

CONFERENCE REPORT

Industrial Heritage, Memory and Well-being

Community Engagement with Industrial Heritage in Post-industrial Contexts.

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DEINDUSTRIALIZATION
AND THE POLITICS OF OUR TIME



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INTRODUCTION

The conference brought together researchers, heritage professionals and representatives of cultural institutions from Germany, Spain, India, Chile, Brazil, Portugal, the UK and France to critically examine the role of industrial heritage in contemporary post-industrial contexts. From a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, the various contributions addressed the relationship between memory, heritage, museums, social justice and well-being, challenging traditional interpretations centred on material conservation and proposing approaches that position communities as key actors in the production of heritage knowledge. In this regard, the meeting established itself as a space for dialogue between different historiographical traditions, methodologies and territorial experiences, where discussions went beyond the comparison of case studies to reflect on the conceptual and political challenges currently facing industrial heritage. The presentations demonstrated that heritage-making processes constitute spaces of ongoing negotiation in which memory conflicts, historical inequalities, struggles for recognition and new forms of civic participation converge. On this basis, the programme fostered sustained dialogue between perspectives from the Global North and the Global South, contributing to broadening the analytical frameworks of industrial heritage studies through the incorporation of decolonial, feminist, community-based, participatory and epistemic justice approaches.

DAY ONE (22 JULY 2026)

The first day of the conference was devoted to examining the conceptual transformations of industrial heritage from perspectives that combined history, memory, museum narratives, social justice and community participation. Although the case studies covered contexts as diverse as Wales, the German Ruhr region, France, Spain and Chile, the contributions shared a critical stance towards traditional narratives of industrial heritage centred exclusively on technological or national processes. Instead, they proposed relational approaches that incorporate the global connections of industrialisation, historical inequalities and contemporary social conflicts.

Bella Dicks (Cardiff University, UK) opened the day with a keynote lecture *“Industrial museums at a new crossroads: impacts of postcolonial and environmental crisis”*, reflecting on Welsh industrial heritage. She argued that mining museums continue to reproduce national narratives that render invisible the connections between industrialisation, colonialism and slavery. In response, she proposed recovering working-class internationalism as a means of reinterpreting heritage from decolonial and anti-racist perspectives.

This line of discussion was further developed in the presentation by Ute Eickelkamp (RUB, Germany), who presented her paper entitled “*Navigating Memory and Method: Researching Industrial Heritage in Post-Industrial Contexts*”, how mining memories in Hochlarmark continue to be negotiated between working-class identities, migration processes and contemporary political tensions. Her methodological proposal of dialogic remembering emphasised the importance of creating spaces for dialogue between social groups with divergent experiences and positions.

The international comparison presented by Irene Díaz (University of Oviedo), “*Coal Regions in Transition: Deindustrialisation and Productive Transformation in Lota-Coronel (Chile) and the Mining Areas of Asturias (Spain). Notes for a Comparative Approach*”, broadened this discussion by examining the trajectories of the coal-mining regions of Asturias and Lota-Coronel. The presentation highlighted that the consequences of deindustrialisation cannot be understood through a single model of ‘just transition’, but rather depend on profound asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South. In this context, the concept of ‘moral landscapes’ was presented as an analytical tool for understanding local perceptions of justice, recognition and territorial transformation.

The contributions by Hillary Orange (Swansea University, UK) and Julián Sobrino (University of Seville, Spain) shifted the discussion towards contemporary forms of heritage activation. While Hillary with her paper “*Street Art after Banksy: ambivalence and wellbeing in Port Talbot*” examined the tensions between urban art, industrial memory and urban regeneration strategies in Port Talbot, Julián presented “*Reimagining Industrial Heritage: Community Engagement and the Revival of Industrial Landscapes in Post-Industrial Societies*” in which he advocated an understanding of industrial heritage as an active resource for territorial development, based on community participation, productive memory and the construction of sustainable futures. Both approaches rejected an exclusively monumental understanding of heritage.

The institutional dimension was addressed by Marie Patou (Mission Bassin Minier, France), with her presentation entitled “*Industrial Heritage and the Politics of Memory: Exploring the Role of Communities in the Preservation and Transformation of Industrial Landscapes*”, and by Marion Steiner (TICCIH International), who presented “*Mobilisations for Industrial Heritage: Community, Resistance, and the Reclamation of Memory in Global Contexts*”. Drawing on the experience of the French Bassin Minier and on initiatives developed by TICCIH International, both presentations emphasised the

need to strengthen heritage narratives capable of responding to current political challenges by incorporating transnational, decolonial and community-based perspectives. They also highlighted the potential of industrial heritage to foster a sense of belonging while maintaining a critical engagement with the historical processes from which it emerged.

The first day concluded with a presentation on the Chilean project Ukamau, Maestranza San Eugenio, entitled “*Community Organisation, Well-being, and Industrial Heritage: A Vision for the Symbolic Preservation of Chile’s Industrial Legacy and Social Housing*”, delivered by Andrés Torres and Cristian Castillo. The presentation proposed a reinterpretation of industrial heritage through the lens of the right to housing and the commons. In this case, former railway sites were conceived not as objects of musealisation, but as forms of infrastructure capable of addressing social needs through processes of community organisation and urban co-production. The project thus offered an alternative approach to industrial heritage, linking the preservation of historical memory with the right to housing, community well-being and the collective use of urban space.

The subsequent discussions converged around several cross-cutting questions: How can colonial histories and global inequalities be integrated into heritage discourses? How can environmental conflicts be addressed without delegitimising working-class memories? What role should heritage institutions play in the face of the growing prominence of exclusionary discourses? And how can industrial heritage be transformed into a means of strengthening social cohesion and democratic participation? Taken as a whole, the first day demonstrated a shift away from approaches centred on conservation towards an understanding of industrial heritage as a dynamic space of social, political and cultural negotiation.

DAY TWO (23 JULY 2026)

The second day built on the debates initiated the previous day, shifting the focus from the reinterpretation of industrial heritage towards the social, political and epistemological conditions that shape the production of memory in post-industrial contexts. The presentations converged around a central question: who produces heritage, from which positions of power, and with what consequences for the communities inhabiting these territories? Drawing on case studies from Europe and Latin America, the contributions explored the relationships between memory, gender, coloniality, well-being, community participation and contemporary political conflicts.

The day began with a presentation by Stefan Berger (RUB, Germany), who proposed a comparative framework for analysing the memory landscapes of

industrialised regions on a global scale. Combining approaches from memory studies, heritage studies, deindustrialisation research and social movement studies, he developed a typology distinguishing between antagonistic, cosmopolitan and agonistic forms of memory. He argued that ways of remembering the industrial past depend both on the trajectories of capitalism and on institutional capacities to manage economic transformation. The subsequent discussion questioned the universal applicability of this model, particularly in relation to the representation of the Global South, the role of different actors in the production of memory, and the need to incorporate the dimensions of colonialism, gender and racialisation across the analytical framework.

The following contributions approached memory as a cultural and social process in a state of continuous construction. Ruben Vega (University of Oviedo, Spain), in his presentation “*Remembering Industry: Artistic Representations of Industrial Heritage*”, examined how Asturian literature, music and cinema have transformed working-class memory into a resource for imagining collective futures. He highlighted the role of a generation that, despite not having inherited industrial work itself, has chosen to preserve this legacy as a form of cultural resistance.

Alicia Gorny (RUB, Germany), in her presentation “*Care, Memory, and Belonging: Inclusive Heritage Practices and Community Well-being in Post-Industrial Contexts*”, complemented this perspective through her study of the women's initiative in Hattingen during the closure of the Henrichshütte steelworks. Her research demonstrated how women's experiences, traditionally marginalised in trade-union and heritage narratives, offer new ways of understanding industrial memory by incorporating affective, familial and community dimensions. The discussion highlighted that participation cannot be reduced to symbolic representation, but requires collaborative processes in which communities themselves share interpretive authority over their past.

Questions of power and representation occupied a central place in Jana Golombek's (LWL-Museum Zeche Zollern) contribution, “*Co-curating Colonial Pasts and Negotiating New Heritage Practices in Times of Political Polarisation*”, which examined the exhibition *Das ist Kolonial* at the LWL-Museum Zeche Zollern. The project demonstrated how participatory curatorial practice can challenge traditional industrial heritage narratives through the incorporation of postcolonial perspectives, institutional transparency and the creation of safe spaces for historically excluded groups. At the same time, the experience demonstrated that museums have become arenas of political confrontation, as evidenced by campaigns against the exhibition organised by far-right groups. The debate emphasised that well-being is not merely an objective of heritage practice, but a necessary condition for different groups to participate on an equal footing in the production of knowledge.

The relationship between heritage, territorial development and tourism was examined from two complementary perspectives. Dr Mário Bruno Pastor (Portuguese Catholic University, Portugal), in his presentation *“Industrial Memory as an Economic Asset: Lessons from the European South”*, examined the case of São João da Madeira (Portugal), where an industrial tourism network has successfully integrated active companies, productive heritage and cultural programming as a strategy for local revitalisation. However, he stressed the need to strengthen the project's research-based and critical dimension in order to prevent heritage from becoming subordinated exclusively to tourism objectives. This concern was taken up by María José Bretti (NUDISUR, Chile), curator of the Festival Ruinas Arte (Chile), who, in her presentation *“Art in Ruins Festival: Diverse Community Narratives of Industrial Heritage”*, analysed how the festival brought together diverse artistic practices to activate working-class memories and strengthen community processes from a decolonial perspective. The subsequent discussion focused on the risk of heritage commodification, the potential instrumentalisation of working communities, and the difficulties involved in establishing sustainable cultural policies beyond short-term initiatives.

The penultimate panel of the conference focused on the environmental legacies of industrialisation and the social dimensions of industrial landscapes. Moulshri Joshi (NUDISUR, India) opened the panel with her presentation *“From Toxic Remains to Collective Renewal: Reclaiming the Memory of Bhopal”*, examining the long-term consequences of industrial toxicity in Bhopal and their impact on local communities. Her contribution highlighted the difficult reality faced by communities living in contaminated environments: despite being aware of the toxic conditions surrounding them and the risks to their health and livelihoods, many residents have few or no viable alternatives to remaining in the places where they live. From this perspective, the presentation drew attention to the intersection between environmental injustice, collective memory and structural inequalities, questioning the extent to which affected communities are able to exercise meaningful choices over their own living environments.

From the perspective of urban planning, Susanne Frank (TU Dortmund University, Germany) then presented *“The Ruhr Industrial Landscape: Social Dimensions, Urban Development, and Heritage Management”*, examining the transformation of the Ruhr industrial landscape and the relationship between its social dimensions, urban development and heritage management. Her contribution highlighted the challenges involved in managing a landscape shaped simultaneously by industrialisation, social history and processes of post-industrial transformation.

The discussion that followed brought these perspectives into dialogue, highlighting the need to understand industrial landscapes not only as spaces of historical and heritage significance, but also as environments in which the consequences of industrialisation continue to shape people's everyday lives. The panel therefore reinforced the importance of integrating environmental justice, community experiences

and social inequalities into approaches to industrial heritage and landscape management.

The day concluded with presentations by María Esperanza Rock-Núñez (RUB, Germany) and Guilherme Pozzer (RUB, Germany), who offered a synthesis of the congress's main conceptual themes. Esperanza presented her paper, "*Epistemic Justice and Industrial Heritage: Community Perspectives in the Co-production of Heritage*", in which she proposed epistemic justice as a tool for questioning traditional forms of heritage knowledge production and social history. She demonstrated, for example, how Mapuche epistemologies can transform understandings of territory and industrial heritage in Chile. Guilherme, for his part, presented Memories and Well-being in Post-Industrial Communities, examining the relationship between memory and well-being through case studies from Sheffield. His contribution demonstrated how industrial heritage can contribute to community well-being both through the active preservation of memory and through processes of adaptive reuse that generate new forms of belonging. Both contributions advocated collaborative models of knowledge production in which communities not only participate but also actively define the meanings attributed to heritage.

The final discussions revealed several cross-cutting themes that ran throughout the day. These included the need to incorporate decolonial, community-based and feminist approaches into heritage research; the importance of recognising conflict as a constitutive component of collective memory; the challenge of balancing participation, well-being and scientific rigour; and the urgent need to develop heritage institutions capable of responding to growing political polarisation. Taken as a whole, the second day consolidated the idea that industrial heritage constitutes a space of social and political negotiation in which interpretations of the past, identities in the present and possibilities for constructing more inclusive futures are simultaneously contested.

DAY THREE (24 JULY 2026)

The third day was devoted to a study visit to the Zollverein Industrial Complex, guided by Stefan Berger (RUB, Germany), with the aim of bringing the main debates developed throughout the conference into the field. The visit provided an opportunity to examine one of the most emblematic examples of industrial heritage transformation in Europe, recognised by UNESCO, while also reflecting on the political, cultural and museological decisions that have shaped its transformation from a former coal-mining complex into a site of heritage, culture and regional development.

Throughout the tour, the different historical layers of the site were examined, with particular attention to the processes of deindustrialisation, conservation and adaptive reuse that have turned Zollverein into an international reference point for industrial heritage management. The visit provided an opportunity to discuss how the heritage-making of former productive sites is not a neutral process, but rather the outcome of institutional decisions, contestations over memory and negotiations between different social actors.

In this context, Stefan Berger (RUB, Germany) revisited several of the concepts discussed during the academic sessions, including the relationships between memory, regional identity and heritage policies, as well as the challenges faced by industrial heritage when incorporating decolonial, gender and community participation perspectives. The visit made it possible to contrast these discussions with the narratives embedded in the site itself, reflecting on the scope and limitations of one of Europe's most influential models of industrial heritage transformation.

As a concluding activity, the visit demonstrated the importance of fieldwork for understanding industrial heritage as a dynamic process of social construction, in which material conservation, knowledge production and public participation are closely interconnected. In this way, the tour of Zollverein served as a practical synthesis of the main themes discussed throughout the conference, reinforcing the need to approach industrial heritage from comparative and critical perspectives oriented towards the social challenges of the present.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the diversity of disciplinary approaches and case studies presented, the conference highlighted a significant epistemological shift within industrial heritage studies. Rather than understanding heritage as a collection of objects intended for conservation or as a means of representing the past, the contributions converged in conceiving it as a space for the production of socially and territorially situated knowledge, in which memories, social and environmental conflicts, and expectations for the future are continuously negotiated. In this sense, industrial heritage emerged not as a repository of historical certainties, but as a form of public infrastructure for democratic deliberation.

One of the conference's main contributions was to demonstrate that the production of heritage knowledge depends, first and foremost, on the capacity to listen. Listening emerged not merely as a methodological attitude, but as an epistemological condition for recognising historically marginalised forms of knowledge. The contributions demonstrated that the inclusion of working communities, women, migrants, Indigenous peoples and other actors traditionally absent from heritage narratives does not constitute a strategy of symbolic representation, but rather a transformation of the very conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, legitimised and shared. In this sense, epistemic justice ceased to be understood merely as a normative category and became an operational principle for heritage research, curatorial practice and management.

Equally, the conference demonstrated across its different contributions that the plurality of perspectives does not weaken historical interpretation but rather enhances its explanatory and reflective capacity. The dialogue between approaches and case studies from different regions demonstrated that industrial memories acquire their full meaning only when understood through their historical interdependencies, power relations and the multiple scales—local, national and global—that shape processes of industrialisation and deindustrialisation. The diversity of voices therefore did not emerge as a mere collection of individual experiences, but as an indispensable condition for constructing more complex, rigorous and socially relevant interpretations.

Taken as a whole, the conference confirmed that the current challenges facing industrial heritage extend far beyond the material conservation of former productive sites. The discussions demonstrated that the future of the field lies in developing analytical frameworks capable of articulating memory, social justice, sustainability, the environment, well-being and democratic participation without reducing the inherent conflict within these processes. Rather than aspiring to consensus, the different contributions advocated the creation of spaces in which disagreement can become a productive form of collective knowledge. In this sense, the meeting not only provided an overview of the current state of international research, but also outlined a scientific agenda that places listening, epistemic justice and the plurality of knowledge at the heart of efforts to understand industrial heritage in the twenty-first century through the principles of well-being, and to imagine more inclusive, reflective and democratic ways of inhabiting our shared past.