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Culture on top
Beyond museification and culture-led regeneration of industrial heritage

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Abstract

This paper intends to critically explore the discourses and practices of regeneration of industrial heritage, examining how and to what extent a variety of notions of industrial heritage have been brought to bear on the plans and the practices enacted in the re-definition of the use of industrial sites. The general context is the one of the move from the industrial to the post-industrial society, entailing a growing abandonment of industrial areas and a parallel increasing awareness of the value of these sites, as testimony of some past material and immaterial culture and as spaces with potential for new forms of contemporary production. The paper thus reconstruct a typology of the main discourses and practices relating to industrial heritage re-uses, and concludes discussing the place of culture in these discourses and practices, the implications of the dominant discourses and practices, together with the need to move onto another view of the place and the shape of culture in and around industrial heritage sites.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we intend to conduct a critical reflection on the relation between industrial heritage regeneration practices and cultural contents.

In the last decades there has been a surge of attention for industrial heritage, both among policy makers, urban planners and researchers. In fact, we are witnessing, on the one hand, a growing availability of built spaces, mainly generated by de-industrialization processes, outsourcing of production in developing economies and obsolescence of some public infrastructures (e.g. old railways, old ports, military buildings, etc.); and, on the other hand, a growing demand for spaces of aggregation for new forms of co-working, production, distribution, innovation and cultural consumption by associations, entrepreneurs, and civil society at large (Bacchella et al., 2015). Taken

together, these two phenomena explain policy makers' and urban planners' turn of attention for the re-use of former industrial sites for new social and cultural purposes. Indeed, the matter of industrial heritage and its destination has become so prominent in the public debate that for example 2015 has been declared to be the "European year of industrial and technical heritage" – an E-FAITH¹ initiative, upon a Council of Europe endorsement), as a way to address attention and resources towards the study and enhancement of the industrial heritage in Europe.

This industrial heritage discourse has been producing concrete consequences: massive public spending by European funds and local governments promoting restorations and re-destination of former industrial sites, sometimes then left unused, other times filled with cultural activities with dubious effects in terms of regenerated local economy (Edwards & Coit, 1996), or even of sustainability of those activities themselves in the long run (Bacchella et al., 2015).

All in all, a lot of debate has now accrued and many experiences have accumulated too in and around industrial heritage sites. It is probably time to understand what is going on from a management scholars' perspective. In particular, beyond simply reconstructing the state of the art, in this paper we will critically explore the extant discourse of industrial heritage regeneration and empirically analyze the strategies through which this is attempted, particularly questioning the place of culture in the mainstream discourses and practices of industrial heritage regeneration.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section we will explore the discursive dimension. By reconstructing the debate around the notion of industrial heritage and by exploring who started to talk about industrial heritage and when, we identify two intertwining discourses: (a) a preservation discourse, that aimed at establishing and legitimizing former industrial sites as part of our cultural heritage deserving preservation and care; (b) a strategic discourse, that shifted the focus on the potential value derived from the re-use of former industrial sites for cultural destinations. Next, after

¹ *European Federation of Associations of Industrial and Technical Heritage* is a platform promoting contacts and co-operation between volunteers and non profit volunteer associations in Europe. It is the place where these can meet, exchange experiences, learn from each other and support each other's activities and campaigns (<http://www.e-faith.org/home/?q=content/what-e-faith>)

a methodological note on how we are proceeding in our empirical investigation, we will illustrate our emerging findings on the extant practices of industrial heritage re-uses. Two dominant practices seem to emerge, mirroring the two dominant discourses: (a) museification – preservation discourse; (b) culture-led regeneration – strategic discourse; plus (c) a third, marginal one: cultural entrepreneurship. Finally, we will conclude discussing the place of culture in these discourses and practices, the implications of the dominant discourses and practices, together with the need to move onto another view of the place and the shape of culture in and around industrial heritage sites.

EXPLORING DISCOURSES OF INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

Until a few decades ago industrial heritage was a term that did not even exist. Physical spaces of industrial production existed, but no particular attention was devoted to them outside of their (present or past) functional dimension as plants or other infrastructure for productive activity. Then in more recent times, together with the so called post-modern turn of attention for the symbolic dimension of production and of human activity at large, the concept of industrial *heritage* started to gain momentum and a whole discourse generated around it, around what it is, around the fact that it is worth being preserved or destined to new culture-related uses.

The general context then is the one of the move from the industrial to the post-industrial society, starting to take place in the 1950s-1960s in the UK, and in the 1970s in Italy. As the functional value of industrial sites started declining with social and technical innovations leading to new production processes or a change in demand, the cultural-historic values of these sites, instead, did not suffer the same decline and even increased (Dewulf et al. 2013). In other words, the growing abandonment of industrial areas due to the outsourcing of production in developing economies, the obsolescence of some public infrastructures and the more general changes of the new economy opened up the issue

that these sites are, first, testimony of some material and immaterial culture (e.g. heritage of the industrial revolutions) and, in turn, of what to do with them (Celano, 2011).

Industrial sites as heritage – a preservation discourse

At first the emphasis was on raising people's awareness on the value of industrial sites as a form of heritage in itself (Hudson 1963; Alfrey et al., 1992). The first efforts in the debate were about reattributing value to industrial "voids" as the only alternative to abandonment and oblivion (Celano, 2011). In Italy a formal recognition of industrial heritage as cultural heritage arrived relatively late and by decree (D.Lgs. 62/2008), where industrial heritage found a legal definition as "a complex of physical remnants, testimony of the organization of an industry in a territory". What descends from this definition is that industrial heritage should not be read in isolation, yet instead in relation to the modifications of the territory generated by the industrialization. This bears also an interdisciplinary dimension, as far as industrial heritage can be conceived of as a bundle of physical artefacts (e.g. buildings, plants and machineries), but also as their meanings and their historical and social contextualization.

The first actions that were undertaken as soon as the concept of industrial heritage or industrial archaeology stopped being perceived as an oxymoron and gained relevance instead, were about identifying and cataloguing these sites by newly established documentation centres or specific national associations in most Countries (in Italy the main actor is the AIPAI – Associazione Italiana per il Patrimonio Archeologico Industriale, founded in 1997 and dedicated to research and cataloguing of the Italian industrial heritage).

Then soon the attention shifted to the importance of preservation and interpretation of these sites (Sykora et al 2010) and on the technical implications of preservation acts: not only should the material and built heritage be physically recovered ("hardware" part), but also, because of their very nature, reflections on the good as a former working place and as a part of social, cultural or other

contextual transformations (“software” part) should be secured (Celano 2011). The underlying idea is that through a sustainable and well conceived renovation we can rediscover our past within the context of the traditional life style (Celano, 2011). This obviously requires interdisciplinary preservation efforts, including architecture restoration competences, but also urban planning, cultural planning and public policy ones.

Industrial heritage and culture-led regeneration - a strategic discourse

Very soon the discourse shifted to claiming the value of industrial heritage as a strategic resource to be restored, modernized and reused as cultural destinations for some consequent presupposed job creation, territorial competitiveness and local development (Edwards & Coit, 1996; Hospers, 2002; Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2009; Lamparska 2013).

One of the first contributions that set the scene for this view of industrial heritage was Alfrey et al.’s book (1992), who addressed the issue not only of how industrial heritage resources can be identified, but also about how they can be exploited. Basically, Alfrey et al. (1992) made an influential argument in favour of planning for new uses in cultural heritage sites: this sounded new in itself at that time, as opposed to a rhetoric of mere preservation. Since then the idea that industrial heritage sites constitute a valuable resource started establishing itself in people’ minds.

For example, Edwards & Coit (1996) proposed a typology of industrial heritage and claimed about their potential as new tourism attractions. Other scholars moved the argument beyond, positing that, through tourism, industrial heritage sites were a potential great resource for local economic development (Xie, 2006; Lamparska, 2013). Similarly, Hospers (2002) claimed that industrial heritage serves more than just increased tourism flows: it is about potential regional renewal. On the same note, Pawlikowska-Piechotka (2009) and Sykora et al., (2010) argued for the value of industrial architecture that, once modernized and reused as museums, galleries, and other tourism and leisure needs generates social, historical, aesthetical and economic enrichment. Connected to this are some

functionalist, normative contributions hinting at the best strategies to make industrial cultural heritage fruitful as a resource, as for example McIntosh & Prentice (1999) on the importance of encoding the experience of the industrial heritage site with people's personal meanings, something that would increase the sense of perceived authenticity.

EXPLORING PRACTICES OF INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE REUSE

After having appreciated the rise and the nature of the main discourses on industrial heritage, we are left with an empirical question. Industrial heritage sites are an important piece of our cultural heritage and can foster both economic and cultural growth, instead of lingering abandoned and unused; but how are these attempts performed? What are the strategies in place concerning the reuses of industrial heritage sites? Who are the actors involved, what are the processes, what are the outcomes? The objective here is to empirically reconstruct the practices of industrial heritage reuse, particularly having in mind our driving question about the place of culture in all this.

Methodological note: data and analysis

This part of the analysis is currently undergoing and it is in its early stages. Let us describe here how we are proceeding and what preliminary findings are starting to emerge.

In order to explore practices of industrial heritage reuses, we have accessed an archive of “micro-stories” collected and filed by an independent Italian cultural association devoted to fostering knowledge about industrial heritage in Italy and beyond². The archive so consists of 40 files on industrial heritage sites in Italy and 20 files on industrial heritage sites in Europe. Each file is few pages long and presents basic technical information about the building, a data sheet about its former

² www.archeologiaindustriale.net

use and story, a description of its current state and destination and information about the ownership and the management of the site.

Although certainly not exhaustive, this case archive serves as a baseline for our analysis, providing us with an initial mapping of the main practices of industrial heritage reuse. We are coding each case by noting:

- the location;
- the type of former industrial use (e.g. factory, energetic central, storage, etc.) and the period of when it was active;
- the present use (e.g. museum, library, archive, park, multifunction cultural centre, etc.) and since when it was re-opened for the new destination;
- the actors involved (e.g. family owners, foundations, public agencies, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, universities, urban planners, etc.) and their roles (e.g. owners, managers, occupants, sponsors, etc.);
- the type of cultural content (e.g. the building itself, machineries, production traditions, archival material, cultural events, museum collections, etc.).

Some patterns concerning the main practices of industrial heritage reuse are already emerging and will be presented in what follows. Future steps of the analysis will include the identification of some key cases and a more in-depth exploration of the specific practices in action, based on interviews and on-site visits.

Preliminary findings

Despite the claimed vast heterogeneity of the interventions on industrial heritage sites, in terms of “galassia in espansione degli attori e dei beneficiari coinvolgibili”, “diversi sistemi proprietari”, “arcipelago in cui affiorano esperienze che variano dalla riappropriazione di luoghi e

contenitori attraverso forme spontanee di auto-organizzazione e presidio civico, alla concessione di spazi pubblici per l'intrapresa culturale profit e no-profit, all'insediamento di istituzioni e di flagship culturali per riconvertire aree in difficoltà, alla pianificazione di veri e propri cluster urbani creativi" (Bacchella et al., 2015), what emerges from our mapping is instead the existence of a dominant practice, a secondary one and a very marginal third one.

The great majority of the sites we reviewed were family-owned factories (N), mostly founded in the mid 1800s or beginning of 1900, and either dismissed in the 1960s-1970s (N), or in some cases still active (N). In all cases, around the years 2000s-2010s they were re-opened and re-destined to new culture-related uses.

Museification

The dominant practice is: family owned businesses that closed down the activity or moved it elsewhere; in the 2000s-2010s restoration and re-opening of the industrial site as a museum and/or an archive to preserve and exhibit the factory history and production-related traditions embodied in documents, photographs, or machineries to celebrate the glory of the company business or its industry. Within this dominant practice of "museification of industrial production" two sub-patterns can be found, depending on the main actors involved and on who drives the transformation.

First, "family-led museification" of the factories that are often still active. In these cases it is the business owning family (sometimes in the form of a family private Foundation) who decides to transform the site into a museum and who finances restoration works. In these cases the family or family-related Foundation is the owner and often also the manager of the museum/archive. This is the case for example of Birra Menabrea, a beer factory located in Biella, now in part transformed into a museum and library on the history of beer production with a connected restaurant, all owned and run by the Group Birra Forst; or the case of Fabbrica di Liquirizia Amarelli, a liquorice factory located

in Rossano, Calabria, and partly transformed into a museum on the history of the family business itself.

Second, “publicly-led museification” of formerly private factories or other industrial sites, then acquired by a local government and transformed into museums and archive. This is for example the case of the “ex stabilimento Florio delle tonnare”, a large fish storage site in Favignana, Sicily, owned by the Region of Sicily and managed and restored by the Trapani Superintendence for cultural and environmental heritage upon European Union funds. The site now hosts exhibitions of maritime archaeology, a video-installation of old workers' memories about their past activity and a permanent exhibition of fishing activity-related photographs. Another example is Centrale Montemartini in Rome, a thermoelectric central dismissed in 1963. Owned by the Municipality and run by ACEA, the local public utility company, the site was transformed into a museum of its past activity in 1997 (displaying machineries and documents about thermoelectric activity) and, in a second stage, as a permanent exhibition site hosting a section of the Municipal Museums collections.

Taken together, despite some differences, these cases share the same feature of having an industrial site restored and converted into some kind of exhibition centres, mainly for celebrative purposes, as testimony of the material and immaterial culture related to the history of the site. This is why we labelled this first practice “museification”.

Culture-led regeneration

Upon analysis, a second practice emerges. This is about public entities financing the recovery and restoration of industrial heritage sites for further entrustment to third parties (cultural associations of any kind) for unspecified future culture-related uses.

A notable example is Laboratori Urbani (“Urban Labs”) initiative of the Puglia Region. La Regione Puglia sta finanziando la nascita dei “Laboratori Urbani”. 151 immobili dismessi di proprietà dei comuni pugliesi come scuole in disuso, siti industriali abbandonati, ex monasteri, mattatoi,

mercati e caserme vengono recuperati per diventare nuovi spazi pubblici per i giovani. La gestione dei Laboratori Urbani viene affidata, attraverso bandi pubblici, ad imprese e associazioni. Ogni Laboratorio Urbano ha contenuti e caratteristiche proprie: spazi per l'arte e lo spettacolo; luoghi di uso sociale e sperimentazione delle nuove tecnologie; servizi per il lavoro, la formazione e l'imprenditorialità giovanile; spazi espositivi, di socializzazione e di ospitalità. Comuni pugliesi coinvolti nel progetto: 169. Immobili recuperati: 151. Metri quadri ristrutturati: oltre 100.000. Investimento complessivo: 54 M euro

Another example is the one of Ex Ansaldo di Milano, quasi 6.000 mq affidati dal comune di Milano, mediante bando, ad una associazione di imprese costituita da Esterni, Avanzi, Make a Cube, Arci Milano e H+. Il percorso di insediamento delle funzioni sarà articolato sull'interpretazione di un concetto integrato e contemporaneo di produzione culturale dove incubazione, produzione e fruizione coesisteranno in uno spazio pensato per ibridare e far convivere formazione, creatività, eventi, imprenditoria, ristorazione ed evasione.

The pattern shared by these practices is one of massive public financing campaigns for major restoration projects to qualify urban areas and create new spaces for cultural and entrepreneurial activities to be subsequently identified. The emphasis of these interventions is therefore on the creation of spaces for other activity, supposedly triggering local cultural and economic growth. This is why we labelled this practice "culture-led regeneration".

Cultural entrepreneurship

Finally, a residual, marginal practice can be identified. It is the one about art interventions in industrial heritage sites that are not designed by family business owners for self-celebrating purposes, nor are commissioned by policy-makers in the name of some supposed local regeneration. It is about individuals or collectives of artists who spontaneously take up an industrial site to perform their activity in the name of culture, sometimes just on a temporary base.

An example in this sense is the one of Sass Muss, a former chemical hub located in Sospirolo (Belluno) beneath the Dolomites. The chemical factory, built in 1924, had flourished in the 1920-30s, then, damaged by WWII bombing, started a rapid decline to be completely dismissed in the 1960s. In the early 2000s a publicly owned agency (Attiva spa, an operating agency mainly participated by local governments of the Veneto region, aimed at developing and commercializing urban and industrial areas) acquired the abandoned site and undertook a major restoration project through European funds, yet left it then empty and unused. In 2011 an independent local art curator decided to occupy and transform the former industrial complex of Sass Muss for three months (august-october) into a contemporary art exhibition centre, creating a sort of “creative citadel” that included an international residency for artists; the former warehouses became exhibition rooms; the surrounding mountain environment became the training ground for the artists and the invited curators who worked on the identity of the site and its surroundings, by inhabiting them. The initiative mobilized all sort of participation of local providers, attracted over 100.000 visitors, wide media attention and local governments’ interest. After the initiative, the curator/initiator left, leaving behind a site that was back into the map, even with some commercial activities that had moved there. This by the way marked the beginning of “Dolomiti Contemporanee”, a serial curatorial art project through which the curator strives to identify relevant abandoned sites on the Dolomites, such as large factories, other complexes of industrial archaeology, or residential settlements that are no longer active, and to reactivate their potential by rethinking their relationship with the surrounding nature and civilization in a non-trivial and non-stereotyped way, through the curatorship of temporary visual arts events.

Because of the entrepreneurial impetus of similar approaches moved essentially by the willingness to “do culture”, we labelled this practice “cultural entrepreneurship”.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we intended to conduct a critical reflection on the relationship between industrial heritage reuses and cultural contents, and we did so by exploring the extant discourses of industrial heritage regeneration and the strategies through which this is attempted, particularly questioning the place of culture in all this. Although the research is still in progress and these are partial results, some first emerging findings are worth sharing and being discussed.

We found the existence of two dominant practices, mirroring the two dominant discourses. The practice of *museification* of industrial heritage sites well relates to discourses of industrial heritage *preservation*. Here “culture” is the cultural heritage in/of the industrial complex, that is the material artefacts, documents and photographs or video material, as repository of a past – and sometimes lost – intangible culture linked to the industrial production techniques and traditions. Consequently, the focus (in the form of flows of resources and attention) tends to be on the preservation of the “container” (the industrial building itself) and of its related artefacts. Culture can then here be seen as the *object* of an action.

The practice of *culture-led regeneration* of industrial heritage matches instead the *strategic* discourses of industrial heritage reuses. Here “culture” becomes the new function for the previously industrial site, which in turn works as something instrumental to other ends (tourism attraction, new job creation, regeneration of urban areas, etc.). The focus in terms of flows of resources and attention tends again to be on the container, but rather in the form of restoration and functional requalification of the spaces to host a variety of new possible businesses or other initiatives (incubators, hubs, offices, co-working spaces, cultural centres, cafés, etc.). In other words, culture is here the *tool*, or a strategic resource, for some other local development.

All in all, what emerges in the mainstream discourses and practices in and around industrial heritage is a shared focus on the restoration, preservation or requalification of the container, where culture is either the object of these actions, or the tool to other ends. But what about culture as the *subject*? And what about the contents, beside the containers? This is where we believe that the (marginal) practice of *cultural entrepreneurship* finds place and the above mentioned case of

Dolomiti Contemporanea at Sass Muss can be illustrative in this sense. The 2011 art intervention was not designed and commissioned by public policies in the name of some supposed local regeneration. It was an entrepreneurial act led by an individual curator who goes, does, leaves, deliberately, to act elsewhere by “cultural blitzes”. The focus was on the content in relation with the container, on the substance within the form, as a whole, and culture was the originating “bother”, not a strategic resource to other ends. Rather, we see DC initiative as a strong denouncing act of the disjunction between form and substance in the mainstream industrial heritage discourse and in the practice of planning for the containers before (or even without) the cultural content.

Building on these preliminary findings and considerations, two (intertwined) issues can be brought up for discussion: the issue of materiality and the issue of functional determinism.

First, it should not be surprising that most of the strategies in place around industrial sites are about the creation of containers through museification or through functional requalification of the spaces. These interventions require enormous capital for restoration and design, but also, because of their materiality and endurance, tangible visibility for the policy-makers or the private bodies who finance these operations. The biggest portions of public resources available for industrial heritage insist indeed on restoration and design projects, i.e. on the materiality. Which are the cultural or social processes that get (or do not get) activated, who are the artists themselves or the forms of culture that flow through these spaces is something irrelevant, or just not caught in the mainstream debate on industrial heritage. In cultural planning attempts there seem to be serious problems in terms of resource allocation: most of the limited amount of available resources goes to large investments for restorations or other interventions on the built heritage, and nothing remains for operating costs and for the planning of cultural contents for these sites. In other words, in the industrial heritage landscape all is “materialized” too much or too fast.

Second, in our view this all is creating many “containers without a content”; the content comes after – when it does – and instrumentally. We see all this as part of the more general discourse on

culture-led regeneration (McCarthy, 1998; Bailey et al., 2004) that considers the territory as the context where cultural processes can be encouraged and used to transform the economy, and culture as a strategic resource at the service of urban strategies, of the vision that a territory has of itself, and of its future positioning (Calcagno et al., 2013). The main limitation of this discourse is its inherent functional determinism. Put simply, the assumption is: “you restore, something will happen” in terms of enrichment, economic development and competitiveness. Moreover, the effects of this supposed functionalism are not determined at all: “you restore, something will happen, sometimes nothing happens”. How much are those industrial heritage museums actually visited? How much are those archives or libraries actually used? How many cultural associations or other entrepreneurial activities actually operate in those very spaces and manage to survive and grow? The immediate risk is then a passive and uncritical acceptance of the leading paradigm of a culture-driven development in the case of industrial heritage too, with potentially dreadful consequences in terms of public money waste.

We conclude provocatively, noting that industrial heritage sites are many and pervasive: do they really need all to be restored and reused, if sometimes there is no demand then for whatever is produced in there, or no obvious virtuous economic cycle, as instead claimed? In any case, we should at least stop producing containers before contents. Careful attention should be placed by industrial heritage policies in escaping functional determinism by reversing its inner logic: culture – content – should be on top.

[Tables and References upon request to authors]