

**Not for citation without permission**

## **On the Recuperation of Postindustrial Sites: An Aesthetic Analysis**

**Jonathan Maskit**

(Forthcoming in *Environnement, Engagement Ésthetique, et Espace Publique*, edited by Nathalie Blanc and Jacques Lolive)

Environmental aesthetics has mostly concerned itself not with changing environments, but with appreciating them. While making sense of how we do and ought to appreciate environments, both natural and built, is surely of value, aesthetics' normative function can also contribute to debates about how we ought to intervene in sites that have been altered by human activity. Such interventions are commonly called *restorations*. In what follows I seek to offer some conceptual clarification, reserving the term *restoration* for only one particular sort of intervention, while introducing two new terms, *transformation* and *renovation*, for others. These three constitute the types of *recuperative* engagement with a site, which is to be contrasted with a *preservationist* engagement, whose goal is not to change the site, but to keep it the way it is.

Of particular interest in what follows are those places that have seen some of the most dramatic anthropogenic alterations: postindustrial sites. I first clarify the distinction between green and brown sites. I then distinguish between preservationist and recuperative engagements as types of normative aesthetic practice. Next I clarify the distinction between restoration, transformation, and renovation. I then argue that there are serious shortcomings with both restoration and transformation, illustrating with several examples. Finally I turn to the argument as to why renovation is to be preferred to the other two forms of engagement.

**I. Sites.** It is commonplace, in particular when dealing with urban areas, to distinguish between *green* fields and *brown* fields. This distinction is intended to make clear the difference between those sites that have previously been developed and those that have seen no such development. In practice, however, the distinction is more complicated, since green

fields usually include parks and agricultural lands, both of which have clearly seen their own form of development. What makes a site brown, therefore, is not so much that it has been developed, but how that development has taken place. One might be willing even to be a bit loose with the term green field, and to include those sites that saw development many years ago, but have since been re-appropriated by natural forces. For example, an area that had been logged a century or so ago and then had been allowed to reforest itself, might, except for those who are deeply committed to some sort of wilderness purity, be counted as a green field.<sup>1</sup> Since my goal here is primarily to discuss what should be done with brown fields, I shall not expend more time on green fields. Brown fields are those sites that have previously been developed and are now under consideration for recuperation of some sort, whether that be redevelopment or re-naturalization. My interest here, as my title suggests, is those sites that have previously been developed industrially and are now in a postindustrial state. The question guiding my essay is this: what ought we to do with such sites?

**II. Aesthetic engagements.** While aesthetics since Kant has meant appreciating something as what it is and not seeking to change it, my interest here is in what we might call *normative aesthetics*, in particular *normative environmental aesthetics*. In other words, how ought we to change how a place looks, sounds, smells, etc. Since we are concerned with interventions in postindustrial sites, it seems fair to ask what principles should guide these interventions. To begin with, we can distinguish between two broad types of normative aesthetic engagement: preservationist and recuperative. This distinction generally will map onto that between green and brown fields drawn above. With green fields our engagements will often be oriented towards *preservation*. The goal of such preservation is a form of protection. We thus hear of wilderness preservation, farmland preservation, etc. Much of the work of park administrators, in particular in wilderness parks, is of this type. One seeks to protect the park from

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of wilderness and purity, see my "Something Wild? Deleuze and Guattari, Wilderness, and Purity," in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

encroachment, whether by developers or users of a particular type (e.g., snowmobilers or off-road vehicle users), to prevent degradation of the park's natural features, etc. Such engagements seek to preserve the site in its current form, rather than trying to make it something new or different. While there are a number of interesting issues that could be addressed here—how much change is too much, how much intervention with natural forces should be allowed, etc.—I must leave these for another time. While there is sometimes talk of preserving postindustrial sites, I take it that we do not mean in these cases preservation in my sense, but something else, since such engagements seek to change the site significantly, e.g., to turn it into something akin to a museum object that can then be preserved.

Recuperative aesthetic engagements do not take as their goal the preservation of a site; they seek to change it somehow. These are the types of engagements usually under consideration for postindustrial and other brown sites. Recuperative aesthetic engagements can be divided into three types, in order to clarify the various goals one might have in such an engagement. The first type I term *restoration*. The goal of restoration is to return a site to the way it was before its industrial use. Such restorations will entail the removal of all signs that the site had ever been used industrially. They will involve re-grading the site and then re-planting the flora that had been on the site before and may involve the reintroduction of no longer extant animals. Restorations are often undertaken with great respect for the preindustrial history of the site. Its industrial history, however, is effaced.

The second type of recuperative engagement I term *transformation*. Unlike restoration, which seeks to return a site to the way it once was, transformation has no such pretenses. As far as the industrial character of the site is concerned, transformation too will seek to eliminate its traces. However its goal is to give the site some aesthetic character that is disconnected both from its preindustrial *and* industrial pasts. Most of what takes place under the name restoration is actually a form of transformation. While efforts will be undertaken to comply with laws and regulations concerning safety, human health, etc., little regard will be paid to the species that once inhabited the site and often little more will be given

to the viability of the newly introduced mix of flora and fauna. Examples of such transformations might include the development of former landfills into public parks and golf courses or the planting of grasses and shrubs on former mine sites where forests once stood.

*Renovation*, the third type of active engagement, shows a sensitivity not only to a site's preindustrial past, but also to its industrial history. Renovation, as the word makes clear, seeks not to return to how things once were nor to break with how they now stand. Instead, its goal is to come up with a way of engaging with a site such that new possibilities are created while the traces of the site's past, preindustrial and industrial, are preserved.<sup>2</sup>

I turn now to a consideration of each of these types of aesthetic engagement in order to begin to clarify what I believe renovation is to be preferred.

**III. Restoration.** To see at least some of the shortcomings of *restoration* as traditionally conceived, I turn now to the work of Robert Elliot, Eric Katz, and Steven Vogel. In his seminal essay, "Faking Nature," Elliot argues that it is important to take into account the history of a site when evaluating its current state.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Elliot holds that restorations are little different from forged artworks. The difference between the worst Vermeer and the best van Meegeren, is that the former is by Vermeer, while the latter is by van Meegeren. That is, even our aesthetic evaluation of the artwork hinges on something non-aesthetic: our knowledge of its provenance. We reject the van Meegeren not (only) because we don't like it, but because it isn't by Vermeer. The case is even clearer when the work in question is not presented as an undiscovered Vermeer (as were van Meegeren's canvasses), but when the painting is a copy of someone else's original. In such cases the difference between this *Night Watch* and that

---

<sup>2</sup> For an earlier, and less developed discussion of renovation, see my "Line of Wreckage: Towards a Postindustrial Environmental Aesthetics" in *Ethics, Place, & Environment* 10 (2007): 323-37.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Elliot, "Faking Nature," *Inquiry* 25 (1982): 81-93.

*Night Watch* is only that this one is by Rembrandt while that one is not.<sup>4</sup> The point here is that we don't distinguish between forgeries and originals by appeals to their aesthetic qualities, but that those very aesthetic qualities are not separable from our knowledge as to the work's authenticity. In the case of restorations, Elliot's point is that it matters how the particular arrangement of flora, fauna, rocks, and water came about. A restored landscape, no matter how carefully and well done, is no different from a forged painting. It presents as natural something that isn't and thus tricks us into thinking that we are encountering something we aren't.

Katz offers additional reasons to be skeptical of restoration in "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature."<sup>5</sup> Katz is critical of restoration for two reasons. First, he argues that restoration is simply a technical fix to a technical problem. That is, Katz worries that pursuing restoration, while sometimes the least-worst option, allows us to avoid thinking about the social, technological, and economic forces and practices that have led to the site's current state. Worse yet, successful restoration may lead us to think that there is little difference between restoring a damaged site and straightening up a room or fixing a car. What is needed, argues Katz, is serious reflection on what it is that we do that leads us to see restoration as the right option. Restoration may now be needed, but it should only happen against the background of altered practices such that fewer restorations are needed in the future. While we are pursuing such restorations, however, we should not think that we are somehow bringing back the nature that once was. Like Elliot, Katz holds that all we can do is create artifacts where once nature was. There is thus, for Katz, something melancholic, perhaps even tragic, in the practice of restoration.

---

<sup>4</sup> I assume that we cannot tell them apart by use of our senses alone. There may, of course, be further differences, of the sort that artworld detectives routinely use to tell forgeries from originals: the type of canvas or pigment or even the residual traces of industrial pollutants in the paint.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Katz, "The Big Lie: Human Restoration of Nature," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 12 (1992): 231–41.

In the "Nature of Artifacts," Vogel argues that both Elliot and Katz are needlessly romantic and have found themselves pining for some pristine nature that our actions have ruined and our attempts to set things right lead not to nature restored, but to a simulacrum thereof.<sup>6</sup> Vogel's contention is that rather than seeing the creation of artifacts as unfortunate deception, we should accept it as the human condition: making things is what people do. The question for Vogel is not ought we to build or refrain from building, but what ought we build and how. Human action is not about destruction of some pure nature (that by implication would be better off without us). It is rather an unavoidable part of human action that we will create artifacts. Vogel's main point is that the very distinction between nature and culture is incoherent. There is no principle upon which we can distinguish "natural" from "artificial" human actions. Either everything we do is natural, in which case we cannot object to some of what we do as unnatural or harming nature, or nothing we do is natural, in which case there is no course of action we could pursue that would not constitute a harm to nature.

I take seriously Vogel's claim that what we need to be asking is not whether we should do something with damaged sites, but what. Of course what we build will not be "natural," if by natural we mean brought about through anything other than human actions. We might call this desideratum *honesty*, i.e., presenting a built environment as a built environment rather than a natural one. As we'll see, both transformation and renovation do better on this account.

**IV. Transformation.** While restoration seeks (and inevitably fails) to bring back into being what once was, both transformation and renovation seek to bring about something that never was before. How they do so and towards what ends marks the difference between them. Transformation avoids the pitfalls of restoration we've just seen. Since transformation seeks to make a site into something it never was before, it certainly cannot be accused of faking nature. No one mistakes a golf course or a public park for a wilderness area. In fact, if one

---

<sup>6</sup> Steven Vogel, "The Nature of Artifacts," *Environmental Ethics* 25 (2003): 149–68.

wishes to build parks or golf courses, brown fields may be better places to do so (leaving aside issues of chemical contamination and the like), since no new green fields must be developed. That said, there is an obliteration of the past involved in transformation. The past in question cannot be the site's natural history, since that has already been broken with when the site was developed industrially. Rather, it is the industrial past of the site that is covered over and forgotten when we transform a site in this way. As I will argue below, it is exactly this obliteration of the past that makes transformation problematic.

**V. Renovation.** Like transformation, renovation does not attempt to make a site look the way it was before its industrial development. It will, however, at least when done right, bear a markedly different relationship to the site's past, and therefore as well to its future. Renovation, unlike restoration or transformation, seeks to preserve, at least in part, traces of a site's industrial past. It ought to show sensitivity to the site's preindustrial character as well. No one will mistake a renovated site for anything other than what it is: a postindustrial site turned to other uses. I argue below that we ought to pursue renovation rather than transformation or restoration, but first let me illustrate with two examples.

**VI. Examples.** Both are in Germany's Ruhr Valley, a region certainly not lacking for postindustrial sites. The first is the artist Herman Prigann's *Skulpturenwald Rheinelbe* (Rheinelbe Sculpture Wood) in Gelsenkirchen. This former coal mine had seen some degree of reforestation, but was really in a state that resisted categorization, neither active industrial site nor park. It was, as Prigann puts it, "non-land." Prigann's engagement with the site sought to make it available for new uses while still preserving the memory of its industrial past. His idea was to reveal "the traces of its depletion and destruction everywhere" while making it a place of beauty that invites people in.<sup>7</sup> To achieve this recuperation, Prigann took discarded concrete blocks (some of them quite large) and old foundations together with wood from the

---

<sup>7</sup> Herman Prigann, "Rheinelbe Sculpture Wood" in *Ecological Aesthetics: Art in Environmental Design: Theory and Practice*, Herman Prigann (initiator) and Heike Strelow (ed.), 132 (Basel, Berlin, and Boston: Birkhäuser, 2004).

Jonathan Maskit

site to remake the place in a way that allows the industrial past to be remembered [Fig. 1]. Rather than romantically pining for a lost preindustrial past or seeking to cover over the site's industrial use, Prigann's work re-appropriates both pasts in a way that is always oriented towards the future.

The second is Peter Latz's *Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord* (Duisburg North Landscape Park), which addresses its site in a similar fashion although its scale is more ambitious, both in terms of the site's size as well as in the array of proposed uses. While Prigann's *Skulpturenwald* invites traditional park uses such as walking and picnicking, Latz's vision accommodates rock climbing, boating, and even scuba diving. In part this difference is due to the type of industrial "relics" in Duisburg, i.e., to the site's history. Unlike a coal mine, most of which exists below ground, Latz's site includes former blast furnaces, coal storage bunkers, and other buildings associated not only with resource extraction but with industrial production [Fig. 2]. But there was also a theoretical element to what was done in Duisburg. As Latz put it, a "theme of the metamorphosis of this landscape is one of 'utilization' of the place and the park. Instead of building objects for specific uses, fantasy and playfulness allow the existing abstract structures to function in new ways. Thus our working method is one of adaptation and interpretation, a metamorphosis of industrial structures without destroying them: the blast furnace is not only an old furnace, it is a menacing dragon rising above frightened men, and it is also a mountain top used by climbers, rising above its surroundings."<sup>8</sup> This theme of utilization springs not only from a commitment to re-use. It is also part of the theory at play in Latz's renovation:

The tasks of dealing with run-down industrial areas and open-cast mines require a new method—one that accepts their physical qualities but also their destroyed nature and topography. This new vision should not be one of 're-cultivation,' for this approach

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Latz, "Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord: The Metamorphosis of an Industrial Site," in *Manufactured Sites: Rethinking the Post-Industrial Landscape*, ed. Niall Kirkwood, 151 (London and New York: Spon Press, 2001).



negates the qualities that they currently possess and destroys them for a second time. The vision for a new landscape should seek its justification exactly within the existing forms of demolition and exhaustion. We have to ask ourselves which spaces from among the dilapidated and redundant places we want to use and occupy, and which of those have to be changed by the mark of a cultural intervention or the remediation of historical contamination.<sup>9</sup>

The description Latz here gives of his method is entirely in line with what I have called renovation. In the final section, I will make a case for why renovation is to be preferred to restoration and transformation.

**VII. Renovation's Advantages.** There are four reasons to prefer renovation when dealing with postindustrial sites. The first of these Latz makes clear: renovation does not negate "the qualities that [the sites] currently possess and [destroy] them for a second time." Renovation demonstrates a thoroughgoing respect for the past, both natural and cultural. The natural past of the site, which was interrupted by the site's industrial development, cannot be brought back. Attempting to bring back the interrupted pre-industrial past of the site (as restoration tries to do), can only take place by effacing the traces of site's industrial past. We should not forget that, whatever misgivings some of us have about industrialism, it constitutes one of the most important developments of modernity. Furthermore, generations of human beings worked (and continue to work), often for low wages and to the detriment of their health and well-being, in industrial sites such as these. To efface the physical traces of the industrial past makes easier our forgetting these lives too.

In addition to this respect for the past, renovation is to be preferred because it is more honest than either restoration or transformation. Transformation, in this regard, lies somewhere between restoration and renovation. While restoration claims to recreate nature while doing no such thing, transformation at least makes no such claims. Both of them

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 158–9.

however, present themselves as correctives to the violence that has been wrought on a site. Renovation makes no such claims, presenting itself as a respectful recuperation of a site and its history.

Renovation is also to be preferred on environmental grounds. While all postindustrial sites will require remediation of some sort to address the presence of toxins and the like, such remediations are likely to be more or less the same regardless what sort of recuperation one pursues. However, insofar as renovation seeks to reuse materials that are on site to the greatest possible degree, it will require fewer new materials (although the old materials may require a certain degree of rehabilitation). It will also avoid the costs and problems associated with the disposal of these materials, costs and problems that both transformation and restoration will have to confront.

Perhaps most importantly, restoration is to be preferred for its attitude towards the future, which requires taking seriously and learning from the past. It seems unlikely that western culture is going to embark on a path that is not in some way a further development of our industrial past. Yet it is important as we consider our options that we take seriously what has worked and what hasn't. It seems clear, at least to some of us, that for all the good that has come out of the last two hundred years of industrial culture, it is certainly not an unalloyed good. Renovation, through its aesthetic retrieval of the relics of former industrial sites, keeps before our eyes in a concrete way the memories of that industrial history. It is to be hoped that such memories will make less likely a repetition of at least some of that history's more negative aspects.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Barbara Fultner for her helpful comments on several earlier drafts of this essay.