

NORD ARCTIC

2025
No.5

**Connecting with Heritage of
Post-Industrial Spaces:
Lessons for Arctic Communities**

POLICY BRIEF

Summary

The Arctic's vast territory contains both natural landscapes and areas shaped by centuries of human activity. Understanding past industrial uses and their connection to the natural environment helps us to envision better futures for these regions. By examining how historical industrial activities created lasting environmental impacts, and how we interpret these cultural and natural artifacts today, can help to guide our way into the future of Arctic development.

This policy brief introduces research from Nordic Arctic and European industrial heritage sites. It explores how natural and cultural artifacts gain meaning across different locations, examining how history and heritage bring new life to post-industrial spaces. The analysis highlights both official and unofficial heritage-making processes, creative reuses of old mining sites, and how different stakeholders understand and relate to industrial heritage.

Please cite as:

Pashkevich, Albina. (2025). Connecting with Heritage of Post-Industrial Space: Lessons for Arctic Communities. Policy Brief Series 2025, No. 5. Nord Arctic, Nord University. Bodø, Norway. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.18838156



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Key Messages

- ⇒ Powerful mining interests often use industrial heritage stories to justify ongoing or new mining project, even when local communities (with less power) and environmental evidence of former and future mining operations raise serious concerns.
- ⇒ Pro-mining stakeholders emphasise positive historical constructs of the past. This means that these stakeholders tend to highlight the nostalgic sentiments often related to the social cohesion and sense of identity of workers in former mining settlements, downplaying environmental and other negative impacts of mining in the same area.
- ⇒ Mining companies present current operations as fundamentally safer and environmentally less damaging than historic operations. This is used to dismiss concerns about repeating past mistakes.
- ⇒ When the same institutions oversee both heritage preservation and mining interest, the industrial heritage interpretation becomes one sided. Thus, there is an obvious need to highlight an importance of alternative community understanding in the role played by industrial heritage promoting inclusiveness and debate.
- ⇒ Local communities must have meaningful input in how their cultural heritage is interpreted and preserved. Local conditions and bottom-up involvement need to be emphasised to provide more equal possibilities for the local societies to embrace the value of preserved heritage and to reconcile with the past that is multifaceted.
- ⇒ Current and future policies must balance heritage tourism and economic development with honest education about the environmental and social impacts of mining. There is a need to strike a balance between the needs of the postmodern consumptive activities of former industrial landscape and the realities of its impact.
- ⇒ At the same time, we shall not forget the lessons of our mining “pasts”, especially in relation to our abilities to create socially cohesive local societies and utilise a power of storytelling and immersive experiences while developing tourism products and services.

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Background

This brief is a short overview of the research that critically assesses the redevelopment of old industrial areas utilizing case studies and comparisons from Nordic countries and across the Circumpolar North. There have been many detailed studies examining the connection between the interpretation of mining heritage and the involvement of local communities. This has found that the processes of reimagining of the industrial past took different directions across the studied examples and the variety of these responses are documented in Avango et al. (2023), Della Lucia & Pashkevich (2022), Pashkevich & Brandt (2024), Pashkevich et al. (2024). They show that the process of profound socio-economic changes across the Europe's industrial centres since the beginning of the 1990s has affected our understanding of industrial heritage. It has also resulted in the appearance of multilayered institutional settings meant to provide the remains of human industrial activities with the protection and necessary interpretation. This provides a baseline for the needs of urban and rural regeneration, boosts social cohesion and contributes to the sustainable economic growth of the declining industrial areas.

The evolving network of actors, such as UNESCO or International Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage, have resulted a preservation focus of safeguarding historical artefacts and site. These have come to dominate the efforts of heritage management and public authorities. This, in combination poses challenges in the way of regional and local modernisation processes. The creation of global and supra national agencies governing the process of cultural heritage preservation, including industrial heritage sites, has triggered local engagement in the complex questions dealing with the integrity of the tangible heritage sites. At the same time, much attention has also been given to highlighting the role of social representations of the significant contributions made by labour, physical structures, landscapes, and the material remains of the bygone eras (Avango et al., 2022; Avango et al., 2023; Crabeck et al. 2024).

From global to local networks in heritage preservation and development

Development of heritage sites which aim both at preservation and possibility to attract domestic and international tourists does not seem to be as straightforward as one could imagine. Our studied cases revealed that a starting point for the destination development of the former industrial sites is focused on the creation of a 'common understanding' of the values behind the heritage. However, a variety of opinions show that identifying the core value of the post-industrial landscape is a process that needs to involve a broad range of stakeholders (Della Lucia & Pashkevich, 2022; Pashkevich, Ekwall & Beckman, 2024). This means that the range of stories to be told about the former mining sites allows for alternative interpretations to emerge and creates possibilities for various groups in society to relate to them. If the focus in the interpretation of the mining heritage is aiming at preservation of historical values supporting 'an official' version of the past, it becomes challenging to create links to other tourism destinations, which ultimately negatively influences the possible economic outcomes.

Similarly, the influence of global institutions (such as UNESCO) responsible for the preservation frameworks carried out and supported by the national and regional governments can act an obstacle, rather than a valuable contribution towards sustainable societal development (Crabeck, et al., 2024; Della Lucia & Pashkevich, 2022). Sustainable regeneration of the former industrial sites is made possible in cases where a common platform for continuous dialogue within the local society and its major stakeholders is an important precondition. Once again, our studies

revealed an existing complexity of each case and the necessity to gather a situational knowledge stemming from the existing stakeholder's networks to capture the development potential that also respects local identity.

Another important aspect in the preservation and potential tourism development of former mining sites across the Nordic region reveals an interesting commonality. This common theme is: unclear understanding of ownership and the possibilities for extracting economic benefits from this heritage. The focus on destination development involves both the material and symbolic values associated with the heritage. However, finding common ground regarding these values proves to be considerably more complex. A common belief is that a well-preserved cultural heritage environment can serve as an important part of sustainable regional development, but this is not possible in case of uncertainties in relation to leadership and common shared goals. The conflict of interests among private and public actors, as well as unbalanced power relations and embedded institutional structures related to the former mining institutions can be decisive factors when trying to explore alternative uses of mining heritage (Avango et al, 2022; Pashkevich & Brandt, 2024).

Development of consumer-centred experiences and creative uses of post-industrial space

Our studies support the notion of the public sector in Nordic countries playing an important contributing role in the restoration and preservation of many post-industrial spaces, which in some cases already contributed to the creation of successful tourist attractions. The local initiatives, which often depend on small-scale entrepreneurship have varying degrees of success in developing touristic experiences. Several accounts analysing the consumer-driven approach to the development of heritage experiences, such as local participation in the tourism guiding activities, but also active use of these landscapes for leisure and sports activities, shows several important observations related to the results connected to this immersive active participation in contemporary post-industrial spaces (Pashkevich & Brandt, 2024; Pashkevich et al., 2024).

The study of the customers' own interactions with the cultural mining landscapes using the images they share on their social media accounts helped to reveal a high level of engagement with historical values. When a mining landscape is physically consumed it continues to live in visitor's mind, inspiring them to communicate their experiences that show their complete immersion with the environment surrounding them. One of the important outcomes of this study was to highlight an importance that a 'typical' visual representation of the tourist attractions appeal to a confined customer group (Pashkevich et al., 2024: 127). In case of a greater diversity to be introduced to the customer group, then the messages related to the visual image production have to be adjusted accordingly.

Another example of translating the meaning of the industrial heritage applied to the same mining heritage landscape is connected to the use of the area as an arena for the outdoor recreation and sport activities (Pashkevich & Brandt (2024). The importance of the historical events and connections to the industrial past of the site are then downplayed for the audience choosing an area for leisure or nature-based activities. Here, we see that nature and the landscape overgrown by forest is showcased, rather than emphasising interpretations of the local industrial history (Pashkevich & Brandt, 2024). In this example the postmodern consumption culture emphasises individual's willingness to immerse in outdoor leisure experiences, including extreme sports, without actively engaging in any history of the site and its surrounding landscape.

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