

Invisible Work, Visible Ruins: At the Moment of Transformation

Marta Kurkowska-Budzan

PhD habil., Faculty of History, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
marta.kurkowska-budzan@uj.edu.pl

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Introduction

At the intersection of material heritage and social memory emerges an invisible boundary of shame — an emotional frontier deeply rooted in the identity of physical laborers of the communist era, particularly women. In the post-industrial landscape of Wałbrzych, Poland, a city whose centuries-old coal mining industry was dismantled in the 1990s, this symbolic boundary finds its material manifestation in a glass wall that separates the meticulously restored historic buildings of the former “Julia” mine from the decaying ruins of the early 20th century coal processing facility. This extensive multi-story industrial complex housed the complete technological sequence for coal preparation: the sorting plant (visible directly behind the glass wall) where raw coal first arrived, as well as the washery, flotation, and enrichment systems. Women worked throughout this entire complex at various technological stations in what was an integrated industrial process. The “Julia” mine, one of the dozens that once defined this Lower Silesian city, closed in 1996 and partially reopened in 2014 as the “Old Mine” Science, Culture and Art Center, now serving as a heritage complex that embodies the selective processes of industrial memory-making (Fig. 1). This architectural division reflects not a deliberate institutional policy, but rather a deeper and ongoing process of social negotiation of meanings showing which elements of the past are incorporated into collective heritage narratives, and which remain silenced.¹

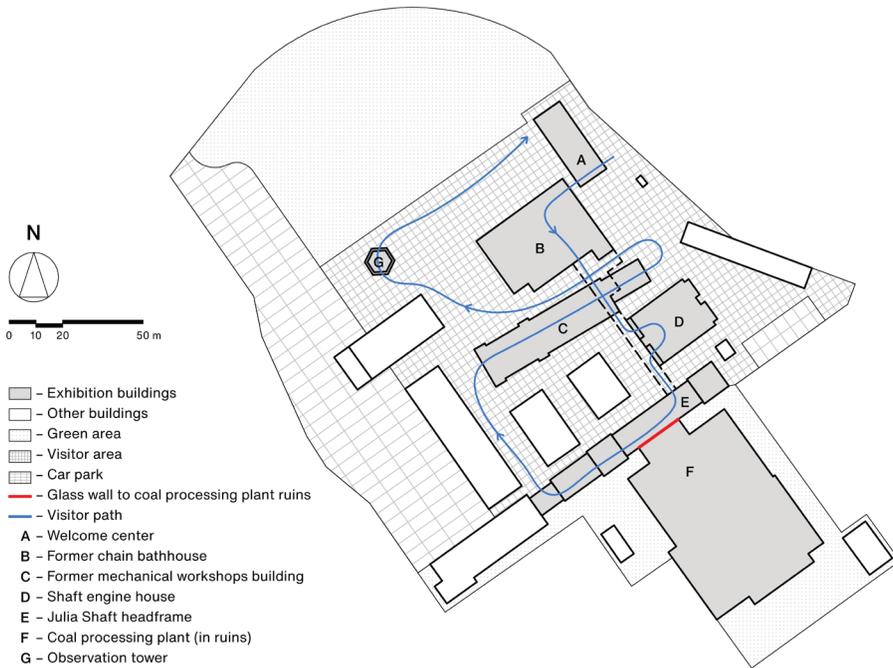
While the renovated mine spaces, including the 1915 chain bathhouse and mechanical workshops, predominantly celebrate the male mining work through museum exhibitions, cultural events, and guided heritage tours led by former miners, the female-dominated labor of coal processing remains literally and figuratively separated from this heritage discourse. Behind the glass wall, the coal processing facility where women were once in charge with the entire preparation process, beginning with sorting raw coal, then washing and preparing it for distribution, stands in ruins, visible yet inaccessible to visitors (Schematic 1).

This exclusion becomes particularly significant when considering that during Wałbrzych's peak as a provincial capital in the 1970s, women constituted an integral part of the industrial workforce that made the city the center of the Lower Silesian Coal Basin. The city then experienced catastrophic deindustrialization, becoming emblematic of the harsh consequences of Poland's economic “shock therapy” with unemployment reaching 31% in 1996.² This economic upheaval fundamentally undermined self-worth tied to industrial labor identities, creating ongoing conflicts between collective trauma and individual shame that continue to influence heritage creation processes.³

1 Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 17-18.

2 “Statystyka” [Statistics], Urząd Pracy, 2000, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.urzadpracy.pl/pl/inne/analizy-i-statystyki/rok-2000/2179,Statystyka.html>.

3 Piotr Sztompka, “Cultural Trauma: The Other Face of Social Change,” *European Journal of Social Theory*



Schematic 1: General arrangement of the “Old Mine” heritage site

This moment exposes differences between various social worlds for whom post-industrial heritage remains a subject of constant meaning negotiation. The peculiarity of post-industrial objects lies in their unavoidable presence: their material existence in the urban fabric forces confrontation with the past that various stakeholders must address through their physical presence and symbolic significance.⁴ (Schematic 1)

This article examines how the glass wall and the coal processing facility ruins function as material manifestations of gendered divisions in industrial heritage representation. Through analysis of the physical space, institutional narratives, and the lived experiences of former workers, I explore three interconnected questions:

1. How do physical boundaries in heritage sites reflect and reinforce gender divisions in labor memory?
2. What factors contribute to the self-exclusion of women from heritage-making processes?
3. How might the ongoing renovation potentially transform or perpetuate these divisions?

The marginalization of the Wałbrzych ruin from official heritage narratives creates its potential as a subversive memory space. While the revitalized parts of the “Old Mine” complex have been aesthetically transformed into multifunctional spaces for culture and entertainment, the coal processing facility ruin stands in stark contrast — a liminal space resisting systematic interpretation.⁵ Its disordered architecture becomes a material testament to overlooked histories of

3, no. 4 (2000): 449-66; Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 152-75.

4 Caitlin Desilvey and Tim Edensor, “Reckoning with Ruins,” in *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, iss. 4 (2013): 465; Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 15; Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

5 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94-130.



Fig. 1: "Old Mine" Complex, in the background, between the shaft towers, visible buildings of the processing facility, including the sorting plant with its characteristic skylights

women's industrial labor, disrupting established heritage narratives that have long privileged male mining experiences while rendering female labor invisible. This article is written at a critical juncture: after a decade of the ruins existing as a visible yet inaccessible part of the heritage complex, conservation work commenced in 2025 specifically in the sorting plant — the first stage of the coal processing facility. The architectural plans, prepared by the same studio that conducted the earlier renovation, suggest a continuation of the aestheticizing approach that has already erased the sensory and material traces of work: dirt, the smell of iron, the rawness of space — crucial to understanding women's embodied work experiences. (Fig. 1)

Theoretical Framework

Decaying post-industrial ruins and meticulously revitalized buildings generate productive tensions in Wąłbrzych's landscape. This liminal architectural arrangement/condition invites multiple theoretical readings that explore how physical spaces and social memory work together to create heritage effects. In my analysis, gender emerges not as a pre-given category but as an effect of assemblages. The coal processing facility ruin, the glass wall, the guides' gestures, and women's silences work together to produce gendered patterns of visibility and invisibility in this heritage space. Drawing on feminist insights within situational analysis, I trace how these patterns emerge through the interactions of material and discursive elements rather than from any single source of patriarchal authority.⁶ This marginalization works both externally and internally:

6 Adele E. Clarke, Carrie Friese, and Rachel S. Washburn, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2018), 103-54.

marginalized groups internalize dominant narratives about the relative value of their experiences and subsequently withdraw from heritage-making processes.⁷ The processing facility's position behind glass — visible yet inaccessible — materially embodies this state of marginalization.

Turner's concept of liminality captures the "in-between" status of this facility — neither functioning industrial site nor fully heritage asset.⁸ This threshold quality creates a space where alternative narratives might emerge, challenging established interpretations of Wałbrzych's industrial past. Behind its glass barrier, the facility occupies a suspended state that both reveals women's industrial labor and reinforces its exclusion from the official heritage discourse.

Beyond its social meaning, the ruin engages with embodied experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach reminds us that these spaces are encountered through the sensing body — their unique acoustics, textures, and spatial dimensions once formed the sensory landscape of daily labor.⁹ This "bodily memory," as Tim Edensor suggests, offers a form of knowledge fundamentally different from the sanitized experience of the traditional museum spaces.¹⁰

The relationship between Wałbrzych's residents and these industrial remnants reveals negotiations of identity and place. Drawing on social representation and identity theories, we see communities simultaneously internalizing and resisting the territorial stigma associated with industrial ruins.¹¹ Residents develop sophisticated adaptive strategies that reinterpret these spaces' meanings, challenging simplistic narratives of decline or nostalgia.

What unites these diverse theoretical approaches is their recognition of ruins not as passive historical remnants but as active participants in ongoing social processes.¹² To capture this dynamic network of relationships, I employed Adele Clarke's situational analysis methodology, which integrates material actants with human discourses in mapping contested spaces of memory and experience.¹³

Methodology

My research on the "Old Mine" complex in Wałbrzych (2021-2025) combined observational and participatory approaches.¹⁴ The fieldwork included guided tours led by former miners, participation in local events like Saint Barbara's Day celebrations, and interviews with guides, retired miners, local historians, and museum staff. Importantly, I carried out comprehensive interviews with three women who previously worked at the coal processing facility, with their employment lasting between seven and seventeen years. Throughout this article, I use a terminology that emerged from these fieldwork encounters: "coal processing facility" (Polish: *zakład przeróbki węgla* or simply *przeróbka*) refers to the entire multi-story complex where women worked at various stations throughout the complete coal preparation sequence. When I specify "sorting plant" (Polish: *sortownia*), I refer to one particular component of this complex — the hall where coal carts arrived from underground for the first phase of processing, which is the space now visible through the glass wall. To contextualize Wałbrzych's heritagization process, I

7 Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 14-25.

8 Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 235-82.

10 Tim Edensor, "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 6 (2005): 829-49.

11 Loïc Wacquant, "Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality," *Thesis Eleven* 91, no. 1 (2007): 66-77.

12 Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2013), 112-40.

13 Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005).

14 Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 4-33.

also conducted comparative work at similar sites in Poland, and Estonia.¹⁵

My access to the physical spaces evolved over time. Only in 2025 did I gain access to parts of the coal processing facility included in the visitor development plan — specifically the sorting plant and weighing room. The Museum of Industry and Technology provided conservation documentation and archival photographs of these spaces.

The analysis of all research materials followed situational analysis methodology, involving three main analytical steps:

1. Coding for emerging themes
2. Creating situational maps to identify human and non-human elements in the research arena¹⁶
3. Conducting positional mapping to understand the various stakeholders' perspectives.¹⁷

Following Clarke's situational analysis, I treat all elements within the research arena as actants, each with varying capacities to shape the heritage experience. The glass wall, for instance, does not merely separate spaces — it actively produces sensory deprivation, cutting visitors off from the smells, sounds, and haptic qualities of the ruin, while simultaneously inciting visual access. For instance, a guide's dismissive gesture toward "the women's kingdom" creates meanings that may resonate more powerfully than lengthy explanations; the towering scale of the decaying facility might spark imagination more effectively than any curated narrative. Rather than imposing analytical hierarchies on these elements, I trace their interactions and effects. This approach reveals how certain assemblages — the glass wall with the gesture, the ruin with its silence, the aesthetic renovation with its erasures — work together to produce patterns of visibility and invisibility. Women's absence from heritage-making thus emerges not from a single source of authority but from the cumulative effects of material arrangements, embodied practices, and discursive framings that reinforce one another in non-hierarchical ways.

Instead of presenting these analytical maps separately, I have integrated the key findings throughout the following sections. This integration demonstrates how material elements (such as the glass wall), human actors (guides and former workers), and discursive elements interact in the creation and contestation of industrial heritage. The significant relationships thus identified through these maps inform my analysis of how physical boundaries in heritage sites reflect social boundaries in memory work. In this way, my approach enabled the analysis of the intersection between physical spaces, institutional narratives, and personal experiences in the formation of industrial heritage.¹⁸

Historical and Material Context

The history of coal mining in Wałbrzych can be traced back to the 16th century.¹⁹ However, the industrial infrastructure that shapes today's post-industrial landscape was primarily established between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the city, then German Waldenburg, was one of Prussia's largest industrial centers. This multilayered history includes the forced displacement of German workers after 1945, adding another dimension to the site's contested

15 Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Grace Simpson, "Transforming Workspaces into Sites of Public History. Former Mineworkers as Stakeholders and Creators at Museal Institutions in Poland and England," in *History in Public Space*, ed. Joanna Wojdon and Dorota Wiśniewska (London: Routledge, 2024), 104-23.

16 Adele E. Clarke, "Situational Maps in Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory After the Postmodern Turn," *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 4 (2003): 553-76.

17 Clarke, Friese, and Washburn, *Situational Analysis*, 103-54.

18 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

19 Andrzej Frużyński, *Zarys dziejów górnictwa węgla kamiennego w Polsce* [An Outline of the History of Coal Mining in Poland] (Zabrze: Muzeum Górnictwa Węglowego, 2012), 124-28; Eufrozyna Piątek, *Historia dolnośląskiego węgla kamiennego od XV do połowy XVIII wieku* [The History of Lower Silesian Hard Coal From the 15th to the Mid-18th Century] (Wrocław: Politechnika Wrocławska, 1989).

heritage.²⁰ Yet across these shifting ethnic and political boundaries of mining heritage, another form of erasure has persisted through all historical periods.

Central to understanding the gendered dimension of mining heritage is recognizing that alongside underground mining work performed predominantly by men, there existed an entire sector of coal processing operations where women constituted the majority of the workforce.²¹ This division of labor created distinct social worlds within the mining complex — worlds that would later be reflected in how the industrial past is remembered and represented.

Following the economic transformation of 1989, authorities decided to close Wałbrzych's mines, citing their unprofitability and high accident rates as primary justifications for the shut-down. The final coal wagons were extracted from Wałbrzych's mines in succession: "Victoria" in 1993, "Wałbrzych" in 1994, and "Thorez" (renamed "Julia") in 1996. The closure of these mines triggered profound economic and social disruption in the region.²² Only a handful of structures from the mines have survived within Wałbrzych's post-industrial landscape.

Among these few preserved industrial monuments, the "Julia" mine complex stands out as particularly significant, with its extraction shafts, the 1915 miners' bathhouse, and mechanical workshops having received protected status through their inclusion in the national register of monuments. As my situational mapping demonstrated, these preserved structures function as powerful material actants in the ongoing negotiation of industrial memory, with their physical presence or absence directly influencing which narratives can be sustained in public discourse.

Boundaries and Divisions in Heritage Space

The transformation of the "Julia" mine from an operational industrial complex into a cultural heritage site represents a critical phase that commenced following its closure in 1996. After nearly a decade of neglect during which the mine suffered gradual deterioration and occasional vandalism, it was formally incorporated into Wałbrzych's Local Revitalization Plan for 2004–2006. This initiative sought to leverage the site's industrial heritage as a catalyst for economic and cultural revitalization, exemplifying the now-conventional trajectory of post-industrial sites in search of new identities within knowledge-based economies, once deindustrialization has rendered their original functions obsolete.²³

The renovation project faced numerous challenges due to conservation requirements and the site's intended functions. For the "Old Mine" to remain viable, it was necessary to introduce new functions and transform it into a public utility that would not impose an excessive financial burden on the supporting local government. According to experts, the renovation project failed to fully adhere to established principles for the adaptive reuse of post-industrial sites. Concrete examples of these shortcomings are evident throughout the complex. Perhaps most emblematic is the transformation of the chain bathhouse — a space that epitomizes coal mining culture worldwide. This historically significant area, where miners would change clothes and shower before and after shifts,

20 Many German workers were initially retained after 1945 to maintain mine operations. The "Old Mine" has recently integrated this German mining history through the 2023 exhibition "Underground World - Mining Work in Pre-war Photographs," curated by Łukasz Chruszcz, featuring a complete collection of 100 photographs acquired from German families.

21 On women's work in heavy industry in Poland see: Małgorzata Fidelis, "Equality through Protection: The Politics of Women's Employment in Postwar Poland, 1945–1956," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 2 (2004): 301–24.

22 Krzysztof Wołodzko, *Restrukturyzacja górnictwa a rynek pracy i warunki życia w regionach górniczych* [Mining Restructuring and the Labor Market and Living Conditions in Mining Regions] (Warsaw: Instytut Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych, 1997), 35–48; Tomasz Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy. Etnografia człowieka zdegradowanego* [Hunters, Gatherers, and Practitioners of Powerlessness: The Ethnography of a Degraded Man] (Warsaw: słowo/obraz/terytoria, 2014), 109–45.

23 Heike Devermann and Harald A. Mieg, eds., *Industrial Heritage Sites in Transformation: Clash of Discourses* (New York: Routledge, 2015).



Fig. 2: Mining clothes illustratively suspended on hooks in the former chain bathhouse

has been repurposed as an exhibition and performance space, with its human presence reduced to merely a few hooks with hanging clothes displayed on a mezzanine level (Fig. 2).

Equally problematic is the treatment of technological equipment throughout the complex: chains on machinery were covered with paint, destroying their functional authenticity; technological continuity was interrupted by new walls and partitions that make it difficult for visitors to comprehend the industrial processes even with guides' explanations; and contemporary materials and technologies were used to cover the original walls in some of the oldest buildings in the complex. These interventions privilege aesthetic appearance and contemporary functionality over the preservation of technical integrity and historical authenticity, creating a sanitized version of industrial history that obscures the material conditions of labor.

The "Old Mine" Center, which opened to the public in 2014, combines the functions of an industrial heritage museum with those of a contemporary cultural center. This dual identity creates inherent tensions in how the space is used and presented. While the museum component aims to "preserve industrial and technical heritage," the broader center focuses on developing cultural tourism, hosting concerts, exhibitions, workshops, and culinary events that often have little direct connection to mining history.



Fig. 3: Cart entry route to the rotary tippers. Enclosed by a wall with windows behind which the processing facility is visible

Central to the functioning of the museum are former miners employed as tour guides who conduct surface-level and underground tours. These miner-guides represent a crucial link between the material heritage preserved at the site and the intangible heritage of mining work. However, some conflicts exist between the miner-guides and the Center's management regarding heritage interpretation and presentation. The guides consistently advocate for more authentic representations of mining work, expressing frustration at what they perceive as the commercialization of their labor heritage. One guide expressed his frustration: "They want culture and entertainment, but they forget that without mining, there would be no culture here in the first place. This was our workplace, not a stage."

It is worth emphasizing that miners in Wałbrzych are organized into five associations of former miners, which testifies to the vitality of their tradition as one of the strongest working-class groups. They constitute a distinct social world that commands respect not only from the management of the "Old Mine" but also from local politicians and decision-makers in the broader urban context.

The Glass Wall

Within the "Old Mine" complex, a large glass wall emerges as a powerful actant in the heritage assemblage. This architectural intervention actively produces the visitor experience; simultaneously revealing and withholding, it allows visual access to the sorting plant while enforcing complete sensory separation. The wall performs multiple operations: it frames the ruin as spectacle, prevents embodied engagement with the space, and generates a moment of frustrated curiosity that has become a recurring element in guided tours. Here, guides typically pause to describe the "technological beauty" of the ore transportation system that once moved coal from underground to surface. What they rarely mention is how this system has been rendered permanently inoperative through renovation — rails and chains painted over, the technological continuity irrevocably disrupted where coal carts once continued to the sorting plant. The glass wall materializes a double erasure: the physical disconnection of technological processes and the narrative minimization of the labor that occurred beyond. (Fig. 3)

This transparent barrier acts as both material divide and meaning-maker. When referring to the sorting plant visible through the glass, guides typically offer only cursory remarks, often simply gesturing toward it with a perfunctory wave, stating: “That’s where coal was dumped and sorted.” Some guides point to a small booth still visible in the renovated area, explaining: “A woman would sit here and count the carts heading to the sorting plant.” One guide referred to the space offhandedly as “the ladies’ kingdom,” his tone suggesting something akin to a place “where ladies crochet doilies.” However, in late 2024, another guide employed a similar phrase — “the women’s kingdom” — but followed it with an account of working conditions and concluded: “I was sent there for just one day by the foreman. I couldn’t have tolerated longer in that noise and dust.”

This arrangement creates a contrast between spaces associated with different gendered labor: the underground transport tunnel — an element of the “men’s world” — is actively appropriated by the guides, who feel “at home” there.²⁴ In this space, they create their own educational initiatives — preparing informational displays depicting the ventilation system or methane hazards, advocating for better representation of their work. Meanwhile, the coal processing facility — predominantly a female workspace — remains a wild ruin behind glass, deprived of similar engagement and care. The glass wall becomes a manifestation of heritage practice’s implicit biases, rendering literal the conceptual boundaries of what is deemed worthy of preservation.

Following Clarke’s situational analysis approach, this glass wall is a “silent actor” in the social world of heritage interpretation, shaping visitor experiences through what it simultaneously reveals and conceals. Through situational mapping, the glass wall emerges as a key non-human actant that influences interactions between guides, visitors, and institutional narratives, creating what Clarke terms a “site of silence” around women’s industrial labor experiences.²⁵

The relative neglect of the coal processing facility reflects broader patterns in industrial heritage preservation globally, where spaces associated with extraction and primary production (typically male-dominated) receive disproportionate attention compared to spaces of secondary processing (often with significant female workforces).²⁶ This pattern becomes especially pronounced in post-socialist contexts, where the representation of women’s industrial labor must navigate both gender bias in heritage practice and the legacy of socialist-era gender politics, which simultaneously celebrated and exploited women’s participation in industrial production.²⁷ For visitors, the glass wall creates a moment of cognitive dissonance — a rupture in the coherent narrative of industrial heritage. The partial visibility afforded by the transparent barrier evokes curiosity while simultaneously denying satisfaction, creating what Urry might term a “frustrated tourist gaze.”²⁸ This frustration, however, holds pedagogical potential, as it may prompt more critical engagement with the constructed nature of heritage presentations and their inevitable exclusions.

The sorting plant visible beyond the glass constitutes not merely an architectural adjunct in the heritage complex but an entire social world of labor that has been marginalized in the commemorative process.²⁹ The women who sorted coal, operated conveyor systems, and managed quality control worked in conditions often as challenging as those faced by their male counterparts underground, yet their contribution remains literally beyond the boundary of what is presented as significant industrial heritage. The glass wall thus materializes a broader epistemological boundary between recognized and unrecognized forms of industrial labor.

24 Massey, “Space, Place and Gender,” 177-85.

25 Adele E. Clarke, “Situational Analyses: Grounded Theory Mapping After the Postmodern Turn,” *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 4 (2003): 553-76; Susan Leigh Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377-91.

26 Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 217-26.

27 Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37-62.

28 John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 91-108; John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 155-74.

29 Tim Edensor, “Sensing the Ruin,” *Senses & Society* 2, no. 2 (2007): 217-32.



Fig. 4: The same cart entry route to the rotary tippers as in Fig. 3, before the renovation of the inter-shaft building. Photo from 2006

Women's Labor Experiences

While the glass partition renders the coal processing facility physically inaccessible to museum visitors, oral histories and archival documentation provide crucial insights into this predominantly female workspace.³⁰ The sorting and processing operations, conducted in what one guide dismissively termed “the ladies’ kingdom,” constituted not merely an auxiliary function but a fundamental component of the entire mining enterprise.

Embodied work experience

The coal extracted and brought to the surface required extensive processing to enhance its quality and value. The process began as carts carrying raw material arrived at the sorting plant, where it was discharged onto vibrating screens and sorted by grain size. What emerges most powerfully from women workers’ testimonies is not the technical specifications but the embodied experience of this industrial space.³¹ (Fig. 4)

“The washery had a separate building, the sorting plant had a separate one, and the shaft hall was separate,” explains Krystyna, describing the topography of the facility. Workers did not

30 Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1-26.

31 Kathleen Canning, “The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History,” *Gender & History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 499-513.

merely perform routine activities in this space — they actively inhabited it, giving it meaning through their practices. When Krystyna describes removing stones (“you had to take a pickaxe, which already weighed five or six kilos, and you had to peck at it”) and Elżbieta recalls a near-accident (“I leaned against some railings, almost losing my lungs here”), they reveal an intense relationship between body and space. Workers and machines co-created the processing assemblage; bodies adapted to rhythms, machines responded to human interventions, creating a dynamic socio-material choreography. The sheet metal halls, multi-level platforms, and extensive conveyor belt systems created a landscape requiring constant navigation. The spatial organization affected even the most basic physiological needs. As Krystyna recalls, toilets were located very far from workstations, and female workers could not leave their positions for extended periods because “something was happening all the time.” This spatial arrangement was particularly problematic for women during menstruation.

Most striking in the workers’ narratives is the intensity of sensory experiences. Omnipresent coal dust penetrated everything, leaving its mark on bodies: “Those little black holes in the skin, so... They ate into it, well, it only came out after years,” Krystyna recalls. This dust created a characteristic image of workers, who were recognized by having “only white teeth and eyes,” as Elżbieta vividly described. The cold of metal structures was directly inscribed in bodily experience. Grażyna recalls extreme conditions: “Everything froze. Water froze, flotation froze, jigs froze.” The body had to constantly negotiate its presence in this temperature-hostile space, looking for opportunities to “put only legs, thighs” against the few sources of heat. Constant noise filled the space, creating an auditory background for daily practices. These sounds, smells, and textures created a sensory landscape that was deeply inscribed in memory.

Work in processing required a special kind of knowledge that could not be fully conveyed verbally. When Krystyna says: “you had to know where to hit the stone so that it would crack, so that it would pass through those chutes, so as not to cause a breakdown or tear the belt,” she describes a skill rooted in practice — an intuitive knowledge of materials, their behaviors, and reactions. This form of knowledge constituted an invisible but fundamental aspect of work.³²

Gender boundaries in the workspace

The processing facility space was distinctly gendered. As Grażyna notes: “At the loading area, for example, women were there by the wagons, as weighers. In flotation, there were men, because you had to use pickaxes to remove those sheets of float. Men were also at the jigs.”

This division of space and tasks reflected a deeper structure of meanings — women’s work in the processing facility was primarily reproductive in nature. As one female worker stated: “They always thought that the mine and coal belonged to men, and women were the workforce for the rest.” This illustrates the dominant norm — mine management and coal extraction were perceived as men’s tasks, while women were assigned to auxiliary roles. Similar to domestic work, these reproductive activities were devalued and rendered invisible.³³ A symbolic manifestation of this exclusion was the absence of invitations for women to celebrations for Miners’ Day named after St. Barbara (*Barbórka*).

Grażyna, as a woman in a supervisory position, experienced a particular kind of tension between her gender and her position: “When I was, as I say, the only female foreman, right? They called me that from the beginning. But later they got used to it.” In her narrative, we can see how a woman’s presence in a space traditionally reserved for men required negotiation and adaptation.

Elżbieta recalls an anecdote from the bathhouse that illustrates everyday situations in the workspace: the women discovered holes in the wall through which men were spying on them. They responded by directing a stream of water into the eye of the voyeur. This story reveals an inter-

32 See Rakowski, *Łowcy, zbieracze, praktycy niemocy*, 146-50.

33 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 15-40.

esting aspect of work reality, where even in clearly separated spaces, boundaries of intimacy were violated, and women developed their own, often ingenious ways of dealing with such situations. While in the narratives of underground miners, hard physical labor, danger, and difficult conditions usually function as elements of a heroic professional story, in the accounts of women from processing, these same experiences flow seamlessly with stories about family life, raising children, or difficulties in acquiring kitchen furniture without drawers.

When Krystyna interrupts her account of work hardships to mention how she organized childcare: “So that in the meantime, because later my mother died, so my mother was no longer there, so in the meantime, as – and then my son was a bit older, so he sat for an hour or an hour and a half at home before we changed shifts,” she shows how the experience of work was inextricably linked to other social roles she fulfilled.

Community of experience

In the difficult conditions of the processing facility, shared experiences created strong bonds between workers. As Grażyna summarizes: “those interpersonal relations were wonderful. Really wonderful. A big school.” These relationships were not abstract; they grew from the daily shared toil, the common struggle with dirt, cold, and noise.

Solidarity extended beyond routine daily support. One of the most vivid memories, to which women return with amusement and pride, concerns a crisis situation when, due to the inattention of one of the female workers, a cart tipped over, spilling several dozen tons of coal. The plant’s work stopped, and all the women immediately rushed to help. The male foreman stood aside and commented that they would probably not come to work the next day due to exhaustion. The women not only came but appeared “all smiling, happy, with cake.” This anecdote became a symbol for the women of their strength, solidarity, and irreplaceable role in the functioning of the processing facility.

Humor became a tool for processing difficult experiences. Elżbieta tells how, after an unsuccessful attempt to wash herself due to a power outage: “we get on the bus, we look at each other and laugh. One looks at the other and laughs: listen, how dirty you are, you didn’t wash properly.” In these moments of shared laughter, difficult experiences could be incorporated into a positive narrative of professional identity.

At the same time, however, women working in the processing facility experienced a sense of otherness and embarrassment about their appearance outside the workplace. Krystyna bitterly compares her appearance with female workers from other plants: “For a woman, it’s... You know, I see girls somewhere in ‘Krzysztof’ there by that porcelain, there, nicely dressed, and so on, and we’re like orphans. A headscarf on the head, a helmet, work overalls.”

This sense of distinctiveness and a kind of degradation of femininity is an important element of the experience of working in processing. The phrase “like orphans” indicates a certain stigmatization they experienced in social space. As one confession shows: “Many times I sat like that in the bathhouse — our bathhouse. I took off those dirty clothes and just sat, sat, before I went to bathe. [...] And I thought: God, no. I’ll probably quit. I probably can’t handle it. I’m probably not... [...] I’ll probably burn out physically so much that afterward I won’t be able to carry my children.”

This confession shows how work changed their bodies in ways over which they had only partial control, violating fundamental aspects of their identity as women and mothers. In Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach, the body is not just an object in the world but primarily a means of experiencing the world. In the case of women from the processing facility, the body became a site of conflict between professional identity and social expectations of femininity.³⁴

³⁴ I would like to thank Jakub Muchowski, a colleague from the [Laborans] research group at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, for bringing this to my attention; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. William

Shame and Silence: Women's Withdrawal From Heritage Production

The difficulty in finding women willing to share their experiences from coal processing facilities reveals a broader phenomenon of self-exclusion.³⁵ While former male miners actively participate in heritage production through miners' associations, as museum guides, and in commemorative events like *Barbórka* celebrations, women who worked above ground tend to remove themselves from these processes. This self-exclusion is profoundly amplified by the collective trauma experienced in Wałbrzych during the post-industrial transition: the economic collapse, social disintegration, and regional stigmatization that followed the mine closures created a powerful assemblage of shame that continues to shape possibilities for self-narration.³⁶

Through situational mapping, I identified a striking asymmetry in the social worlds involved in heritage-making: the robust presence of five active associations of retired male miners contrasts sharply with the complete absence of women-specific associations. This organizational disparity creates material consequences for whose stories become institutionalized in the heritage landscape. As Clarke suggests, absent actants can be as significant in social arenas as present ones; the very absence of women's collective organization becomes a powerful factor in how industrial heritage is conceptualized and presented.

The self-exclusion emerges from multiple interwoven factors: the internalization of value hierarchies that privilege underground mining work over surface processing; the systematic prioritization of male narratives in official heritage presentations; and most critically, the dramatic reversal in how physical labor has been valued socially.³⁷ While communist-era official discourse glorified physical labor and elevated the figure of the worker to a heroic status, the post-1989 transformation brought a complete ideological shift. The once-celebrated term *robotnik* (worker) either disappeared from positive discourse or degraded to pejorative forms like *robot* (roughly equivalent to "laborer" in its derogatory sense).³⁸

My positional mapping showed how this devaluation of physical labor intersects specifically with gender expectations, creating a double marginalization for women industrial workers. As Elżbieta, a seniors' club activist, explained, "women these days are ashamed to mention their physical work at the mines if they didn't manage to 'break out' of it and obtain a better (cleaner, lighter, more feminine) job." This internalized shame exemplifies Sayer's concept of class-based shame as an emotional response to perceived judgment, powerful in a community where physical labor performed during the communist era has been transformed from a source of pride to a marker of social stigma.³⁹

The interplay between collective trauma and individual shame has created powerful psychological barriers to participation in heritage-making processes, particularly for women whose labor was already marginalized within industrial hierarchies. Yet there are exceptions to this pattern of self-exclusion that hold potential for countering the dominant heritage narrative. Elżbieta not only engaged in multiple conversations about her work experiences but also granted permission for her entire interview to be used in workshops with students from the Academy of Fine Arts, who developed graphic novel concepts about "invisible women's labor in mining." Her willingness to share her story enacts a form of resistance against the dominant heritage discourse that has rendered women's industrial labor largely invisible.

Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12-42.

35 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006), 235-48;

36 Sztompka, "Cultural Trauma", 449-66.

37 David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 37-62.

38 Michał Buchowski, "The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother," *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2006): 463-482.

39 Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 148-172.



Fig. 5: The impossible-to-ignore coal processing facility connected to the renovated part of the “Old Mine.”
View from Wysockiego Street and the main entrance to the facility

The social arena mapping identified these individual acts of resistance as potentially transformative elements within the larger field of heritage production. When former processing facility workers do share their stories, they provide the necessary “translation” for the material testimony of the ruins — connecting physical structures to lived experiences, giving voice to what the buildings themselves cannot articulate. Weaving together workplace experiences with domestic responsibilities, emphasizing collective problem-solving over individual heroism, and articulating their ambivalent relationships with embodied femininity, their accounts create what Clarke terms “sites of possibility” within otherwise rigid discursive structures.

These alternative narratives, together with the persistent material presence of the ruins, create what Macdonald and Edensor identify as the “subversive potential” of marginalized stories to challenge conventional understandings of industrial heritage.⁴⁰ The question remains whether heritage institutions can create spaces that actively counter the mechanisms of self-exclusion — physical spaces, organizational structures, and narrative frameworks that explicitly validate women’s industrial experiences and counteract the class-based shame that currently limits their participation in heritage-making processes.

40 Sharon Macdonald, “Unsettling Memories: Intervention and Controversy Over Difficult Public Heritage,” in *Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures*, ed. Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson (London: Routledge, 2017), 93-112.

Conservation As Turning Point (?)

The material presence of the coal processing facility in Wałbrzych's landscape has undergone a significant transformation in its social meaning over time. In the immediate post-industrial period, the processing facility was simply one of many abandoned, deteriorating buildings — collectively dismissed as scrapyard in local parlance, a term that reduced these industrial remnants to mere reservoirs of scrap metal awaiting salvage.⁴¹ However, the temporal dynamics of urban revitalization have fundamentally altered the ruin's social and spatial significance.

As the surrounding areas have progressively renewed — with the renovated “Old Mine” buildings, the new railway station, and recently completed arterial roads — a stark contrast has emerged that makes the ruin impossible to ignore.⁴² This changing contextual relationship has transformed the processing facility from an unremarkable element of general post-industrial decay into a provocative anomaly within a revitalized landscape. The ruin now evokes emotional responses while also generating questions. (Fig. 5)

The coal processing facility at the former “Julia” mine constitutes one of the few pieces of industrial heritage that survived the chaotic liquidation of mines in the Lower Silesian Basin.⁴³ According to heritage experts, its historical and documentary value is “indisputable” as the only processing complex preserved from this mining region.

The plans for adapting the processing facility ruins have evolved from the initial concept of a “permanent ruin” adapted for tourism to the current recognition that the facility requires proper conservation. My positional mapping identified tensions between different stakeholders' approaches: the aestheticizing approach preferred by the city government (as investor) and the architectural firm focuses on creating spaces for cultural tourism; the technical conservation approach championed by museum experts emphasizes preserving authentic industrial features; while a rarely represented third position considers how women's experiences might be incorporated into the site's interpretation.⁴⁴

The architectural firm that renovated the above-ground buildings of the “Old Mine” is also handling the processing facility, but while they have consulted with experts from the Museum of Industry and Technology, the museum is not officially a party to these decisions.

There exists a risk that previous renovation mistakes may be repeated, resulting in over-aestheticization and loss of industrial character. The sensory qualities — crucial to understanding the working environment — may disappear. Technological sequences could be disrupted, preventing visitors from comprehending the industrial processes. As Aleksandra Kośmicka notes: “The extraordinary facility that is the coal sorting plant creates its own narrative... Inside this magical place we can still smell the scents, feel the textures of the materials, and participate with all our

41 Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 29-54.

42 Andreas Huyssen, “Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 17-28.

43 Aleksandra Kośmicka, *Rekomendacje w zakresie działań konserwatorsko-remontowych oraz tzw. dobrych praktyk stosowanych w konserwacji zabytkowej architektury przemysłowej. Opracowanie dla sortowni i budynku wagi kolejowej w kompleksie zakładu przeróbki mechaniczno-chemicznej węgla dawnej Kopalni Węgla Kamiennego “Julia”* [Recommendations for conservation and renovation activities and so-called good practices in the conservation of historic industrial architecture. Study for the sorting plant and railway weighing building in the mechanical-chemical coal processing facility complex of the former “Julia” Coal Mine] (Museum of Industry and Technology at the Science, Culture and Art Centre Stara Kopalnia in Wałbrzych, February 2025, manuscript) 7; Jacek Marciniuk, “Ochrona i konserwacja zabytków przemysłu górniczego na Dolnym Śląsku” [Protection and Conservation of Mining Industry Monuments in Lower Silesia], *Ochrona Zabytków* 64, no. 1-4 (2011): 39-54.

44 Luda Thornton, “Industrial Heritage Management in the Context of Urban Planning,” *Built Environment* 42, no. 2 (2016): 258-70.

senses in the beauty and uniqueness of this part of the mechanical coal processing facility.”⁴⁵

Despite these challenges, the commencement of conservation has created what Clarke terms a “discursive opening” — a moment when established narratives can be contested and new interpretations introduced.⁴⁶ Through situational analysis of this emerging discursive field, I identified how the concrete conservation plans might serve as a catalyst for overcoming the self-exclusion mechanisms described earlier — providing a specific material context that could motivate former female workers to contribute their knowledge and memories.

To create an effective narrative for guides who will lead visitors through the renovated space, it must be made authentic and equal in appeal to the narratives presented by former miners-guides. This requires actively seeking out women who worked in these facilities and mobilizing them to share their experiences. As these previously “shameful” working-class women’s narratives emerge, a “critical mass” may be achieved that breaks through class shame — potentially extending beyond coal processing to other industries in Wałbrzych, including the recently closed porcelain production at the “Krzysztof” factory.

Visible Ruin, Invisible Work: Conclusions

In the former skyline of Wałbrzych, the powerful structures of coal processing facilities towered over the city space — material testimonies of the industrial past whose presence was impossible to ignore.⁴⁷ These architectural colossi, with their industrial rawness, presented a tangible contrast to the invisible, yet fundamental work that took place within their walls.

The women who once inhabited these spaces have largely retreated from the heritage-making process. Their withdrawal reflects deeper structures of exclusion. When Krystyna compared herself and her coworkers to “orphans” among the more feminine porcelain factory workers, she revealed how industrial labor marked women’s bodies and identities, generating shame once these forms of work lost their social validation.

What remains particularly striking in this gendered division of heritage is a profound contradiction: the hands and bodies of women were blackened by the same coal that stained the hands and bodies of male miners. In the narratives of male miners, this coal was “black gold” — almost sacred, especially the anthracite of Wałbrzych. Yet while coal conferred a kind of sanctity upon the bodies of male miners, elevating their labor to heroic status, it did not bestow the same dignity upon women’s bodies. The very same material that transformed men’s work into celebrated heritage rendered women’s labor invisible.

Today, when only a few relics remain of the former industrial landscape, an authentic adaptation of the preserved processing facility must face a dual challenge: preserving the last material traces while simultaneously making visible the intangible heritage of labor that gave meaning to these spaces. Including women’s narratives about work in the processing facility would constitute a significant step toward breaking down class shame associated with physical labor, creating an environment where diverse working-class heritage can be appreciated.

In this ongoing process of negotiation, we might find hope in small moments of resistance — in Elżbieta’s willingness to share her story with young artists, in the stubborn materiality of the ruins that refuse simple reinterpretation. These moments suggest that despite powerful forces of exclusion, alternative narratives find ways to persist, waiting for the opportunity to reshape our understanding of industrial heritage.

45 Aleksandra Kośmicka, *Rekomendacje*, 28; see also Aleksandra Kośmicka, “Problemy adaptacji obiektów poprzemysłowych do nowych funkcji” [Problems of adapting post-industrial objects to new functions], *Ochrona Zabytków* 60, no. 2 (2012): 43-52.

46 Clarke, “Situational Analysis,” 553-76.

47 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 22-43.

The sorting plant endures behind its glass barrier, preserving sensory dimensions of work that renovated spaces cannot recapture — the dust that penetrated everything, the cold of metal platforms, the constant mechanical noise. While former workers remain largely silent about their experiences, the building itself persists as material testimony. This persistence matters. As conservation begins and new narratives take shape, the facility's industrial integrity offers something the cleaned-up exhibition spaces cannot: an honest encounter with the conditions of women's labor. The contrast between the renovated museum and the unrenovated ruin, between what is celebrated and what stands neglected, continues to show whose work counts as heritage. Yet this very contrast — visitors' frustrated curiosity at the glass wall, the ruin's stubborn presence in the urban landscape — opens space for more complete accounts of industrial history. Architecture, it seems, remembers even what we choose to forget.

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