

The Cultural Significance of Telecommunication Heritage Sites

Abstract : Telecommunication technologies are a crucial piece in today's world economy, sciences, and culture. Yet, when looking at research and practices in the cultural heritage field, their legacy is under-represented in both the areas of industrial heritage and twentieth-century heritage. The paper puts the spotlight on this overshadowed position and recognizes the unique nature, importance, richness, and complexity of this typology. With representative European sites from the radiocommunication branch, the multi-layered values attached to these places are revealed, challenging the assumptions attached to industrial heritage, and celebrating a legacy that continues to shape contemporary societies.

In the 21st century, Telecommunication surrounds us and shapes daily every aspect of our contemporary societies. Yet the first seeds of its technologies did not appear until about the mid-19th century, expanding from then with unforeseeable developments.

To this day, little is discussed in the Cultural Heritage field about the legacy of Telecommunication in comparison to other heritage categories. This is a problematic situation because many historic sites are abandoned after the obsolescence of their operations, putting the challenge of their demolition or reuse on the table.

The submitted paper will question the inclusion of Telecommunication Heritage as a sub-theme of Industrial Heritage, which makes it overshadowed by the other sub-themes with a "classical" sense of industry. For instance, debates about the significance of these technologies' places are scarce compared to other ones from the first and second industrial revolutions such as ironworks, power plants, and transportation infrastructures. This position hinders their acknowledgement and conservation, resulting in a lack of recognized sites that interpret Telecommunication's beginnings, the aspects of its development, and the driving forces behind its rapid growth.

The argument will be based on the results of a double Master's Research in World Heritage Studies and Cultural Heritage. Considering that the Cultural Significance assessment is the first step for respectful conservation, it would unveil the meanings attached to the sites of Telecommunication with a focus on the Radiocommunication branch.

The analysis will reveal the challenging situation that the professionals of the Cultural Heritage field can face when dealing with Radiocommunication heritage sites, taking the evaluation of their values and key concepts such as Authenticity and Integrity to a new level of complexity. This situation can be explained, inter alia, by their transnational and highly dynamic character, by their complexity and constantly evolving technology, and by the interdependence between their tangible and intangible dimensions both necessary to understand their significance. The paper asserts that multidisciplinary approaches are crucial to identify and bridge the different heritage values of these sites while looking at them across multi-level geographical contexts.

In the light of the discussion, it will be concluded that a redefinition of "industrial" has to be crafted beyond the manufacturing industries to fully comprehend the legacy of Telecommunication and allow the scientific and larger communities to embrace their unique profile. This crucial shift must occur if our contemporary societies are to build awareness about the importance of these places, prevent the disappearance of their tangible remains and stories, and fully engage in their conservation and safeguarding.