

Investigating the Outer Zone; Spatial practices and values in the abandoned territories of the industrial city

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Introduction

The country of Charleroi was part of the first wave of industrialization in Western Europe in the 19th century, mainly due to the massive presence of coal in its underground. The extraction sites were directly located around the city. As for workers' housing districts, they were developed in the direct vicinity of these sites, exposed to disturbances and pollutions (see figure 1: Pierre Paulus, *Le pays de Charleroi*, 1911).

As the industry declined, the mining sites were progressively abandoned. Their location, their state of pollution and their topography, with the presence of many slag heaps, made them unsuitable for setting up new economic activities. For fifty years, these sites were abandoned. This study focuses on the slag heaps themselves, as landscape objects and also as places. It questions how these sites can be considered in the context of the urban regeneration policies currently underway, with social and ecological concerns in mind.

The remaining slag heaps are regularly disposed all around the city. Anywhere you live in Charleroi, there is one of these artificial mountains located a stone's throw away. There are about sixty of them in the urban agglomeration of Charleroi (see figure 2: Aerial view of the urban agglomeration of Charleroi with localization of the slag heaps, 2022).

Inside/Outside

In order to articulate a relevant reading of these sites, we propose to return to some recent theoretical references. In 1995, in Rome, a collective of architects named "Stalker" walked through the disregarded residual spaces of the metropolitan area of Rome. In their manifesto, they propose to recognize the paradoxal richness of these spaces left aside by urban expansion, claiming they were "the places of repressed memory and the unconscious becoming of urban systems, the dark side of the city, the spaces of conflict and contamination between organic and inorganic, between nature and artifice."

In 2000, the young french architect Yvan Detraz wrote a seminal text named "Zone Sweet Zone", dedicated to neglected urban areas. Among other things, it states that these spaces could be "what the street and the square are to the traditional city: a fundamental public space", and become places where the city can "provide shelter for the wild, the nomadic and the unplanned ; for space that is economically unproductive but socially, symbolically and ecologically profitable."

In Charleroi, forbidden accessibility, long-term abandonment, pollution and depreciation have given to the former industrial areas the status of an "outside" of the city. What socio-spatial values reside in this "outside" ? This is what this study will try to assess.



1.



2.



3.

This question will be considered through a series of figures aiming to represent these spaces. These figures form the synthesis of an ongoing investigation into the historical, anthropological and social aspects of these places. The present reality of these spaces is to be found in the global picture these figures form together, taking into account the affinities and conflictualities that persist between them.

1. *Mounds* - Tim Ingold and the anthropology of the mound

This figure is mobilized not to directly describe the slag heaps of Charleroi themselves, but to put this particular landscape objects into perspective.

In his book "Making", the anthropologist Tim Ingold underlines the vocation of mounds and tumuli to embody the gathered community, as well as the relationship to the cosmos. In traditional cultures, most of them were meeting places where stories and decisions were shared between neighbouring communities. The mound traditionally has this symbolic and political dimension. Moreover, its character is cosmogonic.

2. *Waste* - the industrial boom and the hollow monumentality

The discharge of mining activities from the 19th century has led to a gradual accumulation of mining waste in close proximity of the mine shafts. At that time, industrial development was a priority that put aside environmental and landscape considerations. The Slags heaps were born like this, covering existing fields and forests.

3. *Ruins* - the organs of a tired machine

The decline in mining activity began in the late fifties (1950s). From this time, the coal mines closed down one after the other. The large portions of land that were devoted to these activities became wastelands, but they are still owned today by the mining companies or the legal structures that replaced them.

4. *Playgrounds* - the forbidden games

Long before the coal mines closed down, the slag heaps were playgrounds for children from the working-class neighborhoods. These practices of the space by children were the source of an affective attachment that would be translated, many years later, into political affects, as we will see below. Even today, on accessible sites as well as on forbidden ones, children are among the first to explore the places and leave their traces there.

5. *Resources* - the thwarted exploitation

In the 1970s and in the context of the oil crisis, the Belgian government considered authorizing the exploitation of the slag heaps as an energy resource. Although this new policy was a source of possible economic recovery, it met with fierce resistance from the inhabitants of the working-class neighbourhoods surrounding the slag heaps, claiming these mountains were belonging to their life landscapes and were the memory of their communities (see figure 3 : leaflet for the defence of the Piges slag heap in Dampremy, 1977). These popular movements succeeded in stopping most of the mining permits and in saving many slag heaps.

6. *Reserves* - biodiversity between otherness and spectacle

To prevent the exploitation of the slag heaps, one of the methods used by the inhabitants of the districts was to have scientists carry out studies of the biodiversity present there (plants, animals, birds). These studies made it possible to mobilize a policy of natural heritage protection which slowed down the exploitation. Certain slag heaps are now officially recognized as biodiversity reserves. They are promoted as such by the city authorities and the tourism policy. But the presence of this biodiversity raises questions about how to deal with it : Can it continue to develop spontaneously or must this development be humanly monitored and controlled ?

7. *Shelter* - the refuge of the refugeless

The large amount of available and unregulated space on and around the slag heaps has also allowed homeless people to set up camps in these zones. The presence of these camps near the city center is

problematic for the authorities, who are concerned about the image of the city, but they have difficulty in curbing this phenomenon because of the great poverty in the region.

8. *Productive landscapes* - plant experimentation

The ongoing conversion of parts of these sites into plant production sites has two intersecting aspects: the productive aspect and the pollution control aspect. The plants and techniques used are not the same for both objectives. Here too, political choices must be made because these choices influence the possible uses of these areas in the very long term (25 to 30 years).

9. *Land capital* - continued extraction

As most sites are still privately owned, their social and biological values are always subject to the possibility of being erased behind the financial exploitation objectives of their owners. The proof is the recent emergence of real estate projects on certain slag heaps. It is significant to note that the publicity leaflets promoting these real estate projects mention the biological qualities of these sites as well as the social activities that take place there, even though these projects are likely to cut into the space available for these very uses.

10. *Monuments* - working class memory through attachment

In Wallonia, some slag heaps have been classified as heritage by the Commission for Monuments and Sites. However, this specific mode of protection raises questions about the destination of these spaces: are they objects to be fixed in their current state, or are they places which should be let free for social creativity and emancipation ?

11. *Attractions* - the tourist slope

In the 2010s, hiking trails through these neglected areas were initiated by the inhabitants. They were later made official. In this context, public access to the sites were granted by landowners, but for a limited amount of time, as these agreements are subject to revision every five years. The tourist use of these sites could be a possible outcome for their ecological and memorial valorization, but it must be confronted with the other scenarios mentioned here.

12. *Commons* - towards a recast cosmogony

All of these definitions, existing or projected, human or non-human, symbiotic or conflicting with each other, are to be considered in the perspective of the current reconfigurations of the urban debate, due to raising ecological and social considerations. These situations lead us to question the still dominant role of economic development parameters in urban policies, as well as the decisive impact of land ownership. In the same way, classic categories of cultural or natural heritage seem inadequate to grasp the issues of valorization that apply to these places.

All these principles of action should be adapted in order to better take into account the complex evolution of these places and their emancipatory character for human and non-human protagonists, suggesting us to consider the elaboration of a new cosmogony.

This is the meaning we propose to assign to the action of "repurposing" these places.

References

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