

The Industrial Heritage of Ostrava - Authenticity at the Crossroads

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Modern Ostrava¹ in the north-east of the country is by population the third largest city of the Czech Republic. It is developing into a lively cultural centre with an outstanding theatrical and musical scene, and possesses many heritage monuments, a large number of which, thanks to their raw and robust nature, are unique in the country. They consist principally of technical monuments, or sites with an industrial history (workers' housing estates, administrative buildings, banks). Although the town dates from the second half of the 13th century and was from its foundation a significant strategic and communication point between the Moravian interior and Polish territory, the town owed its greatest development and expansion to the industrialisation of the area in the third quarter of the 19th century. Rich finds of quality black coal, the availability of iron ore (in Frýdlant, Čeladná, Baška), the beginning of iron smelting near the mines, and the construction of the railway line called the Emperor Ferdinand Northern Railway connecting Ostrava with Vienna and Kraków, together with a constant supply of water (River Ostravice) were steps that enabled the growth from a small provincial town into an industrial centre of the Habsburg Empire.

The building and population boom that occurred in Ostrava as a result of industrialisation is difficult

for us to imagine. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries more than 370 mine workings² were opened, and many companies dealing with heavy industry set up, so that the town and its landscape were fundamentally changed into an industrial environment. The population in Moravian Ostrava alone increased from under 2,000 in 1830 to 13,000 in 1880. Naturally such an increase in inhabitants necessitated the speedy construction of workers' housing estates (that still surround the city), and equally quickly the provision of various other facilities in which the employees of different businesses and companies could spend their hard-earned pay, places that still contribute to the colour and appearance of the city.

Although industrial firms in the natural course of events don't always keep growing and can also die out, the first perceptible wave of decline in industrial output in Ostrava was after the Second World War in the 1950s. In the post-war years

¹1. Shortly after the founding of Czechoslovakia, in the year 1924 'Greater Ostrava' was formed by combining Moravian Ostrava (now the town centre) with neighbouring towns: Přívoz, Mariánské Hory, Vítkovice, Hrabůvka, Zábřeh a Nová Ves. In the course of the Second World War, in fact in 1942, there was a further expansion of Ostrava to include Silesian Ostrava, Heřmanice, Hrušov, Muglinov, Michálkovice, Radvanice, Kunčice, Kunčičky, Vjíškovice a Hrabová. References made to Ostrava as it is known today already include the surrounding towns as a part of the whole.

²MATĚJ, M., KLÁT, J., KORBELÁŘOVÁ, I. Cultural monuments of the Ostrava-Karviná coalfield. Ostrava: Národní památkový ústav, územní odborné pracoviště v Ostravě, 2008. ISBN 978-80-85034-41-7. s. 173-174



Photograph from the 1920s, commemorating the centenary of the Julius Kittl works at Vítkovice. Several of the structures visible in the top right-hand quarter of this image survive and are seen in the photograph from 2014 on page 7.



The Anselm Ironworks in an image from the 1840s. Families and fashionably-dressed people are shown.

industry there had to contend with irreversible changes as a result of wartime damage. Companies were ruined or ransacked, in all areas there was a recognisable shortage of workers, and property relations within firms were altered as a result of nationalisation. Smaller industrial areas underwent conversion, as did certain mine workings, in the course of which the mines were filled in and the towers taken down. However, a much greater impact on the life of the town and its people occurred during the second wave of de-industrialisation, sponsored and financed by the State in the 1990s. The change of political conditions in the then Czechoslovakia in 1989 led to a restructuring of the national economy, which encompassed among other things a decision to reduce coal production and to remove its traces.

The State mining company Ostrava-Karviná Mines, which was founded in 1946 during nationalisation to take over all the mining in the area, was subject to 'coupon'-privatisation, with the active parts of the business being privatised, while those that were evaluated as being in decline were gradually dissolved. A further exceptional blow that affected not only the local economy but also the social sphere of Ostrava was the end of iron smelting and the coking plant at Vítkovice in 1998 (in the area of Lower Vítkovice). This became what were the largest brown-field areas in Ostrava, eventually covering more than 180ha. The blast furnaces and the coking plant together with their associated services nevertheless represented the past of one of the most significant and progressive industrial centres of the Habsburg Empire. In the course of their 170-year-long, unbroken production the Lower Vítkovice area processed 90 million tons of pig iron, and 42 million tons of coke using sixblast furnaces.³ In 1977, the year of highest production, the output was 1.7 million tons. By the end of the 1990s Ostrava was a moribund city facing many

issues. One of the most burning questions was how to deal with the now-defunct industrial buildings, technology and facilities.

Following research by the NPÚ (National Heritage Institute) that consisted of mapping the situation on the ground, examining archive material and the subsequent defining and evaluating of the value of individual sites, there followed heritage protection for a series of buildings and machinery. Two mines, Hlubina and Michal, eventually achieved statutory listing as national cultural monuments. Together with other valuable sites in the industrially productive areas of Ostrava, the Anselm coalmine, the ventilation shaft at Vrbice, and the coking plant and blast furnaces at Vítkovice were registered as the first industrial complex on the indicative list of the Czech Republic for inclusion on the World Heritage List of UNESCO.⁴

Apart from the traditional historic and architectural values of the blast furnaces, the coking plant and the attached carboniferous mine Hlubina, it was the complete technological process, including its authenticity and atmosphere, that made it special in comparison with other sites in the city. Ostrava's famous industrial past is reflected in many other relics connected with its industrial development. Slagheaps, entrances to mines, water and air shafts, skeletons of internal trains, chimneys and coalmining towers are all clear and visible traces left by the people who worked there and lived nearby. The old 'black' city is also an inspiration, well-recorded and living in the the work of artists, writers and filmmakers. Local streets, bus and tram stops bear the names reflecting the past – Kovářská Street (Blacksmith), Hutní (Smelting) Street, Tovární (Factory) Street etc. In the last few years the public has shown more interest in the city's industrial heritage but investors too are now coming in and looking for new ways of using the old, long-idle and unproductive, but technically and historically valuable buildings. And it is exactly these necessary changes that bring new problems and a certain amount of controversy between the heritage experts and the developers.

³Annual report of Třinecké Ironworks 2011. Available here: <http://www.trz.cz/pdf/tzvz.cz/202011.pdf> [cit. 2016-04-24]

⁴More in: MATEJ, M., KUČOVÁ, V. Industrial Complexes in Ostrava to be Nominated for Inscription on the UNESCO. *Ostrava: National Institute for the Protection and Conservation of Monuments and Sites, Central Unit in Prague, and in the Regional Department in Ostrava, 2007. ISBN 978-80-85034-02-8.*

Although the change of use of a heritage site is mostly welcome, how do we deal with the necessary, or worse, the unnecessary intervention that alters the atmosphere of the place? Despite the protected status of a listed site, in most cases modern changes represent a threat to its highly valued authenticity and remembrance of the people who worked there and of their lives. To find a compromise between the old and the new, between a heritage expert and an architect, poses a great dilemma for Ostrava today. Indeed, the site of Vítkovice, Lower Area (*Dolní oblast*)⁵ is a very sensitive problem for the Czech Republic as a whole.

How do we preserve authenticity and the atmosphere of the industrial heritage long-term? The architectural and development project of Nové (New) Vitkovice has been running in several stages since 2006. Its main objective is to change the use of the industrial site and replace it with a cultural, educational and recreational facility. One of the first conversions that replaced a disused gas holder from the 1920s was a grand multifunctional hall with a capacity of more than 1,500 visitors. Designed by Josef Pleskot (aka the 'court architect' of Vítkovice), and fully supported by heritage experts, the project transformed the original and utilitarian industrial structure into a venue for music festivals, scientific symposia and theatre performances, while preserving the industrial character of the building with all the load-bearing constructions and the authenticity of the place intact.

The opening of a blast furnace to the public followed, together with a guided sightseeing trail



The Bolt Tower is a modern coffee-house in Lower Vítkovice (Dolní oblast), built round and over Blast Furnace No.1, providing panoramic views of the centre of Ostrava and the surrounding countryside.

where the visitor, starting from the old coalmine Hlubina, can see the technology, architecture and the entire process of making iron, from mining the coal to producing coke and iron-casting itself. Along the trail there are information boards for the visitor together with the original signposts and the internal transport signs for the workers, all aiding the feel and atmosphere of the place. The educational value of the trail is important and indisputable, but the heritage work parts company with the demands and expectations of the public by the introduction of modern additions. Suspended bridges for pedestrians, safety rails, barriers etc., all make the movement of visitors safer and easier among the old technology but at the same time wipe out and sanitise the raw nature of the working environment and the memory of the place, which was essentially very harsh. Equally controversial is the new coffee-house visible from a long distance at the top of one of the coalmining towers, complete with a spiral viewing circuit, or the new science centre 'Big World of Technology'. Architecturally well-designed, they are very popular with the visitors but nevertheless affect the value of the entire industrial heritage complex - the panorama and the authenticity have been to a certain extent compromised while at the same time they represent the only way forward to keep the site alive and developing.⁶

One of the ways of preserving the old values in the face of new development could be reaching out to local communities and raising their awareness of such issues by means of a better and wider education programme centered on the importance of preserving their technical heritage. The locals who should be bringing pressure on the developers, town planners and the local government currently accept the old industrial sites as an integral part of their locality, but without a full understanding of the uniqueness and heritage value they represent. Their industrial environment is being perceived mostly only as a background to recreation and leisure activities. Although the situation may seem shocking, it is not. For a large part of the population of Ostrava these industrial complexes represent a working environment, not cultural values. The enormous and radical changes

⁵ <http://dolnivitkovice.cz>

⁶ The number of visitors to Dolní oblast in Vítkovice in 2014 was 800,000; the Michal Mine, the only industrial heritage site managed by the NPÚ, was seen in 2014 by 12,000 visitors – source: www.patriotmagazin.cz/dul-michal-a-dolni-vitkovice-prilakavy-rekordni-pocty-navstevniku



The Lower Area (Dolní oblast) in Vítkovice as the setting for the Colours of Ostrava Festival in 2014

that took place in fewer than the last twenty years could be described simply as 'yesterday in mining overalls, today in a suit'. It is not easy to convince a community that knows its environment only through hard work, low wages and pollution that Ostrava holds a unique place in the country's heritage. It is necessary to understand that in the Czech Republic, in comparison with Anglo-Saxon models, work with the public is only just beginning and it will take time to reach a point where the industrial heritage is seen as a valuable cultural asset. How to protect, present and develop the industrial heritage has been a legitimate field of study for the NPÚ (the National Heritage Institute) and other institutions since the end of the 1980s.

The Research Centre at ČVUT (Czech Technical University) in Prague, the National Technical Museum and the Technical Museum in Brno, including many local action groups, are in the forefront of research and educational activities. They organise a wide spectrum of events, from conferences, seminars and workshops to photographic exhibitions, popular science publications and guided tours to special sites both open to and not normally accessible to the public.⁷

However, most of the education programmes are aimed at the adult market where the participant is expected to have at least a basic knowledge of the subject. What is almost completely missing is the necessary work with lay people, be it children or the target groups of parents and children, that would lead

to gaining more information and a better understanding of what industrial heritage is. Fortunately there are some museums that have responded promptly to the growing demand for a 'different' form of imparting information. They are using the potential of industrial heritage to further both formal and informal education by building scientific and technical interactive/play centres and organising thematic days or exhibitions. The choice of programmes offered by the museums is relatively rich and varied and has to be welcomed, even though it is often the entertainment value that outweighs the education. Sadly, it is exactly the authenticity and importance of protecting and preserving heritage values that museums are not stressing enough. They are also failing to introduce the economic mechanisms that could help provide means for the reconstruction of many industrial heritage sites. Perhaps a programme that includes all these factors could be a solution for many other technical and industrial sites in Ostrava that cannot compete with the grand scale of the project The Lower Area (*Dolní oblast*) in Vítkovice.

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Translation by Jana Sommerlad and Stephen Conlin.

⁷Website in English relating to many aspects of Czech industrial heritage: <http://vcpd.cvut.cz/>