Reclaiming the Wasteland – Landscapes and Working-Class Communities in Charleroi

Michael Bianchi, PhD assistant, Faculty of Architecture, University of Liège (Belgium)

First of all I'd like to thank the ICOMOS for accepting this paper and allow me to participate to this event. I'd also like to thank the organisers of the session to welcome me here and give me the occasion to parcicipate to this exchange.

[0 title] The approach I'll be presenting here is about the notion of 'cultural landscapes' and the political and ecological issues associated with it. I'd like to provide a few elements of context before describing how my field of study may inform these issues. For this introduction, I will rely in particular on a recent paper by Christoph Brumann & Aurélie Gfeller (Brumann & Gfeller, 2021).

As these authors document, the notion of 'cultural landscapes' has emerged in heritage studies, and notably in the UNESCO standards, as the result of a long and conflictual process. In particular, it has been associated with two major topics, both scientific and ethical. I'll briefly mention them, with apologies to those among you that already know the story for a long time.

[title] **Between nature and culture**

The first topic is the questioning of the separation between Nature and Culture.

In the first version of the World Heritage Convention published in 1972, the criteria for inscription were clearly separated into cultural and natural ones, and evaluated separately by ICOMOS and IUCN. [Rice field] In practice, certain sites, obviously parts of heritage but historically generated by the close interactions between humans and non-humans (for example sites shaped by agriculture), escaped a possible inscription. In response to this gap the concept of "cultural landscape" was discussed and finally introduced in 1992 in the Operational Guidelines of the Word Heritage List.

[title] **Decolonizing heritage**

The second debate around ‘cultural landscapes’ concerns decolonization of world heritage standards. This subject is obviously linked to the previous one, since the separation between nature and culture, was shown to be specific to modern societies, most of which have also been involved in colonizing processes.

The criteria set out in 1972, which proved more favorable to the recognition of built monumental heritage, first resulted in European sites being over-represented on the World Heritage List. Brumann & Gfeller's highlight the fact that one of the aims of introducing "cultural landscapes" as a category was to open the way to wider heritage recognition for countries in the Global South and for under-represented cultures. Again, this is a known story.

[Glover painting] In particular, Isabel McBryde, a researcher who was also involved in the defense of Aboriginal culture in Australia, advocated for a formulation of this category that would recognize associations between human practices and natural elements, even in the lack of material support. This may be the case, for example, in cultures where oral tradition is dominant, or in places where colonial administration has almost wiped out the material traces of colonized communities.

What I wanted to point out by reminding this story is the way category of cultural landcapes puts heritage on the global political scene regarding ecological and socio-political stakes (as it has notably been adressed yesterday by the opening keynote of this conference). Specifically regarding the right for communities with historical relationship with a place to be involved in the decisions that affect this place.

After this introduction, which I apologise again for being so long for those of you who are already familiar with this story, I will now turn to my field of study.

[title] **Slag Heaps**

[Map Europe]The area of Charleroi in Belgium, also known as the Black Country, was once a mining and industrial area, before the period of deindustrialization that began in the late 1950s. This territory is located at the heart of the West European coal crescent, the

second most industrialized region in the world at the end of the 19th century, notably due to the extent of its coal fields.

[Diggin']In the Black Country, this resource had been exploited since the 13th century, but it wasn't until the 18th century that it really took on a pre-industrial scale, leading to a genuine "excavation madness" in the region. This madness went so far as to compromise agrarian activities. In 1764, a report by government inspectors dispatched to the area recounted that (I quote) "...woods, gardens, arable lands, every area was subjected to the search for the precious ore : sometimes it even took place in the heart of towns and villages. Communal properties in the region were ravaged...".

But this was nothing compared to what followed a century later, when the industrial revolution took off. [Map] This map in 1850 shows dozens of extraction pits in the vicinity of the town. At that time, in the whole Walloon coal belt, more than one person in four, including children, was employed in the coal industry (Michotte, 1928).

[Paulus] The intensity of this industrial activity had a significant impact on the landscape. In the area of the coal belt, natural sites and agricultural activities almost completely disappeared. The painters and poets of that time, half fascinated, half horrified, attempted to describe this dantesque vision. Victor Hugo, for example, described the industrial valley of Liège, located in the Walloon coal belt, in these terms:

> [Citation] *"The whole valley seems pierced by erupting craters. Some of them gush out behind the undergrowth in swirls of scarlet steam spangled with sparks; others gloomily outline the black silhouette of villages against a red background; elsewhere the flames appear through the cracks in a group of buildings. You would think that an enemy army had just crossed the country, and that twenty villages had been sacked, offering you at the same time in this dark night all the aspects and all the phases of the fire, some engulfed in flames, some smoking, others blazing. This spectacle of war is given by peace; this appalling copy of devastation is made by industry".*
>
> *Victor Hugo, "The Rhine, letters to a friend", letter VII, 1842*

[Landscape] From this monumental landscape of brick and steel, a new topography emerged, built little by little by the accumulation of unused mining waste. Over time, these mounds eventually rose to a height of several dozen metres. They took on the dimensions of small

mountains that dominate the entire surrounding region. [Map] Around the town of Charleroi, within a radius of 5 miles, there are now around sixty of them, the highest rising 120 metres above the surrounding ground. Over time, their presence became as much part of the physical landscape as it was of the mental landscape of the people.

[title] **Nature, culture, places**

[Glaneuse] During the peak of the industrial era, the slag heaps were mainly places of work and gleaning. The various stages of sorting the coal before it was placed on the slag heap left behind some usable waste. These were generally collected by children or young girls, who were not strong enough for the hard mining works.

[Paul Meyer] From the beginning of the 20th century, some slag heaps were abandoned and gradually regained by vegetation. Although located next to working-class neighbourhoods, these areas were generally not frequented by local residents at that time. They remained the private property of the concession holders, and access to them was in principle not permitted. But controlling access or fencing off these areas would have been costly and of little use.

Forgotten by the world of work that occupied the industrialists and the workers, the rewilded slag heaps became the favourite playground for children, once the latter were freed from the obligation to work in mines and factories. This phenomenon was to become one of the sources of attachment to these places by the working-class communities living nearby, as we shall now see.

[Exploitation] In 1975, in the context of the oil crisis, the Belgian government was looking for alternative sources of energy. The five hundred slag heaps located in the coal belt were one possibility: most of them still contained a certain proportion of recoverable coal shale, which had originally been neglected but had become attractive with the rise of energy prices. Authorization to mine slag heaps was granted by the Belgian government in 1975. However, although this activity represented an economic opportunity in regions impoverished by deindustrialization, it was strongly opposed by the working-class neighbourhoods surrounding the slag heaps.

[Notre Terril] Residents' committees put forward a wide range of arguments to oppose these mining projects. In addition to rejecting the noise and pollutions caused by these activities in the vicinity of their homes, the residents also echoed a growing ecological awareness that was emerging in Belgian society at that time. Residents claimed that slag heaps had to be defended "because in their region, deserted by nature, revegetated slag heaps can be the breathing spaces of their towns". For the residents, their biological value was all the greater given that the environment in these regions had been ravaged more than elsewhere by industrial activity.

In addition to these arguments, there were also symbolic and memorial considerations : the slag heaps were described by their supporters as monuments to the working class memory and the source of a "cultural attachment", nourished by the stories passed down in families from one generation to the next.

Lastly, the slag heaps were already being used for social activities at that time. Apart being a privileged playground for children and teenagers, some slag heaps, reclaimed by nature, were already being used for recreative walks and sometimes local parties. Finally, the opening up of slag heap mining and the resistance it provoked brought to light a previously unnoticed phenomenon: the slag heaps had become the object of a deep attachment by people living in the coal belt.

[Martinet] The conflicts about the slag heaps continued well into the 1990s. The case of the Martinet slag heap, near Charleroi, is emblematic of this period. Without going into the many twists and turns of this fierce struggle between a residents' committee and a mining company, it should be noted that it finally ended in 1995 with a classification of the site by the local authorities, effectively preventing any future mining of the slag heap. Something important to notice is that the main argument in favour of that classification was a biological survey of the site carried out on the initiative of the residents' committee, which revealed the wealth of flora and fauna that had settled there. This political victory was therefore the product of an interspecific alliance, to phrase it in the manner of Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot in their recent book titled "Nous ne sommes pas seuls" ("We are not alone"). Renewed awareness of these interspecific

alliances in northern societies is one of the legacies of symmetrical anthropology mentioned before.

[title] **Cultural landscapes**

The attachment of local populations to these landscape objects therefore include memorial factors (the family accounts of working-class memories), social factors (the current social uses) and ecological factors (the defence of green spaces and biodiversity). A range of considerations that would tend to identify all these places as cultural landscapes, even if they do not exactly match the definition used by the World Heritage Convention.

[Accès Interdit] Some local players who love the slag heaps have already considered developing a classification process in line with UNESCO standards. However, this approach has not proved successful for a series of reasons that would take too long to list here. The main one is that not all slag heaps are recognised to the same degree by the various local and regional authorities. While some are valued as biodiversity reserves or leisure areas, others are privately owned, and access to them can be dangerous or forbidden. Without a locally shared vision of the future and of the potential of these areas, it will be difficult to develop the heritage they represent as a whole.

[Valimo] In the absence of this vision, some of the slag heaps in the coal belt are still considered to be exploitable resources, even if the nature of this "resource" has changed slightly. Today, it is no longer a question of mining energy resources, but of making profit with land. For example, a local real estate company, which acquired the land assets of former mining companies, currently owns around ten slag heaps in Charleroi, with the aim of developing real estate projects on them in the long term.

[Terril des Piges] Without prejudging the interest of these projects, or of other methods of exploitation that might be considered for the slag heaps, it seems that a prior debate is desirable on the value that they represent as a whole, at the scale of the coal belt, and in the light of their identification as cultural landscapes for communities around. Otherwise, this potential value could be lost or altered before it has been identified.

To return to the issues I mentioned at the beginning of this speech, the problem of the renatured slag heaps has similarities with the ecological and decolonial issues that concern regions of the Global South. Heritage recognition is a potential tool for these marginalized and sometimes destructured communities in the South AND the North, who developed multiple forms of attachments to the land, to assert their legitimacy in preserving them and managing them. These approaches, as they are most often associated to concerns and relationships with the ecological environments, can be assimilated to what Pierre Charbonnier recently described as the "self-protection of the land", involving humans and non-humans in the same move.

In this respect, communities in the North probably has a lot to learn from communities in the South that kept tight relations with landscapes and nature.