

Productions of Space: nostalgia and memory in industrial heritage

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Abstract

When Jean Nouvel undertook the redevelopment of the Ile Seguin in Paris in 2004, his stated intention was to “recreate” the memory and allure of the industrial heritage that had been central to the island’s urban history since the construction of the first Renault factory on the site in 1919. Ironically, Nouvel had earlier protested the removal of the existing buildings on the site in the early 1990s, when the factory was decommissioned and the built traces were controversially cleared. Nouvel’s response was to both the architectural legacy and its historical resonances, referring specifically to the role the factory played in the worker movement in France, and especially in the 1968 riots. The urge to resurrect the prior “memories’ of the site underlines a critical and shifting paradigm in late Modernism, where the historical traces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are not only revered by contemporary architectural discourse, but to an even greater extent, pressured by the broader forces of urban development and capital investment.

That contemporary architects are now both arguing for, and seeking to emulate industrial landscapes invites important questions in regard to architectural theory and its inherent productive capacities. The example of the Isle Seguin is only one of a number of contemporary examples where the erasure of urban heritage has resulted in a “nostalgic” response to the spatial conditions of industry, reprogrammed as culturally innovative urban centres. With an emphasis on the rhetoric of Isle Seguin in Paris (and the structure of Paris in general), this paper makes an argument for the importance of historical industrial landscapes in contemporary architectural theory and, drawing from Marxist theories of space and organisation, concludes that the preservation and “collaging” of these landscapes is not only a radical reinvention of the city but a counter position to the dominant hegemonies of both capitalism and “culture”. Between the poles of nostalgia and modernism lies a fertile and undervalued fragment of spatial production that is critical to both reclaiming and invigorating the “outmoded” territories of capitalism and the industrial revolution at large.