as a part of a living procedural landscape.

The project was defined by the competition program as a «monastery», a space inviting dialogue between old and new. The existing architecture of the ruin preserved its authentic atmosphere, while the new structure introduced a layer that does not dominate, but



Fig. 1. Representation of the Penafirme Convent in Portugal (Pešterac and Erdeljan, 2022)

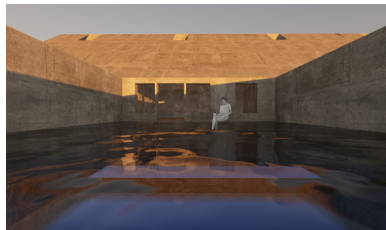


Fig. 2. Nonlinear space of the Penafirme Convent in Portugal (Pešterac and Erdeljan, 2022)

rather reacts to and continues the existing rhythm (Fig. 1). Communication paths follow the dramaturgy of space: although they appear free, movement is designed to allow fluid, nonlinear experience. (Fig. 2).

Inspiration from sand dunes was translated into interior, where layers of material and light intertwine. A particularly significant space is located beneath the water surface at the upper level, above the open ground floor with a glass ceiling, enabling multilayered perception through water, glass, and landscape (Fig. 3). This layered viewing reflects the ruin as a palimpsest, in which layers are built upon one another. The project does not attempt to “fix” the ruin; it listens to it and interprets new meaning through its fragility. This corresponds to the idea that architecture should enhance the existing rather than impose the new.

This project shows that intervention in abandoned space can be unobtrusive, allowing atmosphere to remain dominant. Architecture does not aim to save the ruin through reconstruction, but to reanimate it through spatial experience. In this sense, adaptive reuse is achieved through perceptual and narrative activation rather than functional replacement. The second project, *Embowering Parasite*, developed for the Tower of Minerva (Torre di Minerva) in Italy, built in 1334, which initially was used as a defensive position against pirates, introduces a parasitic strategy. The existing tower is recognized as a strong environmental and historical landmark; therefore, intervention must emphasize rather than imperil its qualities and *genius loci*.

This new structure acts as a parasite in the biological sense: it exists on the body of the host without exhausting it. Its aim is to extend the life of the ruin and enable new readings of space. The structure stretches all the way along the approach path up until the base of the tower, entering and embowing the tower from the inside, ending at the viewing point at the top of the tower. This journey from the ground approach path all the way to the viewing point creates a spatial narrative: showing the visitors the already existing historical layers, almost being able to physically touch them, and in the end lifting it into a new contemporary layer (Fig. 4).

The parasitic structure also introduces a new program layer – artistic residence and spaces for temporary events, which were defined by the architectural competition brief (Fig. 5). In this way introducing an immaterial layer into the ruin: narration, performativity, and ephemerality. Space can no longer be perceived only as a «remainder» it also becomes an «event» in its own right. This kind of approach is important because it shows that the poetics of abandonment can indeed enhance space by adding a new layer of life, and

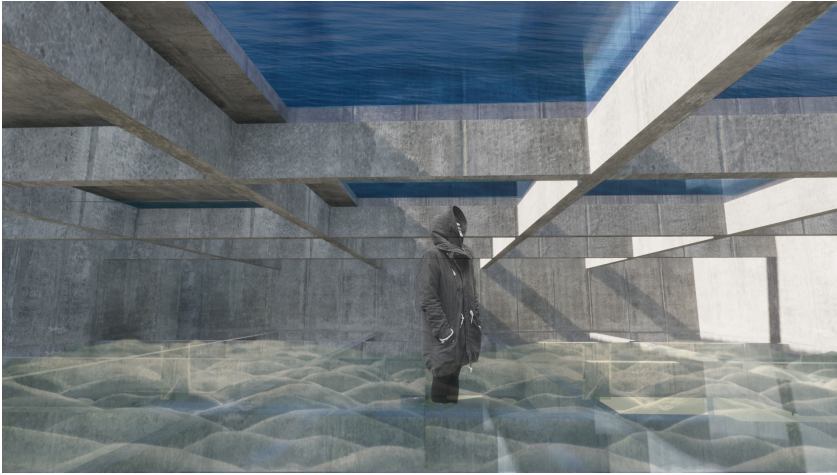


Fig. 3. Layered Space of the Penaferme Convent in Portugal (Pešterac and Erdeljan, 2022)

not only by preservation. In this way, architecture becomes a living organism, a spatial palimpsest in which every layer is added on the next one, as once Aldo Rossi said, «as a trace of collective memory» (Rossi 1982, 130).

Something particularly precious about this project is the new glass structure, in the sense that it creates a protected, enclosed, and shaded space—not erasing the existing vegetation and patina that embraced the tower, the glass structure enables everything to remain a part of the existing ambiance. In this way creating a relationship that is both aesthetic and ethical: the new does not cancel the old, it rather exposes everything to new gazes, while protecting it.

One thing that bridges both architectural competition entries is the conscious distancing from the aesthetics of the spectacle. At a time when photographs of abandoned buildings become popular because how dramatic they are—equally within the field of artistic photography and social media—these two projects enter a dialog with this phenomenon, but at the same time they overcome it. Both projects take over the visually striking context of the ruin, and do not leave it just at the level of an image; both projects introduce dramaturgy, program, atmosphere, and time. In this way architecture breaks the logic of *ruin porn* which freezes a frame and offers a new logic of presence that stimulates imagination.

New Value of Abandoned Spaces

The examples that were analyzed show that the poetics of abandonment is not necessarily tied to the restoration of the functionality of space but rather tied to the resemanticization of space. Abandoned spaces can become a field of architectural imagination, where new values are not built upon material addition, but rather upon an expansion of meaning. In this process a key task is to recognize the already existing qualities of the atmosphere of space—light, sound, smell, memory of space, and the relationship between the natural and built environment—building the intervention up in a way so that these qualities become more visible.



Fig. 4. The New Structure in Tower of Minerva (Pešterac, Stefanović, Sekulić, 2025)



Fig. 5. Artistic Residence in Tower of Minerva (Pešterac, Stefanović, Sekulić, 2025)

In that sense, new value of ruins do not stem only from their physical restoration, but from their ability to empower emotional and contemplative processes within the observer. The ruin becomes a place of reflection, a sort of mediator between the past and the present. As a key difference from *ruin porn*, satisfied only with an image, this kind of approach in architectural design respects the poetics of abandonment and deals with sojourn: how will a person move through space, where will the person stop, where will their gaze be stopped and why, what the person will hear, and what kind of trace will the light leave within the space. In this way it is possible to establish an audio-visual-tactile scenario of the use of space.

Speer's idea about «graceful ageing» of architecture gains a new interpretation—not as an aesthetic ideal of monumentality, rather as an ethical responsibility for time (Speer 1934). Preservation of the ruin in the contemporary context does not always mean restoration of the space in its original form but rather means enabling the space to continue ageing in a way that is able to be read and understood. In both examples the new was introduced in a way that does not enclose, but rather introduces possibilities for long term ageing, for future interventions, and future narratives.

Based on the examples shown in this research we could agree that there are several specific design principles when working with abandoned structures: (1) the principle of unobtrusiveness—a new intervention must not cancel out the existing atmosphere; (2) principle of layering—the new must be introduced as a new layer, on top of the existing ones; (3) the principle of visibility of time—traces of decay must not be removed in their entirety because they represent a kind of spatial witness of the history of space; (4) the principle of activation—enabling new forms of use which are compatible with the character of the place; (5) the principle of openness—the project must not have an intention to be the last interpretation of place.

Within the scope of research of transformation of space into place it is shown that spatial influence can become a tool in establishing new values exactly because architecture has the potential to transform the way in which space is experienced. When that kind of potential is applied to the ruin, the result is not just a restored and revitalized space, but rather a poetic transformation—the creation of new meaning from the atmosphere and state of the already existing space. In that sense, abandonment is not a defect which has to be repaired, but rather becomes a new resource which needs to be articulated.

Conclusions

A space in which something is missing—a space in which absence can be seen and is present—possesses a strong poetic potential. Its potency lies in its the ability to stimulate imagination, to become a place of reflection on transience, continuance, and memory. This kind of space does not perform its influence because it is complete, but rather because it is incomplete.

Projects analyzed in this research paper show that architecture can be treated as a tool which establishes new values of the ruin, not through the process of restoration, but rather through understanding the poetical influence a space can have. In that sense, abandonment in this context should not be perceived as a loss, but rather as a state of possibilities—as a space between the material and immaterial, between the present and the absent. Architectural intervention which understands this does not even attempt to cancel meaning, it only strives to amplify it. From the perspective of adaptive-reuse discourse, this approach positions poetic reinterpretation as a legitimate form of spatial reactivation, in which new value is created without erasing historical continuity (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel 2011; Cantell 2005).

For future research there remains a question of how the poetics of abandonment can be categorized and systematized in formal education of architects, but also in the field of conservation politics. If the scholarly society accepts that a certain degree of abandonment and decay inherently carries value, only then can a certain criterion of conservation be determined and made more flexible and open to «controlled incompleteness». This would create a space for projects such as the ones analyzed in this research paper, which do not belong singularly to the category of restoration, nor to the category of new buildings, but belong to a third category—a category of poetic reinterpretation.

In the end, this research paper also shows the importance of differentiating between abandonment and dilapidation. The paper refers to the absence of care for space, while the former in the sense in which it has been analyzed in the paper postulates that it can be a conscious decision to leave room for space to be reinterpreted in the future. Architecture that is conscious of this kind of approach is always designed with a gauge for this kind of space: a space designed in a way that does not fully repair everything that is missing and does not cover all the traces of the history of space. This kind of architecture can accept time as a creative tool—time may be the deepest kind of expression of the poetics of abandonment.

In that sense, the poetics of abandonment can also become a corrective tool for the excessively commercialized approach in contemporary architecture. Instead of «beautifying» space up to a point of unrecognizability, this approach suggests conserving the tension, the quiet and even the discomfort of space. Because these emotions make space memorable and make humans able to establish a connection with space, this is in accordance with the contemporary understanding of participative and experiential heritage.

Notes

This research has been supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation (Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200156) and the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad through project “Scientific and Artistic Research Work of Researchers in Teaching and Associate Positions at the Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad 2025”

(No. 01-50/295).

1 Authors of this project are Aleksandra Pešterac and Zoja Erdeljan.

2 Authors of this project are Aleksandra Pešterac, Violeta Stefanović, and Darko Sekulić

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Cantell, Sophie F. *The Adaptive Reuse of Historic Industrial Buildings*. Burlington: University of Vermont, 2005.

DeSilvey, Caitlin. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Edensor, Tim. *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005.

Pešterac, Aleksandra. *Transformacija prostora u mesto: stalnosti i promene poetičkog dejstva mesta*. Novi Sad: Fakultet tehničkih nauka, Univerzitet u Novom SADu, 2017.

Plevoets, Bie, and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. "Adaptive reuse as an emerging discipline: An historic survey". *The Journal of Architectural Conservation* 17, 7–32, 2011.

Rossi, Aldo. *The Architecture of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982.

Speer, Albert. *Die Ruinenwerttheorie*. Berlin: Propaganda Verlag, 1934.

Trigg, Dylan. *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia and the Absence of Reason*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.