

From Derelict Land to the Preservation of Industrial Remains. Approaches to Wastelands in Western Europe

SUSANNE HAUSER

Summary

Till today the on-going processes of industrial restructuring generate a variety of marginal and redundant spaces. Wastelands with remains and traces of former industrial production are common parts of urban or rural areas and of urbanised landscapes. This nowadays global phenomenon first became obvious in the older industrial areas of Western Europe. In Great Britain these sites have been a focus of scientific research and experimental interventions since as early as in the 1950s. In other Western European countries, in France, Belgium or in the Federal Republic of Germany, the concern for these spaces finally began to grow at the end of the 1960s, when fundamental changes in industrial production increased the number of abandoned industrial sites so rapidly that ignoring them was no longer an option, at least not in regions whose economy mainly depended on the then closing textile factories, mines or steel works. This happened in the South of Belgium, the North of France, Lorraine, the Saar, the Rhine and the Ruhr.

This paper describes the role of preservation and changes in its concepts that accompanied the transformation of former industrial regions of Western Europe. This conceptual change even supported the ways of dealing with the huge amount of derelict spaces that were discovered as such – in the sense of acknowledged – for the first time some 60 years ago. The first part of the paper gives an outline of four different approaches characterized through different activities and attitudes towards former industrial land between 1950 and 1990. The second part characterizes two prominent conceptual strategies for the redevelopment of former industrial sites that came into full bloom at the end of the 1980s. The third part reflects on two early and pioneering concepts for the preservation of former industrial sites and relates these approaches to the question of identity.

Attitudes and Activities

Some 60 years ago the terms “derelict land”, “*friches industrielles*”, or “*Industriebrachen*” were not very common and the term “brownfields” did not even exist.¹ The occurrence of derelict, damaged and neglected land in Western European cities was common but usually short-lived. Derelict land did not draw any special political or academic attention before the late 1950s. Till that time former industrial areas within urbanised environments were kept as a reserve, rebuilt or modernized when former uses ceased, as most European industrial cities or cities with strong industrial activities were expanding after World War II.

At different times at different places in Western Europe this process came to a halt and the first city administrations, politicians, and citizens began to realize that not all of the remaining derelict sites were going to be reused without the investment of special effort and public support. Four approaches to former industrial production sites can be identified beyond the still very common practice of neglecting or ignoring devastated areas. Identifying these four approaches means developing a typology of attitudes and activities. In some places they also define a series of phases in the approach to dereliction. They can be observed everywhere in Western Europe. In Great Britain their development starts in the 1950s, in Western Germany and in France during the 1960s, and practices typical of all of the four approaches are still to be observed today.²

The first type is characterized by the practice of clearing the site completely if this is economically feasible. It has become an eyesore and disturbs the cities' image and self-esteem. Old industrial buildings are torn down. Nobody is interested in remains. A clean-up is done according to the usual standards of remediation practices, a parameter varying to an impressive degree during the last 60 years. Colliery spoils or slag heaps are ignored, left to themselves or covered by some sort of green. Some trees are planted in case visual enhancement is a factor under

consideration. Nobody comments on any historic or archaeological significance, nobody talks about any biotopes on industrial wastelands, or about the aesthetic impact of a certain construction. Successful redevelopment still means the creation of new buildings for new industrial production, or, in urban areas, for other purposes while industry is leaving town.

The second approach is characterized by different forms of analysis. Former industrial sites become an intensely discussed subject for administrations and planners. Industry is not leaving town but definitely closing down. Some communities realize and acknowledge that there is indeed derelict land that has not been used for a much longer time than just the usual turnover rate of production facilities. The creation of office space and housing developments does not fill the gap. The land is not needed for further urban development and the sites are too big to be cleaned. To become useful again their functions have to be redefined. Urbanists, and in some places already special planning agencies, begin to reconsider the situation still considered to be temporary but which would change too slowly if left entirely to the free play of market forces. Contamination becomes an issue and lowers the sale potential of the sites in question. Some groups, concerned citizens, ecologists as well as developers, start to think about ecological effects and toxic remains of former industrial production. The idea that industrial buildings are worth their preservation gains popularity.

The third attitude is characterized by openness towards experimental approaches. There are so many derelict sites that they cannot be cleared or used any more. Apart from deliberate disregard, there are two ways of dealing with the situation: hope beyond reason or revitalization supported by public investment. In this phase, the management of revitalization processes includes arguments presented by preservationists into their schemes. Old industrial buildings and structures are “saved”, and certain characteristic traits of former industrial sites are protected and inspire new designs. Some remains of the long forgotten industrial production are even considered as assets with some value. These may include settlements, housing estates, and, in very ambitious projects, also social structures and lifestyles. The neighbourhoods surrounding former industrial areas are considered as places worthy of their preservation too. Several museums are created and post-industrial biotopes become rec-

ognized as nature of a special and highly interesting kind. Questions concerning contamination enter revitalization programs and lead to intensified clean-ups, including physical and chemical treatments of brownfields.

The fourth attitude reacts to the fact that the number of abandoned industrial sites once again has been growing. Waiting for new industries has definitely turned out to be another term for neglect which, of course, is still a possible option but no longer acceptable. A better option is the search for opportunities for cheap and minimal intervention. Whereas other or earlier rebuilding processes resulted in quite impressive relocations of materials, movements of materials have now diminished. The concepts of physical and chemical clean-ups are more ambitious than ever, but the guiding idea of perfection in processing and cleaning severely damaged land is abolished. Gradual solutions are preferred. The symbolic reorganization of spaces is even more important than in the third approach. This includes the heightened relevance of “tradition” and “history”, the forming of “images” of certain restructured areas, the importance of the “uniqueness” of certain built structures. Aesthetics and ambitious conceptual strategies become decisive issues in planning for derelict sites. Also the recognition of the former industrial, the “manufactured site”³ as a “natural site” is important in so far as the present structure is seen as a given to human intervention just as it is or was. Concepts of culture and nature as well as their boundaries vanish at the same time. New models of the environment and its control and management emerge.⁴ The way of dealing with the former industrial sites becomes imaginative, holistic and controlling. Sometimes their new functions even have to be invented from scratch. This insight grows slowly and leads to imaginative and even visionary ways of dealing with dereliction.

Symbolic Strategies

Planning and designs for former industrial sites differ widely depending on the date of implementation and on local conditions. Two symbolic strategies with close ties to concepts of preservation, however, were often considered in the 1980s and 1990s and later, if a redevelopment of the first type was not possible and if hope did not bridge the time between old functions and new developments. The required basic knowledge informing these strategies is differ-

ent as well as their motivation and their respective histories. They can be best understood as results of manifold intellectual efforts and practices related to industrial sites that ultimately consolidated into standard practices. One strategy has its starting point in biological and ecological interest, the other in ways of recalling the past. I call them the *turn to nature* and the *turn to memory*. Both approaches became powerful and efficient means in recycling and redevelopment processes. Both were results of the remodelling of traditional assumptions about nature and culture, a process that involved not just several academic disciplines, but also the growing interest and expertise of citizens. In the 1980s and 1990s both strategies were inspired and enjoyed the backing of public interest.

The success of the turn to nature during the 1980s and 1990s was due to a shift in ecological observation and research and a growing popular interest in “nature”. As much as the turn to history this turn can be described as a slow move towards a new subject in the academic field, supported by a process leading to a new political agenda. It was inspired by environmentalism as much as by academic ecology, by green political agendas as much as by scepticism towards any industrial activity.

The strategic potential of the interest in urban or industrial “nature” was not at all predictable when some pioneers began their surveys. Till the 1950s the academic discipline of biology had not taken any special interest in urban areas and even less in plants or animals on industrial sites. Already in the 1920s, however, there was an international network of corresponding botanists, many of them not professionals but *connaisseurs* or *amateurs*, who did research on foreign and newly arriving plants able to survive without human support in the locations where they had landed by chance. The most rewarding places for observations were, of course, railway transshipment points and docklands in industrial areas, or any other place where imported raw materials such as cotton or copper or sugar were unloaded. These botanists seem to have been the first to bridge the gap between botanical interest, and a devotion to the aesthetics of nature and industry.⁵

In the 1950s this link was enforced by a different approach driven by quite pragmatic aims. In areas heavily damaged through mining activities, in Wales and Lancashire, some biologists started a search for plants able to survive on toxic debris of varying kinds. They hoped to find plants able to sup-

port the greening of colliery spoils.⁶ The idea was to solve three problems with one approach: Greening stopped erosion and dangerous landslips, and, as green hills were aesthetically preferred, grey slag hills should undergo a treatment to make them more appealing to the eye. As a consequence, psychological effects for the remaining neighbourhood were also taken into account. Above all these approaches were intended to minimize the necessary degree of intervention and corresponding costs. The research was intended to find out how “nature” did the greening just by itself and to identify economic means of supporting the natural processes. This was one of the first steps towards minimal intervention that is quite common today.

A third group with again different interests offered their findings on wastelands and former industrial sites. Some ecologists specialized in cities and thus defined the new discipline of urban ecology. They took a closer look at urban and industrial sites and showed that several plants and some wild animals too could get along quite well with the living conditions provided by urban environments and industrial production. They began to popularize the idea that some industrial production sites where common prejudice expected nothing but toxic and xenobiotic conditions showed a very interesting range of fauna and flora, with a broad, and at times quite unexpected, variance in type and quantity.⁷ Some ecologists even argued and demonstrated that some of the sites with the highest bio-diversity were urban industrial or post-industrial areas. When ecologists counted the plant species in a former railway area of 150 hectares in Berlin in the 1980s, it turned out to be supporting the enormous number of 566 different species. Four plants were identified that had never been found in Germany before, and three plants were described for the first time in the history of biology.⁸

These plants and animals, this “nature”, was not untouched by human influence, it had previously been used in a productive or in a destructive way – this depends on the observer’s perspective on urban and industrial development – and it did not meet traditional criteria of beauty. This may be one of the reasons why it took some time till plants and animals in cities and on former industrial land became recognized beyond the discourse of botany and urban ecology. But new political movements helped to spread the message. Evidently pristine nature as the bulwark of authentic life could not be expected on industrial sites formed and often

damaged through human activity. But this did not obviate activities to preserve the “nature” as found, regardless of how it came into existence. Even brownfields and any cultivated or exploited area could become untouched, pristine nature again if human beings would leave it alone, an attitude which still prevails today.⁹

The popularity of urban nature and especially urban wilderness emerged during the 1970s and resulted in a widespread public appreciation of the newly discovered urban nature outside of parks and other controlled areas, in claims for the preservation of urban and industrial biotopes and in the maintenance of wild flower populations in private gardens and on urban balconies.¹⁰ The urban and industrial wilderness became a symbol for freedom and one of the last romantic residues close at hand.

In the 1980s and 1990s some brownfields were discovered to be refuges for rare species of plants and animals. These descriptions added another aspect to the interest in post-industrial nature. They were able to draw together the spheres of ecological research, the claim for preservation, the necessity of management, and they challenged the naive assumption that rural areas were still somehow closer to “nature” in the sense of biodiversity than cities.¹¹ This again opened new perspectives on aesthetic considerations. Today, nearly three decades later, a wide-ranging stock of knowledge, including ecological descriptions and a vital interest in the aesthetics of post-industrial nature, serve as planning inputs. The acceptance of huge lakes filling former open-pit mines in Brandenburg, or the reinterpretation of former military zones as future wildernesses, would be highly improbable without the still on-going reinterpretation of industrial and post-industrial “nature”.¹²

The “turn to memory”, and its career in the re-development of former industrial sites, also started with the interest of groups specialized in marginalized phenomena and uncommon themes. There was some early public interest though for science and technology, including their history, and this interest enjoyed powerful supporters among politicians and businessmen. Institutions displaying ties between technology and memory to the public were established as early as the late 18th and in the 19th century: the *Musée des Arts et Métiers* in Paris of 1794 and the *Science Museum* in London of 1857. Their exhibitions, however, were not yet linked or devoted to industrial production. This link was established on an institutional basis

between 1900 and 1930, when museums of technology were founded in several capitals of industrialized nations. Some of their exhibitions included displays of outdated machinery and other material witnesses of earlier stages of manufacturing and industrial production. In Germany the *Deutsches Museum* in Munich, founded in 1905, and the *Verein Deutscher Ingenieure*, supported these activities, while in England the *Newcomen Society for the Study of the History of Engineering and Technology*, founded in 1919, was a driving force in the preservation of the material remains of former productions. This was one of the aspects furthering the later development of the turn to memory and its role in reclamation processes.

Another important ingredient of the turn to memory in the rehabilitation of former industrial sites was a change in the scope of academic research. After World War II, social and economic topics entered the humanities with renewed energy, and gained some influence on the mainstream of historiography. The relations of economy, industry and society became common issues, especially in British and French historiography. This also included the dedicated research on the workers’ perspectives on industrial production and their political role. Some approaches to that subject became quite popular reads.¹³

The term “industrial archaeology” provided another and possibly the crucial link between the spheres of industry and humanities. It was coined in 1955.¹⁴ It defined a new field for research as it tied together engineering and the history of technology, art history, architecture, and the history of construction and building, and referred to the methods of archaeology. Already in the 1960s, the recently proposed concept played an important role in the first creation of a post-industrial landscape as a museum of its industrial past. The result was the later World Heritage Site of the *Ironbridge Gorge Museums* in Shropshire. Ironbridge has become the Mecca of industrial archaeology and still serves as a blueprint for museum and preservation projects. Here, for the first time, the new, prolifically publishing industrial archaeologists met with local urban planners to plan a common project. The urban development of the New Town of Telford and the development of the adjacent Iron Bridge Gorge, industrialized more than 300 years earlier and left for more than hundred years in the 19th century, were conceived at least in part as a single comprehensive project.

Today the *Ironbridge Gorge Museums* comprise eight major heritage sites and several hundred preserved buildings in various industrial villages. The heritage sites draw on a wide range of presentation styles: tours of the now about 400 year-old furnaces; classical displays of collections; invitations into reconstructed residences; visits to a variety of workplaces representing various stages of industrial labour; “working museums” where old production methods can be observed; re-enactments of historical events. The last major addition was a new interactive Design and Technology Museum. The Iron Bridge – indeed the world’s first bridge made of iron – lends its own quite unique flair to this varied and constantly, according to the most recent developments of museology, reworked program.

The “turn to history” as well as the “turn to nature” were highly complex answers to the damaged land left behind after the disappearance of industrial production. The treatment of former industrial sites and the redevelopment of deindustrialized regions questioned aesthetic approaches and symbolic practices. It also affected, challenged and even linked concepts associated with nature or with history: the idea of the (post-)industrial landscape integrating very special natural habitats and special industrial buildings, machinery and other traces seems to be one of the remaining results of the practices and attitudes developed over some sixty years in Western Europe.

Some Remarks on Identity and Preservation

Notable is the fact that already the early debate on the preservation of industrial remains in Great Britain was staged as a debate of national concern and as an invitation to add a new aspect to the national identity. In 1955 Michael Rix, the first promoter of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum project, underlined the urgency of his cause through the argument that Ironbridge, as the “cradle” of the “industrial revolution”, is evidence of the pioneering role of Britain in the international process of industrialization. The idea of preserving “the evidence” convinced the local development corporation, and finally won the attention of public funding bodies, among them national institutions.¹⁵

A different approach was taken in *Écomusées*.¹⁶ The discussions and the strategies were, according to the programmatic ideas mainly based on ethnological considerations, directed towards local and regional development and involvement. The general

agenda for any *Écomusée* was to turn not just a place but landscapes into heritage sites that function on behalf of the economic and social future of the local inhabitants, and open up new perspectives through reference to earlier accomplishments and strengths.

The approach in Ironbridge and the principles of the *Écomusée*, first applied to an industrial site in Le Creusot in 1971, accepted the fact that depression may ensue from economic collapse. The approaches were based on the conclusion that this state had to be consciously countered through the rehabilitation of the industrial past: there is no reason to devalue the past once it has proved to be economically unviable. Its fruits and the experience born of it should be perceived as riches and as a resource. In this respect both programs show a psychotherapeutic potential. The articulation of the past, its presentation, and appreciation, are seen as means to establish a new perspective and to trigger future-oriented activities. In this sense they were and still are meant to support a self-confident idea of a local, regional, or national identity.

These cases were pioneering projects. Their promoters succeeded in the permanent integration of their subjects into the general discourses on history and preservation. Questions of identity are tackled and answered differently today, as the offer of identifying bonds is manifold and not necessarily bound to specific places any more. A constant and thus identifying local reference to old industries cannot be easily maintained in Western Europe’s former industrial regions once the generation with a vital connection to the closed slate quarries or textile mills, to the decommissioned mines or steelworks, has died. And sites with protected, local, post-industrial biotopes are usually not used or understood as very special and identifying places. New conditions assert themselves when the local focus of work has shifted to an economy based on services. Economic changes push the former industries into the background and, in the long run, render the material remains and their specifics as alien to the local population as any other old or new unknown object. But industrial activities are still a common subject of historiography; the opportunity to save industrial structures as monuments still exists, as do highly appreciated museums of industry. Thus former industrial sites and the associated ways of working and living in Western Europe are and will be among the many remains and historic subjects that may retain the interest of future generations.

Notes

- ¹ The now prominent term *brownfields* was coined in the US in the early 1990s to promote the decontamination and the reuse of former industrial sites; Alker, Sandra / Joy, Victoria / Roberts, Peter / Smith, Nathan: The Definition of Brownfield, in: *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 43, 1, 2000, 49–69
- ² This part sums up observations on reclamation processes in Western Europe in: Hauser, Susanne: *Metamorphosen des Abfalls. Konzepte für alte Industrieareale*, Frankfurt am Main / New York 2001
- ³ Kirkwood, Niall: *Manufactured Sites. Rethinking the Post-Industrial Landscape*, London and New York 2001
- ⁴ See e.g. Rebele, Franz / Dettmar, Jörg: *Industriebrachen. Ökologie und Management*, Stuttgart 1996
- ⁵ See e.g. Scheuermann, Richard: *Mittelmeerpflanzen der Güterbahnhöfe des rheinisch-westfälischen Industriegebietes*, in: *Beiträge zur Landeskunde des Ruhrgebiets*, H. 3, Essen 1930, 119–207; for publications of early observations in industrial areas in Britain see Cole, Lyndis: *Urban Nature Conservation*, in: Warren, Andrew / Goldsmith, Frank Barrie (eds.): *Conservation in Perspective*, Chichester / New York / Brisbane / Toronto 1983, 267–285
- ⁶ See e.g. Gemmell, R.P. / Connell, R.K.: *Conservation and creation of wildlife habitats on industrial land in Greater Manchester*, in: *Landscape Planning* 11, 1984, 175–186; Jochimsen, Maren: *Natürliche Begrünung auf Bergehalden*, in: *Kolloquium über technisch-ökologische Untersuchungen zu Fragen der Rekultivierung von Bergehalden. Resümee*, hg. v. Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet, Bochum 1984, 85–109
- ⁷ Laurie, Ian C. (ed.): *Nature in Cities. The Natural Environment in the Design and Development of Urban Green Space*, Chichester / New York / Brisbane / Toronto 1979; Sukopp, Herbert / Wittig, Rüdiger (Hg.): *Stadtökologie*, Jena / Stuttgart 1993
- ⁸ Neiss, Thomas: *Wertvolle Kulturlandschaft neues Emschertal? Naturschutzgebiete in urban-industrieller Landschaft*, in: *Natur und Landschaft* 70, H. 10, 1995, 454–457, 456
- ⁹ Hauser 2001 (as in note 2), 214 ff.
- ¹⁰ This book added to the popularity of these approaches in German speaking countries: Andritzky, Michael / Spitzer, Klaus (Hg.): *Grün in der Stadt – von oben von selbst für alle von allen*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1981
- ¹¹ Drecker, P.F. / Sudhoff, B. / Vedder, A.: *Biologische Aspekte und deren Berücksichtigung im Planungsprozeß*, in: Genske, Dieter D. / Noll, Hans-Peter (eds.): *Brachflächen und Flächenrecycling*, Berlin, 95–106, 96 ff.
- ¹² See www.wildnisstiftung.de (2018-03-30)
- ¹³ Influential British historians promoting this perspective were E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm; the link between social, economic and environmental history was first established in a systematic way through the French *École des Annales*
- ¹⁴ This article seems to have been the inauguration of the term industrial archeology: Rix, Michael: *Industrial Archaeology*, in: *The Amateur Historian* v.2 no.8, October-November 1955, 225–229.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*
- ¹⁶ See the short account of the basic principles in Hubert, Francois: *Das Konzept Écomusée*, in: Korff, Gottfried / Roth, Martin (eds.): *Das historische Museum. Labor, Schaubühne, Identitätsfabrik*, Frankfurt am Main / New York / Paris 1990, 199–215