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Industrial Heritage and their Legacies: “Memento non mori: Remember you shall not die”

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Abstract

This paper will explore the possibilities of reactivating the disused site of Coryton Oil Refinery in Thurrock, UK as a cultural heritage site through analysis of its relationship with landscape, people and their interrelated processes. The oil refinery was closed in 2012, leaving behind an impressive 586 acres of industrial as well as cultural history. The tangible and intangible factors effected by the industrial sites, as well as people’s perceptions and awareness towards industrial heritage as places of production, collective and personal memory and place identity will be investigated in this research paper.

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1. Introduction

Merely a generation ago, industrial heritage was an unused term in academic discourse, and although it has been making its way into developments and projects, especially in Europe (Alfrey & Putnam, 1992), it is still an emerging concept as far as landscape architectural projects are concerned with these new landscape typologies of great complexity. Furthermore the emphasis has been put on the tangible aspects of the heritage: the physical elements on the landscapes – the material heritage. Intangible aspects such as reconstruction of emotional safety, place attachment, identity, community spirit and story continue to be secondary considerations. On the other hand, some argue that ‘sense of place’ the *genius loci* have been overemphasised within the field of landscape design, and Fleming (2007) states that it has lost its sincerity and credibility through exploitation.

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Selective focus on the ‘appropriate’ visual impact, age and rarity of structures forgoes historic dimensions when dealing with industrial heritage (Alfrey & Putnam, 1992). Anderson *et al.* (2004) states that post-industrial sites are commonly assessed to be of unfavorable value, and prevalent perceptions of conservation values move quickly towards categories such as romantic, monumental, ancient and sublime. Woodward (2012) argues that the new ruins of the post-industrial age poses a new aesthetic challenge and designers have been working on convincing responses.

Landscape as perception (as opposed to a physical body) has been significant to the study, and it focuses on an everyday based understanding and reverence of place. This responds well with Fairclough & Ripponn’s (2002) theory that understanding and appreciation does not have set qualities to be valued by, and may be interpreted in a variety of ways, including individual, personal and subjective, in addition to commonly accepted ‘scientific’ ways.

This research focuses on the affect and phenomenology in relation to a robust physical phenomenon – the relationship between the local community of the Stanford-le-Hope area in Essex, UK and the disused site of Coryton Oil Refinery. Coryton Oil Refinery is in the process of demolition as we speak; a tabula rasa approach with no regard to its heritage values or the community’s unique links with the industrial site. The industrial site has shaped the landscape, creating a new value, aesthetic and uses through people’s perceptions; this landscape became a new cultural construct, providing a strong sense of belonging. In order to understand the existing values and links to the industrial site interviews and surveys were conducted within the local community of the area. According to the results an alternative heritage approach will be suggested that respects both place and people. Furthermore the research will investigate the tangible and intangible factors that affect and are affected by the post-industrial sites, as well as people’s perceptions of these as places of production, memory and identity. In doing so, it will attempt to advance awareness of the refinery’s crucial role as a source of heritage and identity as well as reveal its ability to counteract the negative consequences of industrial decline in the communities such as depression, social exclusion, unemployment and depopulation that occur when such sites cease production.

The research will investigate the possibility of a new heritage model approach and demonstrate its applicability to the proposal of the new heritage site of Coryton Oil Refinery. Landscape architectural design will be the agent to develop the proposed heritage model and aim to create multi-functional areas with positive influences that local residents can identify and own with pride, engaging fully with the place and the community. Furthermore the design intends to challenge existing strategies such as the minimalist approach with minimum intervention or the museumification approach that freezes time and creates static scenery of the past without allowing it to evolve. This research aims to prove that post-industrial sites do share such strong and valuable historical and cultural bonds with the local community and its landscape, and that they are worthy of conservation under the cultural heritage status.

2. Industrial Heritage

During the second half of the 20th century a great number of former industrial towns faced substantial economic decline as a result of deindustrialization (Trinder, 2013). The consequences were directly related with social and cultural decline, as well as the uncertainty regarding the future of these derelict spaces (Baines, 2012) left by the closure of the heavy industry.

Niemi (2003) explains that deindustrialization led to new extrovert politics that aimed to deal with the new challenges, and aspired to make the post-industrial site or landscape attractive to investors, and then secondly to make the local residents see new potential in their surroundings. A trend of conserving old, unique or pretty building structures whilst adding elements of distilled contemporary structure grew in order to ‘enhance the industrial heritage’, whilst simultaneously portraying a future-oriented society (Haapala, 2003).

Deindustrialization was a social and economic turning point, where the industrial society itself had become the problem. Later, environmental problems due to industry became evident, and were, according to Haapala (2003), a death blow to its reputation.

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