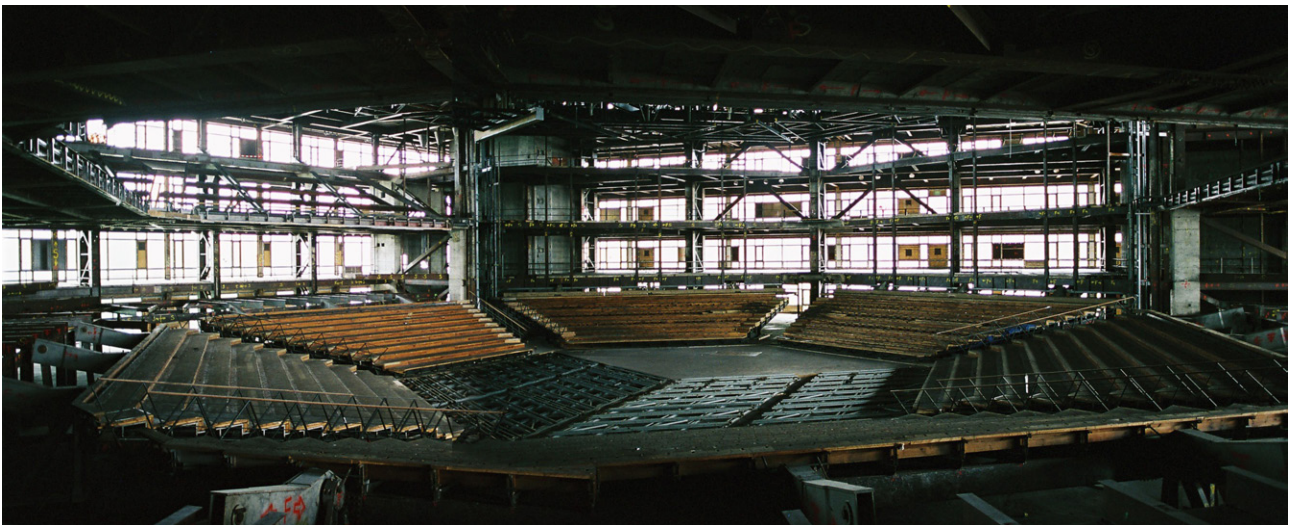


Spaghetti western

The function of a space is often more subject to obsolescence than its structure. In some cases there is no intention to make the function last. World fairs have temporary pavilions that are dismantled or left unmaintained. The *Jinhua Architectural Park*, by Ai Weiwei and world renowned architects, has been displaying avant-garde architecture, it though just fulfilled exhibition purposes, the structures began to decay just after their publication. The form of some cultural institutions built for city marketing also have an accessory function, the shell being the purpose. In an even more absurd logic, highways are built in Italy with no destination, just in order to cash euro subventions and hire local companies.



Palast der Republik, 2005

More common are accidental origins for the loss of the function. *Shrinking cities*, as defined by Philipp Oswalt, know economical drawbacks mostly due to work outsourcing in cheaper areas of the world. Industries close, the inhabitants leave and whole districts get decaying. A political shift, as for the *Palast der Republik* in Berlin, can condemn a structure in sufficient condition for reuse. The building has known a heavily debated fate, it has been a symbol of an oppressive regime but a catalyst of cultural hopes in the potential of its conversion. Its destruction for a pastiche reconstruction of a symbol of an older oppressive regime is still splitting the opinion, the old form being somehow inappropriate for contemporary cultural use.

The short term logic of the market even leads to situations where the purpose of a space can be lost before completion. *Torre David* in Caracas is an unfinished office skyscraper now housing informal homes, a vertical *favela*. The *Rossi ruin* in Berlin, a hotel design that remained on standby over a decade, has been completed in a modified architectural expression. The Spanish *ruinas modernas* are also a product of economical mismanagement before achievement.





Rossi ruin, 2005

Let's have a closer look at the *Rossi ruin* in Berlin. It has been a financial construct of the beginning of the 1990's based on the prognostic of a rapid development of East Berlin. Aldo Rossi has been contracted for the design of a complex of shopping mall, hotel and offices at the gate of the metro area. Such speculations might have met success in most European megalopolis like Paris or London that have reliable growth indexes, but Berlin was still a city in motion. Building complications, exploding costs and the death of the architect stopped the construction site. It also turned out that the program has been too ambitious and that the interest was not high enough anymore for completion. It has been Berlin's biggest investor ruin for over a decade.

It stand proudly as an architectural curiosity. Aldo Rossi strong expression in distinct volumes along with the imposing unusual scale had an impressive impact. The hugeness of the building was emphasized by its complete emptiness. The carefully designed architecture got timeless through its uncompleted character and achieved a monumental status similar to classical ruins. Though it was discouraged for security reasons, exploring it was truly fascinating. Concrete only shaped the high rise structure like a sculpture. Light, water, the distant sound of the city filled the place with a particular aura. It was an extraordinary space although a financial disaster.

The construction had a strength that got lost in its late completion. It turned mono-functional, hotel only, in a design that completely reshaped the original in a cheaper manner. The result is a banal building that might remain unnoticed by most passing by. It might also have been the case in the original completed design, yet the striking power of the uncompleted hardware might have been more promising.



Valdeluz, source *Business Insider / Guardian*

In Spain speculative *turbo-urbanism* lead to underpopulated housing developments like Sesena, Yebes, Valdeluz, Horche, Chiloeches, Quer, Alovera, Yuncos,... estimated to a million empty units over the country. These towns at commuting distance from economical centers or touristic areas might have failed even before their bankruptcy. In fact, they have been planned as dormitory districts for whom couldn't afford decent housing in the metropolitan area. The fact that they have been made possible by virtual money that vanished in the 2008 crisis might not have been their most questionable characteristics : just like some French *banlieues* conceived on similar purpose in great urge, they might have become latent failures in creating blooming urban conditions and on the long term might have turned to social time bombs.

Furthermore, the economical model that generated them excludes a part of the population from decent housing conditions. Affordable housing in European and Spanish metropolitan areas is increasingly lacking, pushing modest people further in the outskirts or shrinking their apartment living areas. These indicators of housing crisis do not find solutions in urban initiatives based on profit. The satellite towns built on cheap land has been the most convenient response in the neoliberal context of strong economical growth of the beginning of the 2000's.

These underdeveloped towns might therefore be seen as a chance for the community to redefine these spaces with a more appropriate purpose. Their actual standby situation might also be the moment for looking for solutions regarding the housing crisis. It gives the possibility to think these projects with a specific identity, an own centrality in order to give

them the aura they might have lacked from beginning. Instead of being cheap beds, they might become towns with developed local activities and a proper urban culture that could make the inhabitants proud of their homes and community. The exchange situation with the neighboring metropolis for sure has to be maintained, but in both directions.

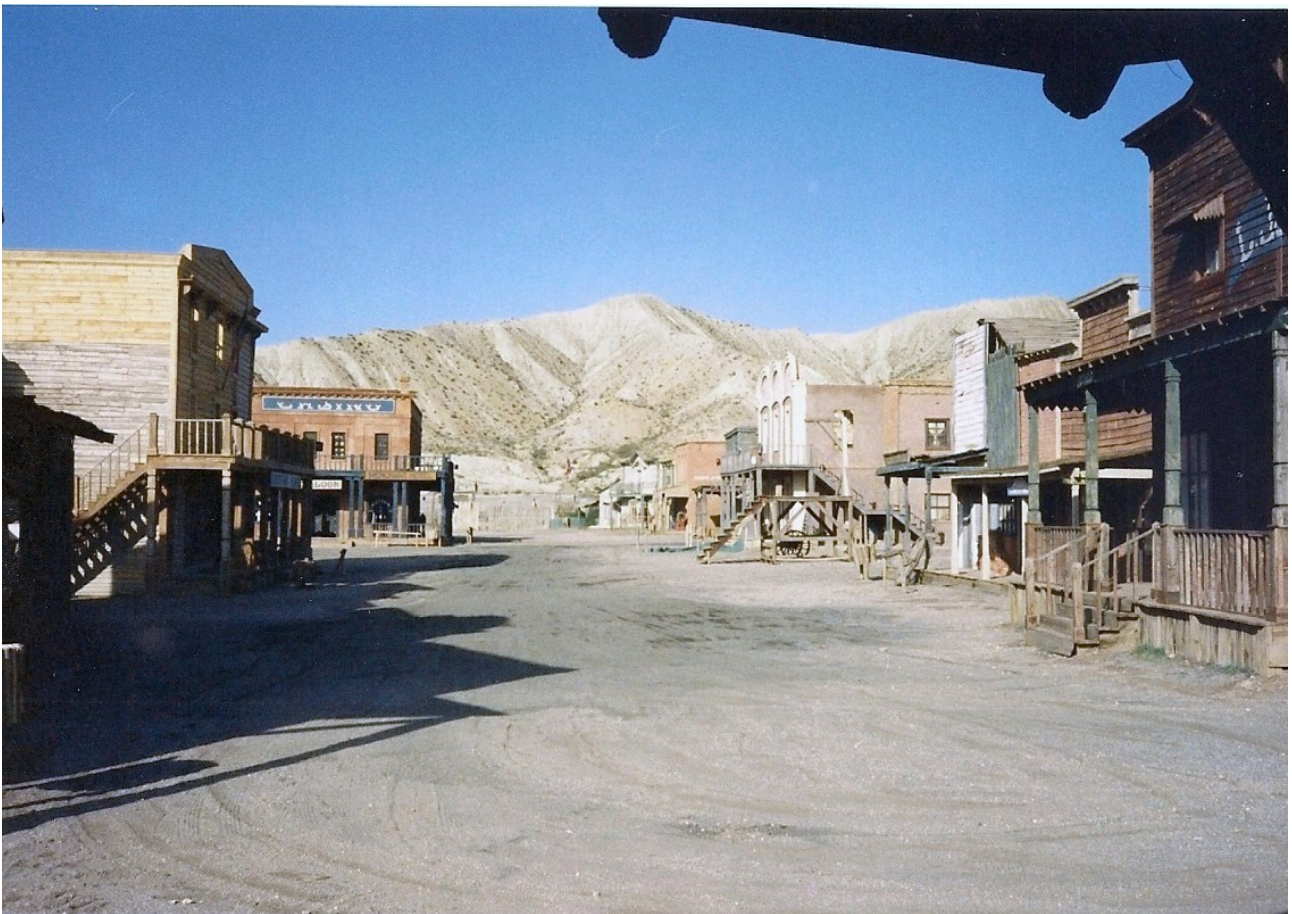


Skateboard facility in an abandoned industrial structure in Berlin

The various factors that lead to vacancy match with the diversity of possible appropriations. The conversion of abandoned areas has shown an incredible creativity in their new affectations. Being disregarded by authorities and economical interests, it often left the door open for experimentation that wouldn't fit in the established context. Already in the 1980's, a blooming urban culture, particularly through music, came from decaying industrial cities like Detroit or Manchester for example. This energy has been made possible by the sudden availability of large areas and their buildings left to their fate. The redefinition of East Berlin in the 1990's has taken surprising ways, the economical effort having broadly failed, it is now the spontaneous urban culture that shapes the city's identity and that is attracting visitors. It has also briefly been on display in the *Palast der Republik* before its destruction, but national interests prevailed in that specific case. Overseas in Caracas, the office tower became a place for those who needed it most. Although squatting is discouraged by opinion and is not appropriate to deliver long-lasting decent living conditions due to their uncertainty, the case delivered a quick response for the excluded from welfare. An unused space is loaded with cultural and social potential, while anybody can identify with it individually. These in between places might conciliate specific needs in a

collective logic.

Moreover, a space that is not producing value cannot be considered inexistent : as a matter of fact, there is a strong plasticity in abandoned structures, as the example of the *Rossi ruin* showed. Time becomes palpable by leaving traces and patina. The story of an abandoned building is told to the visitor that understands it with his own vocabulary. Ruins have strong romantic connotation, should they belong to the antique or the industrial area. It is a terrain for exploration and discovery, that could be called amateur archeology. Imagining this emptiness busy with activities adds to the beauty. The space also contains all his possible future developments and interpretations. Nature often settles back and shows that human activity is limited in time. Abandoned spaces don't make false promises, they are in that way truthful.



Tabernas, Spain. Source spainthenandnow.com

These appropriation concepts could serve the development of scenarios for the aftermath of the virtual gold rush that lead to spanish ghost towns.

Most satellite towns are set in the desert around Madrid. The exploration of these places is both about the landscape surrounding them and the urban decadence. Ghost towns and deserts are recurrent settings of *spaghetti western*, the journey to them can be loaded with cinematographic memories. The setting, now seen as failure and waste, could be associated with thrill and glamour. Cultural happenings could take place in the emptiness, getting people out of their quotidian labour. The commutation could be reversed, attracting people from the metropolis to these far outskirts for an escape of everyday life.

The *Rossi ruin* showed that the standby situation can be more exceptional than its banal

completion. The exploration and experimentation potential of Spanish unfinished towns might be the chance to open the debate about urban expectations. On the one hand there is a housing crisis, on the other there is too much houses available. The biggest challenge might be on the first sight to bypass economical concerns, yet a prospective approach might conciliate public and private interests. In a society where space is becoming a luxury, available one might be a base for experimentations that don't fit in the established centers.