Conflating Industrial Heritage and Geopolitics in the Arctic at Pyramiden - Dr. Eric Nay

What does Pyramiden reveal to us about the future of industrial heritage, “outstanding universal value”?[[1]](#endnote-1) and the emergence of the Arctic as a “new geopolitical region?”[[2]](#endnote-2) What forms of emergent thinking around industrial heritage can be seen at play within the (mostly) abandoned Soviet coal mining settlement of Pyramiden? By focusing on a particular abandoned coal mining settlement, as both artifact and social narrative, Pyramiden serves as key case study in understanding the interweaving of post-industrial heritage and geopolitics in the Arctic as well as an emergent “spatialize” form of governance.[[3]](#endnote-3) Pyramiden’s unique positionally provide a useful tool to study both industrial heritage and the futurity of abandoned coal mining towns within the unique context of the Arctic’s geopolitics.

In a 1972 International Treaty adopted by UNESCO members the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world that was considered to be of “outstanding universal value.” Some of methods used to frame “OUV” included built heritage that demonstrated exemplary engineering prowess in artifacts such as bridges, irrigation systems, railways and mining settlements, like Pyramiden. The ongoing appraisal and re-appraisal of OUV, as taken up in industrial sites like Pyramiden, continues to re-shape opportunities for the expansion of OUV, while introducing new political nuances to industrial heritage classification.

UNESCO’s newly expanded range of industrial sites indexes several significant contemporary concerns, such as the continuing climatological effects of industry on our planet and new respect for working class people and culture—concerns exaggerated by the aestheticization and dissemination of industrial ruins on social media.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Methodologically, abandoned coal mining towns are able to successfully model many of the theoretical and practical conflicts surrounding post-industrial heritage heritage sites within one convenient, often self-contradictory, package. Many of these abandoned towns represent an embodiment of many of the challenges bound up in fundamental questions about heritage, value, place and artifact, as well as the foregrounding the complicated contexts and practical problems lurking behind industrial heritage classification as a practice. “Elements of post-industrial areas are not easily conserved. They are a demanding, problematic heritage, which sometimes, due to the lack of understanding of the necessity to protect this kind of objects, can even be considered unwanted.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Pyramiden, named after the pyramid shaped mountain that dominates its views, was founded by Sweden in 1910 and sold to the Soviet Union in 1927.Pyramiden (Пирами́да) is an abandoned Soviet coal mining settlement on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, which exists politically under the provisions of the Svalbard Treaty (1920).[[6]](#endnote-6) The end byproduct is an anomalous multi-territorial international state. The Svalbard Treaty, originally the Spitsbergen Treaty recognizes the sovereignty of Norway over the archipelago of Svalbard, but also foregrounds a number of local conditions and exceptionalities that still shape life in Svalbard today. For example, the treaty has always required the demilitarization of the archipelago and residents pay only local taxes and, for all intents and purposes, operate with local governments and rules in place as a structure. The fifteen signatory nations were given equal rights to engage in commercial activities (mainly coal mining) on the islands as an extra-territorial right. The archipelago remains an entirely visa-free zone under the terms of the Svalbard Treaty.

Pyramiden, “the Pyramid” was not fully occupied until 1946, when the arrival of six hundred polar workers produced the settlement that remains today as a ghost town.[[7]](#endnote-7) The town itself profited from its isolation and plentiful supply of coal and hot water to heat barns for livestock and vegetable production, provide heating for homes as well as salt water swimming pools and mineral ash which provided concrete bricks for constructing buildings amongst a very efficient system of recycling waste to produce a settlement that could be seen as a symbiotic and quite suitable system.“The self-supportive, recycling character of the settlement was also reflected in the abundance of locally produced tools and equipment, many of them bearing traces of careful maintenance, mending, and skillful artistic decoration.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

In Soviet times, the population of Pyramiden was mostly Ukrainian and the settlement was owned and run by the state-owned Russian mining company, Arktikugol Trust, which also owned the nearby Soviet settlement of Barentsberg, nearby. At its peak the settlement at Pyramiden had a population of more than one thousand inhabitants, housed in a self-contained city that included schools, cultural centres, swimming facilities, a theatre, a library, a sports complex and a cantina. Many families lived their adult lives here, and often with a higher standard of living than would have been achieved at home. Two-year renewable contracts were the norm and for many Pyramiden provided an ideal life.

Pyramiden was not officially abandoned until 1998, along with many of the Norwegian coal mines in nearby Longyearben, but the role of this particular abandoned settlement is quite different today than its Norwegian neighbours, both locally, and in terms of industrial heritage. As Elin Andreassen and co-authors write, “Pyramiden is a ruin, but it hardly fits into the common tropes of heritage.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Pyramiden challenges us to rethink the purposes of heritage designation while pondering how “heritage” persists as a “manufactured” concept.[[10]](#endnote-10) In this analysis, frameworks used to facilitate this re-thinking include:

1. Post-colonialism: How do nation states reckon with their complicity in colonialism becomes a very localized issue tied to very fragile imaginaries that heritage and preservation policies often fail to comprehend. In unpacking UNESCO’s expansion into the Arctic, it is possible to draw upon current work being done on the ground across a number of disciplines in relationship to the unique treaty-based geopolitical positionality of Svalbard.

2. Arctic Exceptionality: The exceptionalism of the Arctic “may lay not only in its frigid weather, or its geophysical specificity, but rather in the ways that Arctic post-industrial heritage challenges the norms of international law as a result of its inaccessibility and role as an imaginary landscape. “As a space that will always remain distant (and different), the Arctic is arguably not a frontier but a colony: not a space to which distant states and their populations expand but a space that they colonize so as to benefit the metropole.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

3. Re-imagining Property and Sovereignty: Who owns the Arctic will continue to be a very difficult question - all compounded by melting glaciers, opening sea passages and flawed claims of dominion over underwater shelves and land that is not quite land. Heritage and sovereignty, Indigenous treaty rights, the rights of communities that were previously owned and controlled by corporations but are now under state control, like Pyramiden, all intensify issues that many abandoned company mining towns experience globally.

4. The Militarization of Heritage: The cautionary tale of a tradition of post-colonial land reclamation by UNESCO and others in the guise of historical preservation is a legacy needing reckoning. I suggest looking towards Pyramiden to address abandoned mining towns as a particular geopolitical type, while opening up dialogues for questioning the role of the heritage and institutions in the Arctic as a form of militarized action.

The age of Coal in this region is over. Only Mine No 7, a smaller coal deposit in nearby Longyearben, is currently kept in operation today. Its sole purpose is to provide supplies to a local coal-fuelled power plant.Consequently, the push to convert Pyramiden into an Arctic tourist attraction has been unimpeded and has been well underway since 2007 with less focused development than its neighbouring Norwegian counterparts. The uncanniness of Pyramiden’s Chernobyl-styled appeal has a limited, but loyal, following if tourist sites such as Trip Advisor are accurate.[[12]](#endnote-12) The Pyramiden hotel is open today with forty-three operational rooms and a small seasonal staff. The hotel also houses the Pyramiden Museum, a post office and a souvenir shop. On August 27, 2019, the world's northernmost film festival was held in Pyramiden.

A Norwegian architectural competition, initiated by students of the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, was held in order to reimagine Pyramiden in 2015 (120 hours) to test ideas about what to do with Pyramiden as a post-industrial design problem. The theme chosen for the competition was “Experimental Preservation” and the event was meant to question and redefine “traditional notions of preservation.”[[13]](#endnote-13) The winner of the competition, a pair of students from Lund, was a project titled “Remember Work?,”which demonstrated a desire to preserve the architectural remnants of the mining settlement by focusing more on preserving the memory of “the colossal agony of human labour invested, irrespective of its character - forced or altruistic.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The second place award went to a team from the Czech Republic for a proposal to “leave the place to live its own life,” (leaving Pyramiden) “to the birds, foxes, polar bears and a few lost Arctic wanderers, for whom Pyramiden is going to be a small laboratory,” thus opting for a non-material method of preservation in lines with the competition’s directive.[[15]](#endnote-15) Since 2014, a number of other projects have been proposed that have included “various approaches to preservation, from traditional to radical, including conservation, maintenance, modernization, replication, inventory-taking, cataloging and more.”[[16]](#endnote-16) For example, “‘the Catalogue, a project by Gabriel Wulf (Architectural Association, UK), proposed “taking an inventory…(by) taking apart the existing buildings…and arranging their materials on the former footprint of the building (as an) inventory of the past…”[[17]](#endnote-17)

However, it is the particularity of industrial heritage in the Arctic as a geopolitical issue that drives heritage as intent in Pyramiden. Marked by constructed imagery of melting ice, opening sea routes, and dwindling numbers of polar bears, the circumpolar Arctic has come to embody a rather abstracted imaginary that serves in the positioning of climate change and heritage policies united. Both the climate-induced physical transformations in the Arctic—i.e., the dramatic physical retreat and thinning of the Arctic sea ice, and the various state and non-state responses to them, have resulted in a significant discursive transformation of the region’s geopolitical importance and identity. “The Arctic has been seemingly turned into a site of shadow boxing where state and non-state actors, both from within and outside the region, are imposing their own maps of values, priorities, and interests on highly complex geophysical, socioeconomic, and ecological landscapes. “…material artifacts, which were put in place to support mining, tourism and scientific research, are, in truth, spatial methods to claim territory and to assert sovereignty aver an unknowable and potentially violent regional future in the Arctic as the ice caps continue to melt.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

More precisely, as an example, the geopolitical significance of strategically drawn and redrawn Arctic territories and even claimed by mounting national flags in seabed floors further complicates notions of territoriality, sovereignty and artifacts. Rather than perceiving the Arctic as *terra nullius*, the Arctic becomes instead a region of gaps, voids and zones of ambiguity, as demonstrated by sovereignty holes, which are extra-territorial voids produced in gaps in mapping that the fishing and mining industries have accidentally left unmapped. “These material artifacts, which were put in place to support mining, tourism and scientific research, are, in truth, spatial methods to claim territory and to assert sovereignty aver an unknowable and potentially violent regional future in the Arctic as the ice caps continue to melt.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

The next step for heritage designation in the region becomes further complicated as melting occurs, and old colonial models of re-claiming territory through heritage will be one of many methods used to re-claim territory. Methods already underway include calling for the protection of intangible cultural practices such as preserving traditional water trade routes or protecting bird migration paths as methods to assert sovereignty. [[20]](#endnote-20) [[21]](#endnote-21) UNESCO has been cautiously, but strategically, exploring these soft edges of dominion in a new age of post-colonial expansion. As the world grows warmer, the Arctic Ocean, which is now frozen for more than half the year, will become increasingly valuable in terms of natural resources, commerce, and military activity. The Arctic may, indeed, remain the last “imaginary place,” but all the while…“present Arctic policies and research agenda(s) are based on the premise that the more Arctic states recognize potentially lucrative implications of a melting Arctic,” (they will) “adopt policies to maximize their interests in the region…”[[22]](#endnote-22) The story of how heritage and abandoned coal mining towns in Svalbard, like Pyramiden, intersect represents a cautionary tale for the futurity of industrial heritage designation as political and post-colonial intent re-emerges. Endnotes

1. UNESCO., “Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage convention,” (WHC.19/01 - 10 July 2019). https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Riabtsev, Vladimir, 2015., “Arktik kak novyi (formiruischiisia) geopolitikicheski regions” [The Arctic as a new (forming) geopolitical region] In: *Sovremennaia nausea I innovatsii* [*Contemporary science and innovation*], vol. 3, no.11, p. 158-165. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Knecht, Sebastian and Kathrin Keil., 2013. “Arctic geopolitics revisited: spatialising governance in the circumpolar North,” *The Polar Journal*, vol. 3, no.1, p.178-203. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rovang, Sarah., 2019. “The UNESCO industrial complex: multi-use heritage in Germany and Belgium,” *Society of Architectural; Historians*. 7 May, 2019. https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-blog/sah-blog/2019/05/07/the-unesco-industrial-complex-multi-use-heritage-in-germany-and-belgium. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Chmielewska, Marta., 2015. “Conservation of post-industrial cultural heritage in Europe in

   local and global context.” *Region and Regionalism,* vol. 2, no.12, Łódź, Poland: University of Łódź, Silesian Institute in Opole, Silesian Institute Society, p.133. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Treaty between Norway, The United States of America, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British overseas Dominions and Sweden concerning Spitsbergen signed in Paris 9th February 1920. http://library.arcticportal.org/1909/1/The\_Svalbard\_Treaty\_9ssFy.pdf. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Staniukovich-Denisova, Ekaterina., 2019. *Experimental Preservation of an Arctic Settlement Piramida on Spitzbergen” In Architectural Conservation and Restoration in Norway and Russia,*  Eds. Khodakovsky and Lexau. London: Routledge, p.188. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Andreassen, Bjerck, H. B., and Olsen, B. 2010., *Persistent memories: Pyramiden: a Soviet mining town in the high Arctic:* Trondheim, Norway, Tapir Academic Press. p.52. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Andreassen, et. al. p.142. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, 1983. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge:

    Cambridge University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Steinberg, Philip E., Hannes Gerhardt, Elizabeth A. Nyman, Adam Keul, and Jeremy Tasch, 2018. *Contesting the Arctic: politics and imaginaries in the circumpolar North:* London: I.B.

    Tauris. p 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Trip Advisor., 2022. Accessed February 7, 2022. https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Attraction\_Review g503714-d1842148-Reviews-Pyramiden-Spitsbergen\_Svalbard.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Staniukovich-Denisova., p.190. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p.192. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p.194. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Chaturvedi., p. 73 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. UNESCO., “Potential marine World Heritage sites in the Arctic region expert meeting,”

    UNESCO Headquarters 7 Place Fontenoy, Paris, Room VI (main building) 25-26 February, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Speer, L., Nelson, R., Casier, R., Gavrilo, M., von Quillfeldt, C., Cleary, J., Halpin, P. and Hooper, P., 2017. “Natural marine world heritage in the Arctic Ocean, report of an expert workshop and review process. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Lackenbauer, P. Whitney, Adam Lajeunesse, James Manicom, and Frédéric Lasserre., 2018. *China's Arctic ambitions and what they mean for Canada*. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press. p.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)