

# Industrial Heritage: A New Cultural Issue

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## Abstract

Industrial heritage is one of the mediums that best reflect the duality of Europe. On the one hand, it illustrates the exchanges that have developed on the continent for three centuries, while on the other, its recognition depends solely on a national context, as demonstrated by the opposing cases of France and the United Kingdom. Endowed with original values (work, technology, production, circulation of goods), it stands out less because of its aesthetics than by its flexibility, scope, and ability to shape landscapes.

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## Article

Industrial heritage, a new field of historical inquiry, industrial heritage is one of the cultural mediums that best reflect the duality of Europe. Through its material remains and immaterial memory, it is a key aspect of European identity, reflecting the exchanges between people and technology, which, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, made the continent the cradle of the modern economy, including beyond Europe itself. In 2012, thirty-six of the forty-six industrial sites enjoying UNESCO World Heritage status were European. However, being vulnerable, complex, and often disproportionately large, it also depends solely on the national context for recognition. The cases of France and Great Britain illustrate this paradox.

In France, the landmarks of the recent past serve as prominent milestones for the development of this heritage. Coinciding with the 1973 oil crisis, the scrapping of Baltard's *halles* in August 1972 destroyed an admired masterpiece of metal architecture. Twenty years later, the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the first Gulf War (1991)—which marked the loss of superpower status acquired in the aftermath of the war—coincided with the closing of the last coal deposits in Oignies (Pas-de-Calais) in December 1990, and of the blast furnace of Uckange (Lorraine) in December 1991, true behemoths of modern times whose gigantic size has raised major problems for conservation. As a result, industrial heritage intersects with four major social concerns of contemporary France: work, landscape, the city and marginality. It emerged just as the employment of labourers decreased and ecological awareness appeared. The Creusot ecomuseum was founded in 1974 on the ashes of the Schneider steel empire, once suppliers to France's military potential. Twenty years were needed for the remodeled remains (château de la Verrerie, drop forge hammer, Riaux plains) of this company town, which was deeply hurt by the crisis, to fit in with revitalization in the minds of the population. The industrial heritage thus heralded the tearing apart of the urban fabric and produced wastelands (la Belle de Mai in Marseille, a former tobacco factory), those disturbing places of the contemporary divide; they are reminders of bygone splendor whose scale makes it possible—at the cost of policy choices—to reconvert or even regenerate a city, as demonstrated by the construction of the Stade de France in the former production fields of Saint-Denis in 1998, or the latest experiments conducted in Nantes (parc des Chantiers), Saint-Étienne (Manufrance), and Mulhouse (DMC neighbourhood).

As we have seen, the temporal nature of history does not coincide with that of heritage, which has the attribute of shaping the vestiges of the distant past in accordance with the population's image of its

near future. The early success of the industrial heritage (early 1960s) and its quick expansion in Great Britain are highly indicative in this regard. The opening in 1968 of an iron museum in Ironbridge (Shropshire), a village that takes its name from the world's first cast iron bridge (1781), conveys the British public's attraction for the success of a family (the Darbys), which was remarkable for its religion (Quakerism), duration (three generations), and technological expertise (the invention of the coke smelting process, improvement of the steam engine, and metal construction). Ironbridge brings together all kinds of attractions, including the arts of fire and, the beauty of the Severn valley, as well as a chronology that overlaps with the Industrial Revolution and expresses the destiny of modern England. The later reconversion of the Albert Dock in Liverpool, Manningham Mills in Bradford, and the electric power plants of Battersea and Bank Side, which became the Tate Modern Museum, was driven by this wave of optimism.

These colossal examples demonstrate an essential aspect of industrial heritage, namely that it should be appreciated in terms of the original values it conveyed (work, technology, the organisation of production, the circulation of material goods in a society subject to accelerated economic modernization for three centuries), and not in terms of simple aesthetic criteria. Buildings are always at the heart of a system to which they belong or which encompasses them, whether they be exceptional buildings (Arc-et-Senans saltworks in France, Wieliczka Royal Salt Mines in Poland, New Lanark cotton mill village in Scotland, the Lingotto factory in Turin, the Völklingen steel industry complex in the Saar) or serial ones (the mining region of Wallonia and Nord-Pas-de-Calais).

The most modest mill itself can take its place in this utilitarian flexibility (Kinderdijk-Elshout drainage network in the Netherlands). But in this respect, one thinks particularly of the proto-industrial ironworks nestled in vast forest cover (Engelsberg in Sweden), silk spinning mills (Ardèche and Northern Italy), model villages (Saltaire, Port Sunlight in England), installations generating or governing cities (Goslar in Lower Saxony and the silver mines of Rammelsberg), establishments that end up shaping entire landscapes (copper extraction in Cornwall, at Falun in Dalecarlia in Sweden, at Røros in Norway; the coal complex of Blaenavon in Wales; the alpine salt valley in Hallstatt-Salzkammergut in Austria, mercury extraction at Almadén in Spain and Idrija in Slovenia). The remnants of production—whether small (the paper pulp factory in Verla, Finland) or dispersed (textile colonies in Catalunya)—light the way for economies and solidary social actors in the long term and within large spaces, as demonstrated by Europe's industrial heritage “route” that is now made up of nearly one thousand sites in forty-four countries, connecting eighty of the major spots.

Due to this multiplicity and their ability to assume new functions, the remains of the industrial age offer—in their most massive known form (the factories and infrastructure of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)—both enormous challenges and potential, because they include the old bases (coal, iron, steel, textiles) and more recent activities (automobiles, aeronautics, electronics, leisure). The problems inherited from the former communist block complicate the situation. Although Lower Lusatia was able to regenerate abandoned structures as cultural monuments (the Lauchhammer coke plant), Upper Silesia and the Urals have only just begun to preserve their former foundries and steel mills. Industry, however, revitalized itself when Nestlé made the abandoned Menier chocolate factory its French headquarters, or when the Fagus factory in Alfeld, Lower Saxony continued to operate. More frequently, factories transform into cultural centres (La Condition Publique in Roubaix, the Grand-Hornu coal mining site in Belgium, Vapor Aymerich at Terrassa in Catalunya). However, the central concern is the revitalization of historic industrial neighbourhoods that perpetuate the universal value of landscape as the trace of a human adventure (in Lodz, Ancoats or Schio), as well as the lasting conservation of sites for social uses that are appropriate to the extinct context, and also accepted by the actors of today (the Ruhr coalfield; the Carl Zeiss factories in Jena, Germany and the Van Nelle complex in Rotterdam, a brilliant example of the modern architecture that now serves as a centre for digital companies). The poor relation of academic beauty, industrial heritage is a powerful

identity base for the European city or territory of the future.

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