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Key Note: Industrial Heritage in midst of the next Industrial Revolution – new challenges in storytelling“

Since the beginning of industrialization, the world has turned faster and faster. We are all familiar with this changing world, so characteristic of the industrial age, and our sites in particular bear the best witness to this. However, the current situation, if not everything is deceptive, seems different. Our world and with it many of our principles are currently undergoing fundamental changes on all fronts. Moreover, many of the convictions that also deeply shape our work in industrial heritage seem increasingly being called into question.

This applies in particular for a fundamental confidence characterizing our industrial age from the beginning: namely, that a better future is possible with industrialization, no matter how exploitative, unjust and difficult its past may have been. Industries came and went, polluted the environment, brought crises and booms - but in the end, through all the crises (perhaps with the exception of the two world wars), this basic conviction never got entirely lost. If only we would be able to properly harness and direct the potentials of industrialization, our children could one day will be better off than us. And yes: the decades after World War II brought prosperity to millions of people in the industrialized or industrializing countries.

This utopian surplus of the industrial age is one of the foundations on which also our work in industrial heritage draws. It bears the stories we tell, the stories of the achievements of those who worked in the factories; and it justifies our message that people can be proud to have contributed to a good cause, despite all the injustices. Recognizing and honouring the life's work of those who created the legacy of the industrial age and foundations of today's society has been and continues to be the concern of our work in industrial heritage.

Industrial heritage – or as we call it appropriately in German “Industriekultur” – has its origins in the last third of the 20th century, a period in which rapid deindustrialisation with massive social problems set in. Work disappeared from the factories, fears of losing one's job spread and the ecological costs of industry and the "limits to growth" came into view for the first time. The pioneers of industrial culture had all this very much in mind - the experience of crisis was a precondition of their work. They never had a naïve idea of progress, named the dark sides of industry with social exploitation, overexploitation of nature, forced labour and war. They were also convinced that we have to talk about that, that industrial heritage is more than nostalgia, is about rethinking these problems.

This sounds topical, even if 40 years old. Perhaps we have lost this perspective somewhat over the years. Respect for people and their history was surely and rightly our first concern. It may also have to do with the fact that most people today only know industry from museums. And the fact that industrial culture has become a success story in tourism, which was and is ERIH's very own concern. Of course, we want to convey positive, uplifting messages to our visitors so that they like to come to us. All these somewhat heroic stories of hard-working miners and Promethean steelworkers, great inventors and entrepreneurs: they all come across very well and are received enthusiastically by millions of people who visit our sites.

So far, so good?

Not that this is wrong, not at all, but some stories and perspectives are missing, of women for example, or of people in the former colonies – perhaps also the voices of nature's tormented creatures.

And a new tone has been heard lately. A dystopian one. Once again, as in the founding years, critical aspects of industry are increasingly coming into view. Once again, industrial society is facing transformation, but this time much more radical, even existential. The global environmental crises, above all the climate crisis, the current distortions of globalisation, they all are calling the very foundations of industrial society into question. Many people, especially young people, are beginning to ask themselves whether our industrial way of life has a future at all. And, they name a culprit for the mess: the industry of the last 150 years, that means: us.

From this point of view, our locations become, so-to-say, the crime scenes of a misconduct against humanity and our planet Earth. From this perspective, industrial heritage sites are places of commemoration of a very different character. The smoking chimney of a steam engine becomes then a portent of the climate crisis, and the miner in the coalmine is no longer a working hero but a symbol of "fossil" patriarchy.

Thus, the image of industrial heritage is questioned as well as the way we communicate with the public. We have to face up to this fundamentally critical view of industry. First, because we want to reach out to these young people and win them over. Second, because it is also about us, about our very own job: I am deeply convinced that without an understanding of the history and legacies of industrial heritage, the upcoming transformation of industrial society won't be successful. We are in a sense experts for the transformation of industrial society - our locations are prime examples of successful change - and therefore we can and should contribute to this process.

We are already in the middle of this next "industrial revolution". It is about much more than the transformation into a post-fossil age. That alone is a big deal, because industrialisation and fossil energies has been virtually inseparable for 2 centuries, as you can learn vividly from our sites. It is also sustainable consumption, about the future of work in a digitalised world. It is about gender justice, global equality and overcoming the colonial legacy, an inseparable part of our story, often left untold in our exhibitions. All this was and is not foreign to us, but a fresh new look of a younger generation trained in post-colonial studies can make us rethink it again.

We cannot and do not want to save the world, but authentic places of industry can play a modest if active role in this societal change. Industrial culture has always been more than edification, has had the claim to be socially relevant, topical and on the pulse of the times.

To be able to do that, we have to be credible. That is, for one thing, that we have to rethink our own activities and make them more sustainable. Up to now most of us are heavy consumers of fossil energies. Then, we have to tell new stories or to tell our old stories differently. It's not about waving a moral finger and lecturing. Rather, it is about letting other people have their say in our stories. This is our topic of today.

With this year's annual conference of ERIH, we want to address some of these challenges. The response to our Call for Papers was great, and we were far from being able to consider all proposals. It shows that the topic is on the minds of many of us.

We begin by introducing the site where we are based today. The following presentations in the morning will first look at how climate crisis is changing the way we tell our stories. Sebastian Nicolai will present participatory approaches addressing the shift to post-fossil society in a former lignite briquette factory in eastern Germany; Kalle Kallio shows us how the Finish Labour Museum's revised permanent exhibition takes now a different perspective on the industrial age in the light of the climate crisis.

Kerstin Baumann then presents the ambitious exhibition portfolio of the Westphalian Industrial Museum that aims to transform its locations into places of discourse for the pressing issues of the day.

René Capovin's first contribution in the afternoon, dealing with the ERIH Water Route in the Po Valley, demonstrates just how topical industrial heritage can be. The dramatic drought this year in the Po area was a warning sign of the climate crisis. In these times of drought, to cite him, water heritage really matters.

From a different perspective, Gabriele Bosi from Prato brings together history and the present. Prato was and is still a very important centre of textile industry, facing now the challenges of a sustainable circular economy and developing tourist offers that combines the historic identity of the place with its hopefully sustainable future.

Finally, Aleksandra Chabiera reminds us, that reusing old industrial building in itself is a first step to sustainability. She shows some intriguing examples of new and unconventional conversions of industrial heritage sites and demonstrates how these re-uses can contribute to sustainable community development.

Of course, only few of the pertinent issues raised can be addressed in one day. We will actually not go into one problem, that is currently worrying many of us, namely how we can operate sites in a more energy-efficient and climate-neutral way, without fossil fuels. The war in Ukraine has dramatically tightened these questions and raised severe energetic and economic problems. CO2-neutral site running would fill a conference day of its own – beginning with energetic building refurbishments and ending with the food in our museum restaurants.

This conference can be just a start. „Protecting, linking and promoting Europe's industrial heritage in a changing world” is the title for our new Creative Europe programme, supported by the European Commission in 2022 to 2024. Our task now is to take these issues forward with the future activities of ERIH, and also to think about linking our work with initiatives like the “European Green Deal” and the “European Bauhaus”. Peter Backes gave us some hints in this direction with a short impulse.

Now I am looking forward to many exciting contributions today and new impulses, which will inspire work for our sites and for ERIH in the coming years. Thank you very much!