

RECOMPOSE FRAGMENTS: SUSPENSION AND RECOVERY OF INDUSTRIAL FABRICS IN DISMANTLEMENT. THE CASE OF AUBERVILLIERS, PARIS.

Giulia Setti¹

1: Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, DASTU
School of Architecture and Society
Politecnico di Milano, via Bonardi 3, 20133 Milano, Italy
e-mail: giulia.setti@polimi.it

Abstract

The text explores the discontinuities and the fractures which characterize the sediments of contemporary cities, focusing its theoretical and design reflection on the conditions and the characters of industrial spaces in disposal, areas showing both the effects of the recent economic downturns and those of a crisis which seems more and more radical. Through the investigation of Aubervilliers' case study, north of Paris, are discussed both the ongoing forms of industrial dismantlement and the possible strategies of recovery and modification for the compromised areas. Industrial fabrics are often elements of fracture in the consolidated structure of the city, as a consequence the fragments defined by industry need to be reassembled using new design tools. Aubervilliers shows the state of crisis of an entire area in which soil and infrastructural supports appear compromised. In the first instance, the text describes the causes of the current dismantlement forms concerning Aubervilliers, telling the nature of these fragments and the evolution of the productive fabric. Aubervilliers' case study constitute the heart of the research, because it is a framework which brings together the vitalities of the current instances of the processes of transformation of the industry.

Aubervilliers defines the interweaving of the relationship between production and city, highlighting a certain critical distance with respect to the forms of disposal described in the Eighties and Nineties. As a result, the research focuses on the current state of degradation, identifying the presence of different times in the processes of industrial decline to which may correspond different interventions for modification and re-composition of the industrial space. Design strategies look at the artifact as a part of a complex productive fabric in which interventions of densification and consolidation are complemented by forms of punctual demolition and rarefaction. Aubervilliers' instable fabric requires, thus, continuous cycles of disposal and reuse, foreshadowing scenarios in which the partial replacement of disappearing parts allows the recreation of the industrial context. The text foreshadows specific planning actions which help to encourage the graft and the recovery of productive activities, showing the vivacity of an area which tries to overcome the uncertainties and the suspensions produced by its disposal.

Keywords: Dismantlement, production, densification, reuse, Aubervilliers

1. DISCONTINUITY AND FRAGMENTS IN THE CONTEMPORAY CITY: A NECESSARY PREMISE

The recent forms of dismantlement have produced fragmented scenarios, where the traditional idea of the city went missing. The discontinuities of the urban space derive, in part, from the consequences of the economic crisis and, in part, from the continuous changes which involve built fabrics. Talking about 'composite cities' means reflecting on fragments and on different types of urban scenarios which are determined, thanks to the juxtaposition of radically different contexts, in a decisive moment for the future of the architectural design as a tool capable of intervening in the discontinuity and in the interstitial spaces of the contemporary city.

How to act on fabrics different for scale and morphology of the parts? How to build strategies able to consider the diversity of the urban fabric as a planning resource? In particular, the scientific research will focus on the ways and the forms which intervene in the relationship between production and city in the contemporary city, highlighting how the addition of production facilities has often generated fractures and disruptions in urban fabrics.

The text reflects both upon the causes which have led to the generation of fragments, urban and not, unable to build their own identity, and upon the need to take new meanings from the ongoing processes of disintegration. For these reasons, we assume as field of application of the research the industrial fabrics and architectures which were the subject of dramatic processes of contraction over the last few years. The survey looks at the industrial fabrics in dismantlement identifying them as autonomous parts, closed enclosures, with respect to the contexts to which they belong. It comes to industrial fabrics which disappear part by part, cease their function and remain in a state of constant expectation, resulting in a complex 'mosaic' of fragments. It can be said that the recent forms of disposal (industrial and not) have increased and intensified the process of economic, social and urban disintegration until they undermine and erode not only the architectural artifacts, but also, and especially, infrastructure and energy media, soils and equipment which represent the necessary substrate to ensure, keep and renew productive activities.

The violent and uncontrolled use of soil, because of the processes of urbanization and industrialization, has resulted in big disruptions in Italian and European territories, compromising an essential resource for the development of different forms of production. Besides, the proliferation of industrial clusters and districts has irrevocably transformed the character of entire territories. Some forms of hybridization fill the fragments of industrial fabric: as a consequence, houses flank halls and the limits of the industries appear less and less rigid. This extends and exacerbates the consumption of already heavily impoverished soils. The extension of the industrial development concerns, therefore, all forms of free territory. As a consequence, every empty space which can be seen in the proximity of the productive fabric is absorbed by the growth of these contexts. "Development is re-actualization of everything. Nothing new here: an unstable occupation extended in the territory and a radical use of fixed, private or social capital. A use which supposes ownership and which is intrusive."(Bianchetti, 2003): so is defined the industrial development which has characterized Europe during the last decade.

In this sense, today the disposal, industrial or not, assumes more radical conditions than in the past: the change of scale concerning such processes determinates a condition of fragmentation which leaves voids, tiny and interstitial spaces and fractures in the productive fabric unresolved. The characters of the recent forms of industrial dismantlement show the state of 'crisis' of entire territories in Europe. This situation is due both to the recent economic contractions, whose first devastating effects we perceive now, and to the mutations of the techniques and of the processes of production, which have led to the abandonment of forms of heavy industry and to the displace of

different productive activities in urban areas. The differences with the ways and timing of the disposal which have arisen around the Eighties and Nineties, when the change of production conditions was marked by the presence of large voids in the fabric statements, appear evident and radical. "In the major European cities, (...) from the end of the Sixties, voids of abandoned industrial areas open. (...) Large and small buildings surrounded by vast industrial areas or sunk, almost stuck, in dense urban fabrics are dismantled." (Secchi, 2005), said Bernardo Secchi.



Figure 1. Aubervilliers, industrial disposal and conditions of crisis

The question the text brings to light through the study of the French context of Aubervilliers concerns the ways and the forms in which it is possible to re-think today a new relationship between forms of industrial production and the need for integration in the urban context, recognizing, in the first instance, the change of the forms of production and, necessarily, of the structures intended to contain them. With these words Aldo Bonomi describes these changes: "It was a capitalist with short nets in the vicinity, where everything was tied. It was stretched like a rubber band in districts and productive platforms, it was frayed in front of the globalization, it was broken in the crisis." (Bonomi, 2013). The nature of industrial districts is manifested in the complex articulation of economic relations which structure the productive space and which change in relation to the mutation of the characters and of the forms of production as well as of the ongoing economic processes. The research attempts to capture the subtle variations which lead to the structuring of different industrial spaces following the changing economic and productive conditions, as well as the reuse or recovery of industrial forms in a state of neglect.

2. INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES BETWEEN FRAGMENTS AND RUINS: WHICH FUTURE SCENARIOS?

Industrial fabrics are seen as a representative sample and as contexts with a highly transformative potential, able to change the character of the places in which they insert, but also to generate fractures in consolidated tissues. After a season marked by productive decentralization, we are now witnessing a return of production in urban fabrics: this has caused deep divisions in the construction of urban forms, both because of the lack of design tools able to work in these contexts and as a result of the extent and width which the processes of disposal are assuming in the urban fabric. This means having to study and compare the relationship between the forms of industrial dismantlement and the consolidated fabric, referring to cases which illustrate how, thanks to recovery processes and design experiments, we can intervene in fragmented tissues.

The scale and the condition of the industrial processes seem radically modified in their deepest essence. In this sense, the disintegration is born from a neglect which affects technical and infrastructural supports, soils and urban structures. The demolition may be considered as a (partial) tool of intervention, where the processes of disintegration appear extreme and without possibility of return. At the same time, the latest industrial abandonment works for layers and at different times, so invasive forms of demolition flank processes of recovery and conversion using industrial ruins as materials of the project.

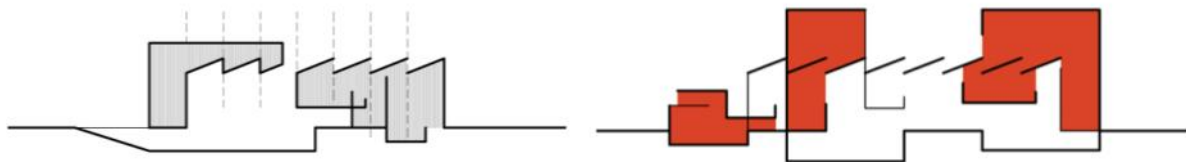


Figure 2. Intervention strategies on industrial buildings: traces and stratifications

Intervention strategies on compromised industrial fabrics can work simultaneously through degrees of densification, which foreshadow the retention of part of the existing facilities and the addition of new forms and, through degrees of demolition or rarefaction, they free the soil where the recovery appears improbable. The description of Aubervilliers' case tells the stratification of processes which alternate densifications and rarefactions foreshadowing new scenarios for the productive environment. The industrial ruins are presented as possible scenarios for reuse and recovery, in which the integration between demolition and new construction can represent a possible form of transformation. Kevin Lynch describes the relationship between densification and rarefaction in urban contexts today: "Densification - the well-known accumulation of new apartments and inserts in the rear of lots - can now be replaced by rarefactions and cleanings of the urban fabric" (Southworth et al., 1992). What Lynch imagines is a city able to overwrite the new buildings to the existing ones, in which parts of the urban fabric are reduced in favor of others which remain and determine the shape of the consolidated fabric. Kevin Lynch describes a city in which rarefaction is preferable to densification. According to him, indeed, it is advisable to renounce to build in order to support the recovery of what already exists. The scenarios identified in Aubervilliers' context and imagined by Lynch change according to different times: the long term is accompanied by the precariousness of the artifacts in dismantlement and the changing nature of the industrial space.

The rapid forms of dismantlement concerning more and more contemporary fabrics, industrial or not, show how the end or the radical modification of the use of a place inevitably jeopardize its development and conservation by causing processes of wear and tear which, in the course of time,

worsen. "Since time immemorial things get consumed and become worn-out, but in the production-consumption cycle which cannot be interrupted they are designed so that they will fast deteriorate." (Galimberti, 2003). Such a fast deterioration requires a rethinking of the functions and uses inherent in such contexts: contemporary fabrics are, therefore, destined to change quickly, they are subject to overwriting, additions and cancellations and they disappear, change their use or remain 'empty spaces'. The industrial space, in particular, is defined thanks to the overlapping of different times, where the cyclical nature of modifications, abandonments and reuses becomes construction matrix of the space itself.

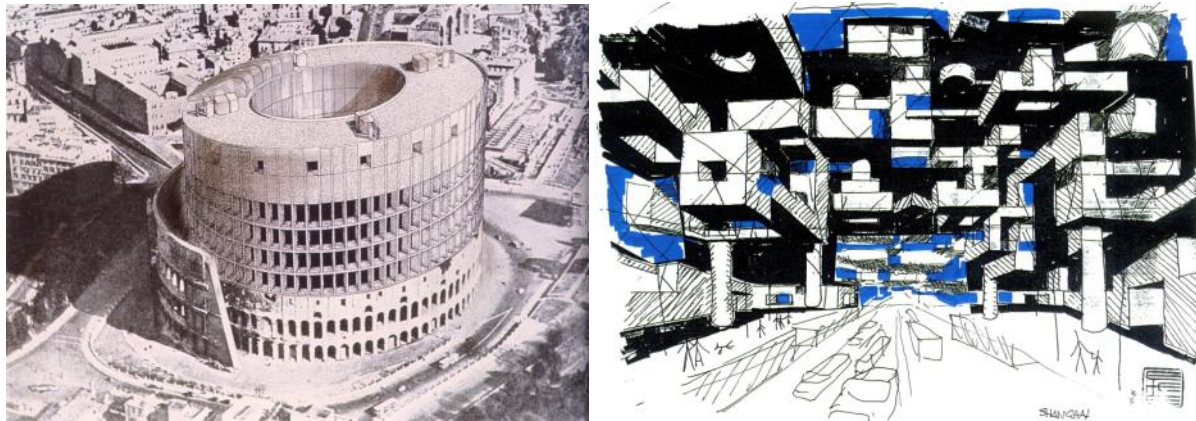


Figure 3-4. Superstudio, Continuous Monument; Yona Friedman, Ville Spatiale

The cyclical nature of the processes of modification, densification and rarefaction goes through the entire history of architecture: it is therefore possible to know the deep roots of the current tools of transformation of contexts in decline. "Each thing comes from something: it is exactly this concatenation and continuity of experiences that ensures their mobility and openness" (Martí Aris, 1994), argues Martí Aris describing the evolution and hybridization of different architectural types. Many urban artifacts are the witness of continuity, layering and reuse typical of the contemporary city (let's think about the theater of Arles or the Palace of Diocletian in Split), but what is interesting is to see how actions of densification and rarefaction were also used in latest design experiments. For example, those conducted by Superstudio in the late Seventies show the utopian character of the processes of overwriting of the existing: the raising of the Coliseum provides the 'completion' of the existing structure which is preserved in its entirety. At the same time, Yona Friedman imagines a raised grid which is overwritten to the existing city, defining a new space for the organization of urban activities. Beyond the utopian character, the processes of overwriting and reuse show the fixed and permanent nature of these tools of the project, necessary today in the modification of the tissues in a state of decay and neglect. The considerations conducted on the theoretical nature of the processes of densification and rarefaction allow us to apply these tools to industrial contexts, in particular, to the case study of Aubervilliers, the subject of some experimentations of theoretical and planning nature concerning the types of industrial disposal and reuse.

3. AUBERVILLIERS: A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCTION AND CITY

The text captures and describes the importance of Aubervilliers' context as an interesting case of transformation and reconversion of an industrial fabric partially in dismantlement. Aubervilliers represents, in fact, a decisive example to understand the different scalar relationships existing in the current processes of industrial dismantlement. In addition, the case shows how the complexity of the

ongoing phenomena of dismantlement requires us to look with renewed attention at the industrial support and at the soil on which artifacts are setting up as a tool of planning survey. In Aubervilliers disintegration and soil pollution appear as one of the crucial tiles in order to recover this territory. The simultaneous presence of interventions of reconversion and recovery identifies a certain vivacity in the industrial context in question, which is accompanied by an apparent condition of decay, abandonment and disintegration. Therefore, how to intervene in a field highly compromised by various degrees of abandonment?

The industrial area of Aubervilliers lies to the north of the urban fabric of Paris, just beyond the Boulevard Périphérique, in the agglomeration called Plaine Commune. It is a territory that "after having been, during thirty years, Europe's biggest industrial area, has become the biggest brownfield with the crisis of the 1970s" (Angeron et al., 2006). With these words is defined the context of the Plaine Commune in the magazine *Espaces et Sociétés* in 2006, which highlights the intricate roots which hide the advance of abandonment in this productive area. In Aubervilliers' industrial fabric are located approximately 2077 firms over an area which extends for about 400 hectares. The case study investigates the conditions of the productive fabric starting from the Boulevard Périphérique until the Stade de France, that is to say, a relevant extension within the morphology plant of the city.

The growth and the evolution of Aubervilliers' context need a reflection on the characters of the industrial fabric, in particular, starting from the 1870s it was witnessed the progressive densification of Saint Denis' area, which was made possible by the development of industrial settlements, predominantly chemical plants, which marked, in fact, the evolution of this urban fragment. Industrial development has contributed to draw a disordered landscape, often disjointed, unable to build stable relationships between the various industrial artifacts settled in the plain. Over the last twenty years, the conditions of Aubervilliers' context have drastically changed: the ongoing processes of dismantlement and abandonment, generated both by the recent economic downturns and by the change of the forms of industrial production, have transformed the character of the productive space in a place of abandonment and decay, not only urban but also social and physical. The scale and the grandeur of the industrial products have contributed to define an autonomous enclosure, separate from the urban environment, in which different times of dismantlement and abandonment ensue and overlap.

The objective of the research is to describe the extent and the complexity of the observed processes of decline, which highlight that change of scale in the phenomena of disposal to which we referred at the beginning of the text. Such a dismantlement appears capillary and affects punctual fragments of fabric within broader productive extensions, indeed, no more only urban voids, but also gaps and tiny spaces, seem to be involved in these processes. The forms of reuse, almost spontaneous, which are changing Aubervilliers' context show how the area keeps a strong productive identity, as historical memory of its past, able to intertwine with the addition of residential structures and spaces for the city.

3.1. Telling dismantlement: methodology of the scientific research

The research starts from a field survey carried out during a year (from October 2012 on), in which various stages of transformation and modification of Aubervilliers' industrial landscape have been documented. The work of design survey initially described the existing forms and types with which the industry has built productive soils so as to experiment possible discrete transformations able to act on these contexts. In the early descriptive phases, the study found the conditions of the actual industrial fabrics, capturing coexistence and plurality of different times which have an impact on the territory and which constitute a premise to forms of intervention and reconversion of different

character. The temporal variable becomes the lens through which we have chosen to observe the industrial scenario of Aubervilliers and its (future or possible) transformations: to different times of abandonment respond different design strategies which identify Aubervilliers' industrial tissues as a resource in the future.

Following a series of visits and some analyses, the research examines the most appropriate forms to describe the context in such a rapid transformation, as well as the possible design strategies necessary to envisage new scenarios in Aubervilliers' fabric. In this sense, the design strategies which will be explained do not take the form of a completed and defined project nor they build new objects, but rather they present some possible ways of intervention on weak and compromised tissues. The industrial fabric is a matter of design and a space in mutation, asking to preserve its characters. Design strategies show how degrees of densification and punctual insertion of new structures can intertwine to forms and degrees of rarefaction or demolition able to free the soil, when this is irreparably compromised.

Going through the spaces between the industries in disuse and the artifacts already converted in Aubervilliers, it can be grasped a deep state of uncertainty, instability and discontinuity, not so much in the construction of the built space, which sometimes appears too saturated, but in customs, values and memories of places which disappear by parts, suddenly interrupting their activities and becoming ruins. The methodology followed in the development of the case study wants to observe with a critical eye the processes of industrial dismantlement, catching, in particular, the evolution of the changes affecting these areas. For these reasons, a first descriptive reading of the characters of the place is followed by interpretations of uses and times which constitute this fragment of city, in order to develop design strategies able to show possible future scenarios of development and conversion of these areas.

3.2. Stories, forms and times of dismantlement

The necessary premise to understand the context of Aubervilliers is to abandon the classic visions related to industrial landscapes which spread around the Eighties in Europe, where the melancholy and fascination of space in ruin have slowed or prevented strong processes of modifications. Aubervilliers is more than this: it is a land in crisis, a set of fragments devoid of connections, an abandoned, degraded, impracticable space and a discontinuous suburbs. It is, moreover, a degraded and polluted soil, more and more an expression of that 'crisis' which, although it seems to leave no concrete traces, it erodes soils and structures. The dismantlement caused processes of punctual corrosion of artifacts and fabrics, when productive activities end their functions, tissues disappear, interrupt, causing short circuits and discontinuities. Are there different times which cross Aubervilliers and how much can the temporal variable help to describe new forms of disposal?

A time of abandonment concerns all the spaces in which disposal acted more harshly, making it difficult to envisage forms of conversion, so urban and industrial areas, with an unrecognizable settlement principle, manifest the conditions of a 'no-return dismantlement'. At any time it exists possible planning strategies designed to enhance recovery and reuse. Besides, abandonment and obsolescence recall scenarios of rarefaction, where the need to free and recover spaces occupied by fragments and ruins is seeable. The demolition represents an important form of compensation, able to eliminate obsolete and polluted forms and facilities. Aubervilliers' context is, besides, marked by fabrics and artifacts in a wait state: these are places abandoned in recent times which await forms of recovery. In this sense, it is possible to imagine forms of recovery thanks to processes of partial consolidation which are starting next to others of selective demolition.

There is also a time which we could define as the time of modification which concerns those fragments already subjects to more or less radical transformation processes. It is possible to catch the vivacity of a fabric which presents a series of ongoing processes of densification and reuse, able to act on existing buildings. Some artifacts have undergone processes of recovery and reuse even with the introduction of new types of entrepreneurs previously unrelated to these territories. It is a vivacity which concerns not only the artifacts, but also the redefinition of characters and forms of productive activities in Aubervilliers. These activities are, in fact, partially replaced by tertiary ones related to trade and storage of goods, or scientific research, foreshadowing a deep mix of uses which also includes the construction of residential structures able to encourage the return to some forms of *mixité* in an area which has been, for decades, of mono-functional matrix. Overall, it seems to capture a progressive expansion of the niches and segments of different activities: these processes appear profoundly and qualitatively different from the changes induced by the previous stages of dismantlement. Aubervilliers' productive context tells today a different story, in which it is called into question the relationship between productive activity and space. In Aubervilliers' area it is possible to perceive embryonic territorial platforms which align a variety of entrepreneurs who are difficult to sort by the usual distinctions between large and small ones.



Figure 5-6. Aubervilliers, identity of industries: time of abandonment and waiting time

If previously the large size of the industry represented its power and productive capacity, today those extensions must be downsized and reconfigured because they must integrate different smaller spaces within large structures by now abandoned. Aubervilliers told that history made up of large companies which would settle there and profited from the proximity with similar productive structures. However, this network has been gradually used up. Modification which concerns, as mentioned, the reuse of existing facilities and the new configuration in productive spaces, is accompanied by a time of regeneration, which concerns contexts in which there are interventions with new constructions of settlements of residential or public nature. The transformation takes place, in this case too, through punctual insertions of new spaces which coexist with the industrial memories. Tiny interventions are able to reconstitute quality and to change the perception of the surrounding space. In this sense, rarefaction and densification follow one another, the liberation of the land from ruins and remains is followed by new interventions which densify the interstitial voids left by dismantlement. Finally, Aubervilliers' context suggests the presence of a further phase, a time over the current and documented disposal. Buildings already subject to processes of recovery and reuse can be characterized by a second phase of recycling, following further alterations or changes of the economic and social conditions which made a readjustment of forms and spaces of production

necessary. Aubervilliers shows, therefore, how the repetition of several cycles of life can extend use and activity of industrial products. In this context, abandonment and decline represent only a phase in the long life of a building, but they do not constitute its end.

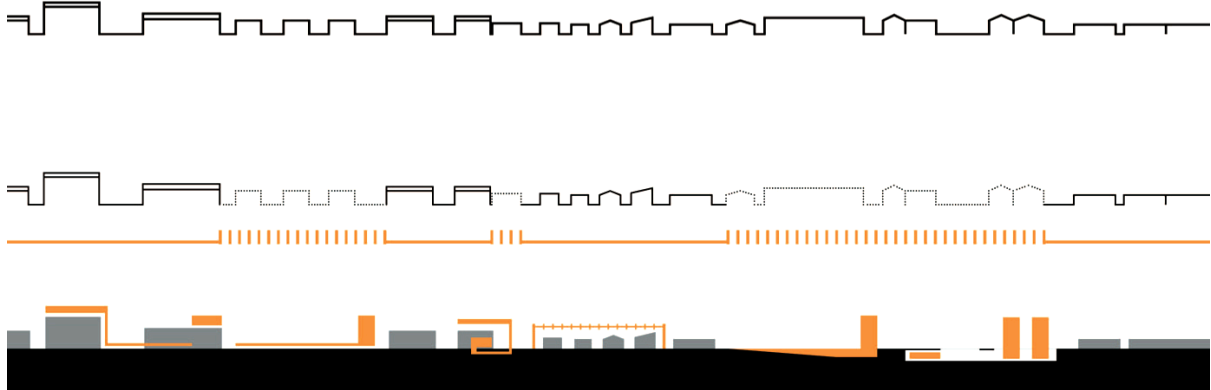


Figure 7. Aubervilliers, intervention strategies on industrial tissue: densification and rarefaction

3.3. New cycles of life and industrial support for Aubervilliers' fabric

Aubervilliers' case tells a new condition compared to what has already been seen in projects of reuse in the latest years, in which industrial fabrics are recycled and transformed again, keeping, at the same time, their industrial character. The forms of recycling concern both industrial fabrics and artifacts and need to imagine scenarios of modification in which degrees of rarefaction and consolidation intertwine defining new conditions and new cycles of life. The complexity of Aubervilliers' context makes it necessary to imagine different forms of intervention in this highly compromised and polluted area. For these reasons, the recovery processes cannot be limited to an action on the product, as independent structure, but they must interact with technological supports, infrastructures and energy which describe the industrial context. Decadence and degradation of Aubervilliers' supports and soils constitute a deep wound, which requires processes of rehabilitation in order to restore possible conditions of future development.

"Today, the condition of risks seems inevitable. Any territory is fraught with localized or global risks. Safe places and, consequently, places address the risks that we do not want to share no longer seem to exist" (Giannotti et al., 2012). There are, therefore, no places devoid of risks, environmental or of any other nature, as stated by Paola Viganò, when it is necessary to ensure the safety and the consolidation of fragile territories. Only through these processes of recovery it will be possible to determine a rediscovered continuity between artifacts and industrial spaces. We have to look at the product, therefore, as part of a productive fabric in which soil is a crucial element in prolonged life cycles. The construction of equipped soils, able to ensure the presence of infrastructure and service networks, appears necessary to facilitate interventions of effective modification in degraded areas. Industrial supports, such as those of Aubervilliers, show how there are nowadays punctual and interstitial substitutions which take place in conditions of instability and which try to cope with a progressive crumbling of soil itself.

4. OPEN CONCLUSIONS AND NEW SCENARIOS

The investigation into Aubervilliers' fabric opens doubts and profound issues related to ways and forms of intervention on tissues in disposal, as well as debates on the future of vast lands strongly exploited for industrial production. In particular, the history of Aubervilliers shows the state of crisis

of a whole territory, which manifests in all its violence and shows the differences between dismantlement in the Eighties/Nineties and today.

The text recognizes some future characters necessary to work in the fragments of industrial fabric as tools of the project, especially the need to integrate different skills to control layers and complexities of these areas. In addition to this, we need to reflect on the potentialities of soils as production supports and encourage punctual transformation processes which integrate specific forms of demolition, densification or consolidation.

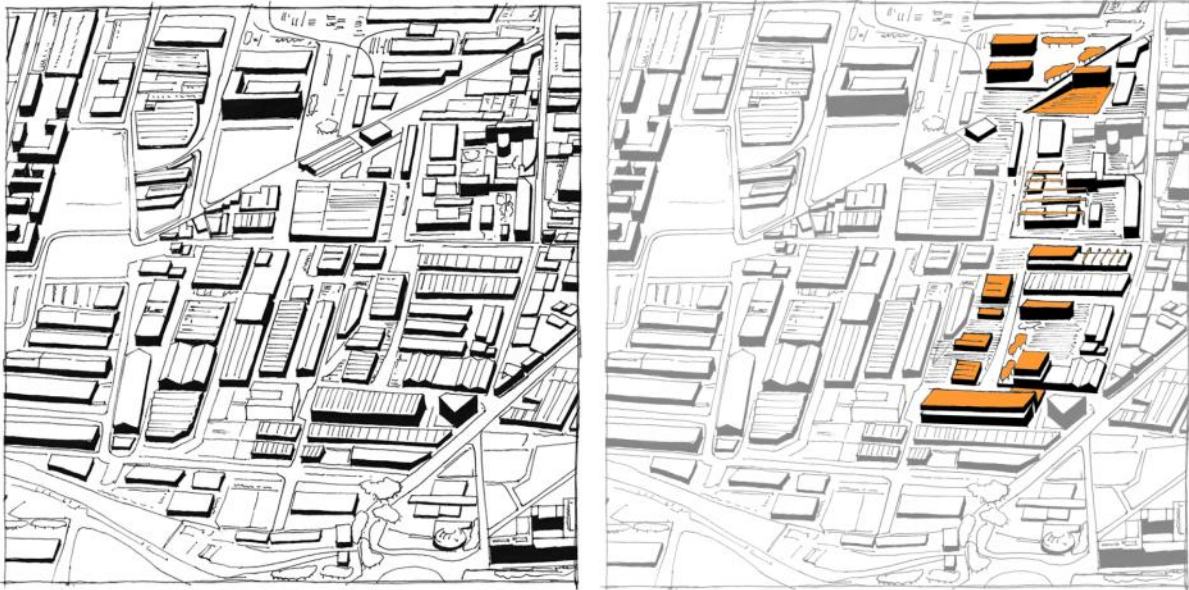


Figure 8. Aubervilliers, scenarios of transformation: possible stories of recycle

Going beyond disposal means studying the diversity of its processes in order to find its future strengths. It also means recognizing the changes in forms and methods of production to ensure new forms of mixité which exceed the mono-functional vision of the industrial space.

Increasingly, industry requires flexible and autonomous spaces for the sharing of forms of knowledge and production, both being material resources to be transformed depending on the future changes associated with production and work. Aubervilliers' case is, in this sense, paradigmatic both because it describes the phenomena of change of production plants and of activities and because it is able to show the first embryonic forms of modification and recycle of industrial space. Through this survey, we perceive possible intervention strategies in which densification or demolition interventions are intertwined. Therefore, we might say that the foreshadowed strategies describe two possible parallel stories of consolidation and rarefaction of the industrial fabric. In addition, Aubervilliers tells the birth of continuous cycles of disposal and reuse to which artifacts are subject in relation to the speed of changes of production spaces.

Recycling cannot be considered as the last step of an item, but rather as a phase in the life cycle of the same object which can, again, be subject to forms of decline and new transformations. Industrial space is a resource for future development and tells complex and stratified stories able to go beyond the current forms of disposal to foreshadow the recovery of fragments of soil and territory.

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6. BIOGRAPHY

Giulia Setti, architect, PhD in Urban and Architectural Design at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (2014), Politecnico di Milano. Her research activity focuses on the topic of urban regeneration and transformation of industrial tissue, whose role is strategic in rethinking the contemporary city. The aim of this research has been to find new design strategies in order to give identity to these enclosures and to recover industrial tissues and architectures. Strategic operations are not only related to space but also to its new uses for production. Therefore, her studies focus on how to make spaces of production more flexible and increase the integration between industries and cities. Currently, she has won a Teaching Fellowship in the Faculty of Architecture at Cept University, Ahmedabad, India, for one year. This experience opens new scenarios in her research activities facing to different contexts and conditions. She has also taught in Design Studio at School of Architecture and Society of Politecnico di Milano and Polo Territoriale di Piacenza since 2011. Moreover, she performs design work both autonomously and through collaborations, her projects having been awarded and published in magazines. She participates in several international seminars and conferences related to the themes of her doctoral research. Giulia Setti has also participated in several international workshops related to the topic of regeneration of industrial and urban tissue.