

# An “Empty Place”? The Transformation of the Industrial Landscape in Contemporary Lithuania

Aušra Teleišė

DOI: 10.21104/CL.2024.3.02

## Abstract

By focusing on the changes to the industrial landscape that can be identified visually and within the materiality of the built environment, this paper discusses the transformation of the industrial landscape and its meaning that has been produced by the human agency that has emerged in damaged industrial places after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence and post-Soviet deindustrialisation. It shows that there is a sense of emptiness related to the ruination and abandonment of the industrial landscape in people’s experiences and memories of Soviet industrial districts. However, it is evident that such emptiness is a transitional stage that creates the conditions for the emergence of new beginnings. The paper reveals that the industrial districts today are active places in which various individual economic activities and economic structures have emerged. The research is based on the two Lithuanian former Soviet industrial cities of Alytus and Marijampolė.

## Key words

landscape, industrial place, visibility, post-Soviet deindustrialisation, Lithuania

## Contact

Dr. Aušra Teleišė, Ph.D.; e-mail: [ausra.teleise@gmail.com](mailto:ausra.teleise@gmail.com)  
ORCID iD 0000-0002-0548-9955

## Jak citovat / How to cite

Aušra Teleišė. 2024. An “Empty Place”? The Transformation of the Industrial Landscape in Contemporary Lithuania. *Český lid* 111: 299–321.  
<https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2024.3.02>

## Introduction

*“Everything has been breaking up and falling apart. [...] Everything has been getting smaller and smaller, and has stayed empty, these buildings, [...] so many were built, [the factory] produced so many things. [...] Now everything is gone.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is how a former factory worker, Jolita, described the fate of former Soviet industrial companies. Feelings of resentment and pain relating to the abandonment of the industrial places and a sense of unrelenting shrinkage that has resulted in the disappearance of factories are palpable in people’s stories of post-Soviet deindustrialisation. This process was part of an abrupt “cataclysmic rupture” (Graeber 2020: 53), which had an impact on the personal lives of people as well as factories and industrial territories. Such fundamental and radical social and economic reconfigurations not only permeate the lives of people but are also imprinted on the landscape. As it is a “socially complicated, historically deep, geographically diverse, and politically perplexing phenomenon” (Cowie – Heathcott 2003: 2), deindustrialisation produces diverse post-industrial landscapes in different regions and countries.

The industrial districts of the two Lithuanian former Soviet industrial cities Alytus and Marijampolė, as with other places whose development depended on Soviet industrialisation, have been exposed to dramatic changes caused by post-Soviet deindustrialisation after the fall of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Lithuania’s independence in 1990. The post-industrial landscape that has appeared as a result of these changes does not embrace one grand narrative such as returning to nature (Simmel 1958) or conversion into a structurally and functionally different site (Kunce 2019) but embodies the human agency that has emerged in the damaged industrial places. By focusing on the changes to the industrial landscape that can be identified visually and within the materiality of the built environment, the paper aims to discuss the transformation of the industrial landscape and its meaning that has been produced by people engaging with the industrial districts after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence and post-Soviet deindustrialisation. It argues that there is a sense of emptiness related to the ruination and abandonment of the industrial landscape in people’s experiences and memories of Soviet industrial districts. The paper shows that the industrial districts today are active places in which various individual economic activities and economic units and structures have

---

1 Jolita, born in 1941, interviewed on August 23, 2020, Alytus.

emerged. It stresses that the industrial landscape is transformed through ongoing individual economic practices that are visible in the materiality of the built environment.

The landscape is perpetually changing and is continuously produced and reproduced, worked and re-worked by people who engage with it in various ways. People take part in the transformation of and within the landscape by moving around, using, and dwelling within the built environment (Ingold 1993: 152; Tilley 1994: 27; Evans – Roberts – Nelson 2001: 53). Materiality and the arrangement of places serve as enduring records of past lives and times, previous activities and events, enfolding dwellers as active creators who temporally took part in the formation of the landscape and its story (Ingold 1993; Tilley 1994; Tilley – Cameron-Daum 2017). In other words, the materiality of the built environment is the emplacement of lived experiences and the outcome of social practices which occurred in particular historical moments and in individual, economic, or political circumstances. As people move within the landscape and engage with it in various ways, the landscape itself constantly takes on new forms and shapes (Lund – Benediktsson 2010: 6). At different temporal moments, different aspects of the landscape become foregrounded or fall into the background (Tilley – Cameron-Daum 2017: 9). Material elements of the past are weaved into the present and continue as traces of people’s lived experiences.

The approach that the landscape is “any environmental locus that gathers human experiences, actions, and meanings spatially and temporally” (Seamon 2018: 2) opens up the materiality of the built environment not as a static object separated from people, but rather as a dynamic construct dependent on human agency. The material reality and visuality of the industrial landscape is a medium that narrates a particular kind of transformation in post-Soviet deindustrialisation. The landscape, which is “what we see around us” (Ingold 1993: 162), reveals the effects of and reactions to the economic and social decline caused by deindustrialisation.

The damaged industrial landscape is represented as degraded physical and material places embodying experiences of deprivation, lost livelihoods, deterioration of personal lives, and abandoned communities. Abandoned industrial places lost their former meaning and purpose because they were detached from the stabilising industrial order (Edensor 2005a: 66–67). The process of decay and ruination leads to the transformation of the material environment of factories and the formation of “a defamiliarized landscape” (Ibid: 318) imbued with traces offering a “ghostly glimpse of factory life” (Edensor 2005b: 843). However, ruins are not simply petrified life or relics from the past, according to Ann Laura Stoler they are what people have been left with (Stoler 2016: 347–348). She suggests that ruins be perceived

as remains with which people live and do something with and about (Ibid: 353). Gastón R. Gordillo notes that ruins are part of the affective, economic, and social configurations of the present (Gordillo 2014: 19). Ruins can become “generative objects” (Ibid: 65) that structure and produce social and economic life around themselves as well as places where new ways and forms of life emerge (Tsing 2015).

The remains of Soviet industrial companies and their immediate environs are tangible marks of a disappearing industrial order which connected people and place. However, the rupture of industrial development discontinuing this relationship between people and place opens up a space in which “something new has to emerge” (Vaccaro – Harper – Murray 2017: 1). “Something new”, which emerges through people’s efforts to start a new life in and out of industrial ruins, can mean reestablishing or maintaining the connection between human beings and a former industrial place (Pelkmans 2013; Chelcea 2015; Vaccaro – Harper – Murray 2017; Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2017; Kurtović 2020; Khatchadourian 2022). Indeed, the loss and reestablishment of a connection between people and an industrial place are interrelated processes and can coexist at the same time and in the same location (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2017). Given that it is “a very complex material thing” (Tilley – Cameron-Daum 2017: 6) that is constantly changing, whose forms depend on various individual and local relationships, contexts and circumstances, the landscape can reveal both the ruination of the industrial place and the emergence of “something new”.

### Research methodology

Post-Soviet deindustrialisation created a mosaic-like landscape made up of many different fragments comprising material traces of the past and elements reflecting processes and practices of the present. In order to accommodate the complexity of this landscape, different approaches to open the materiality and the peoples’ practices embodied in it were applied. To research the materiality of the landscape, it is necessary for the researcher to be there and experience it (Tilley – Cameron-Daum 2017: 5). Anthropologists argue that walking is an active way to get to know, communicate with, perceive and experience a place (de Certeau 1988: 93; Wunderlich 2008: 128; Low 2015: 300). The understanding of a place and its features originates from the perception of one’s surroundings while walking. Although walking is a bodily and sensory experience involving sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste, vision is paramount and dominant (Jenks – Neves 2000: 6; Ingold 2004: 331). Walking and looking at the built environment allows us to observe the different fragments of the materiality of the landscape.

When we walk we can see that material elements of the past and present interweave and connect into visual patterns that narrate the specificity of the landscape. However, this narrative is not eloquent but is made up of a series of discontinuous signs or imprints (Ingold – Vergunst 2016: 8; Edensor 2016: 137). It reveals the perception of the landscape from the point of view of the walker. Talking to people provides us with fragments of the landscape that cannot be obtained by walking and seeing. This is a way of getting to know the practices of people that produce the landscape which is seen visually. The walking approach combined with interviews conveying people’s individual experiences of a place and their attitudes towards it provides us with different but complementary perspectives of the landscape. This combination allows us to uncover the complexity of the landscape.

The ethnographic fieldwork<sup>2</sup> of this research was conducted in Alytus and Marijampolė from 2018 to 2021. Alytus and Marijampolė, which share similar geographic and demographic characteristics, were visited many times during the research. Alytus, the country’s sixth-largest city, is located in southern Lithuania and is situated on both sides of the country’s largest river – the Nemunas. Marijampolė is the seventh-largest city in Lithuania and is situated in the southwest, on both sides of Šešupė River. Both cities are located near the Polish border. Their populations have declined significantly in recent decades, from 76,500 in 1991 to 49,205 in 2021 in Alytus and from 52,100 to 34,747 in Marijampolė (Lietuvos socialinė raida 1991: 11; Lithuanian Department of Statistics 2021).

During this research, the walks focused on the perception of the changes caused by post-Soviet deindustrialisation and the understanding of the reality of these industrial territories today. They were employed as a way of gathering information that is inscribed on the built environment of the industrial districts in Alytus and Marijampolė. During walks along the main streets of the cities, detailed attention was devoted to the material and visual elements of the industrial districts. This involved tracing the various visual attributes such as colours, inscriptions, signs, finishing materials or vegetation indicating the state and function of the buildings of the former Soviet factories and their immediate environments. Various newly built structures and elements of their appearance that provided information about their activities and viability were observed. During the walks, even the smallest details were important to the perception of the transformation of the industrial landscape. These walks formed the researcher’s perspective of the industrial districts and the processes taking place in them. To identify

---

2 The fieldwork in Alytus and Marijampolė was part of my doctoral theses on post-industrial city-making and the cultural and social processes of post-Soviet deindustrialisation.

the changes caused by post-Soviet deindustrialisation, information<sup>3</sup> about the Soviet industrial landscape was collected before the walks. The walks themselves were unplanned and differed in duration and length of route. During these visits, whole industrial territories or separate parts of them were explored. The industrial districts were visited many times during different hours and seasons. The factories, buildings and their surroundings, and the streets and paths were photographed.

Semi-structured interviews provided information on the practices and lived experiences of the residents. The interviews, which investigated people's experiences of post-Soviet deindustrialisation and their everyday lives in the city today, were conducted with industrial workers, white-collar workers, and other city residents, including those who were encountered accidentally. The majority of the interviewees<sup>4</sup> were people who had faced challenges to their livelihood and had had to maintain their households and well-being during the years of transformation. Their post-Soviet experiences differed. After losing a factory job, some had experienced long-term unemployment, or moved between several jobs, while others became engaged in informal economic activities or established their own enterprises.

### The Soviet industrial landscape and its abandonment

In 1964, during the Soviet era, *The Long-Term Scheme for the Urban Development and Distribution of Industry* was introduced by the Lithuanian Communist Party Central Committee (Drémaitė 2017: 101). This scheme decided that Alytus and Marijampolė<sup>5</sup> – along with Utena, Plungė and Jurbakas – would become regional industrial centres of Lithuania. The plan was for rapid urbanisation based on extensive industrial development and population growth to satisfy the demand for industrial workers.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of the plan resulted in the creation of industrial urban structures on the peripheries of these cities, in which a variety of factories and *kombinats*

---

3 Interviews, informative publications of the factories, photographs documenting urban development during the Soviet era, and local newspapers published in the Soviet times conveyed features of the Soviet industrial landscape.

4 Interviewees are represented anonymously and assigned a pseudonym.

5 During the Soviet era, Marijampolė was renamed Kapsukas in honour of a Lithuanian communist political activist.

6 According to the plan, it was calculated that the population of Alytus would increase from 14,000 in 1962 to 70,000 in 1980 and the number of industrial workers would grow from 1,600 in 1961 to 15,300 in 1980; the population of Marijampolė would increase from 22,000 in 1962 to 55,000 in 1980, and the number of industrial workers would grow from 2,200 in 1961 to 12,000 in 1980 (Kaunas Regional State Archives 1963: 129).

(also referred to as combines)<sup>7</sup> were concentrated. These industrial districts were independent and unique places, operating entirely according to the industrial function. The industrial companies that were established in these districts in Alytus were the Alytus Cotton Combine, the Machinery Plant, the Snaigė Refrigerator Plant, the Alytus Experimental House Building Enterprise, the Alytus Meat Factory, the Compound Feeds Factory, milk and bread producers, and others. Their factories constituted the industrial district, which was considered the largest industrial urban structure in Lithuania during Soviet times (Balčiūnas 1976: 7). The Kapsukas Bulked Yarn Factory, the Kapsukas Dairies and Canned Complex Enterprise, the Kapsukas Food Industry Machine Factory, the Grain Product Factory, the Kapsukas Sugar Factory, the Kapsukas Auto Repair Factory, and others were constructed or reconstructed in Marijampolė. Some industrial companies were located in one large building, incorporating administrative and production sections, while others consisted of several buildings, such as workshops, factories, and administrative offices.

Photographs show that these industrial companies were constructed as complete architectural ensembles. The integral nature of these factories is seen in their design, in the aesthetics of modernist architectural forms, and the standardised and unified exteriors of their buildings (Fig. 1). These are large white buildings with strict rectangular shapes. The immediate environment, including grasslands, flower gardens, trees, and non-industrial objects such as squares, fountains, or sculptures, unified the complex of buildings and created a feeling of an evenly maintained place. Photographs of the industrial districts confirm that industrial territories were not only functionally but also visually homogeneous urban areas.

Interviewees associated the Soviet industrial companies with “*beautiful*”, “*neat*” or “*orderly*” surroundings, large buildings, mighty machinery, and the employment of a large number of people. They described the Soviet factory as “*massive*”, “*big*”, “*huge*” and “*mighty*”. For them, these large factories signified a stable workplace, economic and social security, and the welfare of their personal lives. As Morta, a former factory worker, observed “*there was a really large company and there was a lot of work. Everyone was happy and there was really no problem of unemployment.*”<sup>8</sup>

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Lithuania’s independence, the integral industrial landscape that represented economic strength and social stability experienced abrupt and radical changes. To-

---

7 The *kombinat* was a Soviet economic organization encompassing multiple companies with a shared governance structure, entailing collaboration based on different stages of production (Kurtović 2020: 237).

8 Morta, born in 1973, interviewed on September 16, 2020, Alytus.

day, the residents of the cities say that the industrial territory is “*an empty place*”, “*there is nothing there*”, “*there is no industry*”, factories “*disappeared*” or “*collapsed*”, “*the premises of large companies are all standing empty*”, and “*the industrial city has become a ghost town*”. Dace Dzenovska argues that emptiness or emptying describes a process in which places or communities rapidly lose their own constitutive elements (Dzenovska 2020). The concept of emptiness refers to a physical or symbolic spatial absence (Varfolomeeva 2023: 16). The sense of abandonment, broken social lives and the ruination of surroundings which is described in Dzenovska’s research on rural Latvia (see Dezenovska 2011; 2018; 2020) is also felt in the lived experiences of the residents of Alytus and Marijampolė.

The residents of the cities talk about the loss and ruination of the factories that existed during the Soviet era. They say that “*everything is ruined, everything has been stolen*”, “*broken up*” or “*torn out*”. The perception of the changed industrial place emerges from the juxtaposition between knowledge about the industrial company in Soviet times and the state of being of the factory today. Interviewees were conscious of the fact that the enterprises today are not as they were in Soviet times: “*today, the companies are not like the large factories before*”, and “*certainly there are not the big industrial companies that there were before*”. They emphasize the reduction in the size of factories. Industrial companies such as Snaigė in Alytus or Vernitas (The Kapsukas Bulk Yarn Factory) in Marijampolė, whose volumes have decreased but whose production has continued, are described as “*barely breathing*”, “*panting*”, or “*barely moving*”. Residents see the factories as living beings who are weak and do not have the strength to function properly. Dramatically reduced production volumes are associated with the lost vitality and the ruination of Soviet factories. Živilė, who lives in Marijampolė, observed that the material reality is an important indicator of the vitality of factories: “*judging from the building, it might not be good times for them either.*”<sup>9</sup> She talks about building complexes that belong to a particular industrial company but are no longer homogeneous in style. For example, the administrative building of such complexes may have been partly renovated, while the other buildings and their parts have been neglected. People associate changes in the industrial landscape with a decline in industrial activity, shrinkage, and the closure of the former Soviet industrial companies.

In turn, people associate the “*ruined*” Soviet industry and the collapse of factories with the deterioration of the personal lives of the factories’ employees. Former factory workers talk about their lost jobs and the disappearance of the vibrant social and cultural life in the factory, as well as

---

9 Živilė, born in 1959, interviewed on May 2, 2019, Marijampolė.



the personal economic and social challenges they have faced (Jurčikonytė 2016). Interviewees in the research said that “*the tragedy began*” when the factories were closed. They emphasized that “*many people were fired; many people were left without a job*”. Former factory workers said that they were “*left without any options*”, “*simply existing*”, and “*collapsing together with the factory*”. They relate their social and cultural lives and economic well-being to working in an industrial company. Here one can draw a parallel between the “*barely breathing*” industrial companies and the personal lives of their former workers. Post-Soviet deindustrialisation led to the loss of vitality of both the factories and their workers. It brought grief and pain to former workers’ personal lives associated with the ruination and abandonment of the industrial landscape.

The feeling of emptiness is visible in the material environment of the industrial landscape. There are evident signs of abandonment and neglect, and some industrial buildings are no longer in use. Their walls are crumbling, they are painted with graffiti, windows are broken, doors are covered with plywood panels, bushes and trees grow on roofs, parking lots are overgrown with grass, and building materials are scattered around their grounds (Fig. 2). Decorative representative elements and non-industrial objects such as fountains and sculptures, which once brought a certain aesthetic into the industrial landscape and established the completeness of the territory, have not been maintained; they are rusting and overgrown with grass and moss. These abandoned factory buildings and their immediate environments appear lifeless and silent.

The factory buildings and their surroundings are material facts that show the reduction in the productive capacity of companies and narrate diminished human agency, “*collapsed*” industry and “*disappearing*” factories. They speak of the painful transformation of post-Soviet deindustrialisation that was experienced by the former factory workers and other city residents. The neglected factory buildings mark the deteriorated personal lives of the former factory workers. According to Lori Khatchadourian, today, abandoned places represent a temporal phase between use and discard, prosperity and demise (Khatchadourian 2022: 324). Decaying buildings and their surroundings are exposed to an uncertain future and are waiting for the prospects of better times, new beginnings, or evanescence.

### **“There are all kinds of companies, both large and small”: the fragmentation of the industrial landscape**

However, the industrial landscape is not empty. While walking in the industrial districts, I observed that although there are material signs of

ruination and the absence of human agency, these areas are not completely abandoned.

In Alytus, for example, one sees today that the functionally and visually integral buildings of the former industrial companies have been divided into different units (Fig. 3). Different companies can be identified by different colours, the titles of enterprises, and the styles of buildings or their parts. Not only do different buildings belong to different companies, but one building might be divided between various enterprises. One part of a building may have been renovated, while another part has been left unattended or only slightly modified. The sense of fragmentation of the industrial landscape is intensified by the multitude of billboards on the roadsides, indicating the locations of the various enterprises (Fig. 4). These billboards, which are widespread throughout the industrial territory, may provide information about a particular company, while others list up to eight different names of companies or give descriptions of the services provided, such as “squeezing juices”, “wood trade”, “scrap metal purchased”, “used car parts”, or “Cafe. Hot dishes, coffee, tea, and coziness”. A variety of new economic initiatives are emerging in the former factories. In them people “*are working with wood, [they] have opened [enterprises providing] services [...] [here] ballrooms have been created out of canteens [...] [and] sewing workshops have been set up.*”<sup>10</sup> In these places, foreign companies have set up operations alongside Lithuanian ones. Furniture manufacturers from Great Britain and Norway, a Danish wire and rope producer and a British sportswear manufacturer occupy a large part of the buildings of former factories. The names of the companies written in foreign languages hang near these buildings, alongside the flags of their countries.

One day I walked around the bankrupt Alytus Meat Factory (Fig. 5). Close to its main building, there is a crumbling billboard depicting the layout of its territory. It claims that the territory of the former industrial company, which consists of several buildings of different sizes, has been converted into the “Business Village” (Fig. 6). On the billboard are listed 37 names of enterprises of different sizes and activities. An interviewee with whom I spoke later said, “*all kinds of very small companies are now located there. I don’t know how many there are, maybe about a hundred companies have set up there.*”<sup>11</sup> The façade of one building shows that new enterprises, such as a bakery, a café, transportation services, and a shop selling plastic windows have been established there. Each enterprise has placed its name on the façade and painted its own part of the building in a different colour (Fig.

---

10 Eugenijus, born in 1970, interviewed on September 16, 2020, Alytus.

11 Asta, born in 1964, interviewed on June 13, 2021, Alytus.

3). This territory is one of the places where Alytus residents have established their own enterprises. One of the owners,<sup>12</sup> whose enterprise is located in the “Business Village”, later told me that the empty buildings of the former factories are suitable places for establishing people’s “own” workshops, shops, or places of service. Her story of active participation in the formation of the “Business Village” through the establishment of a company is similar to the experiences of other people who managed to start their own businesses in the first decades after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence. Like many others, she had lost her job – “*your workplace, which you had, is not there anymore, it’s gone, it’s just gone*” – and she found herself in a precarious social situation, which, in her view, stimulated people “*to do something by themselves*”. She emphasized her education, the skills that she acquired while working at the factory, her ability to sell products and the economic situation in those days: “*there was a lack of everything*”, which was a catalyst for her decision to establish “*her own*” enterprise. People’s attempts “*to do something*”, which is perceived as the use of the knowledge, experiences, and skills acquired during the industrial past, and to take advantage of the free-market economy and the liberalization of the economy led to the creation of a variety of individual enterprises in the vacant spaces of the former factories. These efforts of people to create certainty in their personal lives during a precarious economic and social situation constitute the contemporary view of the former *kombinat* and produce a sense of fragmentation in the industrial landscape. The “Business Village” emerged as a suitable place for people to make a fresh start assembled out of ruined lives and the changed political and economic situation.

The transformation of the Alytus Experimental House Building Enterprise is another example of the dismantling of a former Soviet industrial company. This *kombinat* which produced prefabricated concrete panel buildings formed a separate area in the industrial district of Alytus. The territory of the enterprise covers more than 130 ha and is surrounded by roads and railways (Alytaus eksperimentinis namų 1979). It consisted of six factories and 16 workshops, including a sawmill, a metalworking facility, and factories for fibreboard, woodworking, wooden windows and doors, mineral wool, and building construction; various departments such as production realisation, transport, and computing; and service areas such as a canteen, a laundry area, sports facilities, and assembly halls (Alytaus eksperimentinis namų 1990). In 1992, during the processes of restructuring and privatisation, this *kombinat* was divided into eleven smaller separate and autonomous companies specialising in one specific economic activity.

---

12 Gintarė, born in 1968, interviewed on June 15, 2021, Alytus.

The local newspaper claimed that, “[t]he monster has been split into 11 little monsters” (Janonis 1992: 1–2). One married couple who remember the *kombinat* as an example of post-Soviet transformation noted that “*all kinds of small businesses were created from that big monster piece by piece. [They were] relatively tiny, on the one hand they were tiny, on the other not so tiny, as there were all kinds [of businesses].*”<sup>13</sup> Although some of these companies later went bankrupt and their buildings are no longer in use, new owners came, and new small enterprises appeared in the territory. There are individual enterprises that still perform the activities carried out by the factories and workshops of the Soviet company, and in the same buildings of the former factory. The names of these enterprises and the descriptions of their activities indicate the presence of sawmills, woodworking workshops, wooden window and door factories, furniture factories, a glass packet factory, sewing factories and various services such as places of trade, repair, transportation, and catering.

Today, this complex of buildings is no longer integrated into one industrial company, and its territory is visually more of a mosaic. It consists of different buildings in different colours, and includes a variety of names of companies. Some buildings or parts of them are decaying, and some representative and decorative details of the former *kombinat*, such as the fountain, a sculpture, and the wall of honour have been neglected. However, alongside them there are a newly renovated but still unused administrative facility and newly built factories. The infrastructure and immediate environs have not been evenly maintained, as, for example, the surface of the road and sidewalk and the streetlights have been only partially replaced, and there are few new bus stops. This former industrial place has changed because it has been split into smaller parts.

The integrity of the industrial landscape, which was once functionally and visually evident, has been lost. However, the fragmentation of the former factories into smaller units and the establishment of individual enterprises in the vacant spaces of the former factories was not an act of ruination, but rather the emergence of “something new” that came both out of and within old economic and urban structures. This was a way of resolving the uncertain and precarious economic and social situation caused by post-Soviet deindustrialisation. The transformation of the industrial landscape has resulted from the change in the sizes of the companies: instead of a large Soviet factory, a variety of “*small factories*” and “*small private enterprises*” have emerged.

---

13 Ernestas, born in 1960 and Janina, born in 1961, interviewed on May 16, 2020, Alytus.

## Practices creating economic units and structures in the former industrial landscape

When walking around the industrial district in Marijampolė, I noticed that in different parts of the territory, there were accumulations of multiple economic activities not related to industrial function. These were places where activities associated with the car trade were concentrated. One such place is the large area named “the great market” on the periphery of the industrial district. This is the car market, which was established at the height of demand for used cars at the beginning of 1990s. Residents of Marijampolė remember that the market was “loaded”, “stuffed” and “crowded” with cars. At the time I visited the market, I saw several storage areas filled with cars, along with some vacant ones (Fig. 7). Although the size of the car market has “*significantly decreased*” and “*shrunk*”, activities related to the selling of cars continue in the industrial territory and in the city. Today, the place where cars are sold is in a different form. During my walks in the industrial district I saw a variety of small car-dealers’ lots, and close to them were other activities related to the car trade. One example was the fenced-off territory of a car-dealer’s lot filled with different types of cars, and a new building with the name of the enterprise and of various insurance companies written on its façade. In front of the building there was an advertising stand listing the services provided: car sales and auction, storage, and engine diagnostics. From this it was apparent that this one enterprise consisted of different activities related to the car trade. Near this company, there were kiosks offering insurance or currency exchange services in Lithuanian, Polish and Russian (Fig. 8), and other enterprises selling cars, organising auctions for cars, and providing various services such as car repair, car rental, and car washing. In another location in the industrial territory, there was another concentration of different activities related to the car trade. A little further from the cluster of the car-dealer’s lot, gas station, café and bar, car wash, and car repair services, there was a street filled with various enterprises selling car parts and providing car repair services: “Tire change. Chassis repair”, “Truck parts”, “New and used car parts”, “Car parts, truck parts, car service equipment and tools”. The scale of the shops and services and the variety of billboards visible on the street give the impression of a specialized outdoor supermarket. One can see that different individual enterprises providing various services related to the car trade tend to gather in one place. Based on this, a large-scale economic structure appears to be forming in the industrial district.

Today, the view of the changed industrial landscape embodies the residents’ practices of making a living during economic and social decline. To survive the challenges caused by post-Soviet deindustrialisation, people

have actively participated in various kinds of trade and engaged in the provision of services: for example, the repair of household appliances, or working from home such as sewing and knitting. As the interviewees recalled, at that time people “*had to do something*” and “*to spin as best they could*”. However, it is evident that involvement in activities related to the car trade was the “common business” (Kaźmierska 2006: 70). Residents highlighted the fact that after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence, “*every second person started selling cars*”, “*everyone went abroad to trade*”, and “*everyone is working with cars*”. The collective nature of engagement in the car trade was an active agent in shaping the industrial landscape.

The interviewees’ insights on the formation of economic units and structures in the industrial district of Marijampolė show that workplaces were created in response to emerging needs related to the car trade.

*“At the beginning [people] drove one car at a time, and then the companies appeared. Some people started to repair cars, then workshops were established. That business expanded very quickly here. [...] immediately there were some people buying, others selling, others opened markets, then others [provided] services of accommodation. In other words, if advertisements were needed, then advertising companies started to operate.”<sup>14</sup>*

Not only the car trade itself developed intensively but also other activities related to it. In garages, people started to provide car repairs and “*beautifying*” and “*polishing*” services. Others provided accommodation and catering services – for example, one former car dealer<sup>15</sup> established a food kiosk in which his wife sold drinks and various dishes after noticing that there was a lack of places to eat in the car market. As the car trade expanded, there was a need for drivers of car transporters and buses transporting people to foreign car markets. The extent of this growth also influenced the emergence of jobs not directly related to the car trade. Monika, the wife of a car dealer, said that “*hairdressing salons [flourished] because everything had flourished since the car business started flourishing. Businessmen’s wives, everyone had jobs.*”<sup>16</sup> The residents’ collective involvement in entrepreneurship and their active use of the changed political situation after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence, which enabled the free movement of people and goods between Lithuania and other European countries,<sup>17</sup> created concentrations of trade

14 Benediktas, born in 1957, interviewed on May 3, 2019, Marijampolė.

15 Jonas, born in 1961, interviewed on May 16, 2019, Marijampolė.

16 Monika, born in 1966, interviewed on May 1, 2019, Marijampolė.

17 In 1993, the visa-free regime with Poland came into force (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės 1993).

and services in the industrial territory and the city. According to Mykolas, a former factory worker, this intense emergence of new individual activities and workplaces based on or related to the car trade “*was [a large] industry.*”<sup>18</sup>

Today, the former industrial landscape is active and loaded with new individual and collective economic activities, practices, and initiatives. Its cultural meaning is embedded not only in the lived experiences of people who managed to overcome the uncertainty of post-Soviet deindustrialisation and adjust to a new social and economic situation but also in the loss of its meaning as an industrial landscape. These places, which had previously been exclusively defined by industrial functions, became the places marking the emergence of trade and service sectors in the city.

## Conclusion

The use of the walking approach and talks with residents of the cities allowed me to understand the transformation of the industrial landscape from the perspective of a researcher observing the materiality of the built environment and the attitude, experiences, and practices of people engaging with it. The walks uncovered even tiny fragments of visual and material changes in the industrial places that may otherwise have gone unnoticed, while the interviews provided insights and an understanding of them. This combination allowed me to understand the multi-meaning nature of the transformation of the industrial landscape.

The material and visual aspects of the former industrial landscape reveal that their transformation was not a direct transition from the Soviet industrial to the post-industrial landscape. The stage of abandonment and emptiness – which is evident in both the residents’ lived experiences and the observable reality – is part of this transformation. It is the state of transition which creates the opportunity for the emergence of individual initiatives and new beginnings. However, despite the presence of economic activity and an emerging large-scale economic structure, the former industrial landscape still signifies uncertainty for the residents of these cities. People perceive it in relation to their experiences and memories of the industrial landscape formed during Soviet times. Abandoned buildings or parts of them, small-scale companies, and non-industrial functions are aspects that create uncertainty. The changes in the industrial landscape were embodied in the destruction of visually and functionally homogeneous industrial territories, large factories, and industrial activity.

Although the residents of the cities emphasise emptiness – the loss of the constitutive elements and ruination of the industrial landscape, the visibility

---

18 Mykolas, born in 1947, interviewed on May 2, 2019, Marijampolė.

and materiality of the built environment reveals that the former industrial landscape is not entirely abandoned and unused but is active and filled with various practices and initiatives. This vitality and fullness has not been achieved by attempts to restore the industrial landscape from social oblivion or convert it into something else by applying various revitalisation, reconstruction, or reconfiguration projects or adapting it to the needs of tourism and recreation. This has emerged via the long-term individual economic actions of people whose aim was to earn a living and improve their own personal well-being. The economic structures and places produced by the individual activity of residents that emerged in that dismantled industrial places and “collapsed” factories transformed the industrial landscape into a multifunctional one, where industrial functions are performed, various services are provided, and trade is carried out. This has created a sense of visual and functional fragmentation of the industrial districts marking the emergence of different economic activities in the damaged industrial landscape. The visibility and materiality of the former industrial landscape still narrate the post-socialist transformation of the former Soviet factories and the new usage of buildings and places which appeared in the changed political and economic situation after the restoration of Lithuania’s independence.

*April 2024*

## Sources

- Alytaus eksperimentinis namų statybos kombinatas: reklaminius leidinys.* 1987. Kaunas: LTSR prekybos ir pramonės rūmai.
- Alytaus eksperimentinis namų statybos kombinatas: reklaminius leidinys.* 1990. Vilnius: Gildija.
- Alytaus Lietuvos Komunistų partijos 60-mečio medvilnės kombinatas: informacinis leidinys.* 1980. Vilnius: Eksperimentinis meninio konstravimo biuras.
- Balčiūnas, Vytautas. 1976. Alytus privalo tapti mūsų laikmečio miestu. *Statyba ir Architektūra* 1, 200: 7–10.
- Janonis, Bronislavas. 1992. Monstras suskilo į 11 monstriukų. *Alytaus naujienos* 207, 7383, 15. 12. 1992: 1–2.
- Liekis, Algimantas. 1972. Alytaus mėsos kombinatą bestatant. *Statyba ir architektūra* 8, 159: 2.
- Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės ir Lenkijos Respublikos Vyriausybės sutartis dėl bevizinio važiavimo. 1993. *e-seimas.lrs.lt* [on-line]. [2023-10-29]. Available at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.11158>



- Lietuvos socialinė raida 1990 metais*. 1991. Vilnius: Informacinis-leidybinis centras.
- Lithuanian Department of Statistics. 2021. Lietuvos gyventojai (2021 m. leidimas). *Oficialiosios statistikos portalas* [on-line]. [2023-10-29]. Available at: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/lietuvos-gyventojai-2021/salies-gyventojai/miesto-ir-kaimo-gyventojai>.
- Kaunas Regional State Archives (hereinafter referred to as KRSA), fonds R–1705 Lietuvos TSR ekonominio administracinio rajono, rajoninio planavimo eksperimentinė schema. Technoekonominis pranešimas apie miestų išvystymą ir pirminių pramonės išdėstymą, inv. no. 4, file. 2, page 129. The document dated 1963.

## Bibliography

- Chelcea, Liviu. 2015. Postindustrial Ecologies: Industrial Rubble, Nature, and the Limits of Representation. *Parcours anthropologiques* 10: 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.4000/pa.448>
- Cowie, Jefferson – Heathcott, Joseph. 2003. Introduction: The Meanings of Deindustrialization. In: Cowie, Jefferson – Heathcott, Joseph (eds.): *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*. Ithaca: ILR Press: 1–15.
- Dzenovska, Dace. 2011. Notes on Emptiness and the Importance of Maintaining Life. *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 29, 2: 228–241.
- Dzenovska, Dace. 2018. Emptiness and its futures: Staying and leaving as tactics of life in Latvia. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 80: 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2018.800102>
- Dzenovska, Dace. 2020. Emptiness: Capitalism without people in the Latvian countryside. *American ethnologist* 47, 1: 10–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12867>
- De Certeau, Michael. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press.
- Drėmaitė, Marija. 2017. *Baltic Modernism: Architecture and Housing in Soviet Lithuania*. Berlin: DOM Publishers.
- Edensor, Tim. 2005a. *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Edensor, Tim. 2005b. The ghosts of industrial ruins: ordering and disordering memory in excessive space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23: 829–849. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d58j>
- Edensor, Tim. 2016. Walking Through Ruins. In: Ingold, Tim – Vergunst, Jo Lee (eds.): *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Abingdon – New York: Routledge: 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315234250>

- Evans, Michael, J. – Roberts, Alexa – Nelson, Peggy. 2001. Ethnographic Landscape. *CRM* 24, 5: 53–56.
- Graeber, David. 2020. *Anarchistinės antropologijos fragmentai*. Vilnius: Hubris.
- Gordillo, Gastón R. 2014. *Rubble: the afterlife of destruction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ingold, Tim. 1993. The Temporality of the Landscape. *World Archeology* 25, 2: 152–174.
- Ingold, Tim. 2004. Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet. *Journal of Material Culture* 9, 3: 315–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183504046896>
- Ingold, Tim – Vergunst, Jo Lee. 2016. Introduction. In: Ingold, Tim – Vergunst, Jo Lee (eds.): *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Abingdon, New York: Routledge: 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315234250>
- Jenks, Chris – Neves, Tiago. 2000. A walk on the wild side: Urban ethnography meets the Flâneur, *Journal for Cultural Research* 4, 1: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580009367183>
- Jurčikonytė, Aušra. 2016. Sovietinė industrija ir poindustrinės atmintys: Alytaus namų statybos kombinatas. *Lietuvos etnologija: socialinės antropologijos ir etnologijos studijos* 16, 25: 155–175.
- Kaźmierska, Kaja. 2006. The Border as an Individual and Collective Experience – The Sejny Case. In: Kurczewska, Joanna (ed.): *Polish Borders and Borderlands in the Making: From the Field Studies of Polish Sociologists and Anthropologists*. Warsaw: IFiS Publishers: 63–87.
- Khatchadourian, Lori. 2022. Life extempore: Trials of Ruination in the Twilight Zone of Soviet Industry. *Cultural Anthropology* 37, 2: 317–348. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca37.2.10>
- Khlinovskaya Rockhill, Elena. 2017. The Afterlife of northern Development: Ghost Towns in the Russian Far North. In: Vaccaro, Ismael – Harper, Kristina – Murray, Seth (eds.): *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism: Ethnographies of Disconnection*. New York – London: Routledge: 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315672311>
- Kunce, Aleksandra. 2019. A place that invites dwelling and reconciliation back: on the anthropology of a post-industrial place. In: Kunce, Aleksandra (ed.): *Post-industrial places as the subject of transdisciplinary studies: from design to rootedness*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra: 17–71.
- Kurtović, Larisa. 2020. When All That Is Solid Does Not Melt into Air: Labor, Politics and Materiality in a Bosnian Detergent Factory. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 43, 2: 228–246. <https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12380>

- Low, Kelvin E. Y. 2015. The Sensuous City: Sensory Methodologies in Urban Ethnographic Research. *Ethnography* 16, 3: 295–312.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138114552938>
- Lund, Anna Katrín – Benediktsson, Karl. 2010. Introduction: Starting a Conversation with Landscape. In: Benediktsson, Karl – Lund, Anna Katrín (eds.): *Conversations with Landscape*. Ashgate e-book: 1–12.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2013. Ruins of hope in a Kyrgyz post-industrial wasteland. *Anthropology Today* 29, 5: 16–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12060>
- Seamon, David. *Life takes place: phenomenology, lifeworlds and place making*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Simmel, Georg. 1958. Two Essays. *The Hudson Review* 11, 3: 371–385.
- Stoler, Ann, Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jn2s>
- Tilley, Christopher. 1994. *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*. Oxford/Providence: Berg Publishers.
- Tilley, Christopher – Cameron-Daum, Kate. 2017. *An Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*. London: UCLPRESS.
- Tsing Lowenhaupt, Anna. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Vaccaro, Ismael – Harper, Kristina – Murray, Seth. 2017. The Anthropology of Postindustrialism: Ethnographies of Disconnection. In: Vaccaro, Ismael – Harper, Kristina – Murray, Seth (ed.): *The Anthropology of Postindustrialism: Ethnographies of Disconnection*. New York, London: Routledge: 1–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315672311>
- Varfolomeeva, Anna. 2023. The nothingness myth: Creation and collapse of a Soviet industrial settlement. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 96: 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2023.960102>
- Wunderlich, Filipa Matos. 2008. Walking and Rythmicity: Sensing Urban Space. *Journal of Urban Design* 13, 1: 125–139.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13574800701803472>



Figure 1 Visual homogeneity of the industrial place. The Alytus Cotton Combine. Source: Alytaus Lietuvos 1980.



Figure 2 The abandonment of factories. The bankrupt Alytus Cotton Combine. Photo by author.



Figure 3 The fragmentation of factories. The bankrupt Alytus Meat Factory. Photo by author.



Figure 4 Billboards on roadsides, indicating the locations of various enterprises. The industrial district of Alytus. Photo by author.

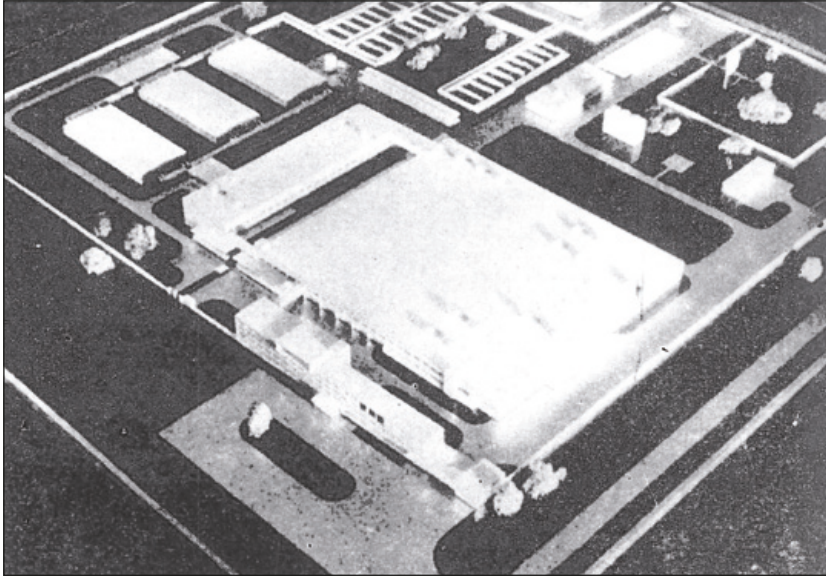


Figure 5 The model of the Alytus Meat Factory. Source: Liekis 1972: 2.



Figure 6 The scheme of the “Business Village”. Photo by author.



Figure 7 “The great [car] market” today. Photo by author.



Figure 8 A kiosk offering insurance or currency exchange services in Lithuanian, Polish and Russian located near a car dealer’s lot. Photo by author.