

With a World of Heritage So Rich

Lessons from Across the Globe for U.S. Historic Preservation in its Second 50 Years

Intangible Industrial Heritage

By Paul Hardin Kapp

The Industrial Revolution shaped most of our cities in North America and its heritage continues to influence how American cities will evolve in the 21st century. Central business districts, streetcar suburbs, and entire infrastructures were built around industrial districts. But cities in the “American Rustbelt,” such as Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland, now contain derelict quarters of abandoned historic factories, warehouses, rail lines, and water ports. Far from being “ruins,” this patrimony can and should be repurposed. These buildings can be rehabilitated in ways that retain their original use: industrial production. The issue is *how to redevelop* historic industrial architecture.

In order to understand the remnants of our shuttered industrial past, conserve it, and utilize it, we must understand the role of the “intangible” in historic preservation. Without understanding it, or at the very least, acknowledging it, we run the risk of losing the inherent meaning in the physical place and, with it, the artifact itself. UNESCO defines intangible heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, and skills transmitted from generation to generation, which provides people with a sense of identity and continuity.” *Intangible Industrial Heritage* is the traditional craftsmanship, knowledge, practices, and skills relevant to the understanding of industrial processes and the material legacies of industrial production.¹

As a Fulbright Scholar conducting research at the University of Birmingham’s Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage in 2014, I experienced how the British have re-generated their post-industrial patrimony utilizing their most valuable intangible heritage asset: British ingenuity.² In the past four years, the British developed a two-step strategy to preserve their industrial heritage: (1) They surveyed citizens in order to understand the importance of industrial patrimony in their country. And (2) they implemented an approach within their overarching strategic framework for funding preservation through various funding sources to safeguard places that have intangible industrial heritage.³ In this paper, I feature three case studies that demonstrate how the British are utilizing intangible industrial heritage to not only preserve their historic industrial past, but more importantly, make it economically relevant. I argue that intangible industrial heritage is an important tool for preservation and economic renewal in post-industrial cities in Europe and North America.

Perhaps no other industrial product produced in the 19th century epitomized the art of British industry more so than architectural tile making or faience, as it is referred to in Britain. Architectural tile work remains a prominent feature in local pubs, butcher shops, churches, front stoops, and even, London’s Underground. During the post-war era, the British tile industry closed. However, in the tiny parish of Jackfield in the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site, the British tile-making tradition endures through the use of intangible industrial heritage to fabricate new tiles and display historic ones in the old Craven Dunnill Encaustic Works Factory. In the 19th century, Craven Dunnill employed over three hundred skilled artisans to produce encaustic and

painted tiles and exported all over the world. But in 1951, Craven Dunnill abandoned the factory and it fell into decay. Fortunately, in 1983, the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust (IGMT) renovated the factory into the new Jackfield Tile Museum, through funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Demonstrating their mission as an “entrepreneurial museum,” the IGMT brought economic vitality back to the old works when they persuaded Craven Dunnill Jackfield, Ltd. to occupy the factory and produce tiles.

Today, visitors admire the historic tile collection on the upper levels of the factory and then experience how tiles for important British landmarks, such as Westminster Palace, are made on the lower levels. This historic building is now both a museum and a working factory. Tourists and tile making workers intermingle as they understand and appreciate both the tangible heritage (the exquisite tile collection in the landmark building) and the intangible heritage of 21st century tile making. Craven Dunnill Jackfield Ltd. could have fabricated tiles anywhere but they chose to return to their original building, which gives their product inherent worth as well as the enhanced value of provenance.



Figure 1: Jackfield Tile Museum, Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site, UK. (Photograph courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, UK)

Living industrial traditions⁴ continue to utilize their historic factories in the UK. Historic factories are best used when their original use—the intangible heritage—remains.

Manufacturing and creating has, and always will be, a dirty messy enterprise. Advances in life safety have greatly improved workplace conditions since the 19th century but less-than-pristine places are still needed in 21st century manufacturing. After decades of neglect, British craftsmanship is now appreciated. Nowhere is this more evident than in the “Little Mesters’ Yards” in Sheffield. Beginning in the Middle Ages, “mesters” (Old English term for “Masters”) have been producing cutlery and tools throughout this historic city. Typically operating on a small scale, the

mester, and no more than two apprentices, made wood and stone chisels, precision tools, and sterling silver cutlery in small labyrinth-like purpose-built factories. These buildings, known as “Little Mesters’ Yards,” occupy entire city blocks in Sheffield and consist of shallow depth floors, and large expanses of wall fenestration. They were planned around courtyards that provided daylight to the upper floors and processing areas for raw materials and finished goods at the ground level. Portland Works, built in 1871 and a Scheduled II* landmark⁵, continues as a functioning little mesters’ yard but as recently as five years ago, it was slated for demolition. It was saved when the tenants, all of whom were mesters, worked together and purchased it through a loan from the British Architectural Heritage Fund.⁶ Portland Works remains dirty, but in sound condition, allowing cutlery making to continue as it has for over one hundred and forty-five years. Little mesters’ yards, such as Portland Works, can be both historic landmarks and working factories that allow the unique intangible industrial heritage to stay relevant in historic cities. Understanding the important intangible heritage by both policymakers and building occupants was the key to its preservation.



Figure 2: Portland Works, Sheffield, UK.
(Photograph courtesy of Portland Works, Ltd., UK)

Urban industrial districts contain an industrial intangible heritage that allows entrepreneurship to flourish. Pubs and churches, streets and alleyways, and government agencies provided British artisans places to socialize and facilitate business dealings to accommodate large business orders, often from the far corners of the world. British geographer Rodney Tolley attributed the social interactions in

these districts as the basis for industrial conurbation. He called this urban spatial structure and business clustering “local industrial linkage”— the development of support networks that encourage idea exchange, sub-contracting and specialized processing all residing in spatial concentrations of small or medium-sized firms where the same industry exist.⁷ In Birmingham’s Jewellery Quarter, local industrial linkage is being re-experienced by a new generation of artisans. Recognizing the heritage of innovation in this Birmingham district, the Royal Society of Artisans initiated “Artisan 21,”⁸ a volunteer-based project aimed at introducing young emerging entrepreneurs to the district that was historically built for small enterprise. Today, customized products are being produced in the same converted 18th century terrace villas that were first used by pioneering industrialists such as James Watt, Matthew Boulton, and William Murdoch.

What makes the Jewellery Quarter a vibrant, but historic, district is its intangible heritage. Artisans continue to interact with each other in its narrow streets and pubs. They appreciate the light filled small-scale jewellery factories. But most importantly, the Birmingham Assay Office continues to play an important role in the everyday lives of the district’s inhabitants as it did when it was established in 1773.⁹ Here, jewelers have their products assayed and the iconic anchor hallmarked on their products. All the while, they interact with their neighboring competitors. Often, they continue their happenstance meeting at the pub across the street. This centuries-old business and social tradition, created by 18th century artisans, is once again relevant in the new innovation economy, where ideas are valued over product quantity and open communication appreciated.



Figure 3: Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham, UK
(Photograph by Author)

Industrial intangible heritage is the basis of industry in Britain. Artisans brought about the Industrial Revolution and modernity. As Fordist-based manufacturing becomes globalized and automated, the historic Pre-Fordist shops and yards can continue to the innovation economy. Be it the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site (known as “the Birthplace of Industry”), Sheffield’s Little Mesters’ Yards, or the Jewellery Quarter, place matters in high-

value industrial production. The industrial intangible heritage plays a significant role in this value. Both consumers and manufacturers appreciate the place where a product has been made for over many centuries. In the UK, industrial intangible heritage is a living heritage and it has been embraced at the grassroots and policymaking level. The intangible of industrial heritage preserves an industrial site’s meaning and embeds products with inherent value. Understanding

and then utilizing intangible industrial heritage can provide a model for preserving American industrial patrimony.



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¹ Mike Robinson, Director, Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, University of Birmingham, Interview by author, Birmingham, UK, February 15, 2014.

² Shane Gould, "The Rolt Memorial Lecture 2012: Industrial Heritage at Risk," *The Journal of Industrial Archaeology* 2015: 74, accessed 30 May 2016, doi: 10.1179/0309072815. In 2011, English Heritage (now known as Historic England) conducted a public survey addressing industrial heritage in the UK. 64% people surveyed agreed that the Industrial Revolution is the most important period in British history.

³ Heritage Lottery Fund UK, <https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/our-strategy> accessed 30 May 2016. The Heritage Lottery Fund receives its funding from the British Lottery. Since 1994 it has awarded £7.1 billion to over 40,000 heritage projects (historic architecture, engineering, archaeology, and objects). Architectural Heritage Fund, UK, <http://www.ahfund.org.uk> accessed 1 June 2016. The Architectural Heritage Fund provides loans and guidance to local organizations throughout the UK.

⁴ Edward Shills, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12-137.

⁵ Historic England, "Portland Works List Entry Number: 1271036, Grade II,*" accessed 30 May 2016, doi: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/results?q=Portland%20Works%20&searchtype=nhlesearch>. Historic monuments in England are designated as "scheduled" landmarks. This policy dates back to the 1882 Ancient Monuments Act.

⁶ Portland Works.Co.uk. <http://portlandworks.co.uk> and <http://www.ahfund.org.uk> accessed 30 May 2016.

⁷ Rodney S. Tolley. "Telford New Town: Construction and Reality in the West Midlands Overspill," *The Town Planning Review*, 43, No. 4 (July 1972): 343-360, accessed 24 May 2016, doi: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40102899>.

⁸ Royal Society of Artisans (RSA), "Artisan 21," <https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/fellowship-projects/fellowship/artisan21> accessed 1 June 2016. In 2014, the RSA funded a study by the University of Warrick to research how young artisans can use the intangible heritage of the Jewellery Quarter for innovation-based industries.

⁹ BBC News, "Birmingham's Assay Office moves to new premises in the Jewellery Quarter," 23 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-33243624>, accessed 1 June 2016. Recognizing its important role in the Jewellery Quarter, the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter built a new modern facility in the district in order to continue to centuries-old jewellery industry in Birmingham.