

POST-INDUSTRIAL SYNANTHROPIA. SPONTANEOUS VEGETATION AND ARCHITECTURAL DECAY

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Shihlin Paper Co. is one of the first companies that were founded in the industrialization phase of Taiwan at the beginning of the XX century. Established in 1918 in downtown Taipei City, its main factory became a symbol of progress and economic development. However, as the industrial landscape evolved, the need for modernization and expanded production processes prompted a transformative move in 1990.

The original factory was dismissed, giving way to a new facility in another part of the city. The historic building was left abandoned, a silent witness to the passage of time, inaccessible and untouched for years.

In 2010, the dismissed structure underwent a phase of renovation. Its doors were opened again, and it was turned into a cultural venue. A section of the building became an exhibition space, while another part – featuring an open-air area – was transformed into a café. A third area of the ensemble was involved in a renovation process led by Interbreeding Field, a research and design collective founded by Li Huang Lu. Originally conceived as an educational program at Tainan National University of Arts in Taiwan, where Lu served as an associate professor, Interbreeding Fields was active from 2004 to 2021. The collective's focus on projects and installations aimed to invigorate collective life in urban public spaces within Taipei City (Vercelloni 2005).

The project that they developed for the former Shihlin Paper Factory constitutes a reflection on the building as an aging organism, an environment capable of hosting a multitude of life forms once intensive human presence and functions retreat.

The concrete and brick walls were damaged by the exposure to atmospheric agents, while sections of the roof's metal plates had collapsed, forming openings that allowed natural light to stream into the space. Unavoidably, these apertures, along with the high levels of humidity that characterize Taipei city, created a favourable environment for the flourishing of a diverse array of plants within the factory's previously desolate confines.

Reflecting on the spontaneous nature flourishing on the walls of the abandoned factory brings to mind Chinese art criticism's emphasis on spontaneity (tzu-jan) as a key element of valuable art. Dušan Pajin's insights into landscape design, particularly the use of rocks eroded by water, echo the notion of natural spontaneity embodied in the very fabric of the building (Pajin 1997).

Approaching the space with the idea of establishing a dialogue with the emergent vegetation, Interbreeding Field made a conscious decision not to erase or disrupt the natural spread of greenery.

Wooden pathway and platforms enveloping spontaneous vegetation

In the intervention by Interbreeding Field, the value of spontaneous vegetation within architectural decay is acknowledged and exposed, barycentric to the project. Photo courtesy of Li H. Lu, 2010.



The design, meticulously executed in wood, manifested as a raised pathway from the floor level, accompanied by platforms that explicitly address the topic of birth and decay by being located and oriented towards the phenomenology of birth and decay in this place.

The essence of this project lies in assigning value to the narrative etched during the years of abandonment, breathing new meaning into the clandestine garden that had taken root within the former paper factory. While the exhibition space and bustling café attracted lively crowds, the segment touched by Interbreeding Field's intervention exuded a quiet and contemplative atmosphere. Visitors were immersed in the symbiosis between human design and nature's reclamation, weaving a narrative that transcended the physical reconstruction of a space into an exploration of coexistence.

Interbreeding Field's intervention in the former Shihlin Paper Factory was not merely an operation of redesign of the space; it was an effort to engage in a dialogue with the natural elements that had taken over the space in the absence of human intervention. The wooden structures integrated with the aged elements as a grafting; it became a story of interconnectedness.

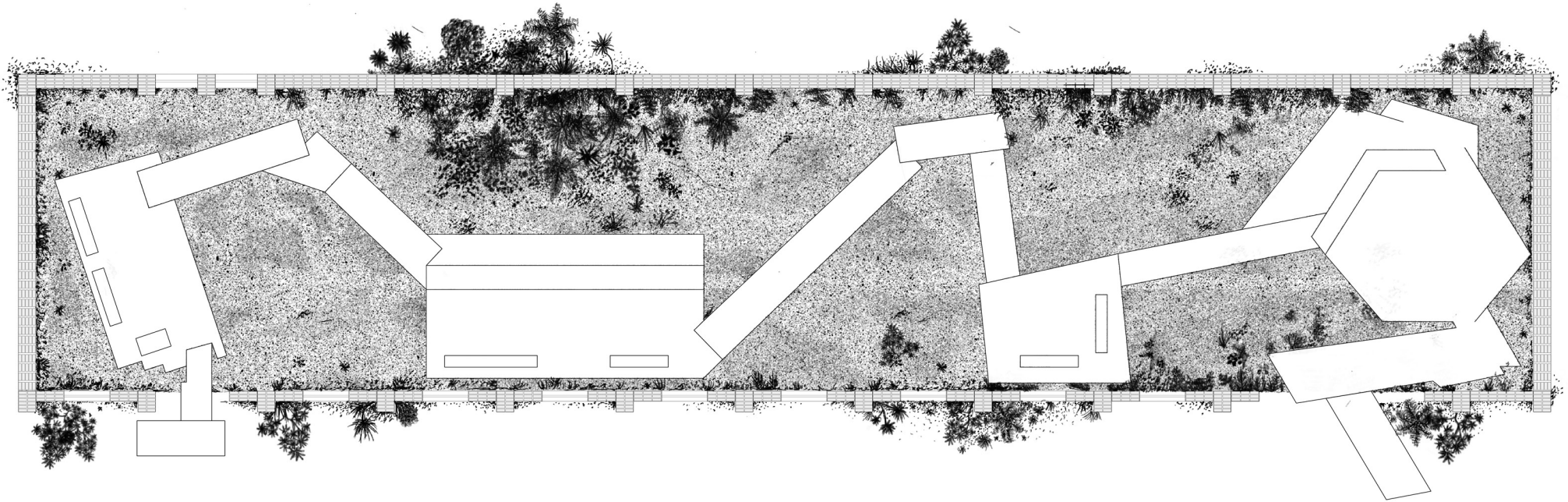
To conceptualize the transformative process from the building's dismission to its renovation, it is crucial to delve into two key concepts: the multiscale nature of the phenomena shaping the building's condition, and the idea of the value embedded in its abandonment.

Investigating the multiscale dimensions of this process involves both a macro and micro level.

From a macro perspective, the vacant, abandoned structure assumes the role of an urban ecosystem, a unique entity capable of encapsulating spontaneous nature within its confines. The apertures in the roof become conduits for life to flourish within the building, allowing processes such as photosynthesis and air circulation. Moreover, the building's perimeter acts as a frame, embedding the vegetal elements and giving rise to a spontaneous vegetal area in the heart of a Taipei City's densely populated neighbourhood.

On the micro scale, the specific stratigraphic layout of the walls, coupled with their construction characteristics, has facilitated the growth of natural elements within the space. The degradation of concrete allowed water to permeate the interstices, creating optimal conditions for plant growth. The chemical properties of bricks and mortar (whose limestone basic composition improves the pH of the soil) further contributed to nurturing vegetation.

Floorplan. *Spontaneous vegetation defining the interior space of the abandoned factory.* The project follows the hierarchy defined by the deterioration of the building and the consequent vegetation growth.
Drawing by Thomas Cabai and Michele Porcelluzzi, 2023.



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Therefore, viewed both macroscopically and microscopically, the condition of abandoned building becomes a haven for optimal plant development. Interbreeding Field's project seeks to acknowledge the intrinsic value of this spontaneous growth and proposes the notion of an unconventional urban garden. As in a microcosm – which is a notion deeply rooted in artistic and garden design tradition – the vegetal elements inside the abandoned Shihlin factory reproduce the life cycle of natural elements: through the sunlight entering by the roof holes and the humidity of the walls, natural phenomena are replicated. Dušan Pajin discusses how the microcosm of a garden mirrors the macrocosm of nature itself, emphasizing the profound interconnectedness found within these crafted spaces (Pajin 1997).

Interbreeding Field's project, situated at the intersection of these macro and micro perspectives, transcends the conventional notions of urban revitalization. Instead of erasing the signs of degradation, it embraces the intrinsic character of the building's transformation in a spontaneous hybrid of organic and inorganic elements.

Considering the transformative process, it aligns with the tradition of Chinese gardens, where an idealized miniature landscape expresses the harmony that should exist between man and nature. As Michel Baridon notes, these carefully crafted landscapes encapsulate a vision of unity, resonating with Interbreeding Field's endeavor to harmonize urban decay and nature's resilience (Baridon 1998).

The second conceptual instance raised by the design process of the intervention by Interbreeding Field in the former Shihlin paper factory is related to the value of the abandonment. As highlighted in the previous paragraph, the specific combination of conditions that allowed nature to grow is related to the conditions of the materials and construction elements of the building, but another important factor is the fact that it was inaccessible to people for 20 years.

In contemporary Chinese urban 'beautification' processes, the predominant tendency is to remove spontaneous plants and replant all the vegetal elements from scratch (Hu & Lima 2019). Interbreeding Field's intentional preservation of spontaneous nature challenges prevailing notions of urban renewal, presenting a unique perspective that values the inherent richness found in the abandoned structure's overgrown embrace.

The intervention does not aim to deny the dismissal of the building, it rather aims to show that from this kind of process new life can develop: the project reframes the narrative of the urban space production as continuous renewal and redesign,

advocating for the recognition of the abandoned structure as a fertile ground for a new kind of public spaces. In doing so, the project challenges preconceived notions of decay and abandonment, proposing an alternative vision where neglect becomes the catalyst for vibrant, spontaneous growth. In essence, the project becomes a built manifestation of the symbiotic relationship between urban decay and nature's resilience, urging the visitors to reconsider the value embedded in abandonment. It beckons us to see the neglected building not as a mere relic of the past but as a layer open to reinterpretation – a canvas upon which vegetal elements play an active role.