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PERCEPTION OF INDUSTRIAL MONUMENTALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ADAPTIVE REUSE: THE CASES OF BATTERSEA POWER STATION AND TATE MODERN IN LONDON

PERCEPCJA MONUMENTALIZMU PRZEMYSŁOWEGO W KONTEKŚCIE ADAPTACJI DO NOWYCH FUNKCJI NA PRZYKŁADZIE BATTERSEA POWER STATION I TATE MODERN W LONDYNIE

Abstract

The article addresses the perception of the monumentality of former post-industrial buildings in the context of their contemporary urban functions, using two London case studies: Battersea Power Station and Tate Modern. Originally serving as municipal power stations supplying Greater London with electricity, these structures now accommodate cultural and service-oriented functions. The two cases represent different models of revitalisation, commercial and cultural, respectively, and exemplify a type of monumental industrial architecture whose scale and form exceed the conventional framework of public-use buildings. Their massive volumes, dominant chimneys, and the rhythm of their brick façades contribute to their strong presence within the urban landscape and their high recognisability. The aim of the study is to analyse how the change of function of these iconic structures influences the perception of monumentality as a common good.

Keywords: *adaptive reuse, monumentality, perception, post-industrial heritage, revitalisation*

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje temat percepcji monumentalności dawnych obiektów poprzemysłowych w kontekście ich współczesnych funkcji miejskich na przykładzie dwóch londyńskich realizacji Battersea Power Station oraz Tate Modern. Obiekty te pełniące dawniej funkcje elektrowni miejskich zasilających Wielki Londyn w energię elektryczną, dziś pełnią funkcje kultury i usług. Oba przypadki są przykładami odmiennych modeli rewitalizacji – komercyjnego i kulturowego; reprezentują typ monumentalnej architektury przemysłowej, której skala i forma przekraczają standardowe ramy obiektów użyteczności publicznej. Ich masywność, dominujące kominy, rytm ceglanych ścian, stanowią o silnej obecności tych obiektów w przestrzeni miasta i rozpoznawalności. Celem badań jest analiza wpływu zmiany funkcji tych ikonicznych budowli na percepcję monumentalności jako dobra wspólnego.

Słowa kluczowe: *adaptacja do nowych funkcji, dziedzictwo postindustrialne, monumentalizm, rewitalizacja, percepcja*

1. INTRODUCTION

The revitalisation of post-industrial buildings has become one of the key issues in contemporary architecture and urban planning. This is particularly relevant to structures of exceptional scale and distinctive form that originally fulfilled essential urban infrastructure functions. Today, through adaptive reuse and revitalisation processes, such buildings can accommodate important public functions related to culture, commerce, and services. London, where history and modernity are closely intertwined in both architecture and urban development, offers numerous examples of monumental structures that are readily recognisable within the urban fabric, contributing significantly to the city's skyline and character, and as such, they constitute an important part of London's urban identity. Among these are Tate Modern, housed in the former Bankside Power Station, and the redeveloped Battersea Power Station, which currently functions as a mixed-use complex with a predominance of commercial uses. Both former power plants represent a distinctive category of monumental post-industrial architecture whose scale and form exceed the conventional dimensions of public buildings. Their original function as electricity-generating facilities, constructed during the first half of the twentieth century, required exceptionally large spatial volumes and structural capacities to accommodate the technologies of the contemporary energy industry.

1.1. AIM, SCOPE AND RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyse the monumentality of the former Battersea and Bankside power stations as post-industrial structures and to examine the impact of their transformation on their perception and role within the urban fabric. To achieve this objective, a comparative case study method was employed, based on the descriptive evaluation of criteria established within the research framework. The author's investigations were preceded by a review of existing literature and research on the history, development, and subsequent decline of both facilities.

1.2. MONUMENTALITY IN ARCHITECTURE

Monumentalism refers to the pursuit of creating works distinguished by extraordinary scale, grandeur, and permanence.[1] It is an architectural quality that evokes a sense of power, significance, and cultural importance. As noted by researchers, monuments, despite their primary purpose and specific meaning, have evolved throughout the history of architecture not only in terms of form, function, and architectural articulation, but also conceptually, acquiring new meanings over time.[2] Monumentalism cannot be reduced solely to the physical size and scale of buildings. It also encompasses representational value, symbolism, collective memory, identity, emotional and social impact, and the relationship between architecture and the urban

[1] *Monumentalizm*, "Słownik języka polskiego PWN", https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/monumentalizm;2568411.html (access: 15.06.2026).

[2] M. Początko, *Betonowe monumenty. Architektura betonowa jako kierunek poszukiwań monumentalności w architekturze współczesnej*, [in:] "Monografie Technologii Betonu: XI Konferencja Dni Betonu", Stowarzyszenie Producentów Cementu, Wisła–Kraków, pp. 165–177, https://www.dnibetonu.com/wp-content/pdfs/2021/Poczatko.pdf (access: 16.06.2026).

space.[3] Scholars emphasise that a monumental building has significance beyond its function and form and may become a symbol of a city or culture. Monumentality should therefore be examined in relation to the society that created it and the system of values that it embodied. A monument cannot exist independently of its social context. Moreover, monumental buildings are continuously adapted and reinterpreted by successive generations, a process that influences and reshapes their significance.[4]

The origins of industrial monumentalism can be traced to the period of rapid industrial development at the end of the nineteenth century. Its defining characteristic was the exceptional scale of industrial facilities within the urban landscape. Such buildings were deliberately designed as monumental landmarks that demonstrated their importance, modernity, and the ambition of their architects and engineers. Despite their industrial purpose, these structures often possessed a representative character, expressing prestige, technological advancement, and economic strength. Examples of this approach can be found in the design of factories, power stations, and the architecture of newly established industrial cities throughout the twentieth century.[5]

This was also the guiding idea behind the construction of both Battersea Power Station and Bankside Power Station. Conceived as strategically important facilities within London's urban hierarchy, they embodied durability and solidity. They also served as symbols of modernity, technological progress, and the industrial power of both London and Great Britain.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. CASE STUDY: BATTERSEA POWER STATION AND TATE MODERN (FORMERLY BANKSIDE POWER STATION)

Battersea Power Station as the *Cathedral of Power* – was constructed during the interwar period as part of a broader modernisation of the British electricity supply system. In the 1920s, London relied on numerous small and inefficient power stations, which resulted in technical difficulties in providing a reliable electricity supply to the rapidly growing city. To address these challenges, the London Power Company proposed the construction of several large centralised generating plants, including Battersea Power Station. The architectural design was entrusted to Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, who gave the building its distinctive appearance by combining monumental scale with the aesthetics of the Art Deco style. The first section of the facility, Battersea A, was constructed between 1929 and 1935, while the second section, Battersea B, was built from 1937 and completed in 1955, following delays caused by

[3] T. Kozłowski, M. Początko, *O monumentalizmie – problem stylu i stylowości w architekturze* [*O Monumentalism – The Problem of Style and Stylistics in Architecture*], "Teka Komisji Urbanistyki i Architektury Oddziału Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Krakowie" 2021, no. 49, pp. 237–248. https://doi.org/10.24425/tkuia.2021.138713 (access: 15.06.2026).

[4] F. Buccellati, *Monumentality: Research Approaches and Methodology*, [in:] F. Buccellati et al. (eds.). *Size Matters – Understanding Monumentality Across Ancient Civilisations*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2019, pp. 41–42.

[5] Wandsworth Council, *History of Battersea Power Station*, "Wandsworth Council", https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/business-and-licensing/regeneration-projects/nine-elms/history-of-battersea-power-station/ (access: 13.06.2026).

the Second World War.[6] Battersea Power Station is frequently cited as a prominent example of monumental infrastructural architecture, in which technical functionality was successfully combined with high architectural and aesthetic values. Its imposing brick massing, symmetrical composition, and four iconic chimneys established it as a dominant landmark within London's urban landscape. Over time, the building evolved from an industrial facility into a cultural and architectural icon. As R. Jóźwik notes[7], the power station represents a type of structure whose significance extends far beyond its utilitarian function, becoming embedded within the discourse of cultural heritage, collective memory, and place identity (Ill. 1, 2).



Ill. 1. Battersea Power Station – general view of the monumental façade. Photo: D. Winnicka-Jasłowska

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] R. Jóźwik, *Iconic architecture and its context – Battersea Power Station*, [in:] *Defining the Architectural Space. Tradition and Modernity in Architecture*, vol. 6, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2019, pp. 7–18.



Ill. 2. Battersea Power Station – monumental interior of the building. Photo: D. Winnicka-Jasłowska

Bankside Power Station – Tate Modern as a *Temple of Culture* – represents one of the most significant case studies in research on the history of technology, urban development, and the adaptive reuse of post-industrial architecture. As S.A. Murray observes, [8] the history of the power station encompasses not only developments in energy production technology but also the complex relationships between politics, spatial planning, and the environmental perception of industrial infrastructure. The origins of Bankside Power Station date back to the late nineteenth century, when the first power station on the site was commissioned in 1891 to supply electricity to the City of London. During the interwar period, the facility operated as part of an increasingly centralised and regulated energy system.[9] A pivotal moment in

[8] S.A. Murray, *The battle for Bankside: electricity, politics, and the plans for post-war London*, "Urban History" 2018, no. 45(4), pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926817000591 (access: 17.05.2026).
[9] *Ibidem*.

its history came after the Second World War, when a decision was made to construct a new power station on the site.

The former Bankside Power Station, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and constructed in two phases between 1947 and 1963, is distinguished by its brick-built structure and a central chimney rising 99 metres above ground level.[10] Following its closure, the power station remained unused for more than a decade and faced the threat of demolition. The absence of statutory heritage protection and shifting economic priorities contributed to the gradual deterioration of the building. At the same time, growing recognition of its architectural and historical value stimulated efforts to preserve it as an important element of Britain's industrial heritage. Public campaigns and the activities of heritage professionals played a significant role in changing perceptions of the site and promoting its conservation. A major turning point occurred in 1994, when the Tate Gallery selected the former power station as the location for a new museum of contemporary art. Following an international architectural competition, the adaptation project was awarded to Herzog & de Meuron, who proposed a strategy based on minimal intervention and the maximum use of the existing industrial structure.[11]



Ill. 3. Tate Modern – general view of the monumental façade. Photo: D. Winnicka-Jasłowska

[10] *Constructing Tate Modern*, "Tate", www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/constructing-tate-modern (access: 25.05. 2026).

[11] S.A. Murray*, op. cit*.



Ill. 4. Tate Modern – monumental interior of Turbine Hall. Photo: D. Winnicka-Jasłowska

The conversion works began in 1995, and Tate Modern officially opened in 2000. The project retained key spatial elements of the former power station, most notably the vast Turbine Hall, while integrating them with the building's new cultural function. As a result, the transformed structure not only preserves the memory of its industrial past but also redefines its meaning within the context of contemporary culture[12] (Ill. 3, 4).

2.2. PERCEPTION OF MONUMENTALITY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BATTERSEA POWER STATION AND TATE MODERN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Both former power station buildings, Battersea Power Station and Bankside Power Station, were examined in original expert research conducted by the author in 2024 and 2026. The study aimed to analyse the monumentality of these former industrial power stations and to examine how their transformation has influenced their perception and role within the urban structure. The qualitative expert research was descriptive and comparative in nature. Both buildings were analysed with reference to the following research criteria: the perception of monumentality, the role of function in the redefinition of monumentality, the significance of public accessibility, the social and cultural role of the buildings and their importance for public life, as well as symbolism as a factor intensifying the perception of monumentality.

[12] J. Baek, Y.-J. Shin, *Accidental yet transformative: Site-specificity of the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern*, "Architectural Research Quarterly" 2015, no. 19(1), pp. 49–60, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135515000287 (access: 15.06.2026).

- **Perception of monumentality.** The research demonstrated that the monumentality of Battersea Power Station derives primarily from its material and spatial characteristics (scale, volume, symmetry of the massing, symmetrical arrangement of the chimneys, and their height), whereas in the case of Tate Modern, monumentality has a hybrid character, combining physical attributes with culturally and symbolically assigned meanings. In both buildings, a superhuman scale constitutes the fundamental determinant of monumentality. However, scale alone does not determine the intensity of its perception. In Tate Modern, monumentality is reinforced by its public cultural function and by the spatial experience it offers, a quality that is less evident in the commercial environment of Battersea.
- **The role of function in redefining monumentality.** The function of a building proves to be an important factor influencing the perception of monumentality. The commercial function of Battersea may result in only a partial perception of the building as monumental, as its symbolic significance has been weakened; consequently, its monumentality remains primarily visual. By contrast, the cultural function of Tate Modern enables an integrated experience of the building, transforming monumentality into both a physical and a symbolic category – a "temple of art."
- **The significance of public accessibility.** The widespread accessibility of Tate Modern reinforces its monumentality through the democratisation of spatial experience. Visitors may feel that the building belongs to society as a whole. The space is used in a more democratic way, which is facilitated by its large publicly accessible areas that, in the case of the main spaces and exhibitions, are not restricted by ticketed access.
- **The social and cultural role – importance for public life.** The former Bankside Power Station, serves not only as a cultural institution but also as an open public space that fosters social integration, education, and participation in culture. Due to its accessibility and diverse programme of events, Tate Modern contributes to the democratisation of access to art and strengthens the importance of the Thames riverfront as a significant centre of public activity. A similar role is played by Battersea Power Station, whose regeneration transformed the former power station into a modern centre for retail, services, recreation, and culture. While preserving the historic architectural form of the building, the redevelopment created a space that combines commercial functions with publicly accessible areas. The project contributed to the revitalisation of a previously degraded area of South London by generating new employment opportunities, creating social gathering spaces, and attracting visitors. As a result, Battersea Power Station has become a symbol of the successful transformation of industrial heritage.
- **Symbolism as a factor intensifying the perception of monumentality.** The symbolism of a "Temple of Culture" associated with Tate Modern endows its monumentality with a transcendent and universal dimension, whereas the symbolism of a "luxury icon" associated with Battersea limits its significance largely to notions of prestige. In the case of Tate Modern, beyond the monumentality resulting from the building's physical volume, visitors experience its stature and importance as a cultural institution housing works of considerable artistic value. The atmosphere of the museum often evokes feelings of respect and reverence for art, reflected in visitors' behaviour – calm movements, quiet conversations, measured circulation, and generally courteous conduct. Battersea Power Station is perceived as a former urban infrastructure facility of extraordinary monumentality and global recognition.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The monumentality of post-industrial structures is not solely a consequence of their scale and form; rather, it emerges from the interaction between materiality, function, accessibility, and symbolic meaning. From this perspective, Tate Modern represents a model of integrated physical and cultural monumentality, whereas Battersea Power Station exemplifies a model of formal and visual monumentality, somewhat weakened by commercialisation and more limited public accessibility.

In contemporary architectural theory and practice, the concept of monumentalism is increasingly interpreted not as an expression of dominance or representative power, but as a carrier of memory, place identity, and social value. Today, monumentality may derive from the authenticity of form, historical continuity, functional adaptability, and the social significance of a building, particularly in the case of revitalized post-industrial architecture. In this sense, monumentality becomes a relational category – dependent upon users' perceptions, patterns of spatial use, and the degree to which a building is integrated into urban life – rather than being determined exclusively by formal or scalar characteristics.

The research findings indicate that maintaining a public-oriented function encourages the reinterpretation of monumentality as a common good of significant social value. Buildings that remain accessible and meaningful to a broad public are more likely to retain and strengthen their monumental status within contemporary society.

Both case studies demonstrate that the adaptive reuse of post-industrial buildings can extend beyond the mere preservation of architectural heritage and contribute to the creation of new centres of public life. By combining historical values with social, cultural, and recreational functions, Battersea Power Station and Tate Modern enhance London's attractiveness as a creative, open, and forward-looking city that consciously engages with and reinterprets its industrial heritage.

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