

Article

# Impacts of Change: Analysing the Perception of Industrial Heritage in the Vogtland Region

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## Abstract

Beyond metropolitan areas, many peripheral regions and their cities in Europe have, in manifold ways, been significantly shaped by industrialisation. In the context of the relocation of industrial production to other countries over the last decades, the question has been raised as to the role this heritage can play in futural regional development as well as the potential local identification with this history. Hence, this article seeks to analyse the perception of the industrial heritage in the Vogtland region, located alongside the border of three German federal states and the Czech Republic. It inquires as to the perception of the industrial heritage by the local population and related potential future narrations. Based on spontaneous and explorative interviews with local people as an empirical base, a discrepancy between the perception of the tangible and intangible dimensions of the industrial heritage can be observed. On the one hand, the tangible heritage like older factories and production complexes are seen as a functional legacy and an “eyesore” narrative is attributed to them. On the other hand, people often reference the personal and familial connection to the industry and highlight its importance for the historical development and the wealth of the region. But these positive associations are mainly limited to the intangible dimension and are disconnected from the material artefacts of industrial production.

## Keywords

industrial heritage; perception; regional development; transformation; Vogtland region

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction and Background

Beyond metropolitan areas, many peripheral regions and their cities in Europe have, in manifold ways, been significantly shaped by industrialisation. In the context of the relocation of industrial production to other countries and the shutdown of several production sites, handling the material legacy of this development today is a major challenge for communities, which still face a massive process of transformation. In many places, significant amounts of money—extensively funded with public means in Germany—are invested in the demolition of these structures, which often seem to be considered worthless and a barrier to future development. However, the socio-spatial dimension and the appreciation of the local population, plus the importance of the industrial

heritage for local identity, are barely taken into account in these debates. Therefore, this article seeks to analyse the perception of the industrial heritage in the Vogtland region, at the border of three German federal states and the Czech Republic.

In general, engagement with industrial heritage has seen an increasing interest in the last decades facing the context of a large transformation of the economic structures in many European countries. Therefore, the transformation of vacant industrial structures has become an important task of planning as well as other disciplines and today, especially in larger cities, is taken for granted. Hence, numerous publications address the re-use of industrial structures and seek to investigate best-practice examples for different typologies (e.g., Oevermann, 2021) or further develop design strategies

more deeply by researching single or multiple case studies (e.g., Loures, 2008; Samadzadehyazdi et al., 2020). Such approaches usually relate to the importance of the industrial heritage to the local identity (e.g., Cossons, 2012, p. 9), but do not outline what this meaning is explicitly about and how preservation can strengthen these bonds or use them to reinforce the legitimization of preserving. Instead, industrial heritage is primarily seen as a physical shell in planning, and the importance of social processes and memories connected with specific places as well as larger spatial correlations is only scarcely considered (Del Pozo & Alonso González, 2012, p. 447). As Jasna Cizler describes in the example of Leeds, in practical urban development, industrial heritage is often used as an image to attract financial investment and therefore reduced to a “marketing tool used to sell places for higher prices” (Cizler, 2012, p. 233). Further, established research concerning the transformation of industrial heritage sites is mainly focused on larger urban and metropolitan areas, whereas the often compartmentalised structures in rural areas are less acknowledged.

Existing literature regarding the perception of the industrial heritage focuses more strongly on its potential for tourism (e.g., Bazazzadeh et al., 2020; Edwards & Llurdés i Coit, 1996). For example, Craveiro et al. (2013) research the potential of industrial heritage in rural areas along with the example of a post-mining area in Portugal using a mixed-methods approach with interviews as well as questionnaires, but their case studies are strongly focused on museal heritage sites and their potential for regional development. Additionally, Vander Stichele et al. (2015) presented a study at the TICCIH-Conference (The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage) in 2015 which deals with the perception of and participation in the industrial heritage and therefore approach a highly important field. However, it is mostly based on a narrow methodical approach using questionnaires with standardised answering possibilities and thus does not allow a deeper understanding of the importance of local identity, but rather highlights the tourism potential. The term “industrial site” in this context is more or less limited to industrial museums and comparable places.

Another approach is proposed by Đukić et al. (2018), who connect industrial heritage to the concept of place attachment and highlight the potential importance of intangible aspects like people’s interaction or memories linked to places, while practical planning usually does not consider these values but reduces the sites to their tangible, material aspects (Đukić et al., 2018, p. 301). However, like the other named studies, it is based on questionnaires and—although they have a broad range of possible answers—therefore restricted to tendentially superficial findings in a sense of measuring how important places are for people, but not dealing with the reasons and characteristics of this importance. So far, regarding the literature review of Lewicka, there seems to be a general lack of existing research concerning place

attachment. In general, the field of people-place relations has seen growing interest within the last decades. But methodical approaches are mainly based on quantitative studies, more strongly asking “how much” rather than “what” and developing scales to describe the importance of places to people than asking what the meaning implies (Lewicka, 2010, pp. 220–221).

Therefore, this article focuses more strongly on “what” industrial heritage means to the local population. It searches for narratives connected to the material, and industrial structures as a potential for regional development and planning. With an added focus on rural industrial areas, new accesses and perspectives may be opened in heritage research. In connection with the cited literature, the article follows a qualitative methodical approach. Established approaches using comparability to measure the importance of industrial heritage and places, in general, may lead to well-applicable results. Against that, the aim of this research is not to quantify and hierarchise the findings, but to get an overview of the attitudes of the people towards industrial heritage and to understand how the social connection to spaces finds an expression.

Practically, spontaneous semi-structured interviews with the local population were conducted during explorative hikes in the region between June–September 2020. While the term “local population” involves all people living in the region, most of the respondents were born and have spent most of their life there. This might be paradigmatic for many peripheral regions in Eastern Germany, which have faced an enormous population loss since the German reunification. However, the role of the hiker was chosen deliberately to approach local people in their everyday environment to avoid formal interview situations and the scientific interest was not exposed until the first barrier of approach had been overcome. Next, the people were informed about the research and the reason for the conversation before further questions were asked. This approach was based on two guiding questions: Which role does tangible and intangible industrial heritage play for the local population? Which futural perspective do people see for vacant structures of industrialisation? In addition, people were asked which general characteristics of the region they valued and why they lived there to contextualise the findings towards the industrial heritage. To avoid extensive “storytelling” from the respondents, a problematisation was conducted within the interviews, for example by pointing at vacant buildings and questioning their potential futural perspectives. Thereby, an attitude of the questioned person towards the industrial heritage should be provoked. Thus, people were specifically approached near vacant buildings if possible, or the topic was raised in interviews in general. Although this interview form might seem a bit unconventional in the way of approaching the interviewed persons, these have been semi-structured interviews methodically grounded on the established literature (e.g., Dunn, 2010).

Overall, 68 interviews were done with a length between 2–30 minutes, all of which were documented afterwards in a standardised pattern with further interview—and person—related demographic data. Three of the interviewed persons were under 18 (4.4%), five were 18–29 (7.3%), 17 were 30–49 (25%), 28 were 50–64 (41.2%), and 15 were over 65 years old (22.1%). 44.1% of the interviewed persons (30) were male and 55.9% female (38). The high shares of people over 50 years may be due to the aforementioned high population loss in the region since the 1990s, as well as the ongoing demographic ageing, and also because these people are retired and use these public spaces more frequently. After finishing the interviews, in a descriptive analysis, the results were sorted into categories inductively developed based on the findings. Then, generalising narratives were developed to summarise the central statements of the interviews. Next, these narratives were contextualised with the person-related data and some differences between different age groups could be found. These results are further described in Section 3. Again, it is important to mention that the aim was explicitly not to quantify the results, but to get an overview of the variety of attitudes towards the industrial heritage. Therefore, the narratives can be understood as the pointed reflection of the captured statements.

## 2. The Case of the Vogtland Region

The Vogtland region is located along the border of the three German federal states of Thuringia, Saxony, Bavaria, and the Czech Republic. The eponymous connection between these different areas relates to a medieval context when the region was controlled by the lords of Weida, Gera, Plauen, and Greiz (Bünz et al., 2013, p. 84). This important epoch is still recognisable along numerous buildings like old churches, castles, mansions, or ruins and also reflects in the public, mainly a touristic representation of the region, which predominantly relates to this heritage and creates an idyllic image of the Vogtland.

However, the Vogtland region gained its crucial character as a cultural landscape in the context of industrialisation beginning in the mid-19th century. Based on numerous manufactories existing since medieval times, the textile industry especially shaped the region with many factories arising throughout the area. The most famous product was the so-called “Plauen lace,” which was exported worldwide and had an excellent reputation (Bünz et al., 2013, pp. 103, 114). Additionally, in the southern Vogtland, along the Saxon-Czech border, musical instruments were produced and also exported worldwide making the “upper Vogtland” one of the most prestigious producers all over the world (Bünz et al., 2013, p. 120). Other minor industries included machine production and tanneries, which grew as side branches of the textile industry. An important characteristic of the region similar to many parts of Thuringia and Saxony in

general is the decentral structure with export-oriented consumer goods industries, whose production sites are spread all over the area and not concentrated in a few central locations. Their built structures often seem to be more “ordinary” and less architecturally outstanding or iconic than those of heavy engineering located in larger cities in general (Friedreich, 2020, pp. 275–276). Still, the region became very wealthy and the cities grew rapidly, as did the framing of social and technical infrastructure. Yet, the Vogtland region was and until today is mainly shaped rurally with many small and medium-sized cities. Because the region is quite hilly, many large bridges were built like the famous “Göltzsch Viaduct,” which was opened in 1851 and today is being considered to become a UNESCO world heritage site.

In the mid-20th century, the German division marked an important break for the industrial development and structure of the region. In Saxony and Thuringia, nearly all private companies were closed and amalgamated into nationally owned enterprises, the so-called “Volkseigene Betriebe.” These companies focused on the mass production of consumer goods based on the theory of economies of scale, which led to an overall reduction of the product line-up. However, although these were major changes on an administrative level and former owners left the German Democratic Republic, the development did not lead to major changes regarding the built structures. Production continued and most buildings were conserved by continuous use, while there had been only a few new building activities in comparison to other East German regions due to the peripheral location of the Vogtland along the inner-German border. However, this continuity and a lack of investment caused Eastern German industries to be hit even harder after the German reunification and the subsequent integration into the international markets. For example, the textile industry mostly used machines from the first half of the 20th century. In globalised production chains, the companies were not competitive and around 90% of the production sites were closed down, people lost their work and primarily young workforces left the region because they did not see a future perspective there. The firms were reprivatised and often closed down after only a few years (Bünz et al., 2013, p. 134). Nonetheless, an important exception should not be kept unmentioned; while the textile industry was nearly completely shut down in the last decades except for some highly specialised firms, the manufacturing of high-class individualised musical instruments has made the upper Vogtland one of the most prestigious producers in the world (again; Bünz et al., 2013, p. 136). Still, today the vacant structures of industrialisation are a challenge for the communities and planning all over the region, which do not have the financial means for larger recreation projects. Due to ongoing decay, many buildings are being demolished, often with extensive funding from higher-level administrations.

So, the Vogtland region has only seen little building activity since 1945 in general, especially in comparison to

areas in Western Germany. Therefore, the region today is still significantly shaped by the material heritage of industrialisation, resulting in a unique landscape with often condensed settlement structures directly bordering the natural surroundings, as seen in Figure 1. Overall, the Vogtland region is an example of the challenges and potentials of many rural European regions characterised by a rich industrial heritage.

### 3. Results

In this section, the results of the interviews in the Vogtland region will be introduced. These were abstracted and summarised in generalising narratives, which pointedly describe the central attitudes of the local population towards the industrial heritage. These are the noticing-describing “yesterday” narrative, the badly associated “eyesore” narrative, the pragmatic future-related “nothing will happen” narrative as well as the “this is all over” narrative, and, last but not least, the more nostalgic “we are all connected to this and therefore it is important to us” narrative. Further, the results are distinguished concerning tangible and intangible aspects of the industrial heritage. The tangible dimension primarily involves production sites and other built structures as well as the products, while the interviews mainly focused on the buildings. Thus, this level mainly summarises results concerning the visible material aspects of the industrial heritage, which, because of their poor state, are often linked to bad associations.

Against that, the intangible level describes advanced associations like nostalgic aspects and memories in a non-material dimension. Of course, such differentiation is only a theoretical construction and, in practice, the associations are closely connected. But especially when researching the industrial heritage, this construction helps to look beyond mostly negative interpretative patterns which often only describe a part of the perception and therefore open the view to new aspects.

A “yesterday” narrative is especially attributed to production sites because the function related to the buildings is obsolete nowadays. Therefore, it is important to mention that this narrative firstly is limited to a noticing and describing level and does not imply any emotional reaction like nostalgia or refusal at all. It is founded on links to the temporal distance like “it is long ago,” “this is how things change over the years” or just “this is history” with explicit reference to the production and with the associated production sites. But additionally, often an emotionally charged “eyesore” narrative relating to the bad aesthetics of vacant buildings is added (Figure 2), usually directly connected with a call to remove these constructions. A renovation is considered to be unrealistic and this narrative reduces the industrial heritage to an aesthetic and short-term dimension.

Closely connected to these aspects is a narrative regarding the futural perspective of the industrial heritage. The respondents often stated that “nothing will happen” and then referred to other buildings in the town or region which had been demolished earlier and



**Figure 1.** Condensed settlement structures and natural surroundings in Mylau, Saxony (2020).



**Figure 2.** To various vacant industrial buildings like this former textile mill in Pausa, Saxony, an “eyesore” narrative is attributed (2020).

therefore saw no perspective for the still existing structures. This was not because they did not want these to be demolished, but because they were just not aware of successful examples of conservation in their everyday environment and therefore thought a demolition to be the only realistic perspective for the structures. Only in single cases did the respondents refer to cases of revitalised buildings and give ideas for potential futural developments and possible uses of the vacant structures. Some of these people expressed regret about the development stating “too bad, that nothing happens here,” but often connected with the “there will not happen anything” narrative, showing they did not believe in a revitalisation. Further, most respondents did not see an initiative to act by themselves, but by external actors plus the communities and their administrations. They assumed these actors to be able to do more for the conservation of historic structure than they actually did. People often pointed to owners from other regions of Germany or even other countries, which had bought the buildings years ago, and often made enormous promises for revitalisation, but practically did not act out of various (speculative) reasons. Additionally, respondents thought the municipalities had the responsibility to take care of the vacant structures since they found them to be the ones with the instruments to act. Interestingly, people do not strongly blame the communities or feel explicitly frus-

trated but seem to be pragmatic and somewhat resigned, since they often recall the “nothing will happen” narrative. Sometimes they even pointed to buildings which had been demolished by the municipalities to illustrate that this is the “usual” way of handling this legacy.

The products only played a minor role in the interviews, but tendentially people showed a stronger attachment to these than to the buildings. They would name musical instruments or the Plauen lace first when asked about the industrial past of the region. After all, if one only considers the tangible dimension of the industrial heritage, one could assume that from the outside, there is no outstanding recognisable esteem of the people in the Vogtland region. Instead, relevant characteristics named by the respondents in tangible terms are natural highlights and the closeness of settlements to the natural surroundings. Regarding built structures, touristic marketed features like castles, churches, and the large bridges within the region were highlighted. Other important factors stated in the interviews were especially those of social and biographic integration, being a “homeland” for many people growing up and living there for decades. For people moving into the region, economic factors like jobs or educational opportunities have been important for their migration and no particular connection to the industrial heritage was identifiable.

These aspects show that factors regarding the tangible dimension of the industrial heritage and the region, in general, have only been one part of the interviews. They were often followed by statements relating to an intangible level. Also, in extension to the “yesterday” narrative, there has been a simple “this is all over” narrative, which refers to the shutdown of production and experiences of loss on different levels like work or the migration of young people, but also in the personal biography. It is often connected with resignation to the development of the last three decades. Therefore, the economic decline also caused a social and cultural loss of meaning, especially for people with a biographical connection to the buildings. In this context, the importance of the factories was explicitly connected to jobs for the region and with their loss and the (functional) relevance of these buildings for the local people was lost, too. Some of the respondents still seemed to be frustrated because of this development and especially blamed foreign companies for the decline, companies that had absorbed the former state-owned enterprises after the German reunification and often closed down after only a few years. But these have been exceptions. Most respondents seemed to be more pragmatic and answered, “That’s how it is and we cannot change it anymore.”

Apart from that, the “yesterday” narrative is often explicitly related to the tangible dimension of the heritage, but not the intangible. For example, when stating “this is history,” the same person subsequently asked to draw younger people’s attention to this history, which shaped the region in manifold ways. This need for sharing memories and awareness of its meaning is also expressed in numerous memorial plates along the region (Figure 3), which give information on the industrial heritage in general or on specific sites. Furthermore, there is a “We are all connected to this and therefore it is important to us” narrative because many interviewees referred to personal or familial connections to the industrial companies, but also the general importance for the region and the bygone wealth. It should also be mentioned that people in the region were mostly very well informed about the development of former production sites and often even knew about the destiny of the former owners.

However, it is important to distinguish between different age groups regarding the named concerns. Particularly, young people under 25 were often not aware of the importance of the industrial past for the region because they have no personal connection to it. Older people, in contrast, generally have a stronger



**Figure 3.** Numerous memorial plates along the region indicate the general importance of the industrial past for the people, like here in Auerbach, Saxony, titled “Expedition Through the Industrial Past” (2020).

personal and biographic bond towards the (intangible) industrial heritage, which sometimes was expressed in connection to specific places, but conservation was mostly not seen as realistic because of the long vacancy. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that especially younger adults between the ages of 25–40, who have no more direct biographical link to industrial production, occasionally pointed out the aesthetical qualities of the industrial buildings and therefore perceived this as a defining part of their everyday environment in positive and negative ways. Intangible aspects played a minor role in comparison to older age groups and these younger people primarily named familial, not personal, connections to industrial production. Additionally, some of these respondents shared memories of vacant factories as a sort of “playground” in their childhood and youth, which also made these places important for them, but for other reasons than for older people. Hence, differences between the age groups could primarily be recognised regarding the “We are all connected to this and therefore it is important to us” narrative since this narrative primarily relates to personal memories and an intangible level. However, additional and deeper research taking into account personal development and memories is needed to better understand the differences and potential reasons for the specific perception of the industrial heritage.

To sum up, concerning the perception of the intangible industrial heritage, there are significant differences in comparison to the tangible dimension. Besides the explicit narratives, many implicit and small hints indicate that the industrial heritage still has significance for the people in the Vogtland region in an intangible dimension. Though, the conservation of the industrial structures respectively the tangible dimension is not seen as a logical conclusion by the local population. Instead, there is a sort of resignation and pragmatism dominating when it comes to the potential of the industrial heritage.

#### 4. Conclusions

This article aimed to investigate the perception of industrial heritage by the local population of the Vogtland region. Overall, a discrepancy between the general importance and the attitude towards the industrial heritage of the local population can be stated. The heritage is received as meaningful in some matters, but this does not lead to an action regarding the objects, instead, pragmatism is dominating.

Generally, the results only allow a limited interpretation regarding the reasons for the discrepancy in the perception of the industrial heritage. Based on the respondents’ statements, a prior reason might be the actual dealing with former production sites and vacant structures in general. Predominantly, they are demolished—often with public funding—and only a few examples of successful reuse exist, which creates the impression this might be some sort of “inevitable” destiny of

the heritage. The responsibility for this development is thought to lie with other actors like municipal administrations and external actors from foreign regions, many of whom own buildings but do not take care of them. Interestingly, this did not lead to frustration, but rather resignation and pragmatism. Another reason could be that people more strongly relate their appreciation for and memories of the industrial heritage with the products instead of the built structures. Generally speaking, more and especially profound research is needed, for example using in-depth interviews to understand the reasons for an individual’s connection to the industrial heritage. This is supported by the observation that in longer conversations, respondents stated the importance of specific buildings and places connected with personal memories, making them relevant factors in the construction of identity. One should be aware that the chosen methodical approach has given some interesting insights into the perception of the industrial heritage but is also limited because of its explorative character. Local people mainly perceived the researcher as a tourist, although the research interest was opened up during the conversations, and therefore often spoke about “usual” highlights, not important places for them personally. Hence, sometimes the interviews remained on a sort of “small-talk” level.

However, based on the described discrepancy and complexity, existing findings towards the perception of industrial heritage and its importance for place attachment can be confirmed. Especially the already mentioned research by Đukić et al. (2018) shows that people often relate positive and negative aspects to the industrial heritage at the same time. It is often seen as a history of loss, but melancholia and nostalgia are connected simultaneously (Đukić et al., 2018, p. 307). They further state that in the investigated case of Smederevo in Serbia “people link industrial heritage with their own destiny, because, in their own opinion, these structures are spatial reflections of it” (Đukić et al., 2018, p. 310). This is a central difference to the results of the interviews in the Vogtland region, where the general bonding with the industrial heritage is often not explicitly connected to the spatial structures. One reason might be general differences in the researched cases, which leads to another important point.

Smederevo might be a middle-sized town like many of those in the Vogtland region, but in industrial terms, it is mono-structured with heavy and steel industries. Despite ongoing economic problems, they are still in production, while in Vogtland most of the textile and other industries are shut down today. Beyond that, the Vogtland region was shaped by decentral industrial production spread all over the region, whose built structures often seem to be more “ordinary” and less architecturally outstanding or iconic than those of heavy engineering and in larger cities in general.

The most famous example of a former highly industrialised area in Germany is surely the Ruhr valley, in which

a vivid industrial culture with catchy narratives along this heavy industry arose over the last decades; also because there is no other similar historical layer of development to relate to like in other regions (Berger et al., 2018). It became a major factor for the local identity and finds a primary consideration in planning strategies with many buildings getting adaptively reused or musealised. In contrast, for areas with a more decentralised industrial heritage, it is not that easy to develop such impactful narrations needing a more differentiated discussion. As the historian and ethnologist Sönke Friedreich outlines, industrial heritage is too often reduced to dominant production sectors disregarding smaller industries producing more daily and maybe less impressive products but also shaping regions' industrial landscapes in manifold ways (Friedreich, 2020, p. 281).

Instead, in the Vogtland region, the external communication relating to the industrial heritage is often reduced to impressive single structures like the Göltzsch or the Elstertal viaducts, while wide parts of the industrial heritage—which originally led to the erection of these infrastructures—are more or less ignored by such narratives. Additionally, in Saxony (and in Thuringia as well) today, primarily in connection to former kingdoms, funding of high culture is fostered, while the industrial heritage—although seeing an increasing awareness—only plays a minor role (Friedreich, 2020, p. 284). This also became obvious in the interviews, when numerous people pointed at the preindustrial heritage like churches and castles after being asked for important places in the region. It is obvious that there are no dominating narrations or self-conception like in other post-industrial regions, and instead, the communication is focused on natural qualities and pre-industrial heritage.

This article shows that more research is needed to understand the complex relationship between the local population and industrial heritage. Existing research in planning concerning the futural potential of industrial heritage might refer to its potential meaning for local identity but mainly reduces it to its tangible dimension. There is barely any knowledge as to which social connections to these spaces exist, what makes them important for people and how planning can address them or at least take them into account in the transformation of industrial areas. Instead, the case of the Vogtland region allows the assumption that practical planning also affects the perception of and the relationship to the industrial heritage. This practically expresses in a discrepancy between an appreciation of an intangible dimension and a lacking connection to the tangible structures.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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