The Obscuring of Working Class Heritage in the Province of Groningen, The Netherlands

By Garrett Burger

Working Class Heritage: The use of the material remains of working class life as a cultural, political, and economic resource for the present

In The Netherlands, a greater percentage of the land area is conserved for heritage purposes than in any other country. However, working class heritage is only very rarely the object of this strong national commitment to heritage conservation. This omission is particularly grievous in the Province of Groningen as the material remains of working class life are particularly abundant there.

To what extent is working class heritage in the Province of Groningen obscured?

Factories, social housing complexes and other material remains of working class life are inscribed on national heritage lists, physically preserved, and adaptively reused with greater frequency in The Netherlands than in most other countries. However, in Groningen and the rest of the country this heritage and others - both on and off the Monument Register - are virtually never interpreted in terms of their socio-historical importance. Instead, the Cultural Heritage Agency and other state actors have focused on the architectonic aspects of heritage. This privileges expert knowledge.

A Tripartite Eclipse

While present in the landscape, working class heritage in the Province of Groningen is obscured from view.

Among other factors, this is due to the heritage policy and management practices of the Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), and other state actors in the realm of heritage. Specifically, opportunities for public involvement in the monument designation and other heritage-related decision-making processes are virtually nonexistent. Consequently, calls that emerge from the public for the state to interpret a site in terms of its working class history or to spend funds on a building that, while architecturally unimpressive, is important to a working class community, are rarely heard.

This must be rectified because working class heritage has the potential to activate and inform ongoing labor struggles and help working class people build pride in a classist, postindustrial era.

A Typology of Tangible Working Class Heritage

Indicators of Obscurance

1. Preservation Status
2. Level of Designation
3. Amount of Socio-Historical Description in Monument Register Entry
4. On-Site Interpretation
5. Off-site Interpretation
6. Access to & Acquisition of Financial Incentives

Recommendations

1. Reform national monument designation process to create opportunities for public involvement.
2. Revise monument register entries to situate monuments in context of labor and social history in general.
3. Improve on-site interpretation of sites of working class and other heritages through use of QR Codes.
4. Create a working class heritage trail.