

Some challenges facing Industrial Heritage in Malta

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I would like to start my intervention with a quote from a UNESCO document (Falser 2001) on industrial heritage sites, which I think is a beautiful way of describing them:

“Guardians of the past, they testify to the ordeals and exploits of those who worked in them. Industrial sites are important milestones in the history of humanity, marking humankind’s dual power of destruction and creation that engenders both nuisances and progress. They embody the hope of a better life, and the ever-greater power over matter.”

I am very pleased to see that awareness of the richness of our industrial heritage is rapidly growing. Heritage Malta has done an excellent job in saving a number of items from the Dockyard and other places, and the news that it intends to appoint a curator for industrial heritage is most welcome news indeed.

My first effort in raising awareness of our industrial heritage was the chapter entitled “Birgu – birthplace of Malta’s technological society” that I wrote for the two-volume work entitled “Birgu: a Maltese Maritime City” (Bugeja, Buhagiar and Fiorini, 1993). My participation in a Grundtvig project on virtual museums, in which I proposed to highlight our industrial heritage, led to an invitation to give a lecture on our industrial heritage to the Archaeological Society of Malta in 2007. I now include a lecture on industrial heritage in my study-unit on “Professional issues for Engineers” to our fourth-year undergraduates. In April 2012, I organized a week-long study tour of our industrial heritage for 30 members of the American Society for Industrial Archaeology.

Malta has a rich industrial heritage. The Dockyard Boiler Shop is full of artefacts of industrial heritage, from buses to machinery salvaged from the Dockyard. There are then the engines and steam plant at Kordin (Figure 2), engines in water pumping stations, the beautifully preserved 1907 machine-shop at the Conservatorio Vincenzo Bugeja, the underground mills, and lots more, besides private collections, some of which are quite interesting and extensive.

One problem is how to conserve all this material, and another problem is deciding what to keep. One positive aspect that has helped safeguard some industrial heritage items is that it sometimes costs more money to scrap them than to leave them where they are; I am thinking in particular of some of the diesel engines in the pumping stations, and of course Kordin Power Station (Figure 3). On the other hand, we have lost some buildings of industrial heritage value, such as the Mira Motors garage in

Gzira, the NAAFI bakery in Marsa which was a reinforced concrete barrel vault built by my father, and the old oil stores at Kalkara.

There is then the dilemma of whether to leave the machinery in its original site and hence in context (and possibly create a heritage trail of such sites), or to move them to some museum.

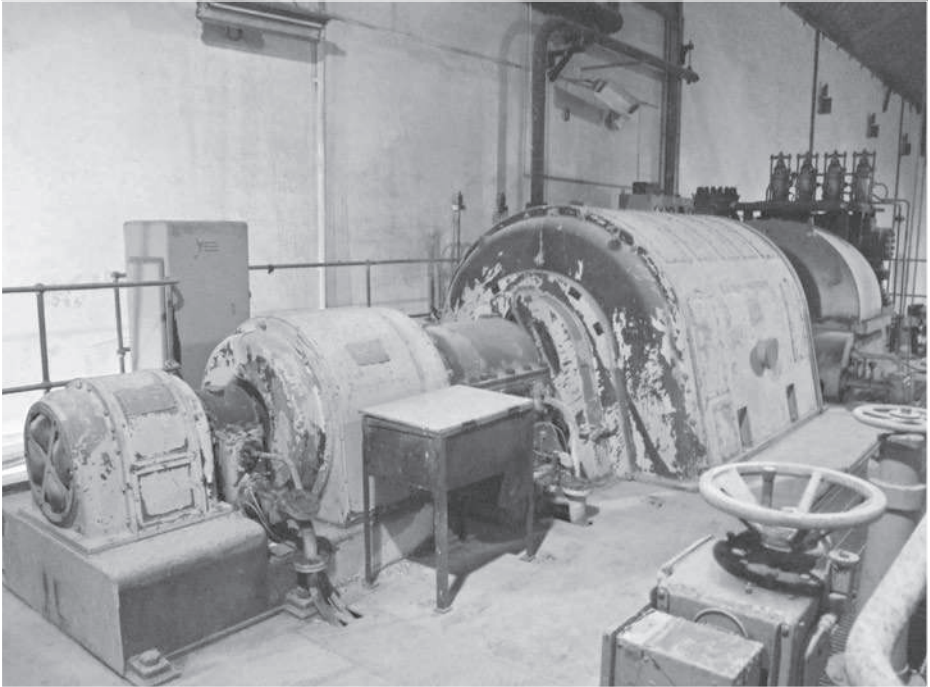


Figure 1. A steam turbine and generator in the underground 'A' station at Marsa Power Station.

It is worth pointing out that machinery only starts being perceived as valuable (from an industrial heritage point of view) some years after it becomes obsolete. This means that very often, the heritage value of a machine is not appreciated at the moment that it falls into disuse, and it is scrapped to make space, if nothing else.

A key question is whether to conserve or to restore. Central to the fascination of machinery is the fact that it moves, and we should therefore try to restore machinery, if not to full working order, at least to a stage where it will move, even if this is done in an artificial way. For example, the steam engine at the Malta Maritime Museum is not driven by steam power, but by an electric motor. *Eppur si muove!*

Of course, as with everything else, funding is a major problem. Another problem is space, particularly because industrial heritage items can be quite big. There is also a dire need for human resources to conduct historical research, besides trained people to restore, conserve and maintain all this material. We need guidelines of what to keep and what not to keep.

We need to involve the private sector and encourage private initiatives. An existing NGO, the Fondazzjoni għall-Ħarsien Wirt Industrijali, could serve as a good base on which to build an NGO network to promote industrial heritage.

Finally, I would like to thank Farsons and the Department of the Built Heritage of the University of Malta for organizing this seminar.

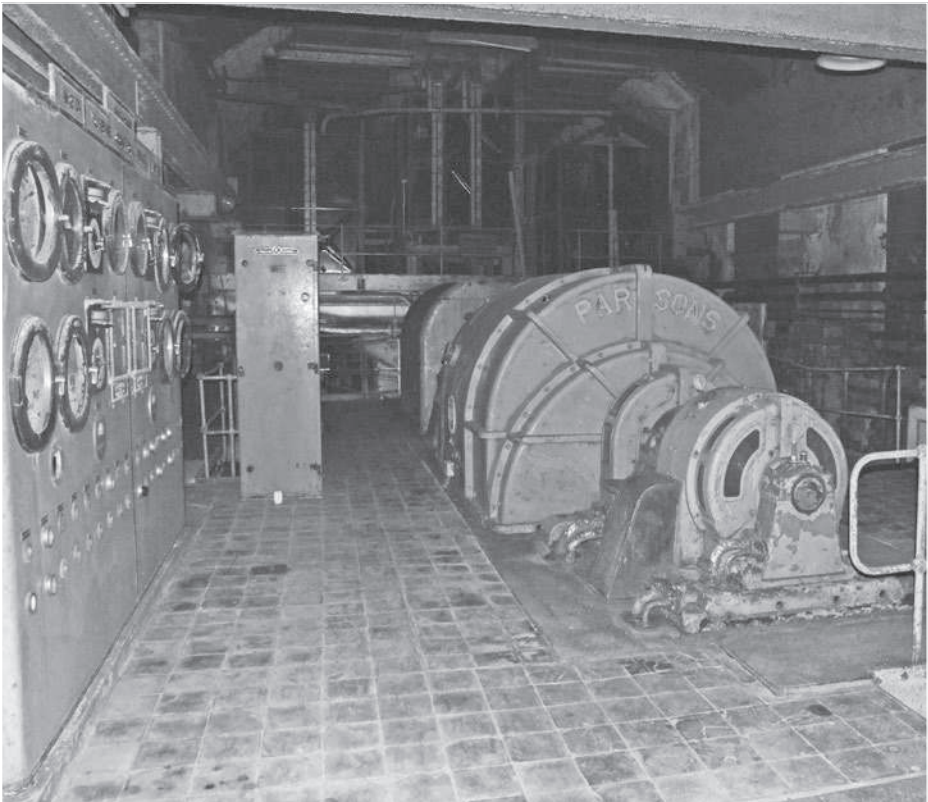


Figure 2. A steam turbine and generator in the underground Power Station at Kordin.

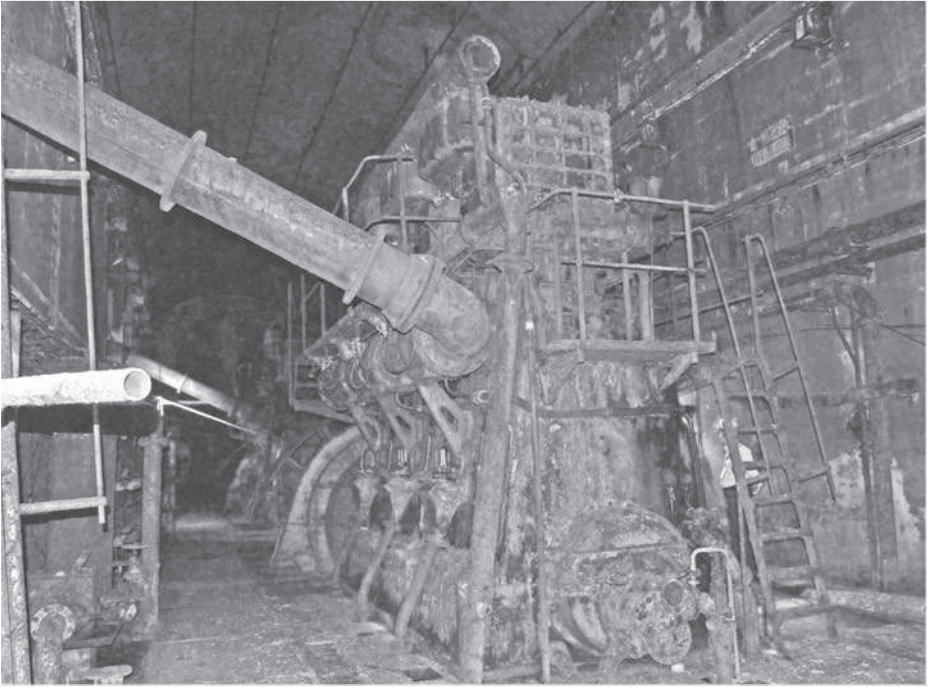


Figure 3. One of the six Fullagar Diesel Engines in the underground Power Station at Kordin.

References

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