

RUINATION DESIGN

Experimental preservation and archaeology of the contemporary past, based on art exhibition design in a modernist-post-socialist context.

Tomasz Świetlik, Michał Kulesza

Introduction

This article presents an experimental approach to dealing with modern ruins and the preservation of the contemporary past. In particular, we analyse a project of exhibition design commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2018 to Tomasz Świetlik studio (currently ŚŃŃ studio) where Michał Kulesza contributed as a part of a design team. The exhibition titled *Neighbours* was exceptional in two ways. First, the location of the exhibition, unknown until late into the project, turned out to contain a surprisingly complex and under-documented architectural and social legacy. Second, the significant size of the curatorial team and the collaborative spirit surrounding the process allowed us to closely engage with the exhibition's artistic content and use this position to augment our design.

The commissioned exhibition was a part of the tenth instalment of the Warsaw Under Construction Festival (WWB), an annual festival dedicated to the city of Warsaw. It uses contemporary art and research to bring the discussion about the city's changes and challenges to a wider audience. While exploring new themes in urban discourse the festival also explores the city itself by changing its venue to a new unexpected location every year. The title of the WWB 2018 edition - *Neighbours* referred to the changing demographics of the Polish capital and the growing contribution of the Ukrainian community to the city life, and the challenges they were facing.

In chapter 1, we provide a background of the project and explore the idea of the modern ruin through the lens of heritage management, anthropology, and archaeology of the contemporary past. We bring examples of novel interpretations of heritage practices and draw conclusions for our work. In chapter 2, we share findings from the on-site survey and describe how the conceptualization of these findings contributes to the advancement of our design. In chapter 3, we describe the curatorial concept for the exhibition, institutional arrangements surrounding the design process and elements of social and historical context relevant to understanding the project. We also share our methodology of working with complex contemporary art exhibitions. In chapter 4, we present how research and theories described in previous chapters, compounded within the design process and what were the final design outcomes. Chapter 5 concludes the presented argument.

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Figure 1. Cepelia pavilion, 1966. source: fotopolska.eu



Figure 2. Cepelia pavilion, 1967. source: fotopolska.eu

1. Modern Ruins

The 10th edition of WWB was located in an abandoned modernist icon called *Cepelia*. As found, the building was subdivided into a number of disjointed spaces, with most of them being vacated. Abandoned spaces were rented to the museum together with a plentitude of interior decorations that amassed over decades. These were said to be of no value to the owner and destined to be one day all removed, which left them fully to our discretion.

The building, however, did not possess an up-to-date survey, and the historical documentation was incomplete. Given the immensity of the transformations the building underwent, as well as the feeling of importance and richness of the story that those transformations carried, led us to conduct a study of the history of the building and an on-site survey of undocumented changes. While accepting this commission, we agreed not to know what will be the venue of the exhibition and what extra work it will require. We see our research and survey as a form of extended mandate, a planned but still unknown part of work, a design risk.

What are ruins?

The idea of the modern ruins has attracted some attention in the past two decades, particularly as part of a broader “turn to things” in anthropology and social sciences in general (Bennett 2009; DeSilvey 2017; Ingold 2013). Notably, these developments led to the emergence of the new sub-discipline of archaeology, that is the archaeology of the contemporary past (Harrison and Schofield 2010). We look into theories and

concepts behind those developments as we see them well suited to elucidate our approach.

Modern ruins present themselves as immediately ambiguous and problematic. How to be modern and a ruin at the same time? More often than not they are neither of them, rather they are in the process of ruination. They are somewhere in between two sought-after, glorious states, thus easy to be overlooked or even dismissed (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014). In a paradoxical position for heritage management, the ruins are sacred but the process of their creation - ruination - is deemed intolerable. Therefore, modern ruins often do not meet the aesthetic expectations of a ruin, and can induce the feeling of disgust (Kristeva 2002). Even worse, their presence still tightly linked to a current state and often being witnesses to recent failures, they do not easily lend themselves to become so-called *lieux de mémoire*, a fabricated site of memory with carefully constructed meanings (Nora 1989). The preservation practices often favour the exceptional objects over their mediocre and generic counterparts, thus creating a distorted historical image (Koolhaas 2010).

Becoming a ruin relates to the acquisition of a new function, that is being part of the heritage. In a utilitarian view, the heritage derives its justification as a resource - to be consumed or extracted either economically or politically e.g. tourism or identity building. Becoming a heritage is a way to domesticate what was once left outside of the public realm, the raw, the rough, the devastated. Often with a deliberate aestheticization and (hi-)story telling (Smith 2006; Lowenthal 1985).

A critical reading of this approach leads some scholars to reject this line of thinking as top-down, selective and reductionist (DeLanda 2006). The first challenge comes from feminist, post-colonial and subaltern studies as a way to challenge dominant historical narratives and broaden the interpretative spectrum (Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994). The second challenge, at which we are looking more closely in this text, comes from the things themselves in line with the paradigm of new materialism (Bennett 2009; Coole and Frost 2010). In reference to the ruins, it can mean a suspension of the strict categorisation like heritage or usefulness and putting more attention on things as they are, their agency, their affective effects upon encounter and involuntary material memory. In this view, the material landscape is in its entirety a 'diverse and palimpsestal assemblages' (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014), where every object is an amalgamation of histories.

How do ruins work?

Loss of function, abandonment and ruination all contribute to the erasure of history-preserving matter (Edensor 2005). Fading colours, deforming shapes, and enigmatic old tools all fall victim to this processes. But they also open new possibilities. Loss of function allows for a study not possible during the state of operation (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014). Like a dead body that lends itself to an autopsy, allowing for a careful study of life when the life is gone. Ruination can also be seen as a form of self-excavation where decomposition can reveal hidden layers and complexities of an object (Edensor 2005).

Modern ruins, unlike still useful and aesthetically acceptable

objects, give face to the part of history that is usually forgotten (Buchli and Lucas 2002). In their uniqueness, they often remind us of failures, mistakes, things marginalised and pushed out of acceptable existence. Being young for a ruin means also that it might be associated with a much wider set of personal memories, including the times before ruination. These serve as a limiting factor for construction of coherent hegemonic narratives, a reality check.

How to work with ruins?

Heritage practices deal with the useless and the abandoned mostly through the lens of supposed other forms of usefulness like historical rootedness and belonging (Solli et al. 2011; Harrison 2013). There is little attention placed on the inherent value of things, their ability to be as they are, not be there for us (Bennett 2009). Taking seriously otherness of things is therefore a prerequisite for a shift toward a broader concept of heritage. Selective and discriminatory process of writing history could be supplemented or even replaced by more creative approaches where things can also be left to speak for themselves.

Aesthetics of heritage also often play a limiting role in engagement with modern ruins. Turning away from aesthetic expectations of frozen in time, purified artefacts and embracement of the aesthetic value of ruination, as well as new artistic and experimental approaches can open new ways of engagement with history. Some notable artistic explorations of heritage and memory of the recent past include works by Gordon Matta-Clark, Rachel Whiteread, Jorge Otero-Pailos. While the full analysis of their artistic production falls beyond

the scope of this text, it is worth noting that they all share direct engagement with things (often buildings) in the process of ruination and they transcend the aesthetics of *lieux de mémoire* through innovative site specific methods.

Among social sciences, archaeology, based on obvious limitations of its subject study, offers an approach with unparalleled attention to things. Archaeology, mostly occupied with objects without any textual layer, goes deeper into understanding objects as they are, stripped from our misleading expectations of what we want them to be witnesses of (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014). Archaeology of the contemporary past can help us fill the gaps where there is no text to describe things, but also crucially can let us see things anew without preconceptions.

In his works Victor Buchli provides examples of using traditional archaeological methods to study the recent past as a science focused on the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, to reveal new perspectives on modern societies (Buchli and Lucas 2002; Buchli 2021). Generally, in an interdisciplinary spirit, it was argued that material culture studies are not restricted to ethnography, but could be broadened with the contributions of history, archaeology, geography, design, and literature (Miller 1998). This holistic approach allows for a capture of the object more comprehensively and even to influence contemporary society through the results. Buchli and Lucas (2002) call this approach archaeology of the future and define it as the active engagement of archaeologists in the materialisation of the present, in a way comparable to designers' work.



Figure 3. Inventory

2. Excavation

Our own survey followed a quasi-archaeological methodology. We uncovered changes that were hastily built on top of each other, we opened up space without entrances, looked for hidden architectural gems and documented all our findings. At the same time, we researched historical sources to understand the context of Cepelia's construction and the process of transformation that accompanied its deterioration to the current state. Our aim was not to look for lost modernist legacy, but to take every found material trace with equal care, regardless of its age, origin, state of ruination, and impulsive aesthetic judgement.

We discovered that over the years the building acquired a layered structure of changes, remodelings, use adaptations, quirky decorative additions, and advertisement infrastructure. We documented and systematised our findings as four distinct layers.

Layer of identities

Cepelia was designed by Zygmunt Stępiński and was completed in 1966 as a part of the bigger urban rearrangement in the city centre. The Building was located right next to the intersection of the two main city avenues but with spacious public space surrounding it. Cepelia served as the display and trade pavilion of the *Central Folk and Artistic Industry*. (abbreviated Cepelia - from which comes the common name of the pavilion).

Cepelia was a state founded association of craftsmen

cooperatives, set up shortly after the Second World War. Its aim was to promote a nationalistic style rooted in Polish folk culture through a variety of products, some handmade, some adapted to larger scale manufacturing. With the shortage economy and low quality of mass production as a backdrop, Cepelia's products were defining a higher standard of living. The design of the trade pavilion followed the principles of its founding institution. It embodied the unlikely merger of airy, transparent, dynamic, modernistic form with reimagined folklore ornamentation. It was an attempt to cement a nationalistic identity in the new realities of a centrally planned modernising country.

Layer of makeshift

The fall of the socialist system brought privatisation, fragmentation, and often abandonment of state owned enterprises. Cepelia was no different, it was split into 5 different companies that, without state support, quickly became irrelevant.

The trading pavilion maintained its function but only partially. Parts of the building were sold out, which initiated a spiral of uncontrolled changes, divisions of space, and new functions like Internet cafe, xero shop, kiosks and grocery store. The facade of the building was also divided, giving way to competition over ever more eye-catching advertising. New entrances punctured the facade to allow access to newly subdivided spaces.

Division of ownership and poor maintenance inhibited the progressing decay of the building. The solution though was not a renovation but concealment. The building facade was

covered from the outside, and a couple of times over from the inside. The outdated aesthetic of both modernism and folklore gave way to cheap interventions, and their aesthetics of randomness, quickness, and makeshift.

Layer of illusion

In the final incarnation in mid-2000s the building's upper floor turned into a gentlemen's club with a casino, and the underground floor into a nightclub.

Upper floor walls, once fully glazed, were covered from the inside with a layer of kitschy Las Vegas-style ornamentation. Next to slender steel columns dressed up with thick classical forms stood dancing poles. Glossy lacunar ceilings reflected the red carpet and marble-like counter of the bar. The place was designed and thought through yet naive and illusory. Golden surfaces and mirrors lit by the led lights turned the space into a suspended in time capsule. Closed off from the world, concentrated around individual and clandestine pleasures, the building became an antithesis of the original modernist open and communal ideal.

A cruder interior of the nightclub in the basement with bare black walls, though originally just a shop storage, revealed more about the structure of the building than other spaces. And it was less elegant than one might expect. A selection of apparently random decorations coincided in the space. The frivolous patchwork of different floorings too geometrical to be coincidental and patterns of sound-insulating panels on the ceilings created a chaotic atmosphere. White stencilled wall paintings with faces of American pop icons like Madonna

or David Haselhoff stood out even in the gloomy light. Together with a pink flamingo (the club's name) they speak in the language of camp aesthetics about soft power and American cultural hegemony.

Layer of information

With more and more introverted functions, the building's facade began to live its own life. Banners and shop names were added and windows were plastered with endless layers of posters and notices. Overlooking the city's main intersection, a jumbotron higher than the building itself was placed on the roof. Finally, the main body of the building was completely covered in large-scale banners. The facade was reduced to an advertising surface which created a paradox of the building that occupies the most visible and busy location in the capital's city centre yet is totally forgotten and invisible.

We found these layers and the stories they tell fascinating and we wished in a quasi-conservationist approach to preserve and expose them. To do so meant to break the taboo about the aesthetics of early transformation, and to confront visitors with what usually remained hidden, the insights of nightlife culture but also the tangible effects of ruination.

All this was happening in the moment of the ongoing mostly essentialist discussion about the modernist architectural legacy in Poland, and the fight for protection, renovation of buildings and mourning about the irreversible losses (Springer 2022; Krasucki 2015). That discourse also led Cepelia's pavilion (its original modernistic form) to be registered as a monument in February 2019.

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Figure 4. Cepelia pavilion, 1971. source: Polish National Archives



Figure 5. Cepelia pavilion 2017. photo: Piotr Halicki



Figure 6. Cepelia pavilion 2019. source: czarnota.org



Figure 7. Client at Cepelia, 1968, photo: Andrzej Wiernicki

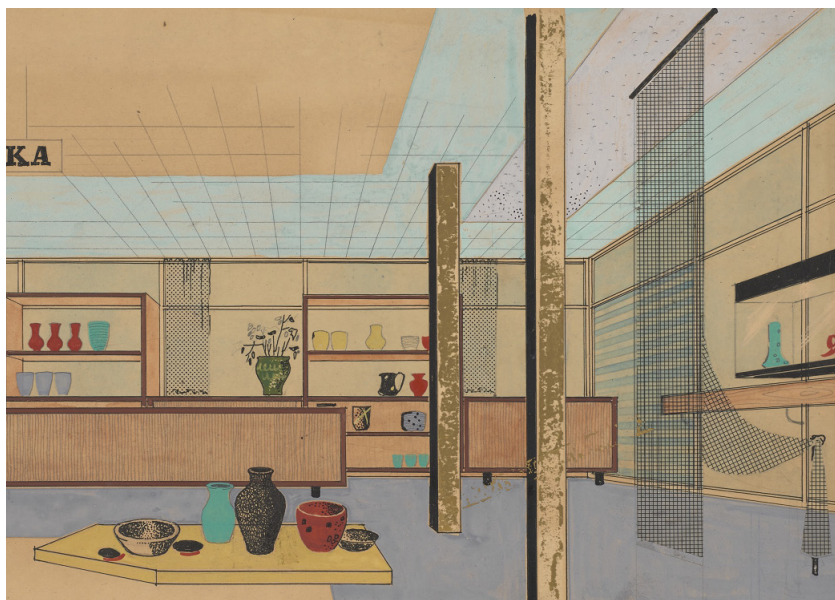


Figure 8. Cepelia pavilion, Interior, 1st floor, Zygmunt Stępiński, 1964-1966. source: Collection of the Museum of Warsaw

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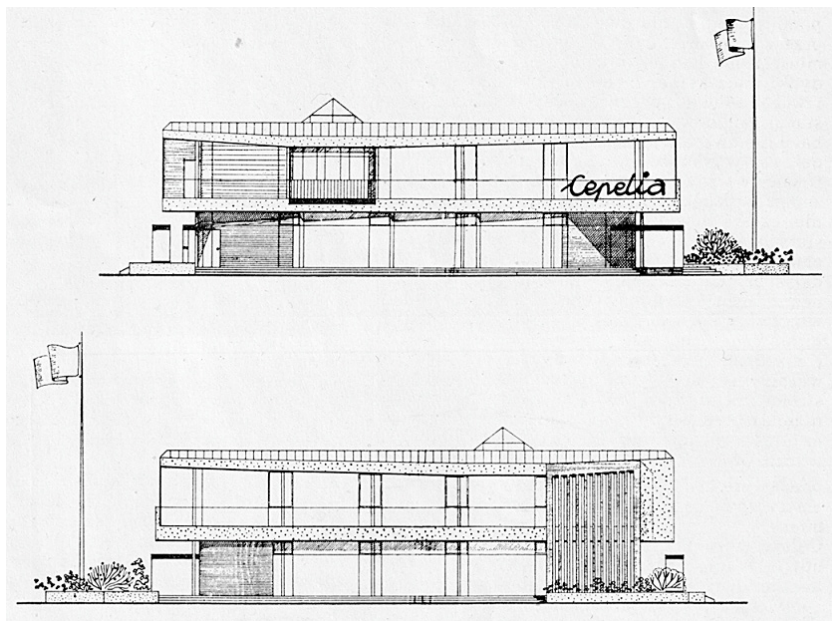


Figure 9. Eastern and Western facades drawing. source: journal *Architektura*, 1966, nr 8/9.



Figure 10. Cepelia Pavilion, view from south. Zygmunt Stepiński, 1964-1966, source: Collection of the Museum of Warsaw



Figure 11. Cepelia pavilion, 1971. source: fotopolska.eu



Figure 12. Cepelia pavilion, 2022. photo: Krystian Dobuszyński



Figure 13. Cepelia pavilion, Interior, 1st floor, 1966, source: Collection of the Museum of Warsaw



Figure 14. Cepelia pavilion, Interior, 1st floor, 2018, photo: Wojtek Radwański

3. Context & Content

The curatorial concept of the exhibition aimed to establish a new frame of reference where the other is rephrased as a *neighbour*, to engage the audience in the process of community-making based on commonalities and proximity. The focus on the Ukrainian nationals was in 2018 both an obvious and surprising choice.

Following the 2014 Maidan Revolution and Russian annexation of Crimea, the flow of Ukrainian migration to Poland and elsewhere took off. Significant demographic shift apparent in the statistical analysis was at the same time less obvious in the discourse. New *neighbours* who were often employed in so-called invisible jobs were not fully present and recognized in urban communities. Yet for the city, whose population remained to a large extent ethnically homogenous since WWII, their arrival marked a notable change in its self-image.

The 2018 WWB was curated by Polish curator Szymon Maliborski together with nine members of Visual Culture Research Center* (VCRC) - an art collective from Kyiv. VCRC is distinguished by its horizontal organisational structure and deliberative decision-making process. This practice influenced not only the internal workings of the curatorial team but also engaged in the same fashion other involved parties, us included. Unlike regular exhibitions where an

* Members of VCRC: Anna Kraweć, Justyna Krawczuk, Ołeksij Radynski, Rusłana Kozijenko, Serhij Kłymko, Wasyl Czerepanyn, Natalia Heszewec, Oksana Briuchowecka, Hanna Cyba

architect is given an exhibition brief that works as a starting point of his or her work, we have been witnessing the emergence of the exhibition's curatorial and artistic vision from the very beginning. This complex set-up, with the multitude of participants, creates an unexpected space for negotiations not possible in more structured projects. The process of co-creation of the exhibition with curators and artists led the design to be not only about the production of space but also about the meanings and narrations based on the interplay between art and architecture.

Through a collection of 46 pieces of conceptual art the exhibition deals with an array of themes like workers' conditions and their economic dependency, issues of collective memory and amnesia, construction and erosion of identities in connection with hastily decommunization and wave of neo-fascist movements, and architectural legacies and conflicts that shape urban life in the state of rapid transformation.

In that context, the choice of Cepelia as a venue for the exhibition is far from accidental. The building belongs to the ill-conceived legacy of socialist architecture that connects Warsaw and Kyiv, and embodies the transformation that took and still takes place in those cities. Moreover, the history of the institution it housed, for better or worse, was deeply invested in the process of constructing identities through material culture (Korduba 2013).

Warsaw as a city provides historically significant context for

working with ruins. After being almost entirely destroyed during World War II, it was rebuilt to the large extent from rubble. The recycled material used in building construction and landscaping is an ever present part of the city's self-image as well as a potent source of discursive reflection on circularity, collective action and material memory (Piątek 2020; Przywara 2023). We see our project as a contribution to Warsaw's long tradition of working with ruins.

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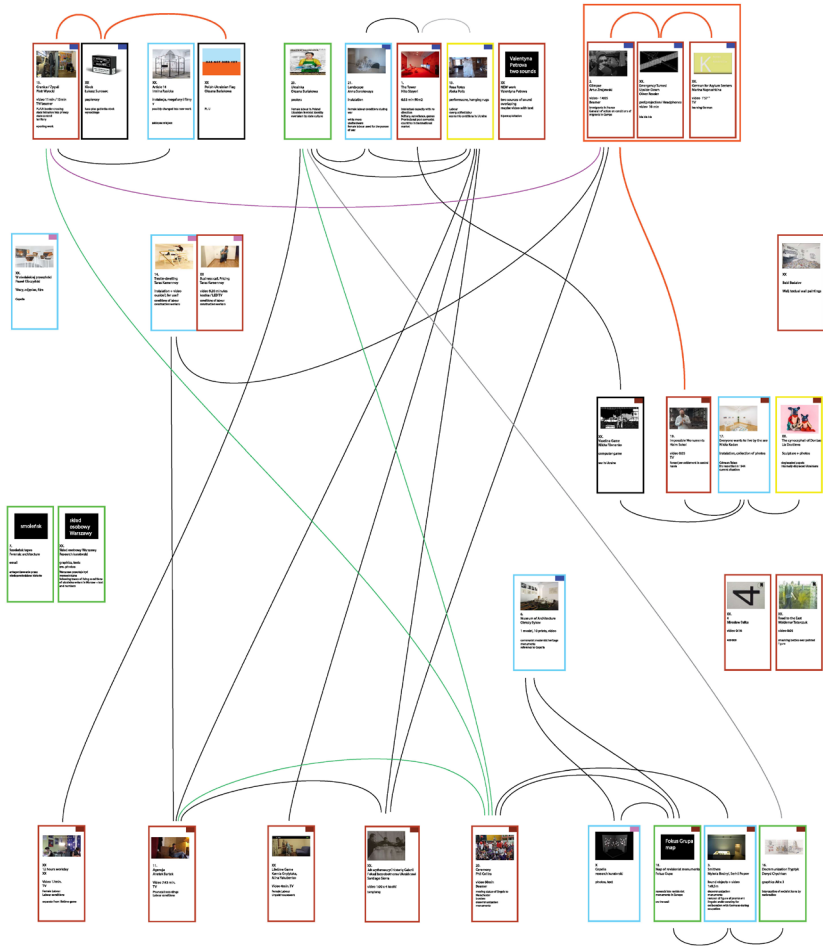


Figure 15. Caption for the diagram

Map of different conceptual links between artworks. Each line and category represents a story that was later transformed into spatial relationships in the exhibition space and/or curatorial text and/or left to be discovered by the curious visitors. This diagram, rather than being a comprehensive source of information on the exhibition, was used as a form of mnemonic device to help us navigate through complex symbolic space.

4. Ruination design

With an understanding of both the building's historical layers and the artistic content of the exhibition, we were able to augment our design process to create a more meaningful backdrop for art and add interpretative depth through involvement of architecture as an artistic/archaeological object in its own right. We uncovered, peeled off, sometimes transformed and relocated pieces of history, making layer manipulation our main design tool. We intervene in the state of ruination not to stop it, but in a way to amplify it.

The exhibition space, turned into a form of archaeological excavation site, brings to the visitors a reflection about the recent past, while carefully manipulated layers create space where artworks can interact according to interpretative frameworks and curatorial concepts.



Figure 16. Curatorial text at the exhibition, 2018. photo: Rita

Following is a selection of interventions that have been made and a rationale behind them.

Roots, bones, ghosts

Fragments of the building were cleared back to reveal their original nationalistic soc-modernistic form from the 1960s. We used these spaces to present artworks that reflect on the architectural heritage, issues of constructed identities and history told through architecture.

The exhibition's opening piece (seen already from the street) by Oksana Briukhovetska (Fig. 17, 27) was a huge mural that blended colours of Polish and Ukrainian flag, and uses a telling phrase, "Has not died yet", that appears in both national anthems. The mural is a commentary on the impact of modern migratory flows on the neighbourhood, with its blending and blurring of populations, and the pursuit of symbolic equality. It also deconstructs the same nationalistic ideas that lied at the heart of the creation of Cepelia.

The story of a so-called *Flying Saucer* (Fig. 19) - an iconic futuro-modernistic building in Kyiv presented throughout the works and research of Oleksiy Bykov (Fig. 20), connecting two capitals in their struggle for recognition and preservation of ill-conceived heritage. The saucer, destined for demolition and replacement by a generic shopping mall, is presented next to stripped to the bare bone deteriorated walls and blade shaped facade detail of the Cepelia.

During our survey of the building we discovered a hidden

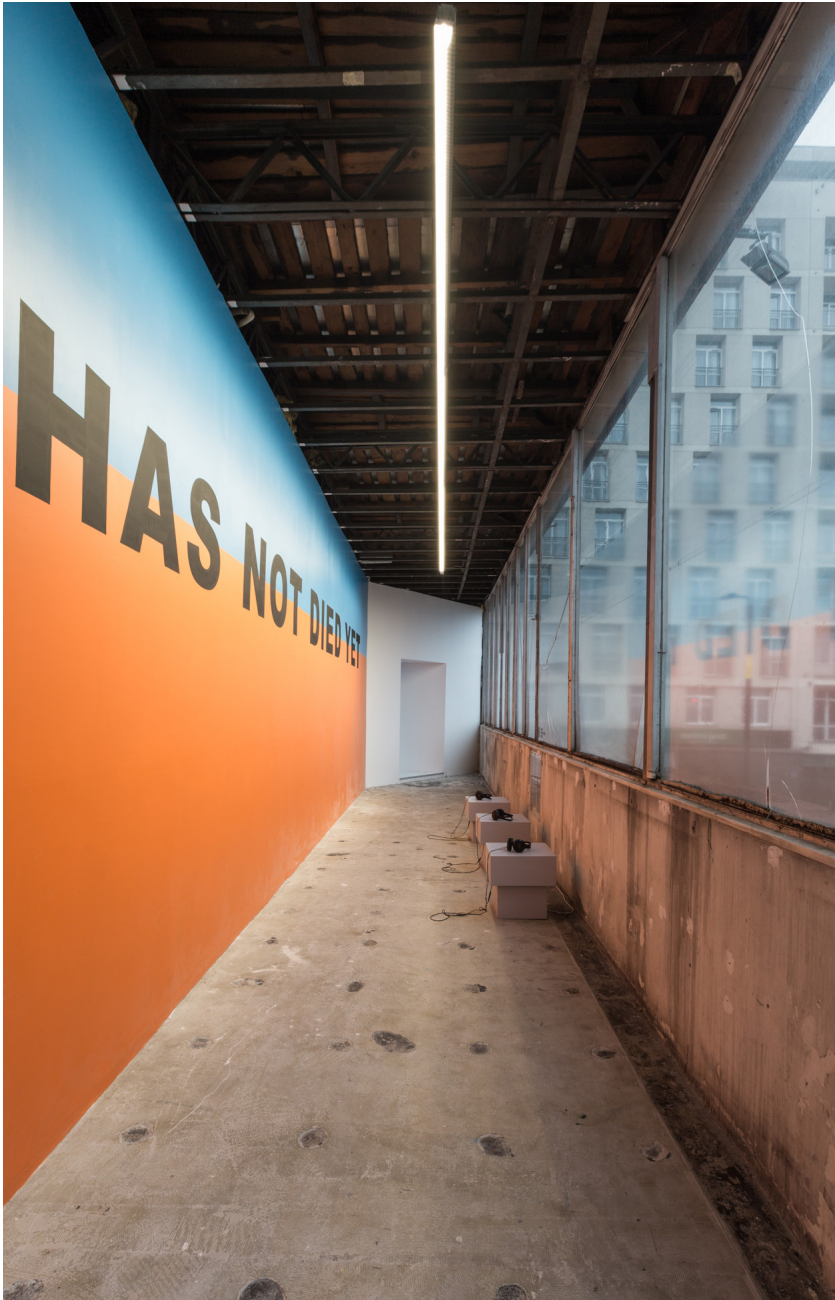


Figure 17. Oksana Briukhovetska, *Polish-Ukrainian Flag*, 2018. photo: Rita



Figure 18. Nikita Kadan, *Everyone wants to live by the see*, 2014. photo: Rita



Figure 19. The Flying Saucer in 1970s. source: National Scientific and Technical Library of Ukraine



Figure 20. Oleksiy Bykov, *Museum of Architecture*, 2018. photo: Rita

skylight completely covered both from the inside and the outside. We decided to bring it back like an architectural ghost to be part of the exhibition. The space underneath was used to present an artwork about Crimea, the legacy and unrealized dreams of its native (ethnic cleansed in 1944) population, Crimean Tatars. In his work Nikita Kadan (Fig. 18) paints dreamed modern Tatar architecture scattered through grassy landscape to bring back the place's forgotten ancestry.

Not what it seems

The former casino main hall was kept with only a handful of adaptations. We designed furniture out of recycled pieces of decoration to match and amplify the place's character. In dim exhibition lights the casino's mirage of prosperity contrasted with the undeniable reality of its makeshift cheap materials. We used this space for artworks that express the discrepancy between the imagined and the factual.

In a group of artworks the promises of economic migration are confronted with the reality of migrant workers living conditions and their state of economic dependency. Taras Kamennyoy's installation (Fig. 21) recreates small architectural objects made by construction workers to sustain their living, while Antek Bartek's video (Fig. 22) documents the process of job search that uncovers the actual, far from legal code, quality of work arrangements.

Three large screens floating in the main space show the work of Hito Steyerl (Fig 23, 24). The immersive animation is a commentary on production of idealised images of violence both in gaming and military training software, a thriving part

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Figure 21. Taras Kamenny, *Trestle-dwelling*, 2018 (foreground), Antek Bartek, Agencja, 2018 (background), photo: Rita



Figure 22. Anna Sorokovya, *Landscape*, 2017. photo: Rita



Figure 23. Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 2015. photo: Rita



Figure 24. Hito Steyerl, *The Tower*, 2015. photo: Rita

of Ukrainian IT sector. Juxtaposed with this work is Anna Sorokovaya's installation *Landscape* (Fig. 22) about realities of civil populations in the times of military conflicts.

Working in liminal space

The Underground level of the Cepelia pavilion has been cleared from the walls, which over time overgrown the space. Yet, we maintained the patchwork of floor styles and marks that remained after the demolished walls to keep the former fragmentation of that space recognizable. On top of that we introduced textile partitions suspended between the floor and the ceiling in clear relation to the original, at some points erratic, building structure.

In an open plan, yet clearly marked by its previous states, and with only ephemeral divisions we placed artworks that speak about the struggle in the liminal space of new social order. The polyphony of critical perspectives from workers



Figure 25. Babi Badalov, wall-painting, 2018. photo: Rita

and feminist, to pacifist movements, represented by different artists such as Lesia Ukrainka, Aleka Polis, Babi Badalov (Fig. 25) respectively filled underground spaces.

Artworks in the central room of the basement took on the issues of the fight for historical narrations. Decommunisation Tryptyk by Davyd Chychkan speaks about the interception of socialist icons by nationalists, and the rise of neo-fascist movements in Ukraine, while in their installation Mykola Rodnyi, Serhii Popov (Fig.26) document the hasty and prone to misunderstandings process of destruction of memorials.

From invisible to transparent

To bring the existence of the Cepelia to public attention and attract visitors to the inside of the building we decided to turn the building from invisible back to transparent. We also cleared the front facade from billboard advertising and placed a passage between the layer of interior decorations



Figure 26. Mykola Rodnyi, Serhii Popov, *Smithers*, 2018. photo: Rita

and the glass. (Fig. 17, 27) We use this space to project an opening piece of the exhibition toward the busy street.

The old layer of sticker signage indicating past functions like “XERO” or “24H” was left on the facade. With the help of graphic designers Maciek Chodźński and Katarzyna Łygońska, we matched with them our own exhibition identification typography, to draw visitors’ attention to the building’s recent history. (Fig. 27)

All art pieces in the exhibition space are supplemented with curatorial texts, but no direct interpretative frames regarding the exhibition design are presented, rather the ruins are left to speak for themselves. Although a lot of thought was put into creation of an interplay between art and the excavation site, we see the unmediated by text exposition and amplification of the ruins and ruination as the key component of our intervention.

With our approach, we directly oppose the ideas that were part of the modernist project behind Creation of Cepelia, with its constructed notions of national aesthetics and identity which uses the heritage as a resource to be exploited if not for profit, then for political means.



Figure 27. Oksana Briukhovetska, Polish-Ukrainian Flag, 2018. photo: Wojtek Radwański

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the showcased design serves as an illustration of an experimental method for addressing modern ruins and preserving the heritage of the contemporary past. It transcends the conventional mandate of exhibition design, that is the creation of space for exhibits, with novel ways of engagement with the context while utilising theories from multiple social sciences.

We drew on the theories surrounding the idea of modern ruin and ruination as a way to question dominant heritage practices. Inspired by the developments in the field of archaeology of the contemporary past we implemented in our research new tools to help us deal with historical complexities of the site. We found excavations and archaeological attention to objects as valuable approaches in the study of the contemporary past.

Our design exemplifies an experimental preservation based on a broader, less discriminatory definition of heritage, that sees all things as historic and worthy of historical consideration. We decided to protect the project site for the duration of the exhibition, but also knowing that it was destined for demolition, we were free to experiment with new approaches, that could be called a ruination design. We followed the idea that history should rather be told than just preserved, and serve as a source of knowledge and reflection rather than mere cause for nostalgia or rejection.

We see such approaches as increasingly relevant, especially

as established cities undergo transformations that render more modern buildings obsolete. As the field of architecture embraces strategies related to the circular economy, architects have the opportunity to view historic materials not only as a material resource but also as historically complex objects. We advocate that the careful consideration and use of these materials can foster conceptually richer architecture.

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