

# Roundup

## Reuben Grima

Department of the Built Heritage, University of Malta

In rounding up the rich discussions we have had during this conference, I will focus on five key ideas which have come up repeatedly during different interventions throughout the day. These are, in turn, knowledge and documentation; the importance of a value-based approach; context; the centrality of people; and the necessity of more networking of efforts in this field.

The first point, at the risk of repeating the obvious, is that the foundation of a sound approach to industrial heritage is knowing what we've got. We've heard of various examples today of how we are experiencing a burgeoning of interest among an ever-widening audience, as more members of the public become more keenly aware of the immense wealth of industrial heritage we are surrounded by. We have also heard how there are many individuals among us, including the speakers and others in this room, who are literally walking archives of knowledge they have accumulated over a lifetime of working with industrial heritage. Much of this knowledge is not yet knowledge in a stable form, which is fully researched, documented and published to make it readily accessible to others. Data capture and documentation constitute an important foundation stone that will continue to merit our attention and resources. This is also true of oral history, where narratives and memories that are as yet unwritten, are constantly in the process of being lost unless documented.

The second key idea which has been raised repeatedly is that of value. I will dwell on this the longest, because it is the area where I have witnessed most misunderstandings between different actors in the field of industrial heritage. Why does industrial heritage matter to us, and why is it worth investing in its preservation? This is closely tied to the issue of priorities, which also came up repeatedly today. What should be preserved with the limited resources available? In this context, it is evidently not realistic or desirable to attempt to preserve Malta's entire industrial landscape, as this would only serve to bring the country to a standstill. Choices and judgements need to be made, and decisions taken about what to preserve, when to preserve in situ and when to do so in a museum, when to restore a machine to full working order and when to cherish it as a fragmented relic. All these decisions need to be based on a sound understanding of the values that these objects hold for us, on why they matter to us. Today's discussion has underlined the fact that there is no

single correct prescription which may be applied dogmatically across the board to the conservation of cultural heritage resources, particularly the conservation of industrial heritage resources. What we have are guiding principles which we may navigate by, of which the understanding and safeguarding of value is perhaps the foremost.

The concept of authenticity is of central relevance here. Since the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, there has been a broad consensus that "... judgements about values attributed to cultural properties... may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria" (UNESCO, 1994, Article 11). This recognition of the culture-specific nature of values and authenticity has ramifications for the field of industrial heritage, which are still being explored (See for instance Passfield, 2005; Casanelles and Douet, 2012). The material culture of the industrialised world has a number of idiosyncrasies which set it apart, and which arguably require a different approach to authenticity to that we are accustomed to when discussing, for example, the value and authenticity, and consequently the treatment, of an archaeological ceramic or a work of painting or sculpture. One such characteristic which sets apart industrial material culture is the reality of mass-production, which means that typically, many artefacts are not unique testimonials in the sense that a hand-crafted object is, but on the contrary, are often perfectly identical, and consequently even interchangeable (Casanelles and Douet, 2012, pp. 196-8). The routine replacement of machinery components as a consequence of wear and tear or accidental damage is an intrinsic characteristic of a machine and its function. This fundamental attribute should recall some of the issues that led to the Nara Document in the first place. A key issue that it addressed concerned monuments where the frequent replacement of elements was a well-established tradition. The culture-specific nature of authenticity, as underlined by the Nara Document, put to rest the notion that such monuments were in any way less authentic than others where less replacement of elements was required, because of the materials and technologies employed in their construction. The relevance to industrial heritage should be clear. The logical corollary is that it is no longer tenable to argue that the replacement of a machine component to maintain or return the whole to working order somehow diminishes its authenticity.

A related argument concerns the repristination of painted finishes. Once again, this is generally an intrinsic characteristic of the maintenance regime of a machine, be it a car, plane or part of a structure or factory plant, and yet nonetheless, it has on occasion been too categorically frowned upon by some conservators more used to dealing with objects of archaeological or art-historical significance. The process of repainting and repristination may, when it is intrinsic to the nature of an object

and the practices and traditions that surround it, itself acquire value and become a necessary component of the object's authenticity. The relevance to our discussion on industrial heritage should be evident. Fresh application of painted finishes to a machine is often an intrinsic and necessary component of the authentic practices associated with that machine, in this sense comparable to the replacement of a mechanical part. Conversely, a significant exception is of course when damage to an artefact is itself considered to have value, such as damage caused by enemy action in wartime, or use-wear associated with an event or individual, which may acquire the value and significance of a memorial. Our discussions of the values and authenticity of industrial heritage needs to take such specific characteristics into careful consideration if we are to successfully safeguard those values.

A corollary to the discussion on values and authenticity is that decisions concerning the material treatment of an object need to be taken hand-in-hand with clear decisions on what we intend to do with it, that is how we want its values to be enjoyed by present and future generations.

The third key idea that I am picking out from the day's discussion is one that latches closely onto the second. The issue of context has come up repeatedly today. During the tour of the old Brewery this morning, we witnessed a prime example of the beauty of encountering an entire industrial process in the context it was created in over sixty years ago. This underlines the importance of moving away from thinking about individual artefacts, to thinking in terms of the entire industrial landscape, in terms of the flow of functions, activities, and processes through equipment, buildings and networks, and their accretion over time. At one point today, Joseph Magro Conti pointed out to us the early seventeenth-century aqueducts which run just past the Brewery, forming a part of the same historic environment. The aqueducts as well as the Brewery each represent a major milestone in the industrial development of the Maltese Islands, and each form part of the same grand narrative of human exploitation of Valletta's harbours, which have played such a central role in defining Maltese history and collective destiny. Perhaps it is in the inner harbour area that we face the most colossal challenges, and opportunities, to preserve and reinterpret a landscape dense with the evidence of past industrial activity that has built up over time, even as the role of the harbours is being reinvented for the future.

That leads me to the fourth key idea which has surfaced several times here, first during Timothy Ambrose's keynote speech, and again during the panel debate and the discussion from the floor. This is the crucial importance of people, and of human narratives, for a successful approach to industrial heritage. We have heard repeatedly how this approach may be enriched by putting people at the centre, in

two important ways. Firstly, in the narratives we collect and pass on, the stories of individuals, families and communities, which together make up the social memory of the encounter with industrialisation, to tell the story of how our lives have been reshaped by machinery. This is a story about much more than the machines themselves, and one which concerns us all. This leads me to the second facet of the centrality of people in our approach, which concerns the way this heritage is interpreted to our audiences today. If we succeed in narrating this story, we will continue to succeed in making industrial heritage relevant to ever wider audiences. Professionals working in the heritage sector sometimes forget that they are a very small proportion of the population. Continuing to engage the entire community, and communicating the relevance of what we do to the rest of society and to different generations, is vital for us to succeed.

The final key idea that I'd like to pick out from your interventions is the importance of networking. The point has been repeatedly made that we need a more integrated strategy, and cannot afford to continue working piecemeal. We have witnessed several noble initiatives which have delivered an immense amount of sterling work. It has too often been the case that different interest groups did not enjoy the right circumstances for a healthy and open exchange of ideas. I can recall episodes in the past when conservators with an academic formation frowned upon the painstaking efforts of amateurs and volunteers, without perhaps engaging enough in a constructive dialogue. Yet as we have been hearing today, the whole spectrum of actors, from national authorities to private individuals, have a vital role to play. The more occasions like today that we can have, when we may make new acquaintances, exchange cards, compare notes, share ideas, and learn from each other, the better. I was delighted to notice a lot of this sort of exchange during the coffee breaks today, which as we know is when a lot of work happens. This networking now needs to develop into more collaboration and pooling of knowledge, experience and other resources. I augur that we all continue to work together to this end.

## References

- Casanelles, E. and Douet, J., 2012. Conserving industrial artifacts. In Douet, J. (ed.) *Industrial Heritage Re-tooled. The TICCIH guide to Industrial Heritage Conservation*, 195-200. Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing.
- Passfield, R.W., 2005. Evaluating Authenticity: Reconstructed Timber Swing Bridges. *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2005), pp. 5-26. Available at: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40968698>> [Accessed 25 October 2013].
- UNESCO, 1994. *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) [pdf] Available at <<http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/events/documents/event-833-3.pdf>> [Accessed 25 October 2013].