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Recollecting the past in historic mines: Guido and the Big Pit

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This paper draws on a comparative case study of the Big Pit National Coal Museum in Blaenavon, Wales and the Historic 'Guido' Coal Mine in Zabrze, Poland. I consider the role which mining museums play in the process of memory-work in terms of the recollection of past industry and also in the post-industrial restructuring process of mining regions. By discussing models of museological theory applied to the sites, I conceptualize mining museums as a potential resource where the industrial past meets its future and argue that the heritage interpretation and communication practice of these historic mines is remarkably people-based and therefore mining museums have a unique character in the contemporary 'museumscape' and 'memoryscape'.

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Introduction

In the Big Pit: National Coal Museum in South Wales I met an underground tour guide who was passionately explaining the role of mining lamps to a group of visitors. Before each shift, miners had to collect a safety lamp from the Lamp Room in exchange for a check, a small metal object with an inscription of the colliery's name and worker's number. In the case of an accident, the checks identified which miners were still underground.

The guide was presenting his own collection of lamp checks; over recent years these objects have become collectable and are distributed through hobbyist networks and online auctions. As of 17 March 2010, the National Mining Memorabilia Association listed on its website the most popular memorabilia from the industry: mining lamps; postcards; commemorative china and glassware; blasting and rescue equipment; tools; books, prints, photographs and documents; miner's artwork; and additionally, colliery tokens, medals, awards, checks, tallies and badges (which are related to union membership, mining schools and colleges, and rescue services).

When asked about his interest in collecting, the guide, himself an ex-miner, responded that lamp checks symbolised hard work and a lifetime's dedication to the mine. In his opinion, these objects represented the identities of individuals who had made the pits their second home, as well as the families and communities that were 'built' on coal. These collectables also evoked memories of dangerous shifts, where the gas-detecting and light-providing lamp proved to be a priceless 'treasure' which saved many lives. Lastly, the guide expressed a sense of nostalgia; after the Big Pit closed in 1982 the token symbolised for him the loss of an industrial lifestyle.

Such private collecting practices, as well as the development of public sites, have contributed to the growth of European industrial heritage. This article will consider two coal mine museums – Guido Mine located in Zabrze, Poland and the Big Pit - in order to investigate the ways in which historic mines are constructed as museums, including meaning-making processes in the mines. I argue that just as mining memorabilia links significantly to collectors sense of identity, mining heritage sites likewise relate strongly to a collective sense of belonging built on a lost industry.

Memory and community: museological perspectives

Before introducing Guido and Bit Pit it is important to consider museological ideas and theories are applicable to the development of mining heritage. Of particular pertinence here is the way that memory has been reconceptualised within museum studies including new modes of curatorship, collecting practices, and techniques of display and communication with the public.

According to Elsner, 'the museum is a kind of entombment, a display of once lived activity' (1994: 155) created through the act of collecting. For Elsner, the desire to collect material remains conjoins the past with the present and heritage becomes a mechanism of nostalgic 'entombment of change'. The final stage of the process is the constitution of a museum - mausoleum where the change process is 'frozen'. This creates a stable perspective from which to look back at past activity (1994: 6) and, in consequence, form a repository of public memory. Misztal argues that as a meaning-making device, collective memory has an influence on the present by reproducing identities, as well as social and political orders. Often framed around places and objects, memory can, of course, be mediated institutionally, mostly through models of education, legislation, museums and mass media (2007: 382).

Aside from revisiting the topic of memory critical museology has revealed over the last two decades that the traditional model of the modern museum was a disciplinary institution with encyclopaedic claims for the classification of culture, knowledge, artefacts and social groups (Bennett, 1995; Cohn, 1996; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pomian, 1990; Sandell, 2007; Vergo, 1989). Moreover, post-colonial critiques of heritage – drawing largely from the fields of social anthropology and material culture studies – have highlighted the unequal nature of identity representation in museums. This includes low public participation in heritage interpretation, a lack of source community 'voices', and the problematic character of curatorial authorship (Ames, 1991; Anderson, 2003; Clifford, 1999; Henare, 2005; Karp and Lavine, 1991; Henare, 2005). As such museums have been criticised as institutions of power which project a politicised model of the past. The main implication of such museology debates was the need to re-examine the social role of the institution. Beyond the didactic model of knowledge transmission, museum practitioners were called on to incorporate negotiated interpretation and to embrace aesthetic and political issues related to accumulated material cultures (Karp, 2006; Stam, 2005; Watson, 2007). At the same time, they were required to re-evaluate institutional authority and their relationship to audiences and source communities, thereby facilitating co-ownership of knowledge, community-based control mechanisms and social advocacy (Heijnen, 2010; Janes and Conaty, 2005; Kreps, 2003; Sandell, 1998; Watson, 2007).

One of the responses to the challenge of developing a 'new museology' was the concept of the ecomuseum: a community museology proposal that originated in France in the 1970s. Following an 'ecological approach' the ecomuseum was conceptualised as an institutional organism that performs complex functions, beyond collecting and stewarding heritage. According to this approach, museums should evoke a community-based 'sense of place' by extending beyond the traditional boundaries of the institution to create an integrated form of heritage protection: a thread that holds together a number of sites and aspects of local heritage including: the conservation of natural resources; the transmission of intangible heritage and cultural memory; the protection of buildings; and celebration of the production of local material culture (Davis, 2008: 404). Managed by the local population, ecomuseums in effect become 'a community-driven museum or heritage project that aids sustainable development' (Davis, 2007:199). In short, the ecomuseum model aims to re-imagine the position of the institution by introducing notions of dialogue, cooperation and interpretive feedback from surrounding communities.

According to Hooper-Greenhill, museums need to modify their agenda and relationships with various stakeholders and move away from the formula of the historical museum (a socially divisive institution) towards a 'post museum' (one that acknowledges various interpretive communities). With a semiotic focus in mind, Hooper-Greenhill adopted the notion of the 'meaning-making community', arguing that subjects form interpretative communities sharing meaning-making strategies, common frameworks of knowledge, intellectual skill, and understanding. In order to accommodate a wide range of interpretative communities, exhibitions should be a medium within a broader communication mix, to be constructed in relation to the needs of diverse audience practices (2001: 30).

Within the post-museum model interpretation techniques should incorporate various perspectives, promoting a model of fragmented and multi-vocal knowledge, representing surrounding views, experiences and values. In this sense, as the key feature of the post-museum is the reconstruction of the institution through more direct links with meaning-making communities. Post-museums therefore focus on the representation of diverse views of the material culture on display and the performance of educational and conciliatory roles. The interactive and experiential characteristics of the post-museum bring to the fore the idea of 'tailored', audience-focused practice with a strong ethical stance, responsiveness and multi-voice.

Meanwhile, for Martin, the act of private collecting is essential to our sense of self (1994: 66). Indeed, it is the arrangement of personal collections that:

... enables us to partially or fully construct an identity. Objects and material thus used can be said to constitute a kind of material language. The narrative they relate depends on what we want them to say to us and others (Martin, 1994: 66).

In contrast, Martin suggests, museum-based collecting tends to be dispassionate and embedded in policies of display, conservation and collection management, resulting in the taxonomical and chronicle-like setup of the collection. In Martin's view, for the museum to reflect a wider understanding of the material world, the institution needs to reintegrate with private collecting practices including collector markets, public shows and auction houses. As 'popular' and private collections mirror the identities' of their creators, bringing them into the museum sector also has the potential to bring new relevance to museum interpretation thereby renewing the relationship between institutions and individuals. In Martin's model the museum would therefore carry the responsibility for generating a formal platform of exchange of information. At the same time, private collectors could play the role of 'a complementary collecting agency for the museum' (1994: 128). Reconsidering the relationship between the institution and surrounding 'identities' would then result in a fuller representation of views and 'voices' related to the subjects covered by the institution.

In summary, the idea of ecomuseums remodelled the logic of the museum's relationship with the surrounding population by assigning various stakeholders with a managerial role and bringing together different spheres of activity into the museum domain to reflect the local 'sense of place'. Secondly, the concept of the post-museum reconsidered curatorial models of authority and advocated a problematized, dynamic, multi-vocal model for site interpretation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Finally, following Martin's reflections, a reconsideration of the role of non-professional actors and practices involved in collecting leads to a more relevant institution that represents a 'popular' perspective and more nuanced interpretation of the material culture presented in museums (1994).

In the rest of this chapter I will draw on the ecomuseum, post-museum and collector-linked museum models in order to demonstrate how interpretation is structured in Guido and Big Pit and the different ways in which these two institutions try to make the industrial past 'matter' to their visitors.

Historic Guido Coal Mine, Zabrze, Poland

The setting and historical context

Established in 1855, Historic Guido Coal Mine was a nineteenth century development led by Prussian industrial magnates. Named after its founder, Prince Guido Henckel von Donnersmarck (1830-1916), the colliery was established to provide energy for a mill serving the growing city of Zabrze, therefore a significant element of the local urbanisation process. As a result of a takeover by the Prussian Mining Treasury in 1889, the mine was systematically modernised and in 1904 connected with the newly built Delbrueck Mine. In the inter-war period, amalgamation with the Berlin-based mining company Preussag Concern resulted in technological innovations in the mine's underground transport and tunnel support, transforming Guido into a draining mine. Post-war territorial changes - the incorporation of Zabrze into Poland - led to further structural changes within the policy of nationalisation under communist rule.

From 1967, after the exploitation of the coalfield, the mine operated as a testing site for mining machinery. In 1982, the state authorities decided that Guido should become a skansen (open air museum) of coal mining, offering a historical overview of technological process by means of underground tours. In the 1990s, the local government decided to disassemble the museum exhibitions, leading to public protest and a campaign to place Guido on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. Czwartynska has noted a strong regional identification with mining (2008: 85) and the significance of this attachment was evident in the form of local campaigns. Following multiple interventions from residents and organisations the historic mine reopened in 2007 as a listed cultural institution; illustrating how mining sites can capitalise on local connections and facilitate community control of local resources (Czwartynska, 2008: 85).

After reopening Guido became a key player in the cultural and social scene of the city; a hybrid of museum and community centre with a strong agenda of dynamic cultural programmes including conferences, folk festivals, trade union meetings, traditional mining games tournaments, and musical shows. Emphasis was placed on 'feedback' from residents' and the cultivation of miners' traditions and consequently museum policy shifted to partnership building, local networking, urban regeneration and the reconstruction of the city's public image.

Among Polish miners, Malgorzata Czwartynska suggested, there is a strong regional identification with mining (Czwartynska, 2008: 85). The significance of this attachment was evident when the museum faced closure. For Czwartynska, the reopening of Guido Mine as a result of a local campaign illustrates how mining sites can capitalise on local connections and facilitates the community to take control of its resources. The mine became a hybrid of museum and community centre with a strong agenda of dynamic cultural programmes such as those described above.

Collections and resources

While the majority of the collections within the new museum came from the former site, a number of historical items, documents and archival material, were donated by the Zabrze Coal Mining Museum. There is a considerable collection of machinery, from the period 1967-1982, when Guido operated as a research unit. In addition, miners and their families donated a significant portion of personal objects, archival photos and uniforms.

The tour

A key part of a visit to Guido is the underground tour where exhibition spaces are spread over two levels: Level 170 (170 metres underground) tells the story of nineteenth century coal production and the history of the mining industry whilst Level 320 contains a reconstruction of a miner's workplace from 1970s until now. Former miners act as guides and interpreters in the galleries and lead the tours on both levels.

Equipped with mining lamps and security masks, visitors are transported underground to the section of Level 170 dedicated to historical interpretation. After displays about the prehistory and formation of the Upper Silesian coalfield, illustrated by geological artefacts, the exhibition continues in a narrow corridor with the story of mining in the local area. This area details the construction of the first collieries in Silesia, including technological developments, and an overview of the impact of socio-political changes on the industry and local population.

The tour then leads to the dimly lit, restored underground stables where the theme of working animals in the collieries is explored. Here, the guide's interpretation was based on historical data, miners' life stories, legends and characters from Polish literature. The next part of the display is the Commemorative Gallery where personal objects of the miners and their families serve to provide an overview of miners' engagements with national and regional politics. Through interpretation panels, models, documents, archival photographs, personal portraits and memorabilia, this display focuses on the involvement of miners in the World Wars, trade unionism, political repression and participation in the strikes during Martial Law in 1981. As a former employee of the mine, the guide brought his own memories of the 1989 anti-communist revolution. He evoked the atmosphere and mood among the workers at the time and told stories of his family's experience of the Second World War: illustrating the complexity of Polish-German relations in the mines during this period.

The tour continues through a dark roadway: this part of the tour was heavily reliant on the guide's explanations of tunnelling techniques, underground transportation and extraction methods. From the roadway, visitors are then led into the Pump Room, a space to reflect on the occupational hazards of the industry, as the guide mixed technical descriptions of the displays with stories of mining explosions and accidents.

On leaving the Pump Room, the tour continues down a dusty corridor with a display of historical collections of mining lamps, and blasting and tunnelling tools. There is an atmospheric simulation of blasting with recorded voices of miners, accompanied by the guide's explanation of the process. This simulation serves to make visitors aware of the noise levels involved in underground work. From the blasting display, the group is taken to a calmer location, an underground chapel built by miners. Silesian miners, believed (Catholic) Saint Barbara (Barbarka) to be their protector from occupational hazards, and hence rich, local folklore developed around her relationship with mining in Poland. Most operating Polish collieries have similar underground chapels and the 4 of December, St. Barbara Day, is still the most significant celebration of the industry in the country. Along with Saint Barbara, the mine was also guarded by the 'Treasurer' (Skarbnik). This bearded spirit, shown on display, was an ambivalent character that helped miners in need and caused trouble for those who did not do their work properly. According to the guide, low-rise corridors in the mines were 'created' by the 'Treasurer' for miners to bow in front of the spirit and remember the forces of nature that made mining possible. The Level 170 tour finishes with a reflexive account on the sudden death of 'men' and the slow 'death of the industry'

On entering Level 320, visitors descend down a dark shaft into the tunnel, which simulates conditions within a contemporary, operating mine. Realistic displays of machinery and tools are organised as a set of reconstructed scenes of the shift, supplemented with models, short demonstrations of operating machinery, oral history; and the guide's anecdotal experiences. Finally, the guide led visitors to a large shaft with a photo gallery of European mining heritage sites where he narrated the story of industrial change across the continent.

Big Pit: National Coal Museum, Blaenavon, South Wales

The setting and historical context

Big Pit colliery, sunk around 1860 to support the local ironworks, was part of a complex of mines in the Rhondda Valley, an important coal mining area in South Wales. By 1908, with increasing coal production, the workforce of the colliery had risen to 1,145 workers with production focused on the extraction of gas, 'house' and steam coal. On nationalisation, in 1947, the colliery underwent a process of mechanisation and

in 1973 was renamed Bleanavon New Mine with 500 employees. On 2 February 1980 - at the time the oldest working colliery in Wales - Big Pit closed due to the exhaustion of the coal reserves. Three years later, the mine reopened as a living history museum; becoming a monument to the industrial past. In 2000, the valley surrounding Big Pit, including the town of Blaenavon, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In 2001 the Big Pit was incorporated into the structure of the National Museum Wales and two years later redeveloped its existing displays and created new Mining Galleries. In 2003, during redevelopment of the museum, the local community was significantly involved in collection policy through the development of built interpretive resources and the donation of workers' memorabilia, family photographs, amateur artworks, personal objects and oral histories.

Collections and resources

Big Pit's collections consist of tools and elements of mechanical equipment from the period of operation and the collections of the National Museums Wales obtained from other pits and residents of the mining valleys. Moreover, collections are being developed by curator's field trips in the region and through private donations, mainly in the areas of mine worker-related art, the heraldry of strike badges and photography.

The tour

Big Pit's displays are structured in four parts: the historic buildings around the site; the underground tour; exhibitions located in the Pithead Baths; interactive mining galleries; and the historic colliery buildings. Around the open space surrounding the building complex, one can also find single objects, for example, a historical water balance and a trailer from the 1980s pickets. All explanatory panels of the buildings and around the site are bilingual, in English and Welsh.

Again, the underground tour is a key attraction. According to Peter Walker, Keeper of the Big Pit, the goal is to provide, 'personal interpretation in an authentic setting ... Primarily the underground tour is based on their (the guides) own personal experiences...' (pers. comm., 9 July 2010). However, each tour's interpretive focus is tailored to the visitors' level of knowledge and preferences. For instance, during a school group visit, the guide framed the tour around the historical content, adding oriented stories towards the children and anecdotes about the miner's day at work, child and animal labour. With a group of mining engineers, the same guide explored in detail the technological particularities of local production processes and unionism in South Wales. Visitors also, of course, provide feedback and information, and the tour has been instrumental in guiding site interpretation (above and below ground) as Peter Walker explained:

(We) Learned the lessons from that (the tour) and tried to apply them to the rest of the site (...). This site is about people, about people who worked in the mining industry and lived in these mining communities. The first layer is the people. People are the message, but also the media. (pers. comm. 9 July 2010).

According to Walker, interpretation of the mine developed in relation to the tour, as the interpreters:

Learned the lessons from that and tried to apply them to the rest of the site (...). This site is about people, about people who worked in the mining industry and lived in these mining communities. The first layer is the people. People are the message, but also the media. (Peter Walker, Interviewed by the author on the 9th July 2010).

During the tour, visitors are equipped with a helmet, lamp, battery and self-rescuer (a portable respiratory device which protects against smoke and carbon monoxide inhalation) used by the Welsh miners. In a similar way to Guido, visitors descend to the coalface to explore a section of historic underground workings, stables and machinery rooms, including haulage engines, and other objects and machinery. Another part of the tour takes place in the Mining Gallery, the newest part of the mine interpretation. Here, an audio-visual display narrated by a miner (with characteristic Welsh accent) presents a film on the history of Big Pit and leads visitors on a virtual tour of the galleries. Multimedia is also used within the galleries themselves to present modern coal production, including tunnelling techniques, the use of explosives, the operations of transport belts; and other aspects of a working-day in a mine. The galleries offer a multi-sensory mixed-media simulation, using sound and light to generate a better understanding of the processes involved in coal extraction as well as a more realistic 'sense' of the working conditions.

The last element of the Big Pit tour is a visit to Pithead Baths. Its eastern side consists of reconstructed medical rooms with an atmospheric voice recording of the memories of a former nurse. The

rest of the building is adapted as exhibition space and divided into four exhibition areas, focusing on the following themes:

'The Mineworker from 1850 to 2000' presents uniforms, equipment and personal objects, supplemented by portraits and memories of the workers. This room is divided into two parts: photographs of former miners and profession-based descriptions are presented in metal lockers adapted for display whilst 'People of the Coal' illustrates the daily life of the mining community, including family life, community structure, education system and the role of Mining Federation. This section also explores other social issues such as health, occupational hazards, child labour and the role of women, provoking a sense of involvement of the whole community in the mining process and its effects. Within the display, personal possessions are displayed with boutique-style lighting accompanied by voices of mining families.

The 'Story of Coal' covers a number of themes: local geology; the uses of coal; surveying; the construction of the mine; and underground transport and lighting. 'Heroes or Villains' presents public perceptions of mining through the juxtaposition of positive and negative images of miners. The ambivalent understandings of the industry are presented by a thought-provoking composition of information on miners' heroism (through material on disasters and rescue actions), juxtaposed with negative public views about strikes and riots. In this composition, the interpretive material ranges from rescue services equipment, press excerpts, awards, picket objects to documentary film. The last display cases in this section illustrate historical change in relation to three main themes - nationalisation, the formation of Federations, and the process of de-industrialisation - discussing the causes and consequences of post-industrial transformation and reflecting on the ambivalent character of the resulting changes. These themes are explored through an accumulation of mining memorabilia and quotations on the closure of the Welsh pits. This section, accompanied by emotive labels, tells a story of crisis, local and national political agendas, economic catastrophe, differing historical narratives, and the impact of change on the local community.

Discussion: interpreting mining histories at Guido and Bit Pit

Both Guido and Big Pit focused their interpretation on underground tours led by guides who have first-hand experience in mining. This strategy, coupling expertise with a living-history style of presentation, creates a more personalised form of heritage interpretation. Through conversational, informal, and the often humorous discussions below ground engaging, reflective and often complex messages about miners' lives and the reality of work (including social dimensions and historical transformations) are communicated.

The ecomuseum model

The positioning of former miners at the centre of interpretation who narrate their 'own' past activities whilst moving between memory and history and the use of 'operating collections' in the workplace setting, mirrors key features of the ecomuseum model. Both historic mines advocated the notion of the interpretive 'sense of place', evoking the ecomuseum's philosophy and priorities (Davis, 2005: 372). For instance, the flexible reactivation of work routines for educational purposes and the provision of space for the facilitation of mining traditions builds on a model of the museum that brings together 'elements that make places special' (Davis, 2005: 373). Furthermore, as both sites are being managed and curated by former miners, they relate strongly to the ecomuseum agenda of community empowerment and holistic site interpretation policy based on local partnerships (Davis, 1999: 228).

The post-museum

At Guido and Big Pit tour guides worked dynamically with the content of the tour, acknowledging the demographic profile and preferences of different visitors. This audience-based interpretation and on-going re-contextualisation of content reflects the postulate of institutional responsibility towards various types of public. By working with audience references, knowledge and intellectual skills, the guides realised the concept of the post-museum: to actively interpret and dynamically respond to the needs of diverse communities (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999: 10). In relying heavily on oral history and conversations with visitors, the post-museum's idea of incorporating various perspectives and multi-voicing found its realisation. At both mines there was minimal labelling; reducing the curator's authority in shaping visitors' understanding of the displays and encouraging forms of interactive meaning-making and individual and guide-led evaluations of the objects presented.

In both museums, visitor engagement was linked to a strong focus on 'content responsibility' (ref), as interpretation was managed, designed and executed by the miners themselves, thereby equipping the community with a curatorial authority. Such a strategy relates to the post-museum's reconceptualisation of

knowledge and communication management. For example, in Big Pit tours were designed to communicate local stories; allowing the public to meet and engage with individuals who represent the living history of the industry. In the Pithead Bath galleries, ambivalence and 'controversy' became key communicative devices. Indeed, the coexistence of opposite views was presented through a range of interpretive media, including extensive use of direct quotations, oral history recordings, documentary film and personal objects from the popular collections of mining memorabilia. Through the thought-provoking instrument of 'controversy interpretation' I would argue that the Big Pit exemplifies a strong post-museum agenda in the presentation of a diversity of opinions, values and experiences.

Throughout the Big Pit tour, in both audio-visual and textual forms of information, oral history and direct quotation was frequently employed. This served two purposes, to present the operational use of dialect and to illustrate the significance of storytelling and lived history, which in turn contributed to the representation of local perspectives on mining. In this sense, the structure of the tour appeared as a composition of fragmented meanings; combining nostalgic 'pride in the mining past' with problematic issues such as vanishing employment, concerns of industrial pollution and the tragedies wrought by occupational hazards. At both sites, controversial themes were addressed by the use of personal objects; from mining tools and, memorabilia, to objects used in the 1980s pickets.

According to Paul Martin, museums need to foster symbiotic relationships with private collectors and acknowledge their role as a complementary collecting agency (Martin, 1994: 128).

Collecting (...) is intrinsic to our sense of self. How we arrange what we collect enables us to partially or fully construct an identity. Objects and material thus used can be said to constitute a kind of material language. The narrative they relate depends on what we want them to say to us and others, in which sense the collector herself or himself becomes the centre of the collection (Martin, 1994: 66).

By incorporating a large number of personal artefacts into the displays, both Guido and Big Pit acted as formal platforms of exchange of information fostering museum – collector networks. That strategy generated a wider framework for communication of meanings associated with local senses of value of the material culture associated with mining and allowed an open-ended interpretation inclusive towards private networks of mining memorabilia.

In summary, the core features of the interpretation strategies at both museums include key characteristics of the ecomuseum, post-museum and collector-related institutional models. Ecomuseum features can be illustrated by the grass – roots, miner-based 'sense of place' within interpretation and site management. Key characteristics of the post-museum model can be identified in the ways that both museums addressed ambivalence in the interpretive content and the use of open means of communication with audiences. One of the key features of both Blaenavon and Zabrze sites was interpretative openness towards the complexities of microstories, controversy related to industrial and social history and nuances of local and 'personal' evaluations of mining material culture achieved through the incorporation of objects obtained from local residents and personal collectors. By mirroring the postulates of museological theory, both mines have enabled their communities to become significant actors in heritage management and curatorship; defining the practice of museum communication and exercising autonomy over the interpretation of their post-industrial legacy and local history.

Conclusion: recollecting the past and memory – work in mining heritage practice

By collecting memorabilia of their lost industry, these mining communities reassemble their lost 'sense of place' and reinvest objects with new understandings and sentiments. According to Buchli and Lucas, the process of such 'archaeological excavations' in contemporary material culture, opens up hidden elements of the present, on what constitutes as one's position in the world. Specifically, with the unique temporary proximity and 'ordinary' character of industrial heritage, industrial archaeology becomes essentially an archaeology of the contemporary past, engaging 'our' notions of 'self' (2001: 10).

The historic Guido Mine and the Big Pit both stand as public forms of 'archaeology of the contemporary past': representing regional history as seen from local perspective, becoming a resource for the present and engaging identities facing change. Guido and Big Pit facilitate dynamic and interactive interpretation, resembling the uncertain position of the mining regions they grew out of. Rather than accumulating material remains for a ready-made story located in a specific 'historic place', these mining museums became unique assemblages, and thought-provoking centres of gathered recollections. They maintain the status of 'a collection' - taken as an accumulation of meanings - without institutional aspirations for generalising narrative or interpretive authority. Therefore, they play a significant role in the process of the recollection of the mining past in its most human dimension, in a remarkable people-based and 'people-oriented' way and play an important part in the process of community self-definition in the aftermath of social and economic flux.

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