Industrial Heritage Conservation as Resistance:
Environmental History and Post-Industrial Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between Environmental History and industrial heritage conservation by examining the role of industrial heritage conservation in a rapidly urbanizing community in Aylmer, Quebec. This paper argues that, while the Deschênes Rapids site in Aylmer, Quebec shares qualities befitting an "evolved cultural landscape", it is also of particular interest because the local community has positioned the heritage value of the site and surrounding landscape as justification against rampant urban growth in Aylmer, Quebec. Seen through the lens of Environmental History, the Deschênes Rapids site therefore not only exemplifies physical evolution of a hydrological post-industrial landscape; it is also evidence of changing perceptions and valuations of historical, industrial landscapes themselves. In this case, an industrial heritage site and the surrounding landscape is used strategically as means of resisting the pressures of urban growth which is characterized as a disruptive, undesirable and invasive process.

KEY WORDS

Environmental History; Industrial Heritage; Post-Industrial Landscape; Resistance
"Modern man at the beginning of the twentieth century particularly enjoys the perception of the purely natural cycle of growth and decay… The reign of nature, including those destructive and disintegrative elements considered part of the constant renewal of life, is granted equal standing with the creative rule of man…the modern viewer of old monuments receives aesthetic satisfaction not from the stasis of preservation but from the continuous and unceasing cycle of change in nature".

Alois Riegel,


"Every environmental story is a story about power."

Douglas R. Weiner
Industrial heritage conservation is something of a curiosity. On one hand, the study and conservation of industrial heritage sites evokes notions of creative urban planning and re-adaptive land use. On the other hand, industrial heritage sites are also often contaminated, hazardous places\(^1\) where raw materials were once extracted or transformed, thereby raising questions about the memorialization of humanity’s problematic relationship with the natural environment. While industrial heritage conservation may render more textured social histories of the human experience, it also exposes increasingly complex ways in which people understand and reclaim their place in post-industrial landscapes. How might we reconcile these inherent tensions in industrial heritage conservation?

This paper examines the role of ideas related to nature, cultural landscapes, and deindustrialization in determining the value of industrial heritage sites. Drawing on sources in an interdisciplinary framework, I argue that environmental history provides a vital dimension for understanding the political and cultural dimensions of industrial heritage conservation.\(^2\) In this light, the relationship between environmental history and industrial heritage sites opens new opportunities for informing a “missing” historical narrative of Canadian post-industrial landscapes. Although the focus is on industrial heritage sites in hydrological landscapes in Quebec, the paper will nevertheless also refer to academic research on other regions in Canada as well as from within the international context.

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\(^2\) For an overview of the scope of environmental history see Donald Worster, “Doing Environmental History”, in David Freeland Duke, ed., *Canadian Environmental History: Essential Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2006), 9. Worster identifies three main branches of environmental history, corresponding roughly to ideas of nature, human impacts on nature, and finally, nature itself as a holistic system.

This paper has three sections. The first establishes a theoretical and historical framework for understanding industrial heritage conservation as a cultural response to deindustrialization in the late-modern period. The second section situates industrial heritage conservation in the discourse on the value of nature in cultural landscapes. It also refocuses the discussion on the Canadian context, particularly in hydrological landscapes seen through the lens of environmental history. Finally, the third section offers a brief analysis of the recent proposal to designate Deschênes Rapids located in Aylmer, Quebec, as a heritage site according to provincial law. The aim of this investigation is to determine the extent to which the proposal to designate the Deschênes Rapids site in Aylmer, Quebec as a heritage site evidences the function of industrial heritage conservation as a mechanism for resisting urbanization in the post-industrial context.

Defining Industrial Heritage in a Post-industrial Landscape

According to the 2011 “Dublin Principles”, the industrial heritage includes both structures and landscapes and “reflects the profound connection between the cultural and natural environment…” as well as “complex social and cultural legacy that shaped the life of communities…” Thus, industrial heritage conservation may be understood according to two main narratives: first, it is the legacy of labour; second, it is the story of the landscape. The origins of both narratives can also be traced back to the concerns of industrial archeology, which emerged in Britain in the 1950s, and was principally concerned with studying the remains of industrial structures dating to the

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Joint ICOMOS – TICCIH Principles for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage Sites, Structures, Areas and Landscapes, «The Dublin Principles», Adopted by the 17th ICOMOS General Assembly on 28 November 2011. In the 2003 Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage, TICCIH went further by saying: “…the Industrial Revolution was the beginning of a historical phenomenon that has affected an ever-greater part of the human population, as well as all the other forms of life on our planet…”
industrial revolution of the 19th century. By the 1980s, the scope of industrial archeology expanded to include ‘contextual archeology’ which consisted of larger ‘networks of associations’, such as class relationships, the experiences of labourers, and the role of the landscape in determining industrial systems. The interaction between human and natural systems has therefore long been an essential component in the study of the industrial heritage.

In the contemporary context, academic discourse on industrial heritage conservation includes a range of perspectives. For example, some heritage scholars such as Edward K. Muller have emphasized the potential function of industrial heritage sites as tourist destinations, interpretive historical sites, or recreational spaces. Others, such as Michael Frisch and Eva Svensson, oppose this view, explaining that both labour unions and rural communities have resisted celebrating the past as a concession to the finality of deindustrialization. Thus, while in the eyes of some observers industrial heritage conservation presents opportunities for economic renewal by memorializing the social history of labour, for others it is the portent of unsettling social transformation in a post-industrial economy.

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The second narrative of industrial heritage involves the story of the landscapes themselves, in which scholars have emphasized the role of industry in altering the non-human environment. For example, Niall Kirkwood studied the recovery of contaminated industrial landscapes\(^7\), while Robert Summerby-Murray has articulated a critique of industrial heritage conservation in Atlantic Canada. According to Summerby-Murray, local industrial heritage conservation has often involved the misrepresentation and commodification of the industrial heritage by intentionally ignoring environmental damage and social upheaval “in order that the image of industry can provide community stability and the sense of a successful past…” As Summerby-Murray explains,

> ...industrialisation was a ‘dirty, smelly, dangerous affair’, complicated by social, economic and political inequality and oppression, and hardly the stuff of a mythical utopian past. Yet, in numerous examples where the industrial past has been presented as heritage... industrial processes have been romanticised and sanitised to the point of becoming non-industrial...\(^8\)

According to this view, the landscape itself is a central feature of the industrial heritage, and implies a pronounced ethical and political dimension. In fact, the industrial heritage might also be read as the critical memorialization of degradation by symbolically articulating our dormant knowledge that industrial activity has deeply, and at times negatively, altered the non-human environment. If the ruins of industrial heritage sites are the signs of our relationship with the natural world, then perhaps allowing these spaces to be reclaimed by non-human processes signify their deeper meaning.

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Similarly, in a recent study of abandoned herring factories in Iceland, Pora Petursdottir suggested that both the tangible and intangible industrial heritage are best appreciated by allowing material objects to decay on site. In her view, the tangible remains of industrial heritage sites are not only reminders of the intangible heritage, such as past forms of knowledge and experiences; they are also symbolic manifestations of the passage of time whereby the past is drifting discernibly away from a more recognizable present.  

Industrial heritage conservation may therefore also be understood as a cultural response to the dramatic and enduring changes to the human condition onset by late modernity and widespread deindustrialization. Randall Mason explained this trend as “an effort to counteract the anomie of modern consumer-driven life, a reaction to sprawl, or an outgrowth of the massive socio-economic transformations falling under the rubric of globalization.” Thus, industrial heritage landscapes imply a particular type of “age-value” because they evoke “natural cycles of creation and decay” expressed in the vivid language of formerly commonplace tools, structures, and systems.

To sum up, although industrial heritage conservation is concerned with memorializing the social histories of labour, industrial landscapes are also spaces where we encounter evidence of the ways in which human technologies and processes that have significantly modified the natural environment. Moreover, post-industrial societies are not only defined by the economic shift away from human labour on materials toward service economies based on work with other humans;

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9 Pora Petursdottir, “Concrete matters: Ruins of modernity and the things called heritage”, Journal of Social Archaeology, 2013, 13:31. Clearly evoking the ideas of John Ruskin, Petursdottir’s discussion is nevertheless original in the subject of her discussion is an industrial heritage site. See also David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985)


they also feature a cultural shift toward industrial heritage conservation as a social rudder in a sea of uncertainty. As the familiar becomes increasingly unfamiliar, industrial heritage conservation emerges as a cultural response to our estrangement from the landscapes created by our industrial past.

**Industrial Heritage in Canada: Conserving Culture or Nature?**

If industrial heritage is about human interactions with nature, what precisely do we mean by nature in the context of post-industrial landscapes? Heritage scholars and environmental historians alike have explored the complexities in defining nature. Perhaps most famously among environmental historians, William Cronon argued that wilderness is a paradoxical cultural construction: if humanity is to have any place in the world, it must be included in landscapes that are ‘natural.’¹³ Similarly, heritage scholars such as Werner Krauss described how the fusion of human and natural forces shaped coastal landscapes, while Bosse Sundin explained how archeological finds in northern Sweden challenged the notion that nature is an untouched or separate entity from human cultures. In Sundin’s words, in place of wilderness, “there is landscape.”¹⁴

The meaning of nature has also been expressed in terms of its specific value. According to David Lowenthal, nature’s value in a given landscape is largely utilitarian, rather than intrinsic (whereby the non-human environment would be attributed value

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beyond human uses alone). Other scholars, such as Ken Taylor and Jane Lennon, maintain that although nature may be a cultural construction, its value is best articulated through our evolving understandings of culture landscapes. In their view, the relaxed distinctions between nature and culture held by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and the IUCN have encouraged greater opportunities for the protection of traditional, indigenous, or rural environments from the pressures of urban encroachment. Furthermore, according to Taylor and Lennon, “environmental ethics have been central to the debate on natural values, in particular that of whether nature has instrumental value or intrinsic value.” Thus, since nature and culture are indivisible human constructs, articulating nature’s value is comparable to attributing particular value to the manifestations of human cultures, or for that matter, an individual human life.

In a much earlier essay, environmental historian Donald Worster framed the value of nature explicitly in terms of rights, explaining that “…nature will always be a system of economic resources for man as well as other species. The right to use nature, therefore, is not more an issue than the right of one human to need and use many other persons for his existence.” In Worster’s view, since the domination of people over one another is inextricably linked to the exploitation of natural resources, the complete liberation of humanity should also endeavor toward the liberation of nature.

16 Ken Taylor and Jane Lennon, “Cultural Landscapes: a bridge between culture and nature?” 2011, 17:6, 544
Although critics of this perspective may dismiss it as a Marxist reading of nature, Worster’s approach nevertheless suggests that industrial landscapes may be understood as the combined result of political and technological responses to challenges found in the non-human environment. Therefore, the utilitarian and intrinsic values of nature do not refer to opposing concepts, but rather the degree to which features of the natural landscape have been integrated into human systems.

In the Canadian context, the notion that the intrinsic value of nature is a question of rights holds particular significance for industrial heritage conservation in hydrological landscapes. Industrial sites such as canals, mills, or hydroelectric installations are composed of an infrastructure designed to harness the power of moving water, and therefore act as barriers between the public and the river. Moreover, as several environmental historians have shown, the massive scale of industrial infrastructure in places such as the St. Lawrence River serves to conceal the extent to which canals, dams, or hydroelectric installations have modified the landscape. Although some urban industrial heritage sites such as the Lachine Canal in Montreal have been redesigned for recreational use, these re-adapted public spaces may at times conceal contamination or histories of social inequality.

In other cases, the future of aging industrial infrastructure in hydrological landscapes is highly contested. For example, the proposal to dismantle and redevelop

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19 Environmental history and heritage studies are sometimes sourced in the same scholarship, such as Roderick Nash’s Wilderness and the American Mind (1967).
21 Susan Ross, “How Appropriate is Our Technological Heritage?” Presentation at the Canadian Studies Heritage Conservation Programme Symposium March 16, 2013, (Ottawa: Carleton University)
the Chaudière Falls Dam on the Ottawa River continues to take shape amidst of web of competing interests and perspectives. Located between municipal, provincial, and federal jurisdictions, the dam is also opposed by First Nations spokespersons as territory un-ceded by treaty, thereby presenting an additional layer of cultural and political complexity. In this case, with limited economic benefit and undetermined heritage value, the removal of the dam might in fact enhance the value of the surrounding landscape. Thus, deindustrialization may create opportunities for the democratisation of the landscape by providing people with greater access previously hidden shorelines.

However, the democratisation of post-industrial hydrological landscapes may not necessarily require the total removal of the physical remains of the industrial heritage in all cases. Indeed, some industrial heritage sites may in fact facilitate public access to the river, or even enhance our understanding of the site’s environmental history. For example, the heritage value of La Pulperie de Chicoutimi has been described in part for the technological integration of its mill structures with the non-human features of the river, while the Montmorency Falls Heritage site near Quebec City is classed as “evolved cultural landscape.”

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In this case, the site’s character defining elements explicitly include “natural features, such as the hydrological and geomorphological systems and woods and ecosystems”, which therefore contextualizes the human changes in the landscape as part of longer and potentially more enduring processes in the non-human environment.\(^{26}\) The heritage value of site therefore partly relates to the evolution of the non-human elements following changes initiated by human design.\(^{27}\)

As a final generalization, while in some cases, industrial sites may be a barrier between people and the landscape, in other cases the conservation of industrial heritage sites may augment, rather than detract from, our interaction with the non-human environment. In this this context, abandoned industrial infrastructure ceases to be a barrier and instead becomes a conduit for re-engaging people with the landscape in the post-industrial context.

**Industrial Heritage Conservation as Resistance: the Deschênes Rapids site**

In 2012, two community-based groups, *l’Association des residents de Deschênes* and *l’Association du patrimoine d’Aylmer*, commissioned a statement of significance in support of their request to designate the Deschênes Rapids and surrounding area as a heritage site. Consisting in several structures built mainly in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries following the development of hydroelectric power by the Hull Electric Company in 1895, the site encompasses a rectangular area of some 1800 by 400 meters along the north bank of the Ottawa River in east end of the village of Aylmer,

http://www.patrimoine-culturel.gouv.qc.ca/rpcq/detail.do?methode=consulter&id=92845&type=bien#.Upq7W8RUeSo


\(^{27}\) Similarly, Donald Worster described this process as *second nature*, which also relates to the perspective of the *longue durée*. Donald Worster, “Doing Environmental History”, in David Freeland Duke, ed., *Canadian Environmental History: Essential Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2006), 9.
Quebec. The site also includes the remains of 19th and early 20th century mills and hydroelectric installations still visible from the recreational pathways maintained by the National Capital Commission along the riverbank.28

Two dimensions of the statement of significance are particularly relevant to the themes discussed in this paper: first, the character-defining elements included in the description of the site itself; second the motives for the request. Although the Deschênes Rapids statement of significance includes a conventional narrative of the site’s industrial history, it also describes the site’s value in terms of the aesthetic, archeological, and recreational uses of the landscape in both past and present contexts. The statement of significance also explicitly names the wooded areas adjacent to the existing built structures and along the river as part of the request to designate the entire area as a cultural landscape. Thus, the site’s value appears to correspond to the UNESCO definition of an “organically evolved landscape” with the qualities of a “continuing landscape” comparable to the Montmorency Falls site. Presumably, the historical uses of the Deschênes area for recreation also satisfy the UNESCO definition of an evolved cultural landscape possessing an “active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life, and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress… [and] exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time.”29 Furthermore, according to Quebec’s Loi sur le patrimoine culturel, cultural landscapes include «tout territoire reconnu par une collectivité pour ses caractéristiques paysagères remarquables résultants de l’interaction de facteurs naturels et humains qui méritent d’être conservées.»

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Therefore, with reference to both provincial law and the UNESCO definition of “evolved cultural landscapes”, the Deschênes rapids statement of significance would be further supported by a rich description of an environmental history of the changes in the landscape related to human industry over time. This might solidly include the undeveloped, wooded areas along the river as a feature of the site’s character-defining elements.

Secondly, the motives for the request stem primarily from the threat of urbanisation as the expansion of residential development in Aylmer continues to change the character of neighborhoods and landscapes included in the recently amalgamated city of Gatineau. Thus, the request to designate the Deschênes rapids area as a heritage site may be read as a cultural response to the social and economic stresses of localized urbanization. In this case, the conservation of an industrial heritage site is a form of community-based resistance to external threat. Moreover, this resistance is twofold: on the one hand, it is political insofar as the heritage designation would exert pressure on municipal government to prevent the over-development of new housing in the Deschênes area; on the other hand, resistance is also cultural as it seeks to maintain people’s relationship with the river by protecting public access to the ruins at the rapids themselves, as well as the surrounding wooded areas. Thus, in this case, industrial heritage conservation is used as a mechanism for asserting public rights to the river, the woods, and to recognition of the legacy of labour associated with the tangible remains of the neighborhood centred on the Deschênes rapids.
Seen through the lens of environmental history, industrial heritage conservation is a complex cultural response to the pressures of deindustrialization and urbanization in the late-modern period. As a means of memorializing human interaction with the non-human environment, industrial heritage conservation also provides new spaces in which people may continue to interact with the landscape. To a considerable extent, the Deschênes Rapids proposal may be understood as a mechanism to maintain people’s rights to the river and to the tangible and intangible symbols of community identity. Nevertheless, framed in terms of rights, industrial heritage conservation also implies corresponding responsibilities. As the scope of environmental and social history broadens under the definition of “evolved cultural landscapes”, a more inclusive and layered vision of industrial heritage is required in order to better understand how the landscape has been modified and described by a variety of communities, such as First Nations peoples or non-industrialized economies. Further research in this area may therefore serve to enhance the heritage value of industrial heritage sites such as Deschênes Rapids for present and future generations alike.

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