“Industrial Abbeys” in XXIst Century Belgium: Issues and Prospects of a Forgotten Heritage
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Abstract
Belgian rural landscapes abound with ancient monasteries that knew an industrial fate from the XIXth century onwards. The deindustrialization of these sites, initiated by recurring economic crises during the XIXth century, is now putting many buildings and industrial wastelands at risk. After having drawn up an inventory of Belgian monastic sites reused for industrial purposes in rural regions in the XIXth and XXth centuries, the present contribution aims to identify the challenges currently posed by this heritage, while examining the prospects for the potential enhancement of the industrial remains, which are often tenuous and mostly abandoned. It also consists in determining the place given to recent industrial history (XIXth-XXth c.) in the development (protection, restoration) of some of these sites since the 1970s.

Introduction
Belgian rural landscapes abound with ancient monasteries not far from which you can perceive, occasionally hidden under the vegetation sometimes the silhouette of a smokestack; other times the shape of a saw-tooth roof. These remains are witnesses of the industrial fate that many rural monastic sites knew from the XIXth century onwards. Sold as Biens Nationaux following the French Revolution (1796-1813), they took part in the early industrialization of Wallonia, second industrial power of the world in the XIXth century after the United Kingdom. Coveted for their many assets (hydraulic energy, spacious and robust buildings, significant land heritage), secularized monastic estates located in rural areas were in fact particularly conducive to the establishment of industrial complexes whose activities continued, for the most remarkable, until the second half of the XXth century. The deindustrialization of these sites, initiated by recurring economic crises during the XXth century, is now putting many buildings and industrial wastelands at risk.

At the time when non-profit association Patrimoine Industriel Wallonie-Bruxelles (PIWB) is updating the inventory of industrial heritage with the support of Walloon Heritage Agency (AWaP), this contribution aims to draw attention to the significant cultural value of the uncommon “industrial abbeys” heritage that takes up a secondary place in current Walloon industrial landscape. No longer truly monastic nor industrial, it has too often been, if not forgotten, relegated to the background.

A significant heritage potential with many values to pass on
On the studied area (Hainaut, Namur, Liège, Walloon Brabant, Flemish Brabant provinces and Brussels-Capital region), no less than nineteen monastic sites were reused for industrial purposes in the XIXth and XXth centuries (figure 1). Some were for a short period, only knowing one kind of industrial activity sector, others were for more than a century. The latter, occasionally experiencing various successive industrial occupations, left the most significant industrial remains that deeply marked the Walloon territory behind. Despite the demolitions that occurred, there are actually still enough industrial history traces on these monastic complexes to consider them as industrial archaeology sites. Tenuous or more obvious, these vestiges range from the imposing well-preserved Saint-Denis-en-Brocqueroie and Florival spinning mills employers' houses to Moulins copper mill and Val-Saint-Lambert crystal-glass making factory manufacturing workshops, by way of Heylissem sugar factory administrative offices and Saint Mary of Oignies glass-making factory working-class housing estate (figure 2). Although some buildings have already been restored and reallocated, others are still awaiting new occupation, while the most fragile remains may soon disappear.

From the 1970s onwards, a large number of former rural monastic sites have been fully or partially protected in Wallonia. In this respect, heritagization of “industrial abbeys”, which began with deindustrialization, have usually been at the expense of the industrial dimension of their history. Apart from complexes with particularly significant remains, industrial heritage advocates and heritage protection authorities have paid little attention to them. Far from being considered as heritage worth to be valued, witnesses of these sites recent industrial history (XIXth-XXth c.) are rarely mentioned in both heritage protection reports or legal heritage decrees, and if so it is as an obstacle to the integrity of the original buildings and landscapes. Moreover, within the 1960s-1970s, one still perceived practical reuses of ancient buildings in a pejorative way, which thus not either has been in favor of the XIXth century industrial appropriations. The lack of interest in “industrial abbeys” recent heritage can also be explained by the fact that, due to its composite nature, it embodies one of the most frequent oppositions that have animated heritage debates since the last third of the XXth century: the one between religious and industrial heritage. The former is mainly considered to be “the most significant”, the latter “the most derisory”. The “in-between” status of “industrial abbeys” has often been detrimental to them, as have the heterogeneity of the XIXth and XXth century vestiges and their remote rural location.

Nevertheless, although occasional and isolated, some actions were carried out in favor of this industrial heritage. For instance, in the early 1990s, the municipality of Aiseau-Presles with financial support from the European Regional Development Fund converted industrial wasteland formerly occupied by Saint Mary of Oignies glass-making factory into a public park, preserving two chimney stumps as well as the remains of the old casting hall and its ovens. In 1994, Social and Industrial Heritage’s Year led to the publication of works highlighting the industrial heritage of some of these sites. More recently, in 2016, Oignies and Saint-Denis-en-Brocqueroie’s local voluntary associations installed commemorative and explicative plates in situ referring to localities’ industrial past. Among these initiatives, the restoration of Val-Saint-Lambert “industrial abbey” represents an exception. Protected as historical monument since 1973, it is currently the subject of a comprehensive conversion program. The development of new post-industrial Cristal Park complex, integrating both old manufacturing workshops and monastic buildings, is part of a dynamic aiming for reviving crystal-glass making factory’s activities, secular cornerstone of Seraing's identity, but also for boosting the economic and social image of a municipality severely affected by deindustrialization. Will this project pass on the cultural value of the “industrial abbey” though…?

Nowadays, the challenge is to enhance “industrial abbeys” historical complexity and composite nature in order to preserve their genius loci lastingly. The strength of these sites lies in their important associative, sensory and evidentiary aspects of value. They attest to the evolution from an Ancien Régime craft society, where monasteries were fundamental foundations of countryside socio-economic life, to a modern industrial society, governed by bourgeois and entrepreneurs, where factories became new centers around which rural communities was henceforth organized. Overlaid on each other like a palimpsest, the abbey and the factory both powerfully shaped their environment and deeply marked the site in which they locate, especially by their remarkable architecture, the vision of which often provides a singular emotion. While being real “microcosm[s] of the components of Walloon landscape”, these territories bearing in them the imprints of technical, economic and social progress but also of various traditions, relationships and practices, are constitutive of Walloon’s identity. Social meaning and collective memory furthermore strongly impregnated
their industrial past. For this reason, these sites history industrial phase deserves to be recognized, preserve and valued properly, just as much as the religious one is.

**Prospects for the enhancement of an uncommon heritage**

Keeping the spirit of the place: endurance as a model

How to pass on the cultural value of “industrial abbeys” and reclaim this heritage today, without losing its significance? One of the answers seems to lie in the history of the sites themselves. Indeed, while XIX\(^{th}\) century industrial reuses have often been judged negatively, it is clearly thanks to this type of conversion – among many others – that a large number of abbeys have survived the centuries. Today, at a time when heritage can claim less and less of an exceptional status, escaping the global effort to save material and financial means, these pragmatic appropriations appear to us in a different light. “Industrial abbey” of Saint-Denis-en-Brocqueroie, used as a cotton mill from 1803 to 1957, proves to be an exceptional example of an appropriation that takes into account the cultural value of the place, while pursuing the prosaic and frugal logic of the XIX\(^{th}\) century reallocations. Here, there is no major restoration program with a colossal budget, but rather occasional renovation and restoration works undertaken with little means by about twenty families who have been working together to keep the site alive. Rather than denying the complex evolution of the site, with its “ups and downs”, the approach is part of the gradual construction of a palimpsest. It significantly contributes to the persistence of the site’s *genius loci* through different cultural and economic contexts. Unlike many other comparable sites, the heritagization of this abbey has not introduced a break or even a step backwards in its history. The site has adapted, almost “naturally”, to successive reuse phases and is therefore a model of endurance. In today’s society, is it not sometimes preferable to draw inspiration from the pragmatic approaches of the XIX\(^{th}\) century industrial reuses, rather than risk freezing the sites in artificial states through restoration, breaking with the “natural” capacity of buildings to adapt to the successive contexts and their constraints?

Preserving memory and transmitting the bond’s strength

Preserving the sites’ memory through documentary research is particularly important when material remains are tenuous or even absent. Their recent history and industrial culture, that shaped several generations, are often remaining anchored in local memory, mainly for factories that lasted until the second half of the XX\(^{th}\) century. Former workers of Val-Saint-Lambert and Moulins establishments, or even their immediate relatives, can for instance still bear witness to this past and give “life” to a sometimes forgotten *savoir-faire*. They represent invaluable intangible information sources for the knowledge of this heritage. As for archives related to the factories activities, they are rich but dispersed, and often difficult to access. Therefore historians, art historians, archaeologists and so on have a forefront role to play in the collection of these testimonies, which must then not only be processed and stored, but also be transmitted to the public authorities and local communities so that they can reclaim this heritage, enhance it, and continue the *genius loci*’s progressive construction.

With this in mind, the notion of “common good” as envisaged by Anne Sgard in relation to landscape is enlightening. According to her, “to transmit a landscape as a common good means [...] to transmit the bond, the strength of the bond, to assess all the symbolic of the place”. She goes on to say that “to establish a landscape as a common good does not mean that this landscape is ‘beautiful’ according to criteria inherited from history of art [or] that one must turned it into a museum piece and preserved as it is, it [rather] indicates that the link is strong!\(^{15}\) Therefore, it is necessary to pass on the landscape of “industrial abbeys” as it built over time, including the inherited elements, but also responding to the needs of the present,
without freezing it, such as noticed with Saint-Denis-en-Brocqueroie’s co-housing community. How? By perpetuating the bond’s strength that exists between the heritage and the population, guaranteeing the upholding of the spirit of the place in its tangible and intangible dimensions. Putting men at the core of the reflections is then essential in order to increase valorization’s initiatives, which are far from being only limited to reuses. Awareness-raising, inventories, publications, conferences and tourist routes are all ways of preserving the memory, sometimes ancient, sometimes more recent, of this singular heritage. Would it be fanciful to consider creating an “industrial abbey route” like the ones already existing for Walloon and European industrial heritage?  

Conclusion  
This contribution intends to offer new keys to reading as well as new avenues of reflection in the service of preservation and enhancement of “industrial abbeys” and, more broadly, of rural industrial heritage. It also hopes to make the scientific community and the authorities in charge of heritage protection more aware not only of the recent industrial history of these monastic sites, but also of the heritage identity that derives from it. By looking at the historical complexity of the “industrial abbeys”, it will be possible to preserve the spirit of these meaningful places and, thus, “reload” them.

References  
1. The research presented in this article is part of a PhD thesis conducted since 2017 under the supervision of Mathieu Piavaux (University of Namur, Belgium) and Claudine Houbart (University of Liège, Belgium). The PhD thesis investigates the adaptive reuse of rural monastic sites in Belgium in the XIXth and XXth centuries with a particular focus on sites converted into industrial facilities. 
3. This number includes all the monastic estates that were still mainly rural at the time of their industrial reuse. Brussels and Liège’s urban area did not include La Cambre, Forest, Le Rouge-Cloître and Val-Saint-Lambert abbeys yet. 
5. The Archive and Documentation Centre of the Royal Commission for Monuments, Sites and Excavations (Liège, Belgium) preserves all heritage protection reports and legal heritage decrees. 


9. Information provided by Philippe Murari, head of technical division of Living Environment and Logistics Department of Aiseau-Presle municipality.


12. Thomas Coomans defines the spirit of the place of monasteries as “the link between religious tradition and monastic architecture”, i.e. the link between tangible and intangible heritage (Coomans, Thomas, 2018, Life inside de cloister, Leuven, Leuven University Press, p. 154.). As far as the “industrial abbey” is concerned, the challenge is to preserve this spirit while taking into consideration industrial heritage values that added to it and contributes to genius loci’s construction too.

13. These aspects of value come from the framework proposed in 2016 by L. Harald Fredheim and Manal Khalaf for assessing and communicating heritage significance (Fredheim, L. Harald and Khalaf Manal, 2016, “The significance of values: heritage value typologies re-examined,” International of Heritage Studies, vol. 22, n° 6, p. 466-481).


Biographical note
Mathilde Macaux is a PhD student and teaching assistant in History of Art and Archaeology Department at Namur University (Belgium). Since 2017, she is conducting a doctoral research that investigates the adaptive reuse of rural monastic sites in Belgium in the XIXth and XXth centuries with a particular focus on sites that have been converted into industrial facilities. She takes a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses the fields of history, history of architecture, archaeology and geography (Historical-GIS).