Perspectives for the Conversion of a XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century Marseille Tartaric Acid Factory: Pollution, Heritage, and Grass Roots Initiatives by Marta Rosenquist

The association of pollution with abandoned factories generally has an adverse impact on the reflection on possibilities for conversions. The notion of pollution surrounding such an operation evokes images of lethal air, hazardous industrial sites, as well as costly operations to decontaminate. Sitting on a coveted spot above the Mediterranean sea by the Calanques National Park, the Legré-Mante Tartaric Acid Factory in Marseille has a long-standing relationship with pollution: Indeed, some of the site’s oldest and most remarkable industrial elements were erected to reduce factory pollution in the late XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century. Paradoxically, in the case of Legré-Mante, the factory’s associations with pollution have somehow facilitated the potential for a successful reconversion in unexpected ways.

The History of Legré-Mante: From Lead to Tartaric Acid

The Legré-Mante Factory was founded in the context of the industrial development on the southern edge of the Marseille coastline, an area to which factories had been relegated in the early XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century. The industries present included lead factories, spinning mills, and glassworks. In 1872, Hillarion Roux founded a lead-refining factory at Madrague de Montredon, on the site of the Bastide Roze, dating from the XVIII\textsuperscript{th} Century. The new factory was part of the local development in the lead ore processing industry, which made Marseille a French leader in the field at the end of the XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century\textsuperscript{i}.

It was during this period that the remarkable 800-meter smelter chimney was constructed, rising dramatically on the hillside above the factory. The chimney was equipped with a 40-meter-wide condensation chamber, as required by the local public authorities. Alas, the system did not appear to resolve the pollution problem: In 1878, following a formal complaint from a neighbor whose pine grove was dying, the Tribunal de première instance de Marseille required factory owner Hillarion Roux to extend the chimney 200 meters farther\textsuperscript{ii}.

After ten years, production ceased and the factory was subsequently sold to the Mante family, who converted it to the fabrication of tartaric acid, used mainly for the wine-making industry: Legré-Mante et Compagnie was thus founded in 1887. In the early 1890’s, the factory was expanded in order to autonomize the production. Installations for the stocking and treating of
chlorohydric and sulfuric acid were constructed in the buildings formerly consecrated to the treatment of lead galena. Legré-Mante thus became the only site of tartaric acid production in France, and at the end of the XIXth Century, gained a great notoriety in that domain.

Legré-Mante et Cie continued operating on the site until 1979, when it was acquired by the Margnat-Tassy company, who continued the tartaric acid fabrication under the name SAS Legré-Mante from 1982 on. After 135 years, the factory activity ceased permanently in 2009. Despite their deterioration, the XVIIth and XIXth Century industrial architecture exudes an excellence through the quality of the architectural signature (figure 1), and the factory largely retains its original appearance, as shown in an engraving dating from 1885 (figure 2). The large industrial halls, dating from the 1880’s, feature limestone frameworks reinforced with corner chains harped in freestone, as well as pediments pierced with large, semi-circular brick bays, which also harped in freestone (figure 3).

2009 Factory Closure Coincides with Developing Awareness of Pollution Linked with XIXth Century Industrial Activity

Following the announcement of the factory closure, the 48 remaining Legré-Mante employees occupied the tartaric acid factory in protest of the decision. During this period, at least one potential buyer, a group specialized in the reprisal and development of troubled chemical companies, was in contact with the factory workers as well as the factory director. However, there was no follow-up, and with that closure, Legré-Mante definitively turned the page on the industrial activity along Marseille’s southern coastline.

The years preceding the factory closure saw the beginning of an awareness of the industrial pollution related to the factories that had operated in the vicinity from the early XIXth Century. The first disclosure, in the early 2000’s, concerned the former Escalette Lead Factory, located less than one kilometer from Legré-Mante. A study then carried out by such authorities as l’Institut national de veille sanitaire, Aix-Marseille Université, and l’Agence nationale de recherche (ANR) found the area to be polluted, namely with zinc, cadmium, lead and arsenic. Furthermore, research led by the ANR found elevated levels of arsenic and lead well-beyond the industrial sites in the vicinity. This new awareness prompted the local inhabitants to get involved in grass-roots activities and create new associations to preserve their local environment.

In 2011, two years after the factory closure, the real estate developer Océanis acquired the site and proposed a large-scale real estate project for the former industrial site. The project featured
325 units, including 285 apartments, and 34 hillside houses above the industrial site. Three local Comités d’intérêt de quartier - neighborhood interest councils - expressed the following environmental concerns about the project:

- The absence of an impact study
- The absence of an environmental incidence study, given the proximity of the Calanque National Park
- Failure to respect coastal regulations
- The absence of a safety file for the smelter chimney

It was in this context that le Comité Santé Littoral Sud (CSLS) was created by residents concerned by questions of environmental health, and to fight for the respect of laws and regulations concerning industrial sites and polluted soils. Their activities concern the entire former industrial zone along the coast on either side of the Legré-Mante factory, with a particular focus on its site - for which they demand a “depollution without danger for the population”vi, and a concertation on prevention measures and protection of inhabitants. Following the local inhabitants’ numerous contestations of the large-scale real estate project, the totality of the Océanis building permits were cancelled or have expired.

In 2017, the Legré-Mante site was acquired by the company, Ginkgo, a European Investment Fund well-known for acquiring highly polluted industrial sites. Once again, the City of Marseille appeared to support a real-estate project to “finance the decontamination of the site”vii. However, while the first real-estate project intended for the Legré-Mante site called for the demolition of the totality of the site’s structures, except the red-brick chimney stack, this second project called for the preservation of certain factory building façades and volumes. The project included a seaside resort featuring 120 rooms, a retirement home with around 70 rooms, over 50 housing units, as well as businesses and local services. As was the case with the first project, the questions regarding the environmental safety precautions surrounding the decontamination of the site were not adequately addressed.

Legal Action Against Aix-Marseille Provence Metropolitan Area and Valorization of Industrial Heritage

In June 2021, the Association Santé Littoral Sud (ASLS) - accredited as an association in 2016 -, along with five other local associations and 22 residents, filed an official complaint with the Judicial Court of Marseille for “deliberate endangerment of others, waste disposal, destruction of habitats of protected species, and water pollution”vi. This decisive legal action was followed
within a few days by the election of a new Marseille mayor, after 25 years of Jean-Claude Gaudin, representing the conservative Les Républicains political party. The new mayor, Michelle Rubirola\textsuperscript{vii}, represents l’Europe Écologie les Verts (The Green Party), and the new municipal administration has permitted a renewed dialogue with the neighborhood associations concerning Legré-Mante.

I have participated in the ASLS activities since fall 2019. Starting around a year after the beginning of my participation, I noticed a gradual shift from an association exclusively aiming to protect local inhabitants from pollution and preserving the village-like environment, to one which began to valorize the heritage surrounding the Legré-Mante Factory. This change may be partially due to my presence as a researcher specialized in the conversion of industrial heritage. But it is certainly also due to the realization that the neighborhood inhabitants are very much attached to the industrial memory of Madrague de Montredon. There are signs of an awareness that since the dangers of the pollution associated with the factory are finally being recognized, the last XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century Marseille factory in the area to close is not just a ‘site to decontaminate’, but also contains a few hidden treasures.

The activities I have been involved in have included a presentation on the Chevalier Roze, whose bastide - still visible today - was built by adding two wings to the factory site’s original building. The Chevalier Roze is an important figure in Marseille history for the key role played in saving the city from the Great Plague of 1720. Oddly enough, events commemorating the 300\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Great Plague were taking place in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic started to impact Marseille. The bastide was later integrated into the factory, but its buildings are still recognizable, and distinctive period features, such as the Pierre Puget entryway, remain part of the edifice.

Other initiatives I have participated in include an official request, in May 2021, for the factory buildings and elements associated with the site to be registered as ‘Historic Monuments’, submitted to the Direction régionale des affaires culturelles. This request included the following elements in and around Legré-Mante: The main factory halls, the smelter chimney and its condensation chambers, the red-brick vertical chimney, the Canal de Marseille (figure 4) - which supplied water to the factory -, the XVIII\textsuperscript{th} Century Bastide du Chevalier Roze, the XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century Bastide standing above the factory site (figure 5), and the XIX\textsuperscript{th} Century Poste d’octroi (plant allocation station). While I was the one who originally suggested to the ASLS that these features should be recognized and accorded the protection the status of ‘historic
moment’ would entail, the formal request was officially submitted by the Marseille association *le Comité du Vieux-Marseille*, with our assistance. One of the key documents submitted with the request was the article on Legré-Mante that I co-authored with Gérard Buffa, published in the June 2020 edition of the French journal *Patrimoine Industriel*. The important stakes of Legré-Mante for the Marseille Municipality mean that the application is likely to be a lengthy process, and it is certainly not guaranteed to be accepted. However, the simple fact that the local cultural authorities find themselves considering the possibility of attributing Legré-Mante the status of ‘historic monument’ can be considered a victory in itself.

**Ginkgo Request for Building Permit Annulled: The Question of Alternative Uses for Legré-Mante**

In September 2021, the ASLS was informed that the request for the building permit made by the Ginkgo European Investment Fund was no longer under examination. While it had neither been “rejected” nor “approved”, it was declared permanently “frozen” - annulled - and it was specified that there would be no further examination of that request. While no explanation has been given, the various actions against the real-estate project led by grass-roots neighborhood groups - and the legal action led by ASLS in particular - are believed to have played an important role in this decision.

The recent turns of events and the initiatives taken by neighborhood activists have led to an evolution of the image of the Legré-Mante Factory: Once thought of as a polluted eye-sore behind a high factory wall, there is a growing vision that the industrial elements of the factory possess some interest and value in themselves, not just the value of the land they stand on, viewed in terms of its real-estate property development potential. The recognition of the importance of the pollution, as well as the absurdity of building a large-scale housing project adjacent to a national park in a zone whose road infrastructures are already saturated, has been a key factor in provoking the municipalities’ reconsideration of the project. The change in municipal governance has also played favorably in this scenario. But if Legré-Mante – or at least certain of its structures – are to be preserved, one must recognize and scrutinize its industrial heritage. This recognition can be sought through initiatives, such as those developed by ASLS in conjunction with other local associations: Presentations on the importance of the heritage related to the site or formal requests for ‘historic monument’ inscription. Not only must the local inhabitants recognize the value of the industrial heritage, but so must the local and municipal authorities, as well as the regional cultural authorities. One must also recognize
the fact that a former factory must “earn its living”; in other words, a practical new use for the industrial buildings must be found.

The coming months will necessarily bring about a further evolution in the perception of Legré-Mante. Given the proximity of the factory to the Calanques National Park and the long-standing relationship the site has with pollution - for better or worse - a conversion integrating its industrial history, the national park, pollution, ecology, Mediterranean biodiversity, and research may be a pertinent choice.viii While it is impossible to foresee what the future will bring, local Marseille grass-roots activists are paving the way to lead to more positive perspectives for the former Legré-Mante Factory.

1 Buffa, Géraud et Marta Rosenquist, 2020, « Patrimoine industriel et pollution : le cas emblématique de Legré-Mante à Marseille », Patrimoine Industriel, Nº 76, p. 36-45.
v Buffà et Rosenquist, p.43.
vii In December 2020, due to a reshuffle within the municipal cabinet, Dominique Payenne replaced Michelle Rubirola as Mayor of Marseille. Rubirola, however, remained as First Deputy Mayor.
viii Buffà et Rosenquist, p.45.

Illustration captions

FIGURE 1. Factory seen from Mont rose with the XIXth Century Bastide on the right, 2019. © Marta Rosenquist
FIGURE 2. Overview and lay out of the factory used in property sales announcement, 1885, drawn from Daumalin, Xavier and Laffont-Schwob (dir.), 2017.
FIGURE 3. Tartaric, resin, seignette, and cream halls, 2020. © Marta Rosenquist
FIGURE 5. XIXth Century Bastide with red-brick chimney on right, 2020. © Marta Rosenquist