

CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES OF INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE CONVERSIONS IN RIGA

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Decrease of industrial production, a general European phenomenon, started only in late 80th of the 20th century in Riga, coinciding with major political and economical changes. After several years of stagnation and neglect, currently industrial sites of the city face a boom of conversions and reuse. Projects, fuelled by general economical growth and rapid development of consumer society, are mostly private initiatives. This paper will be devoted to renovations and conversions of industrial buildings in Riga during the last 15 years, providing analytical insight into challenges determining the process and practices developing in context of raising awareness.

One of the greatest challenges regarding conversion of industrial sites in Riga is the huge scale of those areas. The industries located in the city were seldom a result of local needs, they were a part of a larger economical system be it Russian Empire in the 19th century or Soviet Union in the 2nd half of the 20th century. Therefore it is not easy for the citizens to relate themselves to the industrial past. The huge size of most of the enterprises is the cause of their splitting in pieces and subsequent alteration and reuse by various companies and developers. Neither the city nor the heir companies of the former enterprises have made a benefit of an area conversion as one historical entity yet.

Besides the challenges of consumer society and commercialization, industrial heritage has to suffer from general competition with other heritage attractions of the city: Art nouveau, timber architecture, and medieval core packed with night-life attractions. Due to a great demand of new housing Riga is experiencing a boom of apartment block construction, too. However, most of industrial heritage is not easily convertible for this purpose. Some of the areas are just kept empty for future speculative purposes.

The current practices of dealing with industrial heritage in Riga involve pulling down of lesser-known and unprotected premises, splitting down the large areas in order to provide space for various commercial activities, conversion through intensification or considerable in-fill, continuity of function (mostly in the cases of food and alcohol production), and early attempts of residential reuse. There are good examples of conversion of industrial premises on a small scale. A few museums created at the end of the previous century are also operating in former industrial premises.

Design house, first conversion of a remarkable industrial building currently experiencing the second stage of regeneration into multi-functional complex on the site of former A. Leutner's bicycle factory, Gypsum factory, also in the second stage of regeneration into up-market residential complex of a former chalk factory, and gradual conversion of two huge industrial areas – VEF and RVR – into business and commercial sites are the most remarkable examples of industrial heritage conversion in Riga. The principles applied there and called a good practice involve a high level of intervention into original architecture of buildings. One of the greatest challenges for the nearest future is the reuse of former thermo-electrical plant for a contemporary art museum.



Areas in waiting: rubber factory and beer factory in outskirts of the city



Recent conversion of a small garage and mechanical workshop into an art gallery in the city centre

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