

Title : Planned obsolescence and the industrial heritage of tomorrow: The case of Choapa Valley and Minera Los Pelambres, Chile

Abstract :

Planned obsolescence and the industrial heritage of tomorrow are processes associated with the crisis cycles of late capitalism. The future obsolescence of mining deposits in mining territories allows us to think of an eventual heritage construction process considering the socioeconomic and paternalistic intervention by a private company. The case of Minera Los Pelambres located in the Choapa Valley in the Coquimbo region of Chile is an example of the process of industrial obsolescence subordinated to global and local socioeconomic processes. We will therefore examine the spatial transformations that permeate local territories in the face of mining obsolescence.

We are surrounded today by what will be the industrial heritage of tomorrow. Mining processes are known to culminate in the impossibility of continuing to extract or from the ground for various reasons, and in the case of Minera Los Pelambres, there is already an expiry date. Located in the upper basin of the Choapa Valley in the Coquimbo region of Chile, at 3,200 metres above sea level in the Andes, the mine, which began operations in 1999, has an estimated useful life until 2035. The production of copper realised here is typical for the extractive practices of the 21st century, and a good example of how technological development makes possible the extraction of minerals that were not profitable decades ago and however new territories that were previously irrelevant to industry are being integrated into world markets. The closure of these mines may be delayed by the introduction of new technical processes that optimise copper production, such as the use of desalinated seawater in response to the water crisis in the region. However, the mining company is unable to anticipate and prevent the constant cycles of crisis of late capitalism on a global scale that could make the use of copper ore obsolete – as happened with the saltpetre industry in northern Chile at the beginning of the 20th century. The end of copper ore mining in the Choapa Valley is approaching and will leave its inhabitants behind without jobs and with a legacy that is marked by a close relationship with the mining company which is using specific 21st century paternalistic practices to consolidate its position as mega industry in the area. Accordingly, the future industrial heritage of the Choapa Valley finds its basis in the relationship between large-scale industry and the workers and inhabitants of the territories it has been intervening not only economically but also socially. It is important to examine the changes that favour breakdowns in the complex network of markets worldwide, and as a direct result of this fragile relationship those who suffer the social and environmental consequences are the local people. We know that history is not cyclical, but it has aspects that tend to be similar, resembling a spiral that advances and is fed by spatial specificities with each turn it takes. In the case of Minera Los Pelambres, the paternalistic approach of the company towards the territory and its inhabitants have created a new reality that will end after two generations at the moment when the extraction of ore is no longer profitable. This raises questions not only about how to deal with the depletion of the mineral, but also about the new political, economic, technological and social ideas that are currently gaining strength in the region and the world – such as the protection of nature's rights or the drafting process of a new constitution in Chile.

