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ADAPTIVE  
REUSE **2023**



## Re-tracing the industrial in contemporary cultural architecture: The best of 2023

STIRred 2023: A look at some adaptive reuse projects that reimagined dysfunctional factories as vibrant cultural hubs.

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The architectural imagination has long associated the modern artist with the bare aesthetic of the industrial warehouse, complete with skylights, open planning, and floor-to-ceiling glazing. 'Warehouse chic' defines the hipster, the offbeat and the often artistically inclined. In the same vein, art galleries and exhibition venues have favoured the stark, sometimes derelict look of factories and industrial settings. Take for instance, perhaps the most well-known example, the Tate Modern in London and following that the Tate Liverpool, which are situated in an old power station and a dockside warehouse respectively.

It's often argued that the minimalist architecture of industry lends itself readily as a canvas for displaying art. Moreover, as cultural ventures struggle to find proper funding, and more economies move away from traditional modes of production leaving industrial sites dysfunctional; as the question of sustainable design becomes paramount for architectural practice, more architects have started to turn towards the more cost- and ecologically-conscious alternative of retrofit.

The question of adaptive reuse begets thinking about how new functions may accommodate themselves within existing structural frameworks. It warrants a critical look at projects that treat retrofitting as just surface-level façade upgradation versus an actual engagement and rethinking of the original through radical choices. From a pretzel factory in the United States to a textile factory in the Czech Republic to even a brewery in China, contemporary architecture has engaged with the vestiges of a machinic era in unique ways. STIR takes a look at the best of 2023 when it comes to thinking of sustainability through the lens of repair.

## 1. La Laguna, Mexico City by PRODUCTORA



PRODUCTORA's project for La Laguna retrofits a former textile factory to house artist studios, exhibition spaces and galleries *Image: © Camila Cossio*

In their ongoing project for La Laguna, Mexican architecture practice, Productora transforms a well-recognised textile factory in Mexico City into a cultural hub. Treating architecture as a process rather than a product, PRODUCTORA's minimalistic interventions in the factory are aimed at reactivating the urban fabric of the area. Centred around the courtyards of the former industrial building, the cultural centre opens out to the public, with two architecture studios (including PRODUCTORA's office), a gallery, a textile workshop, LIGA, an organisation that promotes Latin American architecture, a bookshop, a school, Mubi's main Mexican office, and a new project of artist residences situated in the industrial premises. The design scheme, which encountered several modifications over the years—as ideas evolved and funds fluctuated—involved working with the existing shell and improving the operation of the building by strategically distributing the horizontal and vertical circulation. A promenade motivating visitors to discover the entire complex was achieved through the insertion of a new staircase tower encased in olive green screens, tying the disaggregated spaces together. An “intentionally unfinished” project, with La Laguna, the Mexican architects strived to cultivate a space that would allow the local community to thrive.

## 2. Wexler Gallery, Philadelphia by DIGSAU

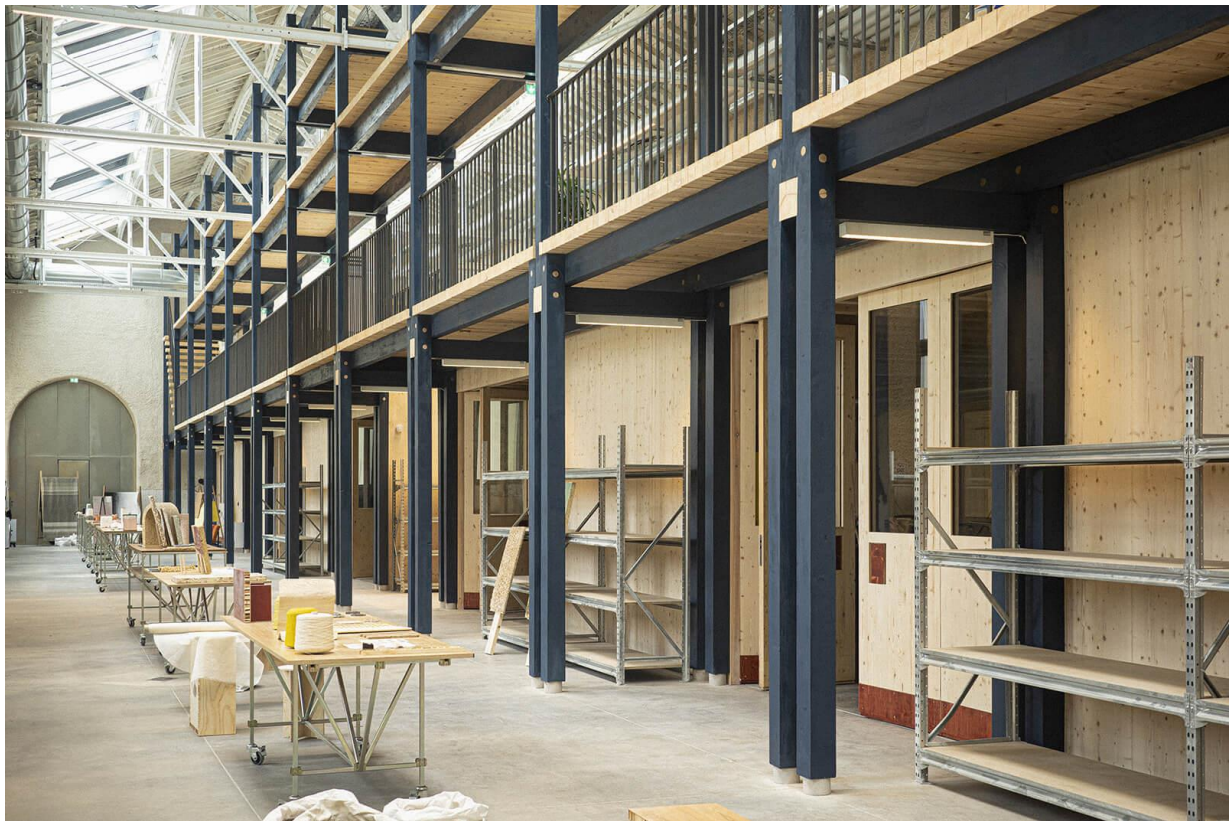


Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia appropriates a former pretzel factory, using its open layout to its advantage *Image: Courtesy of Halkin Mason photography*

Philadelphia-based architects, DIGSAU breathes new life into a former pretzel factory with their sensitive design for Wexler Gallery. The gallery space, which recently shifted to the Fishtown-Kensington community of Philadelphia, is spread across 11,500 sqft of the former industrial building. Taking advantage of an open floor plan that allows for the curators to freely display

artworks in different configurations, the gallery's central atrium is topped by restored timber gabled roof. Further, the American architecture practice utilised the large structural bays, high ceilings, and clerestory windows—all staples of industrial architecture—to their advantage in the new design. Apart from the proportions being suitable, both in an aesthetic and structural sense, these elements lent clear avenues for the experience of diverse media across scales, while allowing for natural light and air to fill the space. As Jamie Unkefer of DIGSAU told STIR, “The spatial schematics of a pretzel factory and, we think, of many industrial spaces are quite well suited for the display of art.” The design for the art gallery is a testament to utilising every component of the existing and updating it for the contemporary.

### 3. Luma Arles by Atelier Luma



With a focus on circular design and bioregional materials, Atelier Luma conceived of a new workshop space for their practice within a railway warehouse. Image: Courtesy of Atelier Luma

French design and research practice Atelier Luma's new office and workshop space, Lot 8 (the official name), was designed in collaboration with BC architects & studies, an architecture studio based in Belgium, and Assemble, a London-based practice as the result of a three-year pilot and experimental project. The goal was to create a building that would serve as an ongoing prototype for sustainable construction with a focus on biomaterials, circular design, and local

craftsmanship. Sunflower fibres, salt crystals, algae and waste earth are just some of the unconventional materials that have been used in the structure. The refurbished industrial lot of Atelier Luma is emblematic of the core philosophies driving the practice, thinking with the local conditions and positively responding to the environmental and socioeconomic challenges of different territories through a multidisciplinary approach. Located within the Parc des Ateliers campus (formerly a 19<sup>th</sup> century railway wasteland), the workshops are part of an ongoing transformation of the campus into exhibition spaces and artist residencies. The design for Luma Arles, “a space of possibilities” retains the original external windows and door openings, while the massing instinctively gives rise to three distinct zones for different functions. The reconfigured program includes research labs, production hubs, and public spaces.

#### 4. Pearl Gallery by CHYBIK + KRISTOF



CHYBIK+KRISTOF's proposal for the refurbishment of a textile mill in Usti nad Orlici imagines it as a thriving cultural space *Image: Courtesy of CHYBIK+KRISTOF*

Winner of a competition organised by the city officials of Usti nad Orlici of the Czech Republic, CHYBIK + KRISTOF (CHK)'s design proposes the conversion of a former textile mill into a contemporary art gallery and cultural centre. Located at the heart of the city, this multifunctional cultural space marries contemporary function with industrial past. With only three original buildings of the eponymous Pearl factory standing after the steady decline of

textile industries through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Prague, Brno, and Bratislava-based firm set out to restore these into two primary masses, connected with new and improved public pathways. The gallery designed by the practice comprises three exhibition spaces, spread over 3200 square metres, serving different functions. Further, the studio preserved the architectural heritage of the space by stripping selective surfaces to reveal the rugged texture of the original material palette. These textured surfaces sit against polished metallic sheets along with smooth and shiny tiles and railings. This contradictory aesthetic is intentional, symbolising spaces that honour the past while looking to the future.

## 5. Kingway Brewery Renovation, Shenzhen by URBANUS



URBANUS breathes new life into the run-down structures of a former brewery in Shenzhen, China paying homage to the legacy of the site  
Image: © TAL

The renovation of Kingway Brewery by Chinese architecture practice URBANUS is aimed at preserving the legacy of a well-known Chinese beer's production facility. Instead of treating the site—which was slated for demolition—as a tabula rasa for new development, URBANUS decided to revive the remaining industrial structures by strategically interjecting elements that would transform it into a vibrant public space for the community. The restoration project involved retrofitting a wastewater treatment plant and an aeration tank to house exhibition spaces, galleries, an auditorium, and offices. Integrating past and present in the design, a raised

plinth unifies the different functions on site. It includes exterior exhibition spaces, recreation areas, and walkways dotted with courtyards and gardens, creating an interplay of built and unbuilt and adding a sense of liveliness to the area. While at the northern end are the most symbolic industrial structures: the brewery's former fermentation building. The architects have transformed it into a multipurpose auditorium with inverted conical tanks creating the illusion of a functional brewery.

Practices that explore adaptive reuse are pertinent to today's world: where land is as precious as the earth's limited resources. While traditionally, renovation, repair, refurbishment, and retrofitting aren't seen as core architectural exercises; relegated to the realm of conservation or interior design, they hold weight in rethinking how we approach building today. Repair does not only have to extend to heritage structures, and should embrace the overlooked, the run-down, and the forgotten. As this list shows, the conversion of industrial lots forecasts and mirrors how the city will continue to grow. By converting neglected spaces into thriving centres of culture, these projects signal a sense of hope for local communities.