

Industrial Heritage and Deindustrialisation: The Challenge of Our Future

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The author argues that mobility is inherent in the industrial process and outlines an agenda for an expansion of our concept of industrial heritage. This paper is slightly modified from one originally presented at the keynote session of the 1994 conference of the International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage.

Since we still use industrial processes and products, it must be that the world has not deindustrialised, rather that industry is no longer found to the extent expected in some of its usual locations. Industry is mobile and it has abandoned some of its old habitats.

In the United States, we have had industrial migration, or 'runaway industry' as it used to be called, for most of the twentieth century. For decades, this migration took place within the borders of the U.S., from North to South. More recently the movement of U.S. industry from place to place has taken it out of the country, often to distant lands. Since the industry currently moving from the U.S. is not being replaced, we call the phenomenon deindustrialisation. The fact of industrial mobility is something all of our countries confront, one way or the other, incoming or outgoing, or simply industry threatening to move. Both the mobility and the threat represent social costs to the locality in question.

Confronting issues of deindustrialisation raises concerns at the very foundation of industrial heritage, its interests, its goals, even its *raison d'être*, its reason for being. Do we care if industry migrates around the world? Why do we want to conserve our industrial heritage? Is it because we admire it as we would an antique object, the product of a bygone age, prized simply for its rarity? I hope it is more than that. Do we try to preserve our industrial past in order to honor the memory of the people who created it, and those who endured it? Are we honoring the creativity and accomplishments of the participants, the inventors, designers, architects, machinists, and assembly line workers who produced the machines, processes, buildings, and other artefacts that helped shape our industrial cultures? Is it to honor the memory of those who, unlike us, did not simply study these subjects but instead contributed their energy, their labor, mental and physical, to the industrial processes of which they were a part? I think our preservation efforts do respect the memory of the untold millions who have devoted their lives to industry.

I believe these are valid reasons for industrial heritage preservation strategies, and different people would emphasise particular directions among them, or yet others. However, I believe that there is more to it. I think that antiquarian pleasure in old objects, even given further ratification by honoring the people associated with them, falls short of fulfilling the mandate of industrial heritage and falls short of confronting the challenge before us.

Underlying all our efforts lies a belief that industrialisation, despite its record of conflict and injustice, had *value*, that there can be something worthwhile in making things, in producing the objects around which our lives turn. The significance of objects is easy to see in an art museum. We see it in industrial museums, and in everyday life. If I am right about this aspect of our belief, our faith, then we have further responsibility now, tied to our efforts at preservation. In order to conserve our industrial heritage today as a *mentalité*, we

must address not only the fate of its artefacts, the physical survival of our past, but also the nature of our industrial future.

PRESERVATION OF INDUSTRIAL HISTORY

This agenda covers a great breadth of activities, but at its core lies, I think, a program which must be kept in mind in all areas of our work, of the responsibilities of industrial heritage. Coming from museum work, I recently addressed some of the preservationists' agenda in an article in *Technology and Culture*.¹ There I discussed the need to preserve not only the isolated artefacts of industrial production, but the artefacts in context, with the workplaces of which they were a part. The people from the production system need to be part of the presentation, in order that visitors can make sense of the operations, not just view surviving machinery. The workers were part of the technology, literally made it work. Preserving the entire production line permits its continued operation and thus far more of the story, the significance, it represents.

This strategy permits us to show what it was about the production process that we find admirable, worth preserving, or, at least, what we find significant about the way things were made. There is a particular pressure for this kind of work, for preservation, now when the workplaces and processes are disappearing from our midst in many of our countries, while more and more of the world's manufacturing is done in places not previously associated with industrial production. Now is the time for museums and other agencies to acquire and preserve that which was *once common but rapidly becomes rare*. And again, not just isolated artefacts, but the contexts within which they can be understood by visitors, ideally within which they can be operated by experts in order that their complete story may be told.

The Nature of Industrial Interpretation

The fact that there is a particular pressure to act at this time points to the next aspect of my program: if industry is something we value, find important, then what does it mean that it is disappearing from many of its longtime locations? Has a change come over it? No, it migrates because of the particular patterns according to which it has been managed, organised. The seeds of mobility were always present. Abbot Lawrence, one of the founders of the industrial cities of Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, wrote in 1835: 'Money holders... can transfer their persons and property to any place or out of the country, having means always about them to do so.' The manager of one of the mills he founded unconsciously repeated his thought in 1945 when he discussed relocating and said: 'Capital is ambulatory.' The pattern of industry developed in the U.S. not only *acknowledged* the mobility of capital, but also made it *inevitable* through its extreme separation of the interests of capital and labor.

The simplest shorthand reference for this system is 'Scientific Management', a system which had everything to do with desire, not with science. This system had as its goal the complete divorce of knowledge and labor, of head and hand. It reflected and intensified the division between owners and workers in western industry, the diminution of much that we would value in industrial work, in the name of efficiency. But this efficiency is real only in its efficient service of the owners' desires to reserve the benefits of, the interest in, and the profits of industrial production for themselves, at the expense of a terribly *inefficient* rejection of labors' potential contribution, its skills, its interest in and satisfaction from its work.

This design for industry is revealed in its willingness to pollute the society, the social relations (not just the rivers and the air) produced by its rules of operation. This design led to its desire to run away from its own effects. Since workers were often injured and regularly laid off from work, society finally imposed taxes to pay for the effects of injuries (Workmen's Compensation), to help people endure periods without work (Unemployment Insurance). As slight as these programs were in the U.S., they encouraged factories to relocate to the Southern states, and later to locations abroad. Since workers had been deskilled through 'Scientific Management' whenever possible, they could be more easily controlled and then replaced. This style of operation also encouraged industry to find new people to do its work at lower costs to the employers while the people it had so successfully deskilled and then abandoned either sought service jobs, or were forced to compete with the cheap labor in other parts of the world to the detriment of labor in both places, to the advantage only of the corporations.

If we find the seeds of mobility inherent in the industrial structure which we try to preserve, then the situation lays this new charge on us, the innocent preservationists of the industrial past that we admire, enjoy, find important. Industry moves around the globe only at great cost to those who are left behind (and at scant benefit to those who lie in its path, in the vanguard of development). For it moves not because it aims to change, but to continue its ways at the expense of its operatives.

The need for Workmen's Compensation and Unemployment Insurance are likely to be repeated. Therefore, our preservations of industry and our interpretations of industry must be sophisticated enough to show not only its admirable parts, but also its evolution, the sources of its mobility, which we often see as failure, although for owners mobility and failure are unrelated. For indeed industry carried the seeds not of its destruction, but of its requirement for mobility, its unacceptability to the people who staffed the factories. Only in areas with heavy immigration, such as the United States, has it been able to maintain its original shape, its inefficient use of human resources, over a period of nearly two centuries.

So our efforts must demonstrate not only how technology (people and machines) worked, but also how industry worked, and for whom, and why this led so inevitably to its departure. Our parks, museums, and exhibits must not simply celebrate that which we have designated as important, they must also show how it evolved in ways which led to its exodus and the expense that this entails for its workers and for the societies to which it moved and those it left behind. These are all part of our industrial heritage.

CREATION OF AN INDUSTRIAL FUTURE

But yet another avenue of exertion must be addressed by us. If we are the conservers of our industrial past, we find something to value, as well as to criticize, in it. We notice industrial production's great ability to produce needed goods, to foster skill, creativity, and the satisfaction of accomplishment in its participants at all levels. If these aspects of our heritage are to be preserved, they must have a place made for them in contemporary and future society, not only in pictures of the past. We need to study ways to create a system of manufacture which offers the benefits we see to all its participants.

The industrial systems of the past are not based on 'natural' laws (like physics), nor will the ones of the future be. We have the opportunity to help shape new laws, rules to spread the benefits, to diminish the imbalance in capital's favor at the expense of good jobs, of any jobs. This means making the most of those aspects of industrialism we find admirable, increasing its benefits to its participants, diminishing its costs, and rationalising its future. If we value our industrial heritage and wish for it to persist, as well as be preserved, we need to address its comparative benefits for its various participants. We need to address the new codes of conduct which will have to be devised for these ends.

Thus I see a broad and difficult, but enormously significant agenda for industrial heritage. First, we assert the value of industrial artefacts and aspects of the life they represent. Second, we preserve and interpret the industrial past in ways which underline the contributions of all parties to it. Third, we show that the industrial system which is migratory contained within it from the start the seeds of this sort of conduct, to the detriment of those who worked, in fact of all but the few who owned it. And fourth, we discuss and promote a new industrialism which spreads the benefits of industry more broadly, leading to its persistence, the greatest factor in ensuring its preservation.

NOTE

1. GROSS, L.F. 1994. 'Problems in Exhibiting Labor in Museums and a Technological Fix', *Technology and Culture* 34. 2 (April):392-400.