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HERITAGE AND REGENERATION – MOVING FROM CENTRE TO PERIPHERY

Patrimonio y renovación urbana – un cambio de centro urbano a periferia

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reading of a transnational region in order to question incongruencies between theory on adaptive reuse, heritage in the periphery and transformative strategies. It analyses the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion and explores the potential and the problems of peripheral built relics and landscape fragments. This transnational region demonstrates situations of sprawl, population shrinkage and economic stagnation. Hence, many relics are situated in suburban landscapes, where there is limited potential for urban regeneration and redevelopment. A review of this case guides the theoretical exploration. A critical analysis of interdisciplinary literature, centred on building vacancy and on repurposing built structures in historical (sub)urbanised landscapes, is presented. The paper concludes by arguing that the fields of architecture and urbanism are challenged to fill in the discovered theoretical hiatuses by selectively outlining in which way settlement patterns have potential for sustainable usage, and which are alternative strategies for conservation of relics with limited potential for continued usage or redevelopment.

Keywords

periphery; urban regeneration; Meuse-Rhine Euroregion; theoretical analysis; interdisciplinarity; building vacancy.

1. INTRODUCTION

This contribution explores a theoretical discourse revolving around repurposing or appropriating obsolete historic buildings for a new stage of usage. Development projects involving existing built patrimony are often presented as contributions to sustainable urban regeneration and as a feasible approach to conserving built relics. The discourse is yet incomplete with regard to historic buildings situated outside central urban growth locations, in a periphery which lacks the benefit of a strategic location in face of possible reuse or continued use. Built heritage is formed by an increasingly broad category of buildings, which can be connected to appreciation of a place and a sense of belonging to it (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007), which in the urban periphery results in dynamics differing from central urban locations. More so, European differences in perception of built heritage in regions with a shared history, economy and landscape become clearer as the EU countries integrate and seek regional interaction across borders, hence defining new centralities in these peripheries. It is the core argument of this paper that such circumstances require differentiation of the architectural theoretical body regarding heritage and significant attention to suitable architectural and planning strategies. In response, this paper concentrates on the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, which covers parts of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. The paper frames regional differences concerning spatial organisation and policy in a reading of diverging theoretical viewpoints concerning building vacancy and adaptive reuse. Three constituting areas are discussed in this paper, being the Dutch side (the province of Limburg), the Flemish side (the Belgian province of Limburg) and the Walloon side (the Belgian province of Liège).¹

2. HERITAGE IN A REGIONAL PERIPHERY: THE MEUSE-RHINE EUROREGION

While together, the composing areas in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion seek to position themselves as an intercultural pole of attraction, these districts can be considered part of their respective national peripheries. Recent history shows the emergence and decline of intense industrial activities, such as mining, steel and textile production, and car manufacturing and therefore this paper will centre on industrial patrimony. In this Euroregion, a number of historical mid-size towns are situated, such as Maastricht, Aachen, Liège and Hasselt; additionally, there are small and young towns which saw a steep development in the mining era, e.g. the city of Genk. The entire area is characterised by border dynamics which are clearly visible in the built landscape under influence of diverging national spatial policies. This allows for a comparison of spatial cases joined in a shared landscape, and history, which face diverging policies, demands and expectations (Knotter, 2002).

The Dutch province of Limburg is situated most peripherally in its national context, and faces population shrinkage, a process which is predicted to continue in coming decades (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Milieu, 2012). This shrinkage is clearly legible in its former mining towns, assembled in the Parkstad Limburg regional governmental cooperative.² Industrial development grew to full stature during the mining period (mainly in the first half of the 20th century; coal mining occurred between 1815 and 1974). This included industrial sites, infrastructure and housing areas. It has resulted in a complex spatial pattern, where

distinctions between centre and periphery are difficult to read. The closing of the mines was followed by dismantling of the industrial sites, after which redevelopment into business, leisure or residential zones followed. The rigorous demolition of mining sites and infrastructural restructuring following this process of dismantling (which may be placed in the long tradition of spatial planning supervised by a strong central government) has left a fragmented industrial heritage, consisting of small, decontextualised relics (figure 1), in a context which appears highly unstructured as a result of ongoing urban redefinition as a result of economical setbacks. The ongoing IBA initiative is the most recent attempt at determining a regional structure (Coenen, 2015).

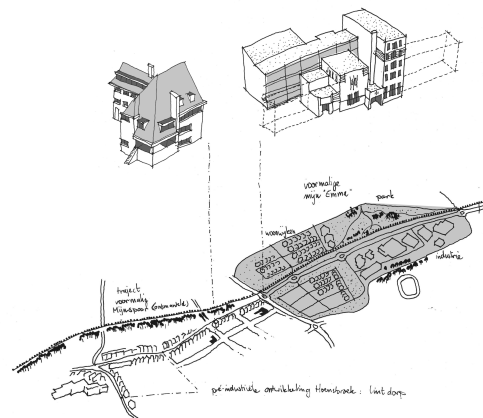


Figure 1. Heerlen, the Netherlands. Two boardinghouses for miners are relics left amidst dismantled railway tracks and mining sites (drawing by the author).

Crossing over to Belgian Limburg, border dynamics are noticeable as population shrinkage is not an issue at the moment.³ Belgium has a much shorter tradition of centralised spatial planning which has resulted in a highly fragmented urbanisation pattern, with small urban cores and a significant suburbanised periphery, which has its consequences for difference regarding reuse and heritage in comparison to the Netherlands. Belgian Limburg shares a mining history with its Dutch counterpart: production started in 1917 and ended in 1992. Equally, the region is dealing with economic transitions: as was the case when the Flemish mines ceased production, the closing of the Genk Ford Factory in 2014 demonstrated the economic fragility of the region. Differing from the Netherlands, mining heritage has not been erased rigorously, and some of the former coal mining complexes have been retrofitted. Also residential mining colonies are being protected by the municipalities they are in. The remaining obsolete rail infrastructure is being scrutinized as a potential backbone for further development in commission of the Flemish community.⁴ More than in the Netherlands, the mining patrimony take centre stage in a search for structure and hierarchy in the isotropic settlement pattern of Flanders.

Finally, the province of Liège and the Walloon region give testimony to a strong lobby in favour of protection and valorisation of relics of its heavy industry, such as its mines and blast-furnaces; four Walloon coalmines are on the UNESCO list for World Heritage.⁵ There are however many more relics of other industrial activities which at the moment face obsolescence and decline. Again, the field of tension between centre and periphery comes to play. The urban ribbon between Liège and Verviers interestingly illustrates how textile and metal industries from the end of the 19th century onward were developed in a linear pattern, visually and functionally closely tied to a landscape rather than to the centrality of a city (Cremasco et al., 2007). Industrial development has interacted with infrastructure of road and rail, which follow a logical course alongside the Vesdre River through a sloping landscape. Between the two cities, vacant or obsolete industrial patrimony may be found (figure 2), some buildings in state of ruination. Interestingly, one of the formulated planning objectives of the Walloon government relates landscape and patrimony in a course of 'striking a balance between protection, evolution and development'⁶ (Gouvernement Wallon, 2013, p.45). This interaction is however not directly translated in effective measures: approaches to deal with built patrimony, like in Flanders, follow the selection of an inventory of main heritage relics, while an approach to deal with landscape as one of the main resources of Wallonia is under development. This elaboration could benefit from clear visions on the integration of landscape and built heritage.



Figure 2. An industrial site in Verviers, Belgium (photography and montage by the author).

This comparison of three cultural areas demonstrates distinct stages of and conditions for reutilization of industrial relics, and diverging conditions defining distinct spatial patterns of local peripheries. The social dynamics inherent to such diffuse settlement patterns delimit demand for continued use, which renders development strategies and policy ambitions problematic. The borders dictate diverging national policies across the area which even diversifies the conditions of each peripheral condition. Hence, this paper continues by

exploring heritage discourses in relation to these peripheral conditions and by outlining a theoretical axis between two poles: heritage as a condition and a vehicle for urban and economic revitalisation, and heritage or ruins as a stage for spontaneous, unregulated and unconventional modes of use. What concepts are in between these poles, and can provide answers to diverse forms of peripheral settlement patterns? The contemporary conception of a 'Historic Urban Landscape Approach' (Bandarin & Van Oers, 2012) to heritage management and preservation proposes an overarching outlook. From this perspective, the entire urban landscape composed of natural and man-made relics defines the guiding lines for policies concerning transformation as well as conservation. Van Oers' (2015) description of this approach acknowledges the reciprocal relation between city and hinterland, and introduces an inclusive analytical armamentarium (e.g. study of water household, geology, typomorphological documentation, oral history, participatory action research, among other instruments). Therefore, an equally interdisciplinary study of stances on adaptive reuse is in order.

3. BROADENING THE CONCEPTS OF APPROPRIATION AND REVALORISATION

Central to heritage is its significance for the present: Graham et al. (2000, p.2) define this significance as "a contemporary use of the past". Thus, heritage plays a pivotal role in connecting history to economy (SHIFT-X, 2014). In many regions across Europe, communities seek a formal connection to leisure, culture and tourism as new economic drivers in lieu of the former industrial production, hence introducing novel patterns of usage as a strategy of regional planning. Within the discussed region, museological and leisurely reuse of mining sites can be encountered e.g. in Heerlen, Kerkrade, Beringen, Genk and Blegny. These patterns of usage may develop into invented 'traditions' (Van Oers, 2015, p. 319) for which not every location has the carrying capacity.

Regarding the capacity of a location to play a role in regional regeneration, exemplary cases are mainly demonstrated in urban environments (see, e.g. Diez, 2012; Ward, 2012), where centrality and density positively influence the feasibility of reuse or continued reuse and place architectural projects in the context of urban regeneration. Conejos et al. (2014) and Langston et al. (2008) even calculate potential for adaptive reuse and translate this evaluation in a score as part of quantitative assessment models: location has a decisive impact on this score. However, the discussed examples of heritage, part of peripheral patterns, demonstrate the diversity of situations which require an accurate and site-specific judgement.

While this formal lens is rightfully critical about the development of new amenities outside of central, urbanised areas, the recognition of structural building vacancy requires architectural experimentation with alternative and temporary programmes. Bergevoet and Van Tuijl (2013), in the Dutch context, argue in favour of a flexible approach to planning, consisting of small steps leaving open multiple options in face of future uncertainty, as an alternative to more traditional long-term planning. This approach leaves open more room for co-creation involving local communities next to traditional institutional and commercial partners. Rietveld and Rietveld (2014) propose the strategic role of a designer in analysing what potential is underused in the vast supply of vacated and obsolete buildings, and addressing this potential

by projecting novel forms of use, seeking to mediate apparent functional and spatial conflicts. This strategic role is characterised by bringing together unconventional interested parties and tapping into '*Large-scale Developments and Processes*' (2014, p. 95) supported by forceful design representation.

In case neither formal nor informal repurposing can be made feasible, the prospective of limited economic growth results in dereliction of the built testimonies of capitalist expansion. Antoine Picon argues that regulated usage of space – making distinction between the brand new 'commercial spaces' and the proverbial 'garbage dump' of obsolete structures in fact replaces the more traditional distinction between centre and periphery (2000, p.75) which this contribution explores. In the context of the presented case study region, this perspective can be related to historically to mining past on the Dutch side of the border, and to current-day industrial vacancy, mainly in the province of Liège. Ruinous obsolete buildings in urban fringes hold an opportunity to give space to forms of usage which are out of order, and which cannot take place in sites where there is high economic pressure on redevelopment (Edensor 2005, p.94). He further argues that cultural and economic salvage of obsolete buildings necessarily occurs accordance with a distinct perspective determined by 'class, gender and expertise' (2005, p.170). Hence, he argues for the inclusion of more diverse interpretations of history. While Edensor discusses 'carnavalesque' forms of usage (mischievous play of children, urban exploring, sexual encounters) there are also programmes imaginable that service essential amenities of a municipality which however will not place the location on the tourist map, and which require a design effort.

However, intentionally allowing ruination as part of a formal strategy for spatial branding, or for providing room for an appropriation by nature of a built site, as occurs in areas such as the German Emscher Park (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2013). This contributes to an overarching strategy of regeneration, in which some sites are purposed for man and others for nature. While heritage and ecological interests are not mutually dependent, it can be a design strategy to seek for an interaction between the two. This underlines the similar kind of very diverse interpretations which are acknowledged both to peripheral landscapes and to obsolete or derelict buildings (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2013; Qviström, 2007), which form a stark contrast with the clear-cut allocation that usually is part and parcel of redevelopment projects.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The case of the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion illustrates the need for an elaboration of the periphery as a rich conceptual category, with diverging opportunities and needs with regard to heritage and vacancy policy. Linking the region to a conceptual framework allows for a critical assessment of inclusivity and completeness of theory of adaptive reuse, as the comparison demonstrates challenging conditions outside the urban centres for which there are incomplete answers from an architectural perspective. Valuable relics displaying sound architectural quality hold potential to make peripheral settlements more resilient, while on the other hand, limits to economical and cultural demand for adaptive reuse raise the question whether all built

heritage can be reused in a feasible manner. The efficacy of heritage policies and strategies in peripheral locations thus remain rather ambiguous and require further investigation.

This interpretation in its turn allows for the consideration of diverse architectural and urban instruments suitable to intervene under such conditions. The article has presented a number of conceptual approaches on an axis between two poles. One pole targets heritage as an asset in formal planning and development; the other pole brings forms of use which are 'out of order' (and not necessarily economically viable on the short term) to the limelight. Both poles illustrate significant challenges to the field of architecture. On a regional level, the differences in national and regional approaches within Europe determine diverging development dynamics impacting the urban development. Furthermore, limited capacity for economic and demographic growth in regions facing transition or population shrinkage requires architects to engage in critical programme definition, and to convince local stakeholders of unconventional and long-term benefits. Hence, in peripheral locations strategic decisions about conservation and continued use need to be informed by rigorous selection processes. While the second pole provides concepts worth consideration, these are based on approaches such as ruination, landscape development and ill-defined patterns of usage, which are not easily combined with the outlook and disciplinarity of the architect. These concepts require further scrutiny in order to make such concepts operational. This pole does provide interesting perspectives on the inclusion of an elongated perspective on the basis of temporal forms of usage, diversifying approaches to conservation, and investments in landscape as well as built infrastructures which pay out on the long term.

NOTES

1. This Euroregion additionally covers the German district of Aachen, and the German-speaking community of Belgium, the so-called Eastern Cantons in the province of Liège. Hence, this Euroregion includes all three communities of the federal state of Belgium (German, Dutch and French speaking), and partly coincides with two of its regions: Flanders and Wallonia.
2. The Parkstad region involves the Dutch municipalities of Brunssum, Heerlen, Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Nuth, Onderbanken, Simpelveld, and Voerendaal.
3. According to demographic predictions, the Belgian province of Limburg will start to face shrinkage around 2045. See http://statbel.fgov.be/nl/modules/publications/statistiques/bevolking/downloads/bevolking_op_1_januari_2015-2061.jsp (accessed 14 April 2015).
4. See <https://www.ruimtevlaanderen.be/NL/Beleid/Beleidsontwikkeling/TOPprojecten/CentraalLimburg> (accessed 24 April 2015).
5. The mining sites are Blegny-Mine, Le Bois du Cazier, Bois-du-Luc and Grand-Hornu.
6. Own translation from French.

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