

# The Oil Industry as Heritage: Baku's Untapped Resource

written by Leyla Sayfutdinova Leyla Sayfutdinova

Much has been written about the difficulties of developing a strategy for Baku's urban development in the post-Soviet period. Drawing on revenues from the Second Oil Boom (2007-2014), city authorities have emphasized the organization of mega-events, Dubai-like spectacularization, and starchitecture as strategies aimed at promoting Baku as an attractive destination on the global map (Valiyev 2018, Koch and Valiyev 2015). These strategies share an orientation towards the future, and while they are successful in attracting some tourism, many observers agree that Soviet material, structural, and governance legacies make them impossible to implement fully in Baku. At the same time, the Reserves Management Centre has focused on the restoration and popularization of the ancient and medieval heritage of Azerbaijan (Reserves Management Centre, nd). In both strategies, Baku's industrial past and present have minimal representation. It is as if industrialization, which has been so central to the development of Baku as a city, is not seen as a part of the city's history.

Alternative voices, urban experts and activists, have been raising the issue of adaptive reuse of Baku's industrial facilities for some time, stressing its potential for the development of (Axundov 2023). Drawing on international experience, they argue that such reuse can transform former industrial facilities into spaces of postmodern consumption and diversify the urban economy. Extending these arguments, in this essay I argue that Baku's industrial past also has a heritage value in itself. While heritage is related to many social processes, such as identity construction, social cohesion, education, and others, in this essay my focus is on industrial heritage as a resource for tourism and post-oil

transition in the city. With this in mind, I ask: what hinders the heritagization of industry in Baku? And from which international experiences can we learn to develop this sector of tourism? I contend that Baku's unique industrial history can become a competitive advantage in regional tourism because while our immediate neighbours share many similarities in nature, culinary traditions, and medieval architecture, no place in the region and beyond can boast Baku's industrial history.

### **Why Industrial Heritage?**

Heritagization can be defined as a process by which objects from the past are selected in the present for preservation and transmission into the future (Harrison 2013). Heritage involves both material and immaterial aspects (so-called "intangible heritage"), but in this essay, I will focus on the material objects and narratives around them. The process of transforming material objects into heritage begins with valorization, or the assigning of value to them. It is therefore inevitably subjective, and heritagization, ultimately, depends on who decides which objects are worthy of preservation as objects to be passed on to the future.

The European heritage movement began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and valorized specific objects, such as ancient ruins, objects of particular historical significance or aesthetic value (Kisiel 2020). Heritagization of industry, on the other hand, is a much more recent phenomenon: it began after the deindustrialization of Europe and North America in the second half of the 20th century (Zazzara 2020). As closures of plants and factories swept across industrialized countries, transforming landscapes and local communities, residents, activists, academics and authorities began to reflect upon the importance of industrialization for their localities.

Indeed, industrialization has been a central process in the development of modern societies. In many places,

industrialization led to the spatial concentration of economic activities, and large-scale urbanization, drawing labor migrants from the countryside and abroad to work in mines and factories. As the population of cities increased, new housing, educational, medical and religious facilities were built, leading to an expansion of cities' built environment. The changes initiated by industrialization are largely irreversible. The industrial past is thus an integral part of local as well as global history. Industrial heritage, or a selection of this past for memorialization and transmission to the future, is a tribute to local material culture and the history of everyday life of ordinary people and elites alike.

In deindustrialized places, industrial heritagization is often employed as part of local strategies for post-industrial urban and regional development. It can contribute to tourism and revitalization of the hospitality sector. Industrial heritage can also contribute to city branding. It can also offer limited employment opportunities to members of local deindustrialized communities, and meaningful engagement for local communities in post-industrial places where employment opportunities dwindle. As such, industrial heritage can be part of local strategies for post-industrial regional development.

### **Baku's Industrial Past: History and Heritage**

Baku's industrial past is a part of this global story of industrialization, but it also has important and unique differences. Baku's role in the global history of oil in the 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century is well known. Along with Pennsylvania, Baku was one of the two pioneering sites of global oil production. The first drilled well, the first oil tanker and a number of technological inventions originated here. However, the oil industry was also pivotal for the development of the city itself: Modern Baku developed as an industrial city around oil extraction. At the turn of the 20th century, the oil industry drew large economic migration both from the rural

areas of the Caucasus and from abroad, forming the base of Baku's multi-ethnic population. The oil industry influenced the spatial organization of the city, including residential districts (Sovetski area, Razin settlement, Ermenikend) and transport links both in the peri-urban area and the region (Blau 2018, Crawford 2022).

Baku's industrial history has some unique features. The spatial concentration of oil industry in Baku, for example, is highly unusual in global experience and resembles more the spatial patterns of industrial cities in Western Europe than the dispersed organization of oil production elsewhere (Mitchell 2011). Soviet overindustrialization also led to the diversification of local industrial production. In the post-Soviet period, despite deindustrialization in the non-oil sector, both refining and manufacturing of oil-related equipment persist. In this period, Baku has become the only oil city that is also a national capital. Baku is thus unique in that it has remained an oil city for over 150 years, despite massive political and economic changes in the region. It is an oil city par excellence, where material legacies of the oil industry from different historical periods coexist.

Yet, the rich and complex industrial history of Baku is almost unintelligible in the urban landscape, even as the traces of industry are highly visible in it. A visitor to Baku would only be able to catch a glimpse of this complexity from exploring the city on their own. If they are lucky to go on a tour with a good guide, they may be able to piece together a bit more. There are some successful examples of industrial heritagization in the city, but they are fragmented and disconnected. Even together, they only scratch the surface of Baku's historical significance.

The new Seaside Park near Bibi-Heybat is a case in point. The area contains several industrial heritage objects and could become a starting point for a larger heritage project. Several reconstructed oil wells (some of them active) offer a

description of the origins of the industry in Bibi Heybat, and the nearby Surakhanı Tanker Museum has a modern exhibit with integrative narrative and interactive tools. But the building of the former Bibi-Heybat power station (aka Krasin's GRES), which used to power the oil field operations of Bibi Heybat and much of the western part of the city, hosts a Museum of Stone. Parts of the original power equipment are scattered around the building with little, if any, explanation. While this is an interesting museum, its exhibit is unrelated to Bibi Heybat and its industrial history, and it is a missed opportunity to heritagize a place that was so central both to the city, and to the global oil industry.

In the eastern part of the city, Baku White City, built in place of the deindustrialized Black City, similarly includes only a few references to its industrial past. Villa Petrolea exhibit presents the story of Nobel Brothers Company, but is hardly an industrial heritage site itself. Out of the hundreds of industrial installations of the Black City, only two refining towers from 1860s are preserved. The Soviet period of Black City's history is almost completely absent. These objects, located close to each other, but not joined by a single narrative, commemorate Russian/Swedish industrialists and a Russian scholar D. Mendeleev, but not the thousands of local workers who toiled in the place during its 150 years of existence. This reductionist representation of Baku's industrial past is a stark contrast to the industrial present just outside the White City, represented by SOCAR-branded storage tanks and the burning flare tip of the Heydar Aliyev Oil Refinery. As these examples show, industrial heritage in Baku is present, but it forms only a thin layer of the city's touristic offering, in contrast to the enormous role of the industry in the city's development. How can Baku's industrial past be capitalized upon to draw tourism?

### **Imagining Industrial Heritage Otherwise**

The main challenge for industrial heritagization in Baku is

that the main industry, oil, is still active. This is also the industry that had the biggest impact on the city and has the highest potential for tourism. Heritagizing an industry that is still operational is problematic—and international experience suggests that heritagization often begins after deindustrialization, when distance in time provides space for people to reflect on its importance.

Yet I argue that the delayed deindustrialization of Baku can be also seen as a resource, and not just an obstacle for heritagization. This delay provides an opportunity to learn from the experience of others, draw on existing industrial heritage projects, select objects for future preservation before they are decommissioned. The anticipation of transition to renewable energy makes this task especially urgent: Baku can potentially be one of the very few sites globally where the whole period of petromodernity is represented, from its origins to its end. Baku's geographical location close to Europe would also attract European tourism and integrate Baku's heritage into European heritage maps and routes, such as the European Route of Industrial Heritage.

Another issue in developing industrial heritage is the legacies of Soviet heritage management with its ideologically-driven single narrative, celebratory ethos and the emphasis on monuments and museums. In the framework of communist ideology, industrialization was generally seen as a measure of development and modernization, while workers were the main agent of history. Industrial labor was romanticized and heroized, and the public spaces of Soviet cities were scattered with monuments celebrating workers. This was also the case in Soviet Baku, where oil workers in particular were memorialized in toponymy and public art. The remnants of this approach are still visible in Baku's public spaces (i.e. *Neftçilər* avenue/metro station, the "*Fəhlə əlləri*" (Workers' hands) monument in the eponymous park, the restored bas-reliefs of Dynamo hotel, and the monument to the worker breaking his chains).

At the same time, industrial objects themselves were rarely considered heritage in Soviet times, unless they could be identified as “historical firsts,” industrial objects that are considered to be the first in their particular field (Sklokina and Kulikov 2021) or had unique historical or aesthetic value. But even some of the “firsts” were often recycled or reused and not assigned the meaning of heritage. This, for example, was the fate of the world’s first oil tanker, “Zoroaster,” which was sunk along with several other ships to lay the basis for the *Neft Daşları* (Oil Rocks). In general, industrial objects did not meet the strict requirements of architectural, aesthetic or historical value, as the “noble objects” (Kiesel 2020) such as castles and religious temples did.

In the post-Soviet period, these trends remain relevant. Monuments and public art dedicated to oil and oil workers partially survived the post-Soviet massive decommunization of Baku’s public space, albeit uneasily. Often, their preservation involved a replacement of Soviet insignia with national symbols, i.e., the tricolor flag of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In this process, the Soviet ideologically-driven narrative of the proletariat as the driving force of history was replaced with a combination of statism and nationalism (aka “Azerbaijanism”). But the continued practice of the reduction of historical complexity to a unified narrative prevents heritagization of industry in its complexity. The celebratory ethos means, for example, that the public art dedicated to workers does not represent the darker side of industrial labor, such as the loss of life of oil workers in many industrial accidents, from 1957 disaster at the *Neft Daşları* to the most recent one, in 2015.

Looking at the international experience, we can see that while heritage is always selective, more critical approaches strive to represent historical complexity and diversity of perspectives. Industrial heritage is especially contested, as the history of industrialization is often ridden with conflicts and controversies, such as class and ethnic conflict

and environmental degradation. This is certainly the case with the oil industry, which is currently seen as one of the main culprits of anthropogenic climate change. Effective heritagization of oil industry thus should reflect its darker side as well as contributions to technological progress, modernization and development, and there are many examples of how a critical and multivocal heritagization can be achieved.

One of them is the Norwegian Petroleum Museum in Stavanger, which presents the history of Norwegian oil industry while fulfilling a diverse set of functions. Along with detailed information about the beginnings of the industry, each of the North Sea platforms, and a special exhibition dedicated to the 1981 disaster at the Alexander Kjelland platform, the museum also conducts research and archival work, collecting materials from selected oil fields.

Yet in Baku, museum approach would be restrictive and would not do justice to the richness of the industry's history here. In Norway, the oil industry is more confined, both temporally and spatially: it only began in 1960-ies and is located offshore. The Norwegian Petroleum Museum, built in the shape of an oil platform, thus represents something that is located outside of the country's inhabitable territory and invisible to those who live or visit Norway. In Baku, the oil industry is nearly 200 years old, and it is a part of the local landscape and everyday life, with industrial objects and toponymy punctuating the city and its suburbs. That is why a landscape approach would be much more appropriate.

A landscape approach to heritage situates industrial objects in their cultural landscape, in their relation both to nature and local material culture (Del Pozo and Gonzalez 2012). Understood in this way, industrial heritage also opens opportunity for engagement of local communities. One example of landscape approach to the oil industry heritage is the Museum of oil industry in Bobrka, Poland – a 20 ha park which includes two 19<sup>th</sup>-century oil wells, and a museum with examples



of oilfield equipment. This museum is also a part of a larger “Petroleum trail” which connects oil sites in Eastern Galicia, now split between Poland and Ukraine. In Ecuador, “Toxic Tours,” which provide an embodied experience of the impact of oil extraction on nature and livelihoods of local people, have also contributed to the environmental justice movement in the country (Fiske and Fischer 2023). This approach is also well suited for representing complex, multi-vocal and difficult heritage, as different sites can highlight specific aspects of the industrial past.

In Baku’s case, the idea of an oil route has been around for a while. The Centre for National and International Studies (CNIS) authored an early proposal for an open-air oil history museum (CNIS 2011). This proposal focused on archaeological finds in Absheron and was interested more in the pre-industrial period of oil extraction. Another way of adopting a landscape approach to heritagization of oil would be to create a network of linked sites, including those from pre-industrial and industrial periods. The network could stretch from Bibi Heybat to the former Black City, as well as incorporate Baku’s oil producing suburbs. In addition to the former industrial objects, it could also include a number of smaller museums that would highlight different aspects of the industry that are inaccessible – for example, an onshore museum dedicated to *Neft Daşları* (Oil Rocks) and the modern offshore platforms.

The linked sites can then be explored both separately and together, they can be incorporated into various touristic routes. The dispersion of heritage sites across the urban and peri-urban landscape can also contribute to the revitalization of the local hospitality sector by attracting tourists to local shops and cafes located outside of Baku’s city centre.

Another underused possibility for preserving industrial heritage is digital tools, such as Augmented and Virtual Reality applications. They are especially useful for objects that are inaccessible or cannot be preserved in full. This is going to become increasingly relevant in Baku with the

decommissioning of old industrial sites and the transition to a post-industrial economy. For example, digital visualizations of sites that are prepared for decommissioning can be incorporated into the exposition of the remaining physical sites, and allow the combination of physical and virtual reality. Here, it is possible to draw on the experience of heritage projects from Eastern Ukraine, such as Saltmines project, which provides virtual excursions into the Soledar salt mines, which have become physically inaccessible because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Solyana Shakhta, n.d.)

## **Conclusion**

This essay argues that industrial heritage is an untapped resource for tourism in Baku. At the moment, the Azerbaijani tourism industry prioritizes ancient and medieval heritage. While important, this approach leaves out the most dynamic, globally significant, and unique part of Baku's history. There are two challenges to developing industrial heritage in the city: first, recognizing it as a past worthy of preservation, and second, representation of this past in complex, reflexive, and non-reductive ways. Both are serious challenges that require coordinated institutional efforts and cooperation between state and non-state actors, and, above all, departure from simple ideological narratives. Yet, the benefits of heritagizing industry can be immense, both for tourism and broader urban development. Baku's unique industrial history can become a competitive advantage in regional tourism, but it can also be especially relevant in anticipation of the global energy transition. Although this transition is likely to be long and uneven, claiming this role now, before the transition is complete, can help the city's own post-industrialization.

**Acknowledgement:** This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 897155



**Funded by  
the European Union**

### **References:**

Axundov, B. (2023). Sənaye və mədəniyyət irsi obyektlərinin qorunması və yenidənqurulması. *Əkinçi*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=l91bDIwuudA>

Blau, E., & Rupnik, I. (2018). *Baku: Oil and urbanism*. Park Books.

CNIS (2011) *The Absheron Oil History Trail (Open Air Oil History Museum) Exploration of the Development Potential of the Absheron Peninsula (Balakhany, Surakhany, Sabunchu)*. Baku. Available online: <https://cnis-baku.org/eng/open-air-oil-history-museum/>

Crawford, C. E. (2022). *Spatial revolution: Architecture and planning in the early Soviet Union* (p. 424). Cornell University Press.

Del Pozo, P. B., & Gonzalez, P. A. (2012). Industrial heritage and place identity in Spain: From monuments to landscapes. *Geographical Review*, 102(4), 446-464.

Fiske, A., & Fischer, J. (2023). Translating and transforming toxicity: Moving between ethnography and graphic art. In Kryder-Reid, E., & May, S. (Eds.). *Toxic Heritage: Legacies, Futures, and Environmental Injustice*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 165-172.

- Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: critical approaches*. Routledge.
- Kisiel, P. (2020). Unwanted inheritance? Industrial past as the EU heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(7), 652-666.
- Koch, N., & Valiyev, A. (2015). Urban boosterism in closed contexts: Spectacular urbanization and second-tier mega-events in three Caspian capitals. *Eurasian geography and economics*, 56(5), 575-598.
- Mitchell, T. (2011). *Carbon democracy: political power in the age of oil*. New York: Verso.
- Reserves Management Centre (n.d.) Available online: <https://www.heritage.org.az/>
- Sklokina, I., & Kulikov, V. (2021). Industrial Heritage and Its Multiple Uses in Donbas, Ukraine. *Region*, 10(1), 33-60.
- Solyana Shakhta*. (n.d.) Virtual reality tour. Available online: <https://saltway.in.ua/soledar-360/>
- Valiyev, A. (2018). Baku's Quest to Become a Major City: Did the Dubai Model Work? *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, (101), 9-11.
- Zazzara, G. (2020). Making sense of the industrial past: deindustrialisation and industrial heritage in Italy. In *"Italia contemporanea"*: 294, supplemento, 2020, Milano : Franco Angeli, pp. 155-181.