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# THE TOXIC SUBLIME OF THE INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

## *The aesthetics of the city of Seraing*

**Abstract**

The ability of cities to preserve and show their history does not determine simple morphological transformations but reflects a different sensitivity and interpretation of places. This essay explores part of a research about the industrial landscape of the Belgian city of Seraing, which has the aim of investigating the signs of the abandonment and the dismantling of the steelworks. The poetic of the sublime paints this scenario of both beauty and abandonment, in which the bucolic setting of the Meuse has given up to the fire of blast furnaces and the pyramids of slags. Nevertheless, the nature of this landscape transforms these uncertain places into possible places, capable of inspiring new project visions and consolidating their memory. It defines the mythologisation of the toxic sublime, which triggers social processes and cultural initiative: the paradox of the Croisière toxique is translated, in this research, in the re-meaning of the elements and the identity of the landscape.

**Keywords:** industrial landscape, sublime, abandonment, dismantling, memory

Fig. 1. Polysemic sublime in Seraing (source: graphic elaboration by the author).

## The landscape beneath the *limen*

The idea of industrial landscape, as a material construct and a cultural deposit, detaches itself from the traditional notion of nature landscape and embraces a polysemic vision, which investigates different meanings, images, and fragments in a dimension both physical and metaphysical.

In a system of interrelationships, the industrial landscape of the Belgian city of Seraing embodies a new sensitivity, which tends to interpret the metamorphosis of nature and its results. It is not just a visible manifestation of human action on earth or a means of introspection of the world, but the result of a cultural and reflective intentionality [1], which brings together heterogeneous elements without eradicating itself from the surrounding territory [2].

Thus, the perception of the landscape breaks down into different perceptual levels. These describe the glorious history of Seraing and, "in turn, refer to restless and tormented states of consciousness (a loro volta rinviano a stati di coscienza inquieti e tormentati)" [3], caused by the current condition of abandonment.

The city represented in the past a bucolic summer residence for the prince-bishops and stood as one of the main productive cores of the steel industry in the province of Liège.
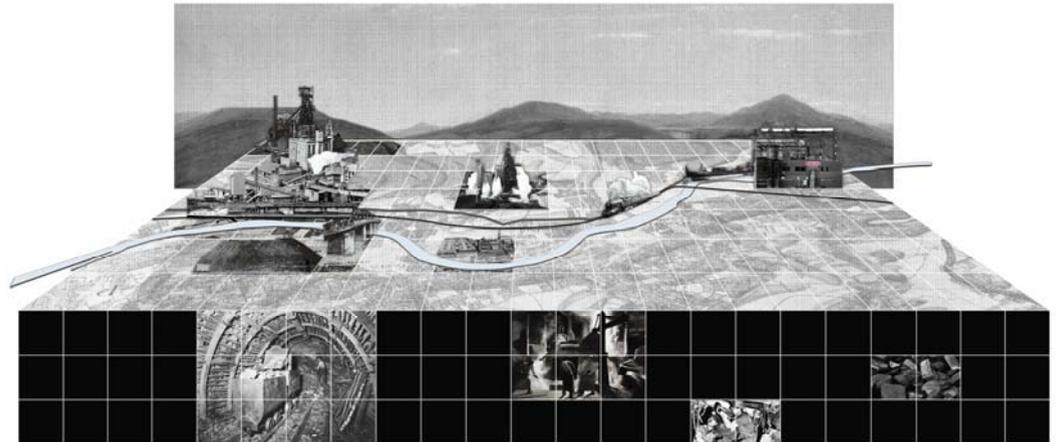
Nowadays, it shows itself as a fragile and complex territory, impregnated with an industrial memory and marked by the fences of the industrial system: the châteaux of the entrepreneurs and the cathedrals of the plants.

This reading system allows to discover what it is found deep within the landscape and what it is hidden beneath the limen: the toxic sublime of an industrial landscape now abandoned. Outcome of a real spiritual process, this sublime lives through the gaze of the spectator. It expresses the conflict between objective and subjective experience [4], in which the contemplation of these steel giants induces the mind to recognize infinite possibilities and complex socio-economic problems in the destructive force of the supersensible.

The manifestation of this type of sublime reveals its physical features in the state of abandonment of the waterfront of Meuse River in Seraing where the steel activity is concentrated, becoming the only place capable of expressing the paradox of reality through its falsification and its inversion of meaning. Therefore, the sight of a similar scenario made of industrial residues and fragments of memory provokes an unceasing movement of the spirit but, at the same time, it manages to return "a recognizable image of all the objects and spaces of the city (un'immagine riconoscibile dell'insieme degli oggetti e degli spazi della città)" [5], through the signs that have been accumulated over the course of history and the heritage of monuments-machines that mark the identity of the city and its society.



Fig. 2. The haut-fourneau 6 of Seraing in 2016 just before the demolition (photo credits: Johanna de Tessières, 2016).

## Dismantling and abandonment

Moving from the upheaval which hit the image of the city center and from the chronicle of the mining industry which is inconceivable without waste, the city of Seraing shows its history, preserving the signs of which legibility has been lost and activating a process of re-reading and decoding of the landscape.

The decline in industrial activity, due to the merger of the Cockerill group with other large foreign industrial giants, produces the activation of political imperatives that fragment the space in a sequence of industrial fences as well as create the discontent of a society that identifies itself with the characteristics of the authentic Walloon steel industry.

The actual epilogue – ArcelorMittal's last scene in Seraing – was written in early 2010 when the hopes for a revival of the steel industry run out due to an economic and financial crisis [6]. This leads to the collapse of the company's shares and the consequent disposal of the
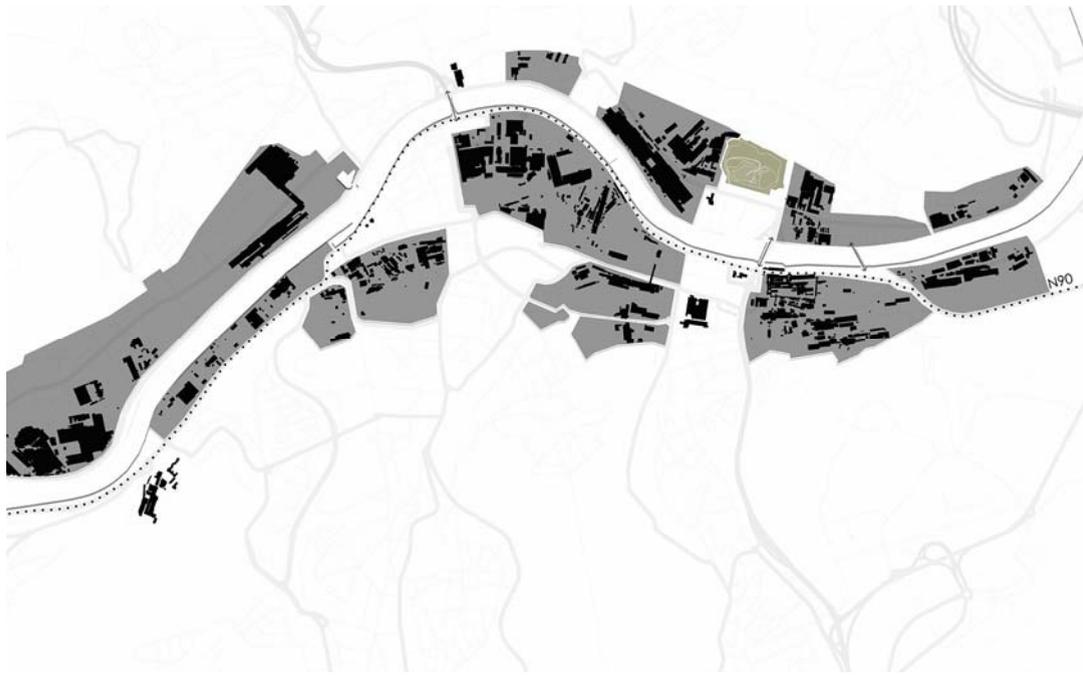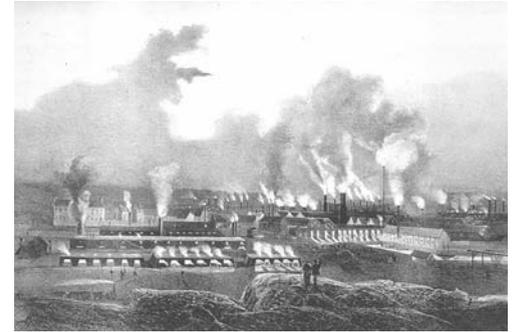
Fig. 3. Industrial fences (source: graphic elaboration by the author).

Fig. 5. Cockerill steelworks in Seraing, 1850ca. (source: Centre d'Histoire des Sciences et Techniques, University of Liège).

plants: haut-fourneau 6 of Seraing (HF6) is completely demolished in 2016 while the haut-fourneau B of Ougrée (HFB) is dismantled in 2009 and assumes the role of symbol of abandonment, standing out as one of the landmarks of the Meuse River waterfront and the neighborhood.

Therefore, it is clear that the elements of the industrial heritage of iron, coal and glass contain interpretative forms to understand the interaction between nature and built and to activate "relationships between different dynamics [...] as ways of looking at the landscape (relazioni tra diverse dinamiche [...] come modi di guardare al paesaggio)" [7].



Fig. 4. Intersections (photo credits: Johanna de Tessières, 2016).

In this perspective, the sublime of the industrial landscape of Seraing is configured as a new totality that goes beyond the individuality of single machine-monuments and ties their meanings together in a vision of things that manages to recognize the intrinsic nature of abandonment. Sold and protected, destroyed and mythologized, the city is not a finished product of a transformation process limited in time and space, but a dynamic and open-ended system, capable of including the most marginal fragments and the least predictable outcomes. The residues that compose its industrial landscape, although different in shape, exploitation and size, have the common characteristic of giving shape to terrains vagues and uncertain places [8] where the sense of

suspension and wait reawakens memories and links the past to the future.

Indeed, the same industrial objects release "the power of a prodigious transmutation of vile, despicable, and humble matter into a noble, beautiful and precious object. [Embodiment of ambivalence, they are like waste] both divine and satanic. I am the midwife of all creation, and the most formidable obstacle to it.

The waste is sublime: an unparalleled mixture of attraction and repulsion, which arouses an equally unparalleled mixture of admiration and fear (il potere di una prodigiosa trasmutazione di materia vile, spregevole e umile in un oggetto nobile, bello e prezioso. [Incarnazione di ambivalenza, essi sono come rifiuti] al tempo stesso divini e satanici. Sono la levatrice di ogni creazione, e il più temibile ostacolo ad essa. I rifiuti sono sublimi: una miscela impareggiabile di attrazione e repulsione, che suscita un misto altrettanto ineguagliabile di ammirazione e timore)" [9].

**A sublime landscape**
"The whole valley seems to be pierced by erupting craters.

Behind the little hedges, some are spewing out great clouds of bright red steam, sprinkled with sparks; others project, against a red background, the oppressive black silhouettes of the villages; elsewhere, the flames creep among the gaps between groups of buildings.

You would think an enemy army had just crossed the country and that twenty villages, razed to the ground, are at once offering you, during this gloomy night, all the aspects and all the phases of fire, these burning, those smoking, others flaming.

This show of war is put on by peace; this frightening image of devastation is made by industry. You have quite simply before your eyes the blast furnaces of Mr. Cockerill.

(Toute la vallée semble trouée de cratères en éruption. Quelques-uns dégorgent derrière les taillis des tourbillons de vapeur écarlate étoilée d'étincelles; d'autres dessinent lugubrement sur un fond rouge la noire silhouette des villages; ailleurs les flammes apparaissent à travers les crevasses d'un groupe d'édifices. On

Tension, astonishment, and suspension are some of the emotions recalled in Victor Hugo's travel cahiers, dating back to 1842.

A sublime and picturesque condition envelops the city of Seraing, where the blast furnaces become fetishes of the iron and steel industry and bell towers of the industry, establishing the cardinal points of the landscape through the fire and outlining in the dark a frightening profile, capable of outlining in the eyes of the writer the Virgil's Tartar and Dante's Inferno. The same sensations remain in the images of contamination and accumulation of a city no longer ardent, but foggy. The echoes of the dismantling and the signs of the deconstruction of the steelworks of the city interpret the power of this landscape, while the poetics of the sublime still paint scenarios of beauty and abandonment, charm and terror, attraction and repulsion.

Linked to the centrality of the Meuse River, the bucolic setting has given up to the fire of blast furnaces and the pyramids of slags, transforming the landscape into an object of consumption and fragmentation. A system in danger which, however, offers the possibility of new configurations and highlights the ability of this organism to reverse today's situation. Therefore, the reading of the elements and spaces shows an interconnected system of signs aimed at describing, regulating and reflecting on the dynamics in progress, as well as on the critical issues of the place: the remains of the industrial heritage - the Cockerill factories in Seraing, the Cockerill-Sambre, the Terril Perron Ouest and the blast furnaces – create inaccessible fences around which the blocks of the maisons ouvrières are distributed, characterized by a poor and recognizable architecture in exposed red brick. They are held together by the passage, at an elevated layer, of a network of pipes and belts for the transport of materials, which cut, frame and still dominate the perspectives in the streets of the neighborhoods.

The residual spaces between the fences are characterized by a mosaic of buildings and

industrial ruins connected to the production and the colossus of Arcelor Mittal: the Ateliers Centraux, the Salle des fêtes d'Ougrée-Marihaye, the old hospital, the Maison des Ingénieurs and the Château de Transester with its park.

This system shows a stratigraphy of a slow, inexorable and infinite urban πάντα ῥεῖ, in which " the notion of sublime as something that opens up to the unheard of, outside of oneself, to the deep, to the joyful or fearful, to the unexpected, to the surprising because mysterious, is in no way confused with that romantic cult [...] but coincides with the meaning referring to the fact that the work of art always reserves the unexpected, produces a distance, a question, something beyond its own interpretation (la nozione di sublime come di sé, al profondo, al gioioso o al temibile, all'inatteso, al sorprendente perché misterioso, non va in alcun modo confusa con quella romantica di culto [...] ma coincide con il significato riferito al fatto che l'opera dell'arte riserva sempre l'inatteso, produce una distanza, un interrogativo, qualcosa al di là della sua stessa interpretazione)" [11].

**Croisières toxiques: collective heritage and memory**
The masses of industrial buildings and the sequences of unused spaces represent the pieces and the permanences of the disused industry in Seraing, transforming the spaces of the mono-functional specialization into waste, residues, possibilities. These abandoned areas are part of an open system in continuous transformation and develop a project idea built starting from the discourse about the context [12] and the various cultural and social actions that are active in the area.

At the beginning there was the river is the incipit of the Croisières toxiques. A system of dissemination and enhancement of the history and industrial heritage, aimed at rediscovering the Belgian territorial identity and collective memory through memories, stories, experiences.
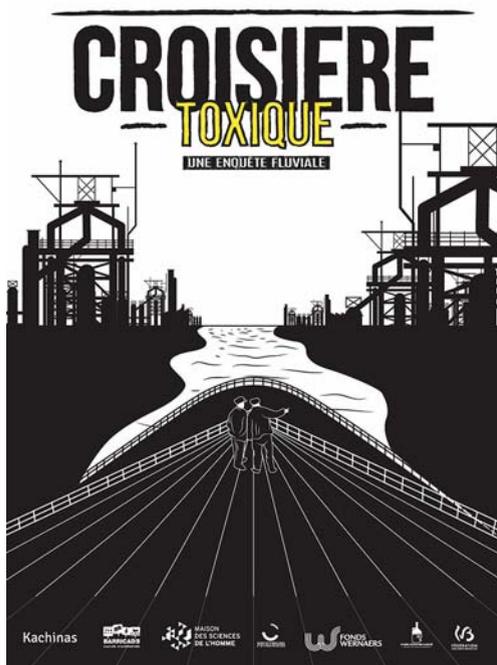


Fig. 6. Cover of the newest booklet (source: Editions D'une Certaine Gaieté)



Fig. 7. Ruins (photo credits: Marianna Sergio, 2018).

The toxic cruise is not limited to this: it is configured as a river investigation, an archeology of the past, built on water and structured on the stories of three scientific personalities. It has the intent to bring out from the imposing landscape a sublime with a toxic aspect and a critical history of industrialization, which characterized the entire Meuse valley. The cornerstone of this experience is the discovery of an exceptional point of view and a new perception of the landscape: the Meuse valley is observed straight from the river. The experiential path moves across the river up to the haut-fourneau B in Ougrée and questions the conventional vision of industrial infrastructures with an approach that lead to the construction of the industries, aimed not only at the historical, economic and social issues but also at the enhancement of identity and collective memory.

The perception of oblivion and suspension of time that is highlighted by the toxic cruise does not describe a totally negative condition: it triggers social activities and events, processes and strategies that aim to regenerate the area. Thinking about the possibility of revitalizing the city's waterfront and revaluing the machine-monuments means interpreting these voids as active areas in the design phase. Inserted in an ever-changing open system, the Meuse represents the main infrastructure of the territory.

The theme of the riverwalk considers the Meuse river as the fulcrum of the formulation of shelter strategies and as the narration of abandoned industrial areas. It proposes the story of the history of the former industrial site, highlighting its cultural, social, and ecological schedule and structuring a riverside promenade down river as a single landscape. This approach is adopted in some international and similar cases: the Snøhetta project alongside Oregon's Willamette Falls develops itself through a network of paths that immerse visitors in a tactile experience that celebrates the change of the water level. The idea of regenerating the riverfront of an industrial area

through the themes of the riverfront and the park also dominates Domino Park, designed by James Corner Field Operations for the transformation of the former sugar refinery in Brooklyn. In this case, the park becomes a symbol of the history of the site, dedicating itself to the diversity and resilience of the neighborhood, inhabitants, and workers. The creation of a new green and recreational space outlines the formation of new poles of attraction for the whole community.

**The Meuse as infrastructure and strategy of recovery**
Solidly embedded in the aquatic landscape, the image of the city is still linked to the Meuse, matrix and driving element, which represents the activating force of the production process and holds together all the pieces of the mosaic-landscape. It represents le ground zero [13], which outlines the key to reinterpreting the city and to understand its natural and artificial changes in the area. The loss of value of the Meuse and the deep change in the society "touches the structures of a syntax that ruled a landscape and communities whose cultures were closely linked to the nature of the substrate mining. [In this way] the balance of the underground system fails; the surface landscape takes the form of abandonment" [14]: the Meuse is the forgotten soul of the city, reduced to a barrier that isolates and isolates



Fig. 8. A different point of view (photo credits: Sabina Sebastiani, 2018)

LANDSCAPE AT RISK OF ABANDONMENT

Fig. 9. The Meuse waterfront (photo credits: Marianna Sergio).

itself from the life of the city, where the connection between the two ends is guaranteed by bridges that can only be traveled by road or rail. The riverside is nothing more than a tube [15], a fast flow, placed at a lower altitude from the rest of the city, which does not create ties and does not create experiences.

Reconsidering, regenerating and mending are three actions through which the project strategy for regeneration unfolds: the riverwalk and the linear park, that follow the course of the river, can formulate a catalog of unfinished intervention actions, capable of rediscovering heterogeneity and potential of an area marked by the disused of the heavy industry.

In this way, the Meuse regains its historical value. On the one hand it represents an urban axis along which sequences of spaces develop, on the other it allows the reception and connection of the elements of a mosaic, consisting of infrastructures, machine-monuments, artificial hills of terrils and park facilities. Based on the fixed elements, the possibilities and the yield points, the physiognomy of the park is structured through acupuncture interventions and small architectures, taking advantage of the different levels of the riverside in the regeneration of the two basins.

Therefore, cultural events as the Croisières toxiques propose something more than a simple story of the landscapes of abandonment. The nature of this landscape, characterized both by the loss of functions and by the persistence of opportunities, transforms these territories of nothingness into territories of the possible, capable of inspiring new design visions and consolidating their memory through a different dialectic of memory and oblivion.

Memory is not a passive container of facts, but an active process of creating meanings through which the industrial ruin contributes not simply to making a journey through history, but to experience pure time [16].

The toxic sublime of the industrial landscape manifests itself in the aesthetics of the city of

Seraing and in its most hidden aspects, in its workers' neighborhood and in its industrial ruins: an interweaving of privileged places and industrial identity in which the collective memory expresses the intrinsic ability of the material and immaterial heritage to suspend, reflect and remember.

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