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Has Industrial Archaeology Lost its Way?

Summary and comment of a typescript paper by Kenneth Hudson
Edited by Massimo Negri

Introduction

Some years after Tom Rolt's[1] death, Kenneth Hudson, regarded as the first promoter and communicator of industrial archaeology in Europe, if not its actual founder, was asked to hold a Rolt Memorial Lecture, which he called "Has Industrial Archaeology Lost Its Way?" [2]. Ann Nicholls, his assistant for a long time, kept a typescript of it, that was found later among the many works he left[3] – more than 50 books published, and many more articles, essays, interviews and radio and TV broadcasts. After almost 10 years, this typescript paper still is very stimulating reading. Kenneth dealt with some basic issues concerning the beginnings and aims of IA, and the "esprit" of what he never wanted to call an academic subject, but rather a path for social action and cultural direction common to diverse fields of study.

25 years after the first Italian event concerning industrial archaeology – the 1977 Milan International Meeting held at Rotonda della Besana (in which a very interesting discussion took place between Kenneth and Eugenio Battisti who also popularized the notion of industrial archeology in Italy) during the exhibit "San Leucio: archeologia, storia, progetto"[4]-, Kenneth's comments in this Rolt Memorial Lecture still provide a valuable intellectual provocation. The author describes the curve of development of British industrial archaeology , from its pioneering times until its mass-popularization and finally, to its establishment as an academic subject – the same happened, with some differences, in other European countries, and partially in Italy as well.

In Italy, the phrase "industrial archaeology" came into current use following a period of time in which we find a proliferation of surveys of industrial monuments in several regions; the

[1] Tom Rolt was the author of a series of important biographies of 18th and 19th century British engineers that were also great protagonists of Industrial Revolution. Among them, the most interesting and fascinating bios are those of Stephenson and Brunel, because they don't just describe their technical and scientific work, but also vividly recall those times of social, political and economical changes in which they were active.
[2] Has Industrial Archaeology Lost Its Way?- Rolt Memorial Lecture, European Museum Forum Archives, Bristol, non- dated typescript. The speech was given in 1996.
[3] Kenneth Hudson died in December 1999.
[4] This debate is contained in the Proceedings of that meeting, edited by Massimo Negri and published by CLUP in 1978.

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collection of photographic works – all of them basically inspired by Gabriele Basilico's work[5] –; as well as a myriad of TV and photo productions featuring industrial archaeological sites as expressively powerful settings for fashion, cars, drinks commercials and so on. Even in **movies**, industrial derelict lands often became the symbol of existential suffering ("Maledetti vi amerò" and "Nirvana" are just two cases chronologically and thematically very different from each other).

We find other examples in art: Arte Povera (Kounellis for instance) and painting (the "pittura-pittura" movement), that has dealt with the subject of historical, real or fantastic industrial buildings since the end of the 1980s, either in hyper-realistic terms (Arduino Cantafora), in De Chirico style (Paola Gandolfi) or in romantic-symbolic terms (some of Raffaele Bueno's works). These artistic representations differ greatly in meaning and aim from those of the industrial landscape made by Futurists and Neorealists – a landscape that was monumental as well, but not decaying and obsolete. The industrial and modernistic narrative of these cultural movements was gradually replaced by the physical and visual representation of a neglected industry past its prime. Or to put it more harshly, of dead industry.

Therefore, in the public consciousness, the idea of the industrial archaeological site as a landmark has grown more as an aesthetic issue than as a conveyor of technological, historical or social values. Evidence of this can be found in Italy, where trade unions have seldom promoted initiatives for the preservation of industrial archaeological remains (except in the case of records heritage, especially archives, which have received special attention), in sharp contrast to other countries such as Sweden's Bergslagen Eco-museum or the Workers' Museum in Copenhagen, both founded with strong support by local trade unions.

Has industrial archaeology lost its way?

It would be simplistic to say that social awareness regarding industrial heritage grew more quickly and easily in countries where industrialization began earlier. In the Rolt Memorial Lecture, Kenneth Hudson describes a process he calls the "democratization of history", seen through the works of Trevelyan, Hoskins and Crawford [6]:

"This, then, was the fertile soil in which industrial archaeology was planted, a compost of social history, local history, and more intelligible archaeology. The term 'Industrial Archaeology' was almost certainly invented early in the 1950s by Donald Dudley, at that time Director of Birmingham University's Extra-Mural Department. He did no more than throw the expression into conversation, possibly with inverted commas in his voice. Its first appearance in print appears to have occurred in the autumn of 1955, in an article written for *The Amateur Historian* by a member of his own Department, Michael Rix, who implied, rather than stated, a definition of the new phrase. 'Great Britain,' he said, 'as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, is full of monuments left by this remarkable series of events. Any other country would have set up machinery for the scheduling and preservation of these memorials that symbolize the movement which is changing the face of the globe, but we

[5] *Milano, ritratti di fabbriche,* Sugar 1983 is the catalogue of the exhibit with the same name held at Milan PAC that can be regarded as the starting point of Basilico's research in this field. About Basilico and photographs in industrial archaeology, see also M.Negri,, *Gabriele Basilico e l'archeologia industriale italiana* in *Aree industriali dismesse tra memoria e futuro,* bilingual edition edited by Le Creusot Eco-museum , 2002, on line at the URL www.euroinpat.org

[6] Kenneth refers in particular to "English Social History" by G.M.Trevelyan, published in 1944, "Local History in England" by W.G.Hoskins published in 1959 and to "Archaeology in the field" by O.G.S. Crawford published in 1953.

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are so oblivious of our national heritage that, apart from a few museum pieces, the majority of these landmarks are neglected or unwittingly destroyed.' Since Michael Rix gave the expression 'Industrial Archaeology' to the world in this way, it has been much disliked and strongly criticized, although nobody has yet been able to suggest a more acceptable alternative".

Hostility towards the early notion of industrial archaeology grew from the idea that the materials were of little historical significance, because they were too recent to be the object of "archaeological research", strictly speaking. This is Kenneth Hudson's opinion on the matter:

"Everything has its birth and its old age and each culture and each industry has to be considered against its own time-scale. In the case of the petroleum industry, for instance, the oldest and rarest monuments date from the second half of the l9th century. For nuclear energy and a number of plastics and synthetic fibres it is the 1940s that we have to consider. For iron bridges, it is the middle of the 18th century. It is pointless and ridiculous to try to establish an arbitrary date which can be used to divide the old from the recent, the archaeological approved from the archaeologically disreputable.

[...] In *Industrial Archaeology: An Introduction*, I attempted a short definition of my own. 'Industrial Archaeology', I wrote, 'is the discovery, recording and study of the physical remains of yesterday's industries and communications'. But, I added, 'each decade will interpret 'study' in its own way, with its own ideas as to what is to be looked for and what details should be recorded.' I think both the definition and the forecast have stood the test of time reasonably well and I am not ashamed of either of them today.
In 1976 I suggested, in the third edition of my magnum opus, that 'during the past 20 years industrial archaeology in Britain has passed through two stages of change and development and is now entering a third.' I identified these three stages as follows".

In describing the three stages, Kenneth Hudson quotes extensively from his book, *Industrial Archaeology: an Introduction.* We shall quote the most interesting passages from the 1976 edition:

"In Stage One, 'a small and curiously assorted body of pioneers devoted a great deal of time and energy to stirring up the public conscience about the rapid disappearance of buildings and machinery which document the history of British industry and technology, especially in the l9th century. In books, articles, lectures, broadcasts and letters to the press, these enthusiasts and crusaders tried to convince disbelieving and tight-fisted bureaucrats, uncomprehending industrialists and cynical, if not actually hostile academics that mills, steam engines and canal locks were of as much historical and cultural importance as castles, cathedrals and l8th-century furniture.'

Stage Two (developing from about 1960 on) covers three main aspects:

'[...] the creation all over Britain of amateur groups pursuing industrial archaeology as a hobby, the beginnings of a rudimentary National Register of Industrial Monuments and the belated growth of academic interest in the subject' [...] 'if Britain has made a special contribution to industrial archaeology, it has been in the form of these amateur groups and societies'.

Stage Three, in its flowering in the half of the 70s, is distinguished by the fact that:

'an increasing number of people begin to take stock of what has been achieved during Stage One and Stage Two and to ask what it all means. What is it all for? How much industrial archaeology do we need? Having beaten off the enemies of preservation and wan glorious victories in saving that old water-mill, this old gas-works and that old steam–engine for posterity, what is the nature of such triumphs?'

These were questions which were bothering me personally a great deal, as well as many other battle-hardened industrial archaeologists in the middle of the Seventies. 'Accumulating pieces of industrial archaeology,' I wrote, ' is not unlike collecting stamps or coins or matchbox labels. For some people, the mere act of collection is sufficient. It becomes absorbing in itself, and a passion which began at the age of 14 is still a passion at 60. But for others, acquisition for acquisition's sake is likely to pall, whether the collection consists of birds' eggs or of

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items for the National Survey of Industrial Monuments. The bits and pieces must add up to something, they must contribute to the understanding of a wider field.'

And that wider field must be the cultivation and nurture of the historical imagination. The whole point of studying history, any sort of history, is to get a better understanding of the lives of our ancestors, with its human mixture of big things and little things. Such an understanding has to be nourished from all possible sources - wide reading, conversations and family memories, visits to sites and museums, looking at pictures and photographs. It is a lifetime job. Industrial archaeology can do no more than add another dimension to what is already available elsewhere. It can help to make better sense of the total pattern. To consider it in its own right is a pathetically sterile pursuit. History is about people, not objects, and the objects, whether they are steam-engines, cotton-mills or Neolithic pots, are valuable only in so far as they provide evidence about the people who used them. In Crawford's words, archaeology is the past tense of anthropology and industrial archaeology is the past tense of industrial workers.

It is certainly not sufficient to do what so-called industrial archaeologists have been doing for 20 years now, visiting the holy places, the sites that have already been adequately documented by their predecessors. Industrial archaeology was a lively and well-patronised affair in the Sixties and Seventies because the people taking part in it had the satisfaction of realising that, often in relatively humble ways, they were contributing to the common stock of historical knowledge. During the Eighties and Nineties, however, its appeal has been fading, largely because people had become weary of gazing on the same old pastures. Archaeology is essentially an active pursuit, in which people are stimulated by the prospect and the reality of making new discoveries. Fieldwork is essential, in order to ensure a continuous supply of fresh blood running through its veins. If fieldwork fades away, the pleasure and the excitement begin to go and the subject loses its point.

This is not to say or imply, of course, that old material is not in constant need of interpretation. Historical models need to be repeatedly abandoned, modified and rebuilt, but this is a skilled job, demanding experience and a powerful imagination. Only a few people are capable of it in any generation. They are the true historians, the creators, the assemblers, the formative influence, the people who can distinguish the wood from the trees. They are always in short supply. To be in a state of health, industrial archaeology needs an adequate number of rank and file workers - coolies, if you like - to carry out the basic tasks of digging out previously unknown facts, and a small number of experts who can sift and assess the material that the coolies uncover. At the present time, I think the balance between these two levels of the army is not what it should be. We have too many officers - and some are pretty dull fellows - and too few other-ranks. The situation reminds me of the Polish army-in-exile during the Second World War. To this extent, what we have far nearly half-a-century been calling industrial archaeology has lost its way. It has been feeding on itself to an undesirable extent.

In order to restore it to full health, I think two developments are required. One is a great extension of its field of activity and the other a change of name. What has become the traditional subject, the one that goes under the name of industrial archaeology, came into existence mainly because so many relics of the age of coal and steam were being recklessly destroyed in the name of progress. During the past 30 years an equally sad and serious process of annihilation and transformation has been going on in fields which the Founding Fathers of industrial archaeology would have considered unworthy of their attention, but which are nonetheless cultural monuments of the same importance as those which I wrote about in my book, *Industrial Archaeology: An Introduction.*

I am thinking about places as varied as small hotels, Lyons Corner Houses and 1930s cinemas, small butchers' and grocers' shops, gas and electricity showrooms, and uncomputerised offices. These all formed part of a culture that is rapidly passing away, a culture that employed millions of people, a previous stage of capitalist society which has been just as important in its way as that of the shipyards, cotton-mills and coalmines which preceded it and which attracted such devoted attention from the first generation of industrial archaeologists.

For perfectly understandable reasons, the words 'industrial archaeology', an improbable combination which once had such a powerful shock value, have lost much of their appeal. I *am* convinced that the time has come to replace them by something better suited to today's and tomorrow's situation. I suggest 'workplace archaeology' or, if that is felt to be too long and clumsy, 'work archaeology'. I think I rather favour 'work archaeology'. In its flavour and apparent absurdity it has the same potential strength as the once-useful 'industrial archaeology'. And it covers all the half–forgotten sources of employment which so badly require the attention of the successors to the pioneers of 40 and 50 years ago. It would pump new life into an ailing body. I recommend it to you and to the next Rolt Memorial lecturer. He could very profitably play about with it".

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Kenneth Hudson's speech gives us a useful and lively panorama of British industrial archaeology, but it also raises two basic questions: the need to go back to the deepest meaning of industrial archaeological research, and to re-define its field of activity with reference to a broader horizon.

We don't know whether the organizers of subsequent Rolt Memorial Lectures followed Kenneth's advice or not. However, we can surely follow the path shown us by one of the most important promoters of this field of cultural activity; one who questioned concepts and methods that now appear to be critically in need of radical re-thinking.

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