

Industrial Heritage and Cultural Clusters: More Than a Temporary Affair?

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Abstract

The transformation of industrial heritage buildings into cultural clusters has emerged as a prominent topic of academic research in urban planning, urban studies, heritage conservation, and architecture. Cultural clusters, defined as geographically concentrated cultural activities and organisations, have become a key instrument in urban regeneration, fostering economic growth and cultural development. Despite the benefits that cultural clusters offer in terms of fostering cultural activity, they often prove to be short-lived due to various external factors, including urban regeneration pressures, shifts in policy, and changes in zoning regulations. This thematic issue presents seven case studies that offer insights into the current state of cultural clusters, their transient nature, and the conditions necessary to guarantee their long-term sustainability in industrial heritage sites. The research is particularly relevant in light of the mounting pressure on urban land, where industrial heritage sites are frequently repurposed for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes.

Keywords

adaptive reuse; brownfield development; cultural cluster; cultural development; industrial heritage; sustainability, UNESCO World Heritage; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

The transformation of industrial heritage buildings into cultural clusters has become a prominent topic of academic research across urban planning, urban studies, heritage conservation, and architecture. Cultural clusters, defined as geographically concentrated cultural activities and organisations, are considered crucial for urban regeneration, economic growth, and cultural development (Chapain & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2020;

Mommaas, 2004). Beyond mere spatial co-location, they often develop into dynamic socio-cultural environments that foster creative production (Pratt, 2008). Reusing industrial heritage sites has gained momentum as cities seek to repurpose obsolete spaces, preserve heritage, and stimulate local economies through cultural and creative industries in culture-led regeneration strategies (Evans, 2001; Hutton, 2016).

The debate on creative cities, stimulated mainly by the work of Charles Landry (2000) and Richard Florida (2002), played an important role in this context. The impulses they generated were perceived very differently around the world. Still, their work led to a race in many places to see which city was most attractive for creatives and which conditions should be created through urban development policy (Grodach & Silver, 2013). The critical debates that followed these publications could not prevent astute analyses from being translated clumsily into strategic approaches.

The culture-led regeneration approach is particularly relevant in this context as it positions culture as a catalyst for regeneration processes and is often integrated into wider urban development strategies (Tallon, 2020). This approach has emerged from the need to reposition cities in the post-industrial era and address the decline in their industrial heritage, both economically and physically (Hutton, 2016). In this context, service economies offer new uses for the legacies of the industrial age. This creates opportunities for both the revitalisation of urban districts and the improvement of everyday living conditions since services generally have a much lower impact on neighbouring residential areas. Based on the observation that cultural and creative uses sometimes arise in a transitional area between the commercial and non-commercial sectors, although it is uncertain to what extent they offer profitable business models, it is understandable that they are spatially formed as niche uses in obsolete existing buildings. With their gritty charm, they seemed almost predestined to serve as both a setting for appropriation by and a stage for the diverse uses of creative milieus (Shaw, 2013).

While these spaces provide fertile ground for cultural activity, allowing for low barriers to entry, adaptability, and experimentation, they are often short-lived due to urban regeneration pressures, policy shifts, or zoning changes (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2023; Gainza, 2018). At the same time, operating under short-term leases limits long-term planning for cultural production and community engagement and makes them vulnerable to economic and political shifts.

As urban regeneration progresses, rising property values in former industrial areas often attract commercial developers, threatening to displace cultural clusters that rely on affordable rents. This cycle complicates the efforts of cultural organisations to establish themselves and sustain their activities. It highlights the “tensions between the use value” of brownfield sites “for cultural experimentation and their potential commercial value” (Colomb, 2012, p. 138).

What planning practices would sustain cultural activities, while managing the tensions that these spaces can generate? This crucial question has often been overlooked in the enthusiastic discourse on the potential of creative clusters and is the focus of this thematic issue. We approach the topic in a broader sense, asking first of all to what extent creative clusters create adaptable content for the respective former industrial sites that they reuse, even over short periods of use. The structural conditions, the use requirements, the urban environment, the history of use, and the identity of the site all play a role here; that is to say, precisely those aspects that contribute to the value of the cultural heritage of an industrial site. A discussion of cultural clusters and their appropriateness in a particular location therefore cannot be separated from the question of how to deal with

the industrial heritage. It is thus necessary to examine the value attributed to certain cultural clusters, as well as the extent to which their transient nature can be considered an inherent feature of creative networks or whether their existence at the location in question should be defended in the medium to long term against real estate and other challenges. Doing so would also require a thorough examination of the tools available for this purpose and the governance arrangements that could be considered for stabilisation and support, in partnership with the local government, businesses, philanthropists, and civil society.

2. Scrutinising the Transient Nature of Cultural Clusters: A Case-Based Approach

This thematic issue brings together case studies that shed light on the current state of cultural clusters, their temporary nature, and the conditions needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of industrial heritage sites. This research is particularly timely given the increasing pressure on urban land, where industrial heritage sites are often repurposed for housing, office space, or new industrial uses (Ferm, 2023; Martin & Grodach, 2023). A number of key themes and challenges relating to the development of cultural clusters emerge from the contributions, which inform this wider discussion.

First, all cases emphasise the need for a supportive policy environment, focusing on financial support, regulatory frameworks (e.g., zoning and heritage protection) and political will. Xueying Chen et al. examine the ambivalent top-down support for cultural brownfields in “Pro- and Contra-Coalition: Governing the Rise and Fall of Creative Industrial Parks in China.” Land use regulations often treat cultural clusters as temporary, encouraging their replacement by more profitable activities as rent differentials widen. The reuse of industrial sites is tightly controlled by state authorities and agencies, creating opposing coalitions: local actors advocating for cultural uses and state authorities favouring economic redevelopment. The economic valuation of land often outweighs heritage protection or cultural development.

Uwe Altröck’s article “Laissez-Faire or Sensitive Policymaking: The Legacy of Creative Clusters on Brownfield Sites in Berlin” offers a historical perspective on brownfield development in Berlin since the 1970s, tracing shifts in policy motivations and support for bottom-up cultural clusters. While early efforts were publicly driven, private sector involvement has increased in recent years. Despite an abundance of vacant industrial sites, these are now mainly located outside the city centre. Altröck points out that although policy has been inconsistent, many initiatives have benefited from public support. It is only in the last decade that a more decisive land use policy has emerged, focusing on the retention of land in public ownership.

Staying in Berlin, Janet Merkel’s “Spatial Politics of Cultural Production: Negotiating Workspaces and Resisting Displacement at Industrial Heritage Sites in Berlin” explores recent political efforts to develop new cultural workspaces. Her analysis of a failed case for a permanent, publicly owned site of cultural production reveals several key issues. While the planning process successfully established governance and funding models that ensured collective use and decision-making, the financial costs of renovation, operation, and maintenance ultimately led the government to abandon negotiations with stakeholders, illustrating the difficulties of balancing cultural preservation with economic and operational viability.

A second recurring theme is the call for participatory governance models that involve a wider range of stakeholders in the planning, governance, and management of cultural clusters at industrial heritage sites. For example, Matilde Ferrero et al. argue for wider participation in the planning of heritage sites in

“Industrial Heritage and Citizen Participation: The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ivrea, Italy.” They stress the importance of including the perspectives of young people as they will be the future custodians of these sites. Similarly, in “Assessing Industrial Heritage Through Collaborative Counter-Mapping: A Case Study of Salts Mill, UK,” Wenyan Jin and Jiayi Jin call for more inclusive stakeholder engagement and dialogue between local communities, site managers, and steering committees. They argue that this is crucial for developing revitalisation strategies that balance the needs of different stakeholders.

Both Chinese case studies highlight the limited opportunities for participatory decision-making despite the efforts of various groups to advocate for alternative approaches to managing creative clusters at former industrial sites. This leads to a third theme: the debate over the value of industrial heritage. A key tension emerges in public discourse between the potential for real-estate development—driven by the value of listed buildings and successful revitalisation—and the cultural values embodied in heritage protection measures such as building listings and world heritage site management plans. In “Industrial Heritage and Pathways for Cultural-Creative Development in Bamberg, Germany,” Heike Oevermann et al. discuss how such a designation can divert attention away from industrial heritage and its potential role within the city.

Xiaohong Tan and Uwe Altröck illustrate the most extreme example of this conflict in “Resistance to Being Listed Industrial Heritage? The Conflicts and Dilemma of Heritage-Making During Land Banking in Guangzhou.” They describe attempts to push for demolition before sites can be listed as industrial heritage, a practice common in several contexts. However, adaptive reuse strategies that integrate cultural and creative elements can sometimes prevent this outcome.

These discussions also raise the question of whether the gap between heritage conservation discourses—often informed by cultural studies—and the utility value, adaptability, and appropriate degree of transformation in the reuse of industrial buildings is insurmountable. This tension poses significant challenges in reconciling heritage conservation with practical regeneration.

A fourth theme running through the articles is the need for new methodological approaches to the study of cultural clusters at industrial heritage sites. Wenyan Jin and Jiayi Jin, for example, explore how user perspectives shape debates about the future of repurposed spaces, focusing on the affective atmospheres created by industrial materiality. However, the limitations of participatory approaches need to be acknowledged, particularly the tension between profit-driven real-estate interests and heritage conservation. While these approaches offer heuristic value in exploring strategies for managing industrial heritage, questions remain about their integration into urban regeneration processes.

Future research should include more historical contextualisation and build on decades of experience in redeveloping industrial buildings. As Uwe Altröck’s study of Berlin suggests, examining the influence of economic cycles on the creative reuse of industrial sites could inform strategic urban planning. Understanding the broader urban dynamics and interactions between individual projects and their environments, with the factors driving both upgrading and devaluation, could provide insights into the long-term management of reused industrial heritage sites.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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