



5 APRIL 2010

***What role for industrial ruins in public parks?  
Between history, memory and leisure***

*By Pierre Donadieu*

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Landscape architects retain more and more industrial ruins in public parks. The users then appreciate a legitimate practice enhancing the collective memories of activities that marked most of the urban areas, during the last century. With the continued de-industrialization, especially in Europe, or the relocation of industries, critics of these practices begin to emerge.

"(In public parks) the aesthetic pleasure of ruins outweighs the authenticity of historical contents. »<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Clemence Chan, who teaches landscape architecture at the University of Oregon, shows that the interest of park designers is more focused on the emotional attraction of users than on the narration of historical facts; on the sensations felt by the public rather than on the environmental quality of places, on the equipment for recreation rather than on the poetics of places.

She presents different ways of telling the industrial history. For some designers, the traces of the industry are interpreted as special places, haunted, sad, terrifying, with a sinister beauty (sublime). They are then considered in such way that the *folies* of the European gardens of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For others, the abandoned industrial areas refer mainly to areas of renewal and unpredictable potential for urban economy. In contrast, for geo-anthropologists like the American JB Jackson (1909-1996)<sup>2</sup>, they constitute ordinary places that local people's sensitivities qualify according to their own rules.

By bringing ruin - remnants of shed, mills, furnaces, refineries, docks, railways, etc. - in the perimeter of a public park, landscape architects cannot escape the needs of scenography and those related to the recreational practices that will occur there. At the same time they emphasize the visible characters of a new place dedicated to industrial or port memory, capable of creating fear, curiosity or wonder, they also must create a functional and safe place for attractive leisure.

What do often landscaping practices make lose, are not symbolic supports of memory, which remain, but their narrative, historical and socio-political content, they should present. Therefore E.C. Chan advocates minimal intervention on the site as theorized and illustrated by the landscapers Peter Latz in Duisburg (Emscher Park) and Bernard Lassus<sup>3</sup>: a raw state, as inheriting, not dressed, cleaned and secured.

Is it then sufficient to recommend to designers to consider the ruins of industrial buildings as "historical evidence" rather than as aesthetic means to impress, and to enjoy them with values of today and not of the past?

It is not certain. This debate on the need to retain the old architectural heritage rather than reinvent or restore it as the architect Viollet-le-Duc has marked the critics during the nineteenth century. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) advocated a strict observance of buildings belonging to the bond of solidarity that unites past and future generations<sup>4</sup>. This idea has gained ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth C. Chan, « What roles for ruins? Meaning and narrative of industrial ruins in contemporary parks », *JoLA*, autumn, 2009, pp. 20-31.

<sup>2</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Xavier Carrère. *A la découverte du paysage vernaculaire*, Arles, Actes sud/ ENSP Versailles, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Lassus. *The landscape approach*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

<sup>4</sup>According to the Historian Françoise Choay in 1997 : <http://www.archi.fr/DA/tex/memPro/choay.htm>

In Essen in the Ruhr, Zollverein, the site of mine and coking plant, and the buildings of modern architecture created in the 1930s, have been classified by Unesco as World Heritage of Humanity in 2001. The outdoor areas of this site, which incorporated a design museum designed by Norman Foster, have been developed since 2003 by landscapers, some of them from the French-German agency TER.

Has it so far lost its historicity and value of ages proposed by the Austrian critics Alois Riegl<sup>5</sup>? No, thinks the jury for projects of landscape architecture selected in the European book *On Site*. Because "near the center, which contains the elements (architectural) protected, preserved as a static and untouchable element, (...) the linear park serves as a threshold space between classified and development zones (economic and cultural)." The jury noted that "ruderal species are constituents of the charm of the place and contrast with (its) severe architecture."<sup>6</sup>

Park designers with industrial ruins would probably have to choose today between the positions of A. Riegl: a new spatial order expressed by the "universal poetic dissolution of inherited things" and that of J. Ruskin updated by landscapers: a continuous sensitivity to things, reinterpreted a minima by the socio-political history of places. A choice that is not easy to make.

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<sup>5</sup> *Der Moderne Denkmal Kultus*, Vienne, 1903.

<sup>6</sup> *On site, l'architecture du paysage en Europe*, Actes Sud LAE Fondation, 2009.