**Destruction can happen almost without noticing**

An essay in memory of John Aage Gjestrum

*Maria do Céu Baptista*

A thin golden web connects me to Røros and to its industrial heritage. Knots here and there, sometimes unconscious – bits and pieces, ancestors’ histories, fragments of knowledge about darkness and light, about creation and destruction. Part-time miners, part-time farmers, fireworks experts building caves for the sake of experimentation. Sometimes conscious – John Aage’s curiosity about the Portuguese museum scene and his deep interest in Røros as a case study in the understanding of Norwegian museum practice and constructing a theoretical body of interpretations which might bring about a shift of paradigms in museum work.

Then there are the critical approaches of other Norwegian museum colleagues; and my own professional career: engaged first in museums and little by little in built and natural landscape as an important frame for validating (or not) museum practices. Hazardous travel through diverse but similar environments from 1995–2000: Astúrias/Northern Spain – iron and charcoal mining and processing, Guanajuato/Mexico – silver mining, Krasnoyarsk, Siberia – heavy metal processing industries and of course Portugal – so many raw materials, from extraction to processing: charcoal, iron, copper, stone, sand – led me to an awareness of the difficulty of addressing a set of similar problems from within the Cultural Heritage discourse: open wounds in the landscape which everyone neither wanted to see nor have anything to do with, a feeling of having contributed to the development of a country mixed with doubts about the real benefits of that development or about the long term costs; an epic of a life on the bread line together with an intuitive feeling for the exhaustion of the soil because of the demanding goals of the ”owners”.

From these travels I have realised that the extraordinary places and the ordinary (sites in the Unesco List as well as sites not listed) could start an extremely interesting dialogue. On the one hand they have a lot in common and on the other it might be illuminating to see how ideas promoted by the extraordinary sites tend to be regarded as exemplary by the
ordinary sites even if the results of the actions have not yet been evaluated. There is a tendency to take what is done in the extraordinary site as authorized. Sites (listed or not) would gain more from a dialogue based on the complexity of industrial problems than from the actual situation in which the Listed Sites (of whatever type) tend to discuss their agenda in closed fora.

This is one of the reasons I have constructed this text as a dialogue between an extraordinary place (Røros) and an ordinary region (Asturias/Northern Spain). In both places there is a complex documentation (the latter containing contemporary sociological studies and research while the former is better in the field of cultural heritage). They are also connected by the extraordinary similarity in the techniques of timber construction (which was also detected in Mexico).

To the complex of industrial problems I have added tourism as a major issue for both. Frequently promoted as quality destinations the World Heritage Sites are appealing to the leisure industry of the 21st century – but tourism is perceived as a potential take-over and resented as a solution representing short-term interests. Finally I could not help bringing in some reflections about nature and landscape: the beautification the industrial sites is a "two edged sword" Can the industrial site be preserved if the industrial landscape is destroyed?

"We could say it is black and very shiny, light, nothing lacking of its natural kind and with all the qualities required of the most precious coal”. The pits (creaderos) are described like this: "...they are the best in Spain, similar to if not better than all those celebrated abroad, easily exploitable, with a good angle of inclination, close to the surface, without obstacles to the extraction work ... they show the gifts they have received from nature and easily meet all the desires of the explorers."

In the words of the miners we can perceive a culture and its roots and why the crisis brings with it a special pain. Unpaid salaries, unemployment, immigration or psychological drama give rise to uncomfortable feelings of shame, of the loss of something one is entitled to, a lack of perspectives. The ghost of a glorified past, in which solidarity in the face of danger and for better pay produced images that differed according to the point of view: the miner himself ("good people") or a member of another group ("evil people"): Nobody wanted to work in the mine, she is vicious When I start working here people use to say – watch yourself, boy, the mine is female...

J.: Nevertheless that culture which is now disappearing was the culture of the mine itself ...in our generation, and there was work, nobody wanted the mine.
R.: That’s true .. nobody wanted it.
J.: I did, I was proud ...I had always been proud.
R.: The mine gave more solidarity.
J.: It was more tender, more like family.
R.: Worry about the problem of the others ...if they have a problem then you show solidarity. Now everyone looks after their own interests
J.: But still, the mines, still...
R.: Still it is about solidarity...
J.: Still is ....and that is a culture in itself ....it is still there ...the roots are still there.
3. Well when I started ...it was bad, relatively bad ...you have to assimilate, you and us we have to assimilate... The miner has to be very attentive, for security reasons, inside the mine... There is a big feeling of unity ...there is a feeling... I cannot express it really, yes...
3. A great strength ...that is pulling you. The mine demands a lot.2
4. It was the mine that changed not the miners. The miner – apart from the hardness of his work – has a
nobility, has a great heart ...and shows solidarity ...we spend seven hours together, more than with the wife ...in that sense we are united.

Salvation through culture for a community that wants to resist oblivion, that wants to continue to live when the industry – the main raison d’être – disappears, is not an easy road to tread.

Beyond the fact that I have no prospects for my future, you live an unreal life, because it is a lie. Well you live ... you don’t have any financial problems because you live with your parents. But you are not living the life you should live... For instance I am 33 years old and I am living as if I was 17. You depend on what you are given at home and you cannot see any other way of organising yourself. This does not help you to become an adult ...you cannot live a life that corresponds to your age...3

Disbelief is a common feeling mainly in connection with the community’s economic and psychological revitalisation. If cultural tourism has to play a role – it is certainly not the non-controversial suggestion one might be led to believe.

It is not strange that many enthusiasts, researchers, associations and other entities, and professional bodies are starting to show their preoccupation and their interest in developing projects which might lead to the protection and reuse of this heritage. Examples such as ...cultural tourism or industrial tourism ...with the idea of promoting initiatives ...that might give the past of this region a future.4

Tourism will not bring extra value to the city... The problem with the tourist policy ...we are not against it ...but the only thing we did was to perform a cosmetic operation on the city...

Sometimes I have the impression that we are creating a giant with feet of clay...I think that the development of this city is based on a lie ...we work hard at the infra structures – which were necessary – at the beaches – it is true that tourism got a lot of help – but we are not looking at it from the perspective of a long-term future...5

It could be interesting to compare these feelings with expert opinions:

Culture and cultural heritage are crucial to people’s identity, self-respect, and dignity. This applies both to affluent and poor societies ... Provided these basic facts are understood and serve as a guideline for presentation and communication between tourists and the local population, cultural tourism has a great potential for improving understanding and respect among different cultures, and from a long term perspective may be regarded as a tool for creating and preserving peace.6

A long stay in Røros/Norway – the first industrial world heritage site on the Unesco list – was to play an important role in my own understanding of the situation and led me to pose some questions which apply to the extraordinary case of Røros as well as to the impact of the Røros experience on an ordinary case such as that of Asturias. As the industries copied models and imported knowledge I hoped that some of the reasoning around extraordinary industrial sites might interest ordinary regions in establishing and planning their own future and the actions they might take. I asked questions like: What was the real effect of the special heritage activities on the daily life of a community? How does the extraordinary distinction act upon the place? Does it promote revitalisation? Is it helping in the construction of a new identity? Is it adding real value to the place or deleting it? Is there any specific purpose in placing an industrial site on Unesco’s list?

Finally: Can achieving cultural understanding of a situation make a difference?
AN EXTRAORDINARY SITE?

There is a set of natural and human opportunities often forgotten but always present: rivers of significance but also with easily harnessed waters, favourable landscapes inviting the design of means of communication or good natural harbours, forests, cheap labour and interesting political-economic frameworks: conflicts, extreme needs for raw materials, internal political changes leading to a change in social perspectives, progress.

Today when all industrial nations put great effort into searching for coal, it is the magic agent of production, the most powerful engine in all factories, the element necessary to reduce distances, travel the seas in safety and transform all nations in one, we couldn’t possibly be more excited about the samples of this invaluable mineral.

Røros was before existing – Unesco’s first industrial world heritage site was born to the map from a fruitful geology, rich in copper (exactly in 1644 when Norway was ruled by Christian IV of Denmark). Two years later the king gave the Mining Company – which had shown sufficient knowledge and competence – the privilege of using the local resources and human labour force. This extraordinary event almost transformed the dull border zone into a battlefield, in which Sweden became the enemy instead of the neighbour.

The threatening situation that resulted came close to a declaration of war and led to the emerging town being completely burned down (1678–79). However Røros remained Norwegian after the conflict. Røros was to enjoy a favourable position, free of competitors, when European wars created a demand for its precious raw material for use in the casting of cannons for the army and navy. Historical change:

When the French destroyed the factories in Navarra new opportunities arose for those in Asturias, … a new factory (was opened) removed from the French border but close to the point where the rivers Nalon and Trubia meet. They would produce ammunition. Again the coal mines in Asturias depended on the needs of the Army.

These apparently simple but essential characteristics bestowed the place were to become an extraordinary birthmark (which can also be found in many other ordinary industrial sites) that seemed to forecast a specific outcome: note the relevant dialogue between the natural and the artificial, between nature and man’s use of it.

A birth brings with it a movement towards the exterior, towards light. But Røros was born from a movement towards darkness, towards the womb. Røros as a visible physical reality corresponds to an empty invisible dark hole.

A hill named Carbayín caught fire … and by chance it reached a certain area … which was burned for 5 months … While my grandfather was hunting he noticed that the ground was soft beneath his feet … and examining it more carefully he realised that it was on fire … he suspected that he might be on top of a coal mine. He thought this because he had read some articles written by English writers.

The expansion of the visible Røros in all directions (the famous circumference – a symbolic circle mainly used by the Company to exclude all possible intruders and to extend the powers granted to it by royal privilege) corresponds to an equal but invisible expansion of its pits.

The last annual report (1976) written just before it declared bankrupt is full of optimism and states that the copper found was sufficient to sustain the Company for more than 300 years.
This constant need to expand, the anxious search for the future never ceased. But unexpected events played a trick on this expansionism. A problem with one mine was enough to bring drama to the small community and caught Røros unprepared. A leitmotif: the industry collapses almost without notice.

Q. – when did the crisis start here?
2. – what, that this was going to happen?
3. – In the 90s?
2. – but no, my child, I think it was before that, around the 60s.
1. – the crisis in the mines started when the pits started to close... who could see it before that?
2. - Everyone, child. Since the first strike in '62, one knew ...
1. – No! The miners didn't know. I remember saying when S. José was closed: They are closing St. José! And they replied: No, they will not close it. There is a lot of coal. And when they did close it, the majority did not know!
3. – So we are living above our means, I would not consider this a crisis.11

They had lived their adult lives without any crisis. There were no models for how they should act in times of change. The company management had been successful, but conventional, not to say conservative, and it was deeply involved in the organisation of the community. The model that the management left behind was adopted. Røros survived12, but this time on artificial respiration carried out by the owners of the, once again, less interesting border zone: the culture and tourist industries. Røros once again became an "extraordinary place", a World Heritage Site.

International tourism is essentially a phenomenon peculiar to industrialised countries...

Driven by a variety of needs to attempt to earn a living from tourism, communities sell not only their labour but themselves, offering themselves as merchandise; as a result, they are to some extent converted into a fetish, a spectacle, and reduced both to serving the function expected of them by tourists and to accepting what the tour operators offer them in exchange. In the arts, music, dance and crafts, the focus is on developing what can be sold.13

What is in place does it really exist?

1981. In this motionless/empty place a scenario quickly emerged: what exists is just a domain for action, an arena; what is absent, the raison d’être, the intangible, has been transformed by alchemy into a new resource: the certainty once again a reality – the unlimited expansion. Following what models? According to what beliefs?

Heritage professionals were already in place. Interested in the site they saw an opportunity, a bargain even – heritage also has sale prices! Part of the mines, tools and smelting hut were easily bought and listed. But with time knowledge increases and it became necessary to include more and more elements, a bigger area. And the promised expansion with the explosion of data, resulted in conflicting interpretations. Awareness, understanding and knowledge, not always well managed led to action. Did Røros miss the opportunity to have a break, an interval in the success story? A "no man’s land moment" that could have allowed some creative considerations, like a certain awareness of the negative, of the option to step back, of the possibility of letting the disharmony show?

John Aage Gjestrum detected something singular about the Røros case. Røros was not a simple open-air museum. It had always provoked national debate. At that time he was
following the development of the ecomuseum experiences and he had detected that in many cases the management of museums had not been able to incorporate the gains of the cultural experience they were both reflecting and promoting.

Røros had been fully documented for several reasons, including a military mapping of the region between 1807–1814. The Mining Company had also kept detailed records of exploitation, investments and gains as well as explorations, control of the human workforce, meetings, agreements and conflicts.

But Røros also had a century of documentation concerning the conservation of its constructed heritage, a history that had been under public scrutiny more than once: at the turn of the 20th century, simultaneously with the active construction of a new cultural identity in Norway. Røros played an important role in the national discussions about the cultural identity of a nation. At that time and influenced by the discussions surrounding the open air museum in Oslo, Røros adopted a similar type of management. Later on, during the 30s, it became clear that instead of one Røros had three archives: one covering the history of farms and farmers in the region, another kept by the mining company, and a third concerning the Church. In 1976 during the bankruptcy the labour union tried very hard to promote the miner’s identity as the core of the Museum representation. This gave birth to a separate museum object Olav’s grave, which was built without benefit of an industrial archaeology programme, perhaps due to the highly political goal that the project represented.

The discussions surrounding the Røros heritage and its role repeatedly arouse national interest – as if the birthmark keeps growing. History has not yet come full circle, even if, in 1996, the museum was placed under the umbrella of a Foundation, Stiftelsen Rorosmuseet.

THE MISSING LINK – OR THE OBLIGATION TOWARDS THE WORLD

It is easier to raise this question when we are talking about an industrial community in a World Heritage Site, situated in a country with a well developed macroeconomy. But the issues around World Heritage Sites are relevant regardless of economy or geographical situation. They have the power to increase individual understanding of certain situations and point out how powerful a force for transformation can be if one is able to react as participant instead of an observer. We are often caught and trapped in certain roles. We have to be aware of the dissonant sound that strikes our ears so as not to miss the message. And when we are representing it both in words and images, let us make clear the standpoint from which we are making the representation. For some reason the industrial sites seem to be ideal places in which to address unique and very contemporary phenomena concerning the values of the World Heritage Sites.

In 2002 the discussion about intangible heritage will be the subject of the next ICO-MOS general assembly in Zimbabwe. Let us take advantage of this to introduce the issue. Otherwise many promising industrial heritage sites could easily be transformed into meaningless places of contradictory actions.

To deal today with the reality of Røros – as a meaningful example for other industrial heritage sites – means dealing with fundamental issues: learning how to cope with the industrial activities which, from the very start
were generated and depended on global circumstances. One has to be fundamentally interested in the site’s activity, reasoning and role. This has become an obligation arising from our daily confrontation with the debris caused by their activities which so often end up as the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and the Environment. Once the resources or its needs are exhausted, the land returns to its owners. And the pollution which was the result of the industrial exploitation suddenly acquires a new owner with double and contradictory responsibilities: to keep and to clean. This clearly points to a need: give time to Time or in other words – use Time to address the new realities which were generated by long periods when there was an absence of harmony.

...The prospects are very bad, but the situation in itself nowadays is not bad. We live well. We know that there is a crisis ... and as we see that there is no way out we see no way to improve our life. We do not try to create new things. Everybody knows and everybody accepts.14

The renewal of discussion surrounding the issues that result from the closing down of an industrial activity and its transformation into a Heritage Site has international relevance.

What does it mean to become a world industrial heritage community instead of being an industrial community?

What responsibilities does an extraordinary industrial community have towards other ordinary communities facing industrial decline?

What responsibilities does an industrial heritage community have towards regions that can become the targets of industrial development?

The greedy expansionist movement that is at the core of industrial activities must be analysed. Issues such as pollution, health, heavy work as well as the feelings of shame and “heritage” among individuals must be set against real experience in a new and total account of gains and losses. The total effect on the landscape, on visual perception and people’s subjective claims to a clean industrial heritage must become a priority for further evaluation and the basis for plan of action.

Ordinary industrial regions must be made aware by the extraordinary industrial sites that their solutions have not yet been fully investigated and that evaluation of the actions taken in the name of industrial heritage has not yet really begun. The ground is a minefield. To buy out, for cultural purposes, the ruins of industrial activities are not cheap and in many circumstances do not provide an adequate response to the feeling of despair that strike a community when decline suddenly closes the door on what were, until yesterday, optimistic enterprises.

There has to be awareness that the spending of time and money is only worthwhile if there is an aim, a strategy and a plan of action that can be tested and evaluated and changed without major dramas. Between heritage intentions and heritage actions there are gaps which consume finances and weaken our perceptions of what is to be protected and what can be erased by uncritical planning.

Finally it is important that one learns to foresee the future regarding heritage management, not through looking in a crystal ball, but understanding, testing and evaluating the actions we take in the name of heritage preservation.

These tasks cannot be reserved to the cultural actors or claimed by them: if the indu-
trialists are not aware and responsible, interested and engaged, involved and truly sharing in these preoccupations, then the capacity to shape a future is not even a possibility. More than ever it is becoming clear that heritage for the sake of heritage is no longer interesting.

From an extraordinary international position to an instrument for local and global transformation

Røros is the unique child of a slow moving nature where forest does not grow fast and where farming is not important enough to promote competition for the use of the soil. Røros is a unique Norwegian settlement and has therefore every possibility – including the Unesco stamp – of becoming a cybernetic arena for relevant discussions and actions around at least the following issues:

With its 100 years of experience as a built heritage Røros is well positioned to ask what is building conservation in an industrial community. If the significance of the place is to be kept we have to learn to operate with more than one alternative answer to allow our minds to start a systematic approach, set in a framework of total perspective and understanding.

In 1919 the First World War began … and the diamond mining fell into SA hands and with that expertise available, richer deposits were discovered along the Orange River which led to the establishment of a new town… Gradually Luederitzbucht collapsed, shedding its population and industries. The school closed, buildings became obsolete and urban decay set in.15

Universal values bring with them universal errors which can lead to complete loss of character in a site as well as a real devaluation of individually owned properties. Today’s information society and the political need to advertise actions in heritage sites can play a big role in spreading less correct solutions. Joint ventures in training for new visions among industrial heritage specialists, house owners and craftsmen might find in Røros a rich soil in which to develop. We are a long way from the 60s when industrial archaeology first started to attract the attention of the heritage professionals. The scope of the discipline has expanded. We are no longer targeting a wider representation (or a representation of the different) in the heritage discourse. We are, or should be, heading towards the construction of a totality that might serve as a reference for world industrial life. If one could check authenticity against this frame we would quickly understand how the definition “authentic is something that has the authority of its original creator” could lead to a completely different understanding of the conservation process in Verdenskulturminnet Røros16.

The conservation and restoration of industrial landscapes – this means actions directed towards the preservation of a significant identity (after the disappearance of the industry) as a key tool in the development of a living community or in its transformation into a mummified shadow of its past. To act in this field we need a total understanding of the place – how it has absorbed and absorbs human actions (before and after the heritage designation).

Does this mean that we regard nature as a stable, balanced and beneficial aspect, giving us all we need or lack in order to build our environment? And is this a nature we understand as an unlimited source of goods that creates the place and absorbs human action? What
then is the role of the quarries... Time and construction have changed... When we think about old quarries, their traces seem to be an inheritance from past civilisations improved by time. However in today’s quarries we must find out why we only ask ourselves about these involuntary signs of an action always justified by growth... The quarries that we now see are interruptions in the landscape. They are parenthesis spaces that keep in suspense the continuity of a world made up of... episodes of what we can call natural and artificial... They talk about strain and crisis, but we should give them a vote of confidence.17

An understanding of the transformation of a former natural landscape into an industrial and rural settlement and later into an urban landscape cannot be attained without an holistic understanding of the interaction between man and nature as well as those beliefs developed by man over time. But Awareness of that interaction has to become an engine for change in terms that are relevant to contemporary life. This implies a subjective understanding of one’s own position rather than of each one’s individuality. In this sense the holistic interpretation of the transformation processes and its communication asks for surrender: industrial heritage sites are complex and difficult to address but their interpretation can no longer be left in the hands of a cultural elite. Industrial heritage sites demand to be liberated from that niche and Roros might be a key place in which to postulate an experiment: the Unesco stamp seen as a condition and not as a life status.

**Ordinary versus extraordinary**—a change in condition, a change in beliefs

Sites and towns known for the significance of their heritage have an opportunity and an obligation to make visible their intangible values whenever they are acknowledged as parts of World Heritage. This acknowledgement forces a change in the condition of the site itself which can become an arena for experimentation and can pioneer dialogues.

The battle will always be between what is true but strange and what is appealing and popular. And one must constantly remind oneself that this battle is ongoing.18 Any ordinary reasoning can prove that the driving force of industry still lies in a belief in free market forces and in their expansionist potential. These beliefs are in complete contrast to the minimal principles that have to be adopted for a relevant preservation of an industrial heritage site. Any promotion of actions which eschews a shift in the condition of the site should not be given our support. The same applies to actions that promote simplistic changes. The present extraordinary speculation around World Heritage Sites, often developed and expressed at the highest levels without local involvement, has not yet proved beneficial for the specific communities. In the case of the industrial sites they endanger and make difficult the natural message to the industrialised world: destruction is still happening almost without being noticed.

I hope that one day the ordinary sites will be able to participate in a multi-voiced dialogue with the extraordinary sites – a dialogue with an echo (to put it in a way familiar to John Aage) – and prove that distinction is a condition to be achieved by the pure desire to defend fundamental values and by a plan of action that faces up to conflicts.
Notes

1. Rafael Anes Álvarez, *Asturias, fuente de energia El carbón asturiano en la economía española*, Hunosa, 1997 (p. 54 – extracts from a Memory presented by the Ministry of Commerce in 1850 describing the qualities of Asturian coal).


3. Ibid. (Chapt. VIII Gijón en el declive industrial de Asturias).


5. In *Asturias: el declive de una region industrial* (Chapt. VIII).


7. *Asturias, fuente de energia*, Hunosa, 1997 (p. 54, quotation from a presentation by the Ministry of Commerce in 1850).

8. Interesting enough today Røros is promoting a pioneer programme concerning configuration situations in world Heritage Sites. It is perhaps symbolic that local fiddlers seem to play a musical metadialogue with high tones during *martnan* (the winter market) while at the same time a theatre group puts on a successful play dealing with the battle against the Swedes. Pure anachronism? Personal/national empowerment in times of latent crisis? A search for ways out? Or is this an invitation to start imagining identity in new ways? If the answer to this last question should prove to be yes perhaps we are witnessing a performative way out – a direct implication of the body in the representation of the wound.


12. Braathens A/S closed the airport several times, a fact which clearly indicated to the community its economic fragility. Studies show that Roros does not have a sound development if compared with neighbouring communities which have not been recognized as having a special heritage and do not receive extra funds for their management.


14. *Asturias, el declive de una region industrial*, Trea, Chapt. VI.


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