Toxic industrial heritage and heritage futures: the case of asbestos in Belgium (Europe)

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Abstract
Since the 1990s, the use and reuse of asbestos is prohibited in Belgium and Europe. This highly toxic mineral has been widely used in several products and building materials. Scientific research argues that not only professionals who used to work in the asbestos industry, but everyone who has close contact with asbestos products is in danger of developing asbestos related diseases. The prohibition doesn’t mean contemporary societies don’t face massive challenges in the management of this toxic heritage. In Flanders, Belgium, the local government has developed a long term policy, aimed at creating an asbestos safe environment. This plan also involves the sector of industrial heritage, as is shown by a heritage project of ETWIE, the Flemish Heritage Center on Industrial Heritage. This presentation/paper tackles the issue of asbestos in industrial heritage from two perspectives. First of all, it will argue that current and future management of asbestos in industrial heritage can benefit from the theoretical insights of the Heritage Futures Project and other projects dealing with ‘difficult’ or ‘controversial’ heritage. A long term perspective is needed, in order to safeguard knowledge on the industry and other health-related issues. Secondly, this presentation/paper will present the results of a large scale project on inventorying asbestos in heritage sites and museum collections as a best practice. New asbestos products in collections have been identified and documented in a new publicly accessible asbestos inventory.

Introduction

Once described as the mineral with a thousand uses, asbestos is, certainly in Europe, know as a silent killer. Compared to other toxic substances, close contact with the mineral itself or damaged and weathered asbestos products does not cause immediate illness. Only after decades asbestos related diseases can develop. The latest scientific research argues that not only professionals who used to work in the asbestos industry, but potentially everyone who had or has close contact with those asbestos products are in danger of developing the well-known diseases like mesothelioma or asbestosis.

The last decade, a new sense of urgency is apparent amongst policy makers in Belgium, especially due to new insights in research on the rapid deterioration of asbestos products. Having the reputation of lasting forever, sample research demonstrates high levels of asbestos fibers releasing from e.g. building materials and everyday life products. Moreover, the country is known for its massive use of asbestos, certainly in the 1960s and 1970s, earning itself the questionable title of asbestos champion. Since the 1990s, the use and reuse of asbestos is prohibited in Belgium and in Europe in 2005. The prohibition doesn’t mean contemporary societies don’t face massive challenges in the management of this toxic heritage.

In Flanders, Belgium, the local government has therefore developed a long term policy, aimed at creating an asbestos safe environment in 2040 (OVAM 2018). Asbestos safe, and not free of asbestos, as the mineral was also processed in permanent formworks and several utility lines and pipes, which cannot be removed easily. One of the recent initiatives by the government is the asbestos inventory
for houses built before 2001. When selling real estate, an official asbestos inventory should be presented to the buyers of the property, together with other official documents.

It is within this context that the Flemish Center for Industrial Heritage ETWIE started a two year project on the history and heritage of asbestos and its industry in 2020. This paper will discuss the most important results of the project, linking it to the theoretical research framework developed by heritage researchers in the European project Heritage Futures. But let’s first take a specific look at the history and heritage of asbestos in Belgium and the specific challenges for the industrial heritage.

Asbestos, its history and heritage

Asbestos is an umbrella concept that covers six specific minerals with some extraordinary characteristics: heat resistant and fireproof, isolating, filtering, protecting against micro organisms etcetera. From a geological point of view however, other minerals have the same characteristics, but have never been commercially exploited like e.g. chrysotile, the white mineral that is mostly associated with asbestos. Although the famous Encyclopédie of Diderot and D’Alembert mentions an important asbestos mine in Namur in the low countries, our country never had an active asbestos mine (Gurdebeke 2022).

The mineral was known for centuries, but it is only since the first industrial revolution in Europe, and more specifically since the 1850s, that the mining and export of asbestos and the production of asbestos products ran at full speed. In Belgium, the first companies were active since the 1880s, specializing in asbestos paper and asbestos textile. The Austrian industrial Ludwig Hatcheck invented and patented the reinforced asbestos cement panels in 1900, revolutionizing the construction business in the next decades. In 1905, the Emsens Family obtained a license from Hatcheck, starting in Brussels and later in Kapelle-op-den-Bos a Belgian brand of the already established Eternit brand in Europe and abroad. In the years that follow, other big construction companies specialize in building materials reinforced with asbestos, like Scheerders Van Kerckhove in Sint-Niklaas (Januarius 2022).

As already mentioned in the introduction, the import of asbestos from Canada, the production and the use of asbestos products really peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, making it an important postwar Belgian industry. The complete history of this industry still needs to be written, although that several case studies are already available (Van den Borre 2017). The same goes for the industrial heritage of the asbestos industry. Former asbestos producing companies like SVK and Eternit have successfully adapted their production in the 1990s, still producing NT building materials containing no asbestos. These companies operate from the historical sites. Other companies went out of business in the 1970 or 1980. Hardly any physical remain has been reused, listed or protected, as they ware rapidly torn down after they closed the gates.
If we take a look at the museums, we notice that there is no asbestos museum in Belgium, in contradiction to other European countries, e.g. the Netherlands. And finally, looking at the intangible heritage as defined by the UNESCO Convention of 2003, no specific initiatives can be mentioned, besides an important oral history project that will be elaborated further in this paper (Januarius 2022).

Why should we talk about asbestos as (toxic) heritage?

To sum up, the asbestos industry has been very important for the Belgian history and economy, not only from the perspective of the companies, but also from the consumers’ perspective: the Belgians loved their asbestos in the 1960s up until the 1990s. And even today, the older generation isn’t aware of the possible problems the use of certain products can generate.

The raising awareness in the industrial heritage sector in Belgium occurred only the last ten years. The Flemish Center for Industrial Heritage ETWIE, together with the Museum of Industry in Ghent, played an important role with several initiatives. There is not only a perception problem in the older generations; younger colleagues (mostly with a background in social or human sciences) are born after the ban of asbestos in Belgium and hardly recognize the asbestos products. Even in specialized training, e.g. conservation and restoration at the University of Antwerp, future specialists in specific materials hardly have any knowledge about asbestos. The general knowledge of asbestos is therefore limited.

But there is also another problem: asbestos is not a popular topic to talk about. It is silenced, specifically in the regions where the former asbestos producing companies are located. The well known author Johan de Vos wrote a book about the history of Sint-Niklaas, the home town of the already mentioned asbestos company Scheerders Van Kerckhove. Based on oral histories, he wanted to write a chapter on the history of asbestos in his beloved city. When the interviewees heard about his plans to publish his book, they all withdrew their statements, afraid of the reaction of the company, family and relatives still depending of the work provided by Scheerders. De Vos concluded in his book: asbestos is a forbidden word in Sint-Niklaas.

This is an excellent example of the theoretical research of Gustav Wollentz and other heritage specialists conducted in 2020. The impressive volume Heritage Futures has a chapter on toxic heritage. The research question is how different forms of controversial heritage, like toxic heritage (nuclear waste, but also asbestos) can and should be managed. Wollentz and his colleagues argue that a wrong management of this heritage can lead to several problems. Health issues are of course evident. They focus moreover on possible tensions within heritage communities due to a non-management of the past and its heritage. The authors see three specific strategies: when heritage is forgotten so that important stories may not be transmitted further; when a heritage is remembered in
order to promote a specific and exclusive version of the past; when heritage is designed so that it supports dangerous politics. The case of author Johan de Vos in Sint-Niklaas demonstrates that the marketing strategies and politics of the asbestos company were very successful in silencing local communities and even politics (Januarius 2022).

To increase the asbestos wisdom in the (industrial) heritage sector and to break through the asbestos silence, the Flemish Center for Industrial Heritage ETWIE launched, with the support of the ministry of culture, a two-year project on toxic heritage – asbestos. In the next part of this paper, we will discuss the most important results of this project.

**Increase your asbestos wisdom!**

One of the goals of the project was increasing the knowledge on asbestos products. Our focus was not on the built heritage, but on less known applications found in technical or industrial museums in Belgium. Extensive research has indeed been done by the Free University of Brussels regarding asbestos in buildings (VUB 2016).

According to the latest research, more than 3000 asbestos products have been documented by specialized asbestos research bureaus. Unfortunately, the research result are not accessible, as these research bureaus are commercial and not non-profit organizations. Therefore, the knowledge remains limited to the asbestos experts of these commercial bureaus. There are of course some exceptions. Asbestorama is a personal initiative of photographer Tony Rich (Rich 2022). It is currently one of the most important online FLICKR pages on asbestos that is publicly accessible. Unfortunately, the photos are not free of copyright and the metadata of the content is not elaborated according to the latest insights in data base management.

After visiting more than 30 industrial and technical museums and private collections in Belgium, we compiled a publicly accessible photo database with all the results of our research. Our asbestos specialist did a visual screening of the exhibitions and the depots of the museums. After the visual inspection, some objects could with certainty be labeled as containing asbestos. Some objects needed further analysis in the lab; these were labeled asbestos suspected in anticipation of the final test results.

In creating this database, we faced three specific challenges. First of all, we wanted to develop a asbestos specific content management system. Existing software has a more general approach. Specific metadata relevant for asbestos research and management could not be written in the traditional fields of existing systems. This is why we developed a new content scheme for asbestos in collections, providing the necessary information, based on our own research.
A second challenge concerns the visualization of asbestos in a photo data base. Looking at the impressive FLICKR page of Tony Rich, one can sometimes wonder where the asbestos is exactly situated in the product or the object. Not every object is made 100 percent out of asbestos; sometimes it is a small part of e.g. a larger machine. That is why we developed a hot spot tool in the content management system. This tool enables us to pinpoint exactly in the picture were the asbestos is located. This pinpoint also contains the possibility to add a specific photo detail of the asbestos.

A final challenge has to do with the copyright of the pictures. In the growing field of industrial heritage in Belgium it is expected that content should be shared in as many ways as possible. Again, after intensive research, the license CC – 0 has been attributed as much as possible to all the images in our data base. This means that the photos belong to the public domain and can be used and reused without any restrictions.

Conservation and management of asbestos in collections

Although we follow the policy of the Flemish government regarding the asbestos safe environment in 2040, we also believe that it is crucial to safeguard asbestos in museum collections whenever this is possible. Indeed, the heritage significance of asbestos for Belgium’s industrial heritage is high. That’s why we developed several tools for industrial heritage sites and collection managers. An asbestos safe collection management is the central thread.

How to consolidate asbestos containing objects in a depot? This research question has been tackled in close cooperation with a restoration bureau Art Salvage. We tested the current product Foster that is used by companies specialized in removing asbestos. Foster helps fixating asbestos in order to prevent the spread of fibers in the air. The first results of our sample research indicates that Foster is not as efficient as two other products. For asbestos textile, Methocel 4AC had satisfying results; for asbestos cardboards Klucel G looks promising. More research is necessary, but these two well known conservation adhesives are not expensive, easy to order and apply. With this simple intervention, possible hazards can be avoided (ETWIE 2022).

Oral history project: the book of Christiane Thijs

A final highlight is the result of an oral history project by the author Johan de Vos, mentioned earlier in the paper. Since a couple of years, together with other heritage volunteers, de Vos is interviewing people who have an asbestos related disease, or their relatives. This oral history of the Land van Waas, the region around the already mentioned Sint-Niklaas, documents the tragedies of workers and their families involved in the asbestos industry. These testimonies are really unique and the narratives really
show a great variation in emotions. The transcriptions provide interesting information on the production process of asbestos products. But, more interestingly, they demonstrate how local (heritage) communities experience asbestos and the consequences of working in and living nearby an asbestos factory (Januarius 2022).

One of the interviews led to a published book earlier this year. Christiane Thijs – a biography tells the story of a 43 year old and unknown woman in Sint-Niklaas who died of mesothelioma in 1988. She was the daughter of a factory worker employed by Scheerders Van Kerckhove. She never set foot in the factory, nor as a visitor or as a factory worker. She had her own career in the knitwear industry in Sint-Niklaas. Washing the clothes of her father when she was young, is probable the cause of her illness.

With this book we hope that the perception problem surrounding asbestos in Belgium and more specifically in Sint-Niklaas can be addressed from a completely different angle (a personal story that moves people when reading it).

Bibliography and selected publications

E-sources

OVAM 2018: https://ovam.vlaanderen.be/omgaan-met-asbest
ETWIE 2022: https://www.ziterasbestin.be
RICH 2022: https://www.flickr.com/photos/asbestos_pix/

Books and articles


**About the author**

Joeri Januarius holds a PhD in history on the topic of mining history and industrial heritage. As of 2015, he is the director of the Flemish Heritage Center on Industrial Heritage (ETWIE, [www.etwie.be](http://www.etwie.be)), which is integrated into the Museum of Industry in Ghent (Belgium). Between 2015 and 2018, he was appointed as guest lecturer at the Free University of Brussels to teach the introductory course on industrial archaeology and industrial heritage to graduate students. Subsequently, in 2019 he was invited by the University of Antwerp to provide guest lectures on industrial heritage in Belgium. He has published several articles and books on the topics of industrial heritage, intangible heritage, the safeguarding of crafts and industrial techniques. In addition he is an editorial member of the Flemish-Dutch industrial heritage journal ‘Erfgoed van Industrie en Techniek’ and is both the president of TICCIH Belgium as well as the ERIH national representative.