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Inspiring adaptation

Peter Wakein

In the last issue of IA News Dr Peter Wakein reported on the recent TICCIH conference in Germany about preserving industrial landscapes. Here he describes several innovative schemes within the Ruhrgebiet which show how large and complex industrial sites - traditionally thought unsuited to adaptive re-use albeit that they are essential to the character of industrial landscapes - may successfully find future roles.

Try this puzzle. Take one recently closed steelworks, the size of a city centre, and see what you can think of to do with it. You have at your disposal a motley collection of generator houses, offices and other buildings, huge blast furnaces, ore hoppers, gas tanks, cranes, settling ponds, chimneys and hundreds of miles of steel pipes. This has been the focus of local life for three generations, but it now lies silent and decaying.

In the Ruhrgebiet region of Germany, several giant steelworks have closed in recent years. Some are sitting derelict. Some have been cleared at great expense for their sites to be redeveloped. But one is being preserved in its entirety, and re-used in a multitude of imaginative ways. The site is becoming once again a focus for its community - and at a fraction of the cost of clearing it away. It is one of several innovative adaptive re-use projects in the Ruhrgebiet initiated by the International Building Exhibition, an organisation funded by the regional government to promote economic and environmental regeneration.

The Meiderich Steelworks at Duisburg was built in 1902 and closed in 1985. Since 1992 it has been fully open to the public as the Duisburg North Landscape Park, and last year alone it attracted over half a million visitors. They come for guided tours of the industrial archaeology. They come to study how nature comes to terms with this most intensely abused of landscapes. People all around use the area for recreation and walking; even for picnicking. Stairways to the top of Blast Furnace Number Five give access to some of the best views in the whole region. A gas tank filled with water is used for training divers. Landscape

gardens have been established in the old cinder bunkers, and the former office block is now a bar and restaurant, with an exhibition about the site upstairs. One of the power halls has been adapted for conferences or parties to be held amidst its machinery with minimal internal alteration. Ore bunkers are used as climbing walls for training by the German mountaineering club. Even concerts and operas are held, under the furnace canopies.

Demolition and reclamation of the site would have cost 137 million Deutschmarks (£60 million), but the full programme of adaptation is costing 87 million (£38 million). Running costs are easily met by revenue from new uses and by interest from the funds deposited by local government and the former owners in part-payment of their obligations toward reclamation. The most expensive work has been the removal of small bore pipes which could have become dangerous; but most of the steelwork requires little or no maintenance, and much of the site is recolonising naturally. Despite the many dangers to visitors that might be imagined, in practice the site is remarkably safe and insur-

ance costs for the operators have been low. Amazing though the concept seems of retaining something so recently and widely thought an unacceptable eyesore, it is rapidly gathering favour. The project is cheaper, it retains historic landscapes and local identity, it provides for beneficial uses of the site, and it is in tune with green philosophy. And, surprisingly, many people are beginning to find the landscape beautiful.

The International Building Exhibition has participated in several other exciting and imaginative schemes of adaptive re-use in the region. At another former steelworks a few miles away at Oberhausen, the giant gasometer was saved temporarily last year to see what could be done with it. At 120 metres high and 50 metres in diameter, its interior is the largest room in Europe. How could such a space be used? The answer was an exhibition, put together as conversion works took place, all within only a few months. Entitled 'Fire and Flame', the exhibition relates superbly the evolution of industrial culture in the region. It uses three levels - the huge circular floor of the gasometer, the spaces between the radial ribs of the plunger which was supported by the gas, and the top of the plunger which is open to the roof 100 metres above. An express lift takes visitors up the dark inside of the structure, watch-



Preserving an industrial landscape: Meiderich Steelworks Urban Park

Photo: Peter Wakein

**Sheffield Conference 1995 • Forth Bridge • 1740s Birmingham trades • Irish Canals
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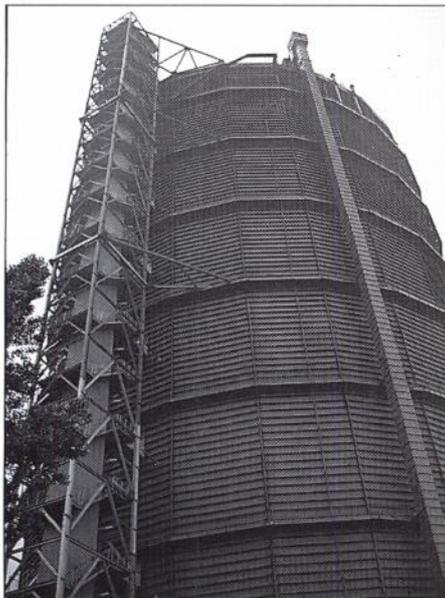


The former boilerhouse at Zollverein XII Colliery, being converted by Sir Norman Foster to the North-Rhine Westphalia Design Centre. Photo: Peter Wakelin



The Bochumer Verein blowing engine hall, now a multi-purpose space for exhibitions, raves and sports events. Photo: Peter Wakelin

ing the lights of the exhibition slip into the distance, like a scene from '2001'. Visitors can then step onto the roof for a panorama of the area. The whole stunning experience attracted 270,000 visitors last summer, and re-opened this year by popular request. The gasometer has already become a landmark which people come



Biggest room in Europe: Oberhausen gasometer, home to the popular exhibition 'Fire and Flame'

Photo: Peter Wakelin

from all around Germany to visit. After only a year, the idea of demolishing it is no longer the obvious, but instead the unthinkable.

Several other buildings have been retained with minimal cost and intervention, simply to be used as large covered spaces when the need arises. They have found regular uses already, for trade shows, raves, exhibitions, conferences, concerts and sports events. Toilets have been built, and screens, seating, special lights and heaters can be hired in if they are wanted. Why adapt further when it could inhibit uses or increase costs? Minimal conversions like this provide such spaces much more cheaply than building new. The approach has worked well at the Bochumer Verein blowing engine hall as well as at the Meiderich steelworks and Oberhausen gasometer. Such flexibility of beginning with minimal alteration and investment and working only gradually towards comprehensive plans has made conservation conceivable at several large and complex sites. Re-use tends to evolve and gather pace if it is given the opportunity, whereas expensive and ambitious schemes may fall at the first hurdle of finding investment all at once.

The adaptation of Zollverein XII Colliery has been an excellent example of the gradualist approach. With 20 separate buildings, each of massive scale, an overall plan would have taken far too long to agree. When the colliery closed nine years ago, a job creation scheme was established to undertake basic care and maintenance and begin conversion of a few structures. A

decision was taken that the uses of the site should focus on art and design, capitalizing on its architectural quality as a Bauhaus inspired super-pit of 1930. One by one, buildings have been taken over, some privately as design and architecture offices; others in major grant-aided or public initiatives. One houses a private art collection. Another is available for temporary exhibitions. The boilerhouse is being converted to the North-Rhine Westphalia Design Centre - designed by the British architect Sir Norman Foster and even utilising the interiors of the boilers as exhibition spaces. The washery plant is the last to have been assigned a use, but is shortly to re-house the department of design of the University of Essen.

Without any marketing or encouragement, Zollverein XII is already attracting 150,000 visitors a year to guided tours, including local people who once again see the site bringing hope for this area of high unemployment. The cost of the conversion compares reasonably with that of building similar sized spaces anew - with historic buildings grants making costs to users highly favourable. But the quality, sense of identity and excitement offered by the surroundings could not be matched by any new-built scheme. And a superb monument to Europe's industrial past has been permanently preserved.

Try this puzzle. Take a redundant colliery like Penallta in the Rhymney Valley, a closing steelworks like Ravenscraig, or an empty power station like Battersea. What do you do with them? Maybe the Ruhrgebiet can give us some ideas.

AIA

ASSOCIATION FOR INDUSTRIAL ARCHAEOLOGY ANNOUNCING THE THREE FIELDWORK AND RECORDING AWARDS FOR 1996

The AIA Fieldwork Award scheme exists to encourage recording of the physical remains of the industrial period to high archaeological standards. The awards are open to both amateur and professional field workers, and have been operating successfully for almost a decade.

Work submitted may already have been published or if not, may be encouraged to publish. As well as the main award there is also the Initiative Awards for innovative projects eg those from local societies and to encourage the future industrial archaeologists, a Student Category.

THE CLOSING DATE FOR ENTRIES IS 1ST MAY 1996

Successful Entries will be notified in August

The successful authors will be invited to attend the AIA annual conference in Bangor to collect their awards in September 1996

Entries should be sent to:

Victoria Beauchamp, c/o The Division of Adult Continuing Education
University of Sheffield, 196-198 West Street, Sheffield S1 4ET

FURTHER DETAILS WILL ALSO BE AVAILABLE FROM THE ABOVE ADDRESS

Two omissions

The Editor apologises for the omission of two captions in IA News 94. On page one, the plate depicts 8-14 Bridge Street, Port Sunlight, photographed by Bedford Lemere in 1896. (Photo: RCHME © Crown Copyright). This particular building was bombed in the Second World War and rebuilt in the 1950s so perfectly that it was Listed in the 1960s before the mistake was realised!

On page four, readers will make more sense of the cartoon sketch by inserting the caption: 'Iron-bridge Weekenders find themselves still undaunted by their fifth delivery of IRIS recording forms.'