

PARADOXES OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN THE COAL BASINS OF NORTHWESTERN BOHEMIA I – EXTINCT SETTLEMENT STRUCTURES IN THE MOST DISTRICT VS. THE BUCKET WHEEL EXCAVATOR RK5000

Barra Mario - Efler Tomáš

MARIO BARRA, ING. ARCH.

Fakulta architektury ČVUT v Praze |
Czech Technical University in Prague,
Faculty of Architecture, Thákurova
2700/9, 166 34 Praha 6 – Dejvice

mario.barra@fa.cvut.cz

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9655-1717

Mario Barra completed his master's degree in the Heritage Conservation module at the FA CTU in Prague in June 2024 under the supervision of Prof. Ing. arch. Akad. arch. Václav Girsá, focusing on the restoration of the lignite mining area in the under the Jezeří Castle. He is currently a PhD. student under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Tomáš Efler and Dr. Martin Ebel, with a focus on heritage conservation in the mining landscape of northwestern Bohemia (Ústí n. Labem and Karlovy Vary Regions).

TOMÁŠ EFLER, DOC. ING. ARCH.

Fakulta architektury ČVUT v Praze |
Czech Technical University in Prague,
Faculty of Architecture, Thákurova
2700/9, 166 34 Praha 6 – Dejvice

tomas.efler@fa.cvut.cz

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-8480-1085

Tomáš Efler (*1979) is an architect, heritage specialist, and lecturer at the FA CTU in Prague, where he leads a design studio and the Department of Heritage Conservation. He studied under Prof. Václav Girsá at FA CTU and in 2001–02 at EAPLV Paris La Villette under Prof. Hervé Filipetti. His focus is on historic architecture and restoration. In collaboration with GIRSÁ AT, he contributed to the conservation of the south façade of Český Krumlov Castle, awarded the Europa Nostra Prize in 2008.

ABSTRACT: Dozens of defunct settlement units located in areas of historically active or still – operating surface lignite mines in the Most District – including the large – scale ČSA mine and the Bílina, Vršany, Jan Šverma, Most – Ležáky, and Julius III mines – are today commemorated thanks to often very detailed documentation, frequently carried out in cooperation with state heritage preservation authorities. Only a small percentage of various types of structures (noble residences, religious buildings, residential houses, etc.) were officially designated as state – protected monuments during the second half of the 20th century. On the other hand, a new layer of legally protected heritage is gradually emerging, representing the most recent industrial phase in the region's history. One potential representative of this layer in the coming years could be the bucket – wheel excavator RK5000, the last of its kind in the Czechia, whose preservation and possible heritage protection is currently under discussion.

KEYWORDS: Post – industrial landscape; Surface mining; Defunct settlements; State – protected monuments; Industrial heritage; Bucket – wheel excavator; Landscape memory; Relationship to the past; Stratification

INTRODUCTION

Heritage conservation in the region of northwestern Bohemia, in the territory of the Ústí and Karlovy Vary regions—an area associated over the past approximately 70 years primarily with surface brown coal mining, which has significantly transformed the local cultural landscape – remains a rather neglected chapter even more than 30 years after the disappearance of the last settlement, the village of Libkovic u Mostu. While the most well – known example, the liquidation of the historic royal town of Most – whose architectural value, according to various opinions, was comparable to Czech towns now listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites [1] – has already been the subject of numerous articles, publications, and exhibitions, the protection of heritage – worthy buildings in locally or regionally significant settlements has remained overlooked. Interest in this area has only begun to grow in recent years in connection with the gradual decline of surface mining, subsequent land reclamation, and the planning of new land uses, including commemorations of its lost form.

Many of the settlements that gradually disappeared between the 1950s and 1990s due to the expansion of surface mines contained exceptional architectural structures, of which only a tiny fraction received – even retrospectively and only temporarily – heritage protection. For this reason, it is more appropriate to speak not of “monuments” but rather of “heritage – worthy structures,” which allows for the inclusion in analyses of, for example, monuments of folk architecture from the Ore Mountains region, certain industrial buildings, or numerous small sacral structures that, despite their heritage value, never received official legal protection and can now only be admired thanks to extensive documentation.

An important factor influencing not only the number of officially registered monuments but also the types of structures considered for listing was the political and social perception of the time. Some groups of heritage – worthy buildings that would today undoubtedly be classified as cultural monuments remained within the

awareness of only the professional public, not the relevant institutions responsible for submitting or deciding on proposals for cultural monument status. For a long time, for example, folk architecture – characteristic of the entire studied area of the Ore Mountains and Sudetenland – remained outside the scope of state – protected monuments, even though its presence is well documented in audiovisual, drawn, and photographic records of now – vanished settlements. The same applies to smaller sacral monuments, not only larger ones (churches, chapels, etc.) but also smaller ones – various wayside shrines, crosses, memorials, and others. These smaller “heritage – worthy structures” sometimes had a better fate – in some cases, they were relocated to new sites, either by decision of local authorities or responsible heritage conservation institutions. In other cases, residents themselves took on the role of “monument saviors,” attempting to respond to the apparent disinterest of official bodies and to preserve “monuments” from their own villages, to which they had developed a strong attachment, perhaps since childhood. One example of relocated monuments in the Most district is a Gothic – style wayside shrine created around 1700 [2], originally located in the now – vanished village of Holešice (in the area of the now – inactive Jan Šverma mine) and now visible in the cemetery grounds in Most, or a cross from a vanished village in the area of the still – active Vršany mine, also now located there [3].

The aim of this article is to present to readers the existence of registered and thus state – protected monuments in the district of Most during the second half of the 20th century, including their fates and to highlight the often – sad story in which many of those officially listed retained their legal protection status for only about 20 years, exceptionally 25. A separate group included in the analysis were post – revolution registered monuments from the industrial period. Monuments listed in the Central List of Cultural Monuments as “complexes” were counted as a single item in the analysis; individual components were only counted separately in exceptional cases – such as when a significant part was delisted and subsequently disappeared. One example is the Jezeří castle park/arboretum, whose lower and middle parts lost heritage protection

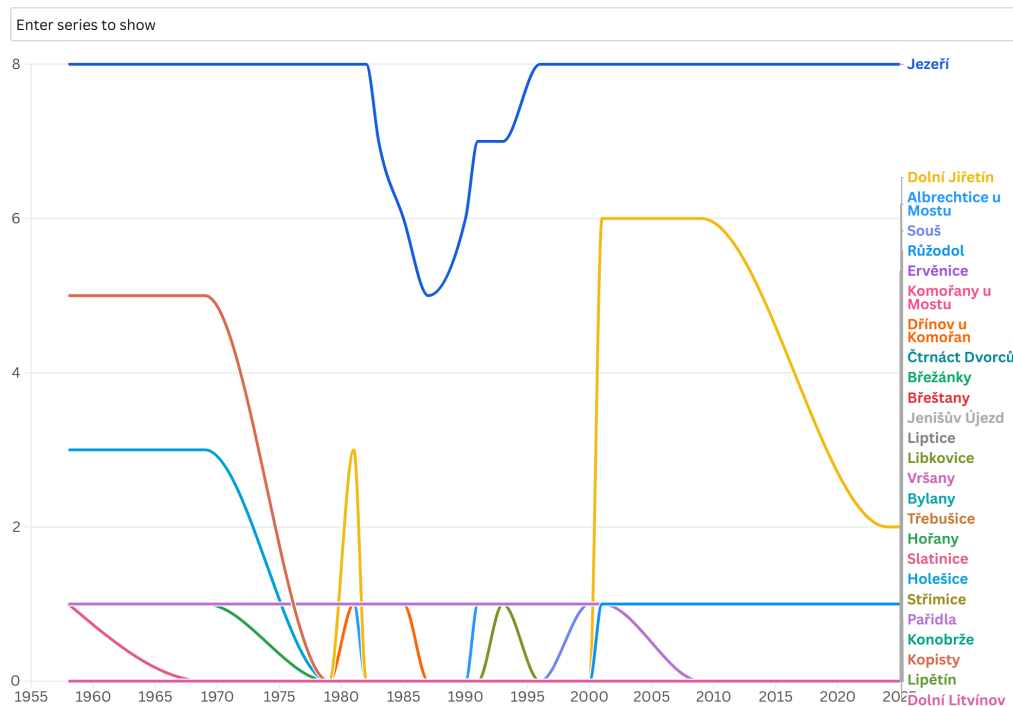


Fig. 1: Development of the number of registered cultural monuments in the settlements of the Most District, author: Mario Barra (Source: <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/24596959/>, 2025)

in two consecutive years, and whose remnants, the so – called Jezeří Arboretum, were re – registered only after 1990. The conclusion of the article focuses on the fate of a significant technical work, the RK5000 bucket – wheel excavator, which is now the last of its kind and has been the subject of ongoing expert discussions in recent years regarding its potential designation as a cultural monument.

AREA OF THE ČSA OPEN – PIT MINE

Mining activities in the area of the ČSA open – pit mine – spanning the districts of Most and Chomutov – began as early as the early 20th century with the Hedvika mine, a branch of the Julius V mine [4]. Until then, the land had primarily been used for agricultural purposes. The local settlement structure began to be affected by mining operations in the 1970s (though earlier decades had already seen road and railway relocations). After 1976, the first village – Dřínov u Komořan – was evacuated and erased from the map. Most of the settlements within the ČSA mine area that would today fall under the Most district disappeared in the first half of the 1980s [5], along with numerous heritage structures – or more precisely, structures of heritage value. The use of this term is more appropriate in this context, as only a handful of monuments received protection under the legal regulations of the time. For example, in settlements (now preserved in cadas-

tral names) such as Albrechtice u Mostu, Ervěnice, Komořany, Dřínov u Komořan, or Dolní Jiřetín, only a few cultural monuments were registered from 1958 until the villages' demise. Of those, only a small fraction was saved from destruction through relocation to nearby settlements [6, 7, 8, 9].

In the villages of Dřínov u Komořan and Albrechtice u Mostu, the situation was marginally better. In each of these settlements (excluding a few monuments relocated outside the mining area before their destruction), one entry can be found in the Heritage Catalogue. In Albrechtice, it was the Church of All Saints, listed as a cultural monument between 1958 and 1982 [10]; in Dřínov, it was the Chapel of St. John of Nepomuk, protected between 1958 and 1987 [11].

The town of Dolní Jiřetín ranks second in terms of heritage protection, with three cultural monuments registered from 1958: the town hall, the Church of St. Nicholas, and a group of six workers' colony buildings from 1890. Their legal protection was revoked in 1982. Additionally, the statue group of St. George was relocated from there to Horní Jiřetín. Nineteen years later, the Centrum Mine complex was newly registered in this cadastral area, consisting of buildings from the 1880s (when mining began) and the 1950s. This status remained until August 2024, when the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic revoked protection for most of the complex¹. Only the shaft building and hoisting tower C1, along with the engine room C1, retained their cultural monument status [12].

From a heritage protection perspective, the Jezeří area historically had the strongest status. After the first heritage law was enacted, eight cultural monuments were declared here, including individual buildings and larger complexes – primarily the state chateau complex with its associated structures such as farm buildings and sculptures. This began to change in the early 1980s: in 1983, protection was removed from the lower part of the chateau park, followed by the middle part in 1985, and in 1987, the forest lodge complex near the chateau (now the parking area). By 1987, the number of protected monuments or complexes had stabilized at five. In the early 1990s, a protective zone was declared around the Jezeří complex, the Jezeří Arboretum was re – registered, and in 1996, a medieval ore adit from the 14th–16th century was added to the list of protected sites. For completeness, it should be noted that

¹ The reason was: "Given the fact that it is currently entirely impossible to restore and present a fully functional structure of all six heritage – protected buildings and two technological components (which was the main reason for their designation as a cultural monument and subsequent inclusion in the Central List of Cultural Monuments), we hereby submit this request for the revocation of the heritage status of the upper part of the Centrum mine." [12]

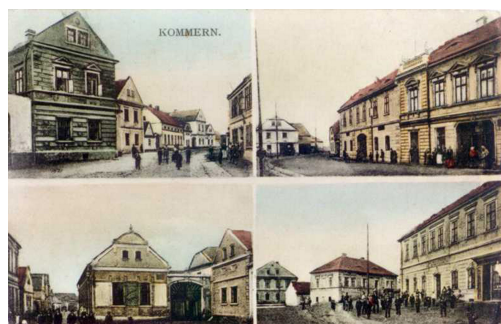


Fig. 2: Old Komořany around the year 1900, author unknown – private collection (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Star%C3%A9_Komořany.jpg, public domain)

the chateau and arboretum complex was declared a national cultural monument in 2023 [13].

None of the examples of traditional Ore Mountain folk architecture – including remnants of Sudeten settlements from the interwar period – were ever included among the legally protected monuments in any of the vanished settlements in the Most region, nor were they even considered for such status. From today's perspective, several technical structures could be considered heritage – worthy, in addition to the bucket – wheel excavator discussed in the final chapter. These include the state thermal power plant in Ervěnice (cadastral area Komořany u Mostu), which supplied electricity to Prague using brown coal from local small – scale mines. Until recently, this also included remnants of the first 110 kV high – voltage line connecting the Ervěnice plant with the substation in Prague – Holešovice. Only fragments of this line remain today, gradually being replaced by modern pylons better suited to the current transmission network. The Register of Cultural Monuments also lists the Komořany thermal power plant and the Fortuna brown coal mine complex from the late 19th century, including its service power station [14].



Fig. 3: Remains of the only surviving building of the Ervěnice Power Plant, photo by Petr Kinšt, 2014 (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Erv%C4%9Bnick%C3%A1_elektr%C3%A1rna_2024_-_11_-_16_Budova_1.jpg, used under CC BY 4.0 license)

BÍLINA MINE AREA

Mining activity in the Bílina mine area began in 1971, originally under the name Maxim Gorky Mine [15]. Unlike the ČSA open – pit mine, where mining has already ceased, Bílina remains an active mining site, with extraction expected to continue at least until the mid – 2030s. This is due to the lifting of mining limits by the Bohuslav Sobotka government in 2015, and there are even considerations of extending operations until 2055, should permission be granted to expand the mine closer to existing towns and villages [16].

Historically, five settlements once stood within the current mine area, now remembered through the names of cadastral territories: Břežánky (disappeared in 1972), Břešťany (1972), Jenišův Újezd (1972–74), Liptice (1976), and Libkovice u Mostu. The latter is notable as the last settlement in Czechoslovakia – and later the Czech Republic – to be evacuated and demolished due to surface brown coal mining, between 1991 and 1993. A deeper look into the heritage records reveals that, since 1958, only one cultural monument was ever registered in this 33 km² area (excluding the Holy Trinity Column, which was relocated to Horní Litvínov): the Church of St. Michael the Archangel in Libkovice u Mostu. Its designation as a cultural monument can be seen as a symbolic gesture – the decision was issued on October 29, 1993, and came into effect on November 18. However, the monument status was revoked just 17 days later, on December 5, 1993. Despite this, the church remained standing until 2001/2, when it was demolished as the last structure in Libkovice, a village that had been almost entirely razed nearly a decade earlier [17].



Fig. 4: Church of St. Michael in Libkovice in 1998, photo by Nadkachna (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Libkovice_1998.jpg, used under CC BY 3.0 license)

VRŠANY MINE AREA

The Vršany mine was opened in 1978 with the start of the first overburden removal, followed four years later by direct brown coal extraction, reaching an annual output of 6 million tons over the next four years. Until 1994, overburden from the active mine was deposited in the former Šmeral mine and the external Březno spoil heap. Today, it is still deposited in the Šmeral mine and the internal spoil heap within the Vršany mine area [18]. During the second half of the 20th century, two settlements disappeared within the mine area: the villages of Vršany and Třebušice. In the broader surroundings, other settlements—Třebušice, Souš, Hořany, and Slatinice—also vanished due to reasons related to surface brown coal mining.

Of the six settlements mentioned above, only half have records of heritage – worthy structures protected under applicable legislation (some of which disappeared after 1950). In Hořany, this was the castle complex, protected between 1958 and 1981, consisting of four components: the early Baroque castle later rebuilt in the Empire style, a farm building, the chapel of St. Blaise, and a gate [19]. In nearby Slatinice, the Baroque single – nave Church of Saints Simon and Jude from the 1630s was protected between 1958 and 1969. The vanished village of Souš – and the reason for its disappearance, surface coal mining – is still com-



Fig. 5: Village of Vršany around 1910, author unknown – private collection (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vr%C5%A1any.jpg>, public domain)

memorated by the cultural monument of the “JULIUS V/NEJEDLÝ I. coal mine,” a complex of three buildings: the engine house, the former bathhouse and locker room building, and the administrative building, constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These were declared a cultural monument in 2000, making it one of the first registered monuments related to the region’s most recent historical chapter – surface brown coal mining. Two additional historically relocated monuments are the statues of St. John of Nepomuk and St. Procopius, now located in the village of Bečov and the centre of the new town of Most [20].

JAN ŠVERMA MINE AREA

Mining in the area of the later Jan Šverma mine began in the 1860s with the establishment of the Robert I deep mine, where coal extraction continued until World War II. Mining was temporarily halted in 1942, while surface mining at the Robert II mine – founded in 1918 – continued. After the war, in 1945, the surface mine was renamed “Jan Šverma Mines,” followed by a mining boom in the 1950s and subsequent decades. As mining progressed and gradually approached the Vršany mine, operations began to wind down in 1995, with mining activities shifting to the Vršany site and overburden from its excavator being deposited in the Jan Šverma spoil heap [21]. Historically, one settlement existed within the mine area: the village of Holešice. According to the first heritage law, three sites in Holešice were protected from May 3, 1958: the homestead complex No. 22, consisting of six components; the rectory complex with four components and the early Gothic Church of St. Nicholas, also with four components. Additional structures (two wayside shrines, statues of St. Lawrence, St. Felix, and St. John of Nepomuk) were relocated to Mariánské Radčice and Most. While the demolition of the village occurred in 1976, all registered monuments in the Holešice cadastral area were officially delisted three years later, on May 11, 1979 [22].



Fig. 6: Holešice near Most around 1910, author unknown – private collection (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hole%C5%A1ice_u_Mostu.jpg, public domain)

MOST – LEŽÁKY MINE AREA

This area, now partially covered by Lake Most, was largely occupied by the historic royal town of the same name. Its fate – including the world – famous relocation of the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary – has been widely presented to both expert and general audiences through exhibitions and publications. As such, it is the best – documented area in terms of the fate of individual “heritage – worthy structures” in the North Bohemian brown coal basin. In addition to the royal town of Most, four smaller settlements once stood within the area of the later Most – Ležáky mine: Konobřez, Střimice, Pařidla, and Kopisty.

While no registered cultural monuments can be found in the Heritage Catalogue or Register for the now – vanished villages of Konobřez and Střimice (except for a relocated statue pedestal from Konobřez, now in Vtelno), the situation is different for Pařidla and Kopisty. In Pařidla, a castle complex from the first half of the 19th century – consisting of two buildings – was registered as a cultural monument after the first Czechoslovak heritage

law came into effect [23]. Although the entire village was demolished between 1967 and 1969 due to surface coal mining, the castle complex (declared protected on May 3, 1958, like many other monuments in the Most coal basin) retained its heritage status until February 11, 2009 – nearly 40 years after the village was razed. The reason was the absence of a formal decision to revoke protection at the time of the village’s destruction² [23]. In Kopisty, five monuments were registered in 1958: House No. 63, a fortress complex (including the fortress itself, an annex, and a house), the Church of the Body of Christ, the 1920 memorial to the victims of the so – called December Strike, the group of six houses in the Julius miners’ colony. Only the statue of St. Florian was relocated from the demolished village to Vtelno [24].



Fig. 7: Village of Konobřez around 1900, author unknown – private collection (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Konobřez%C5%BEE.jpg>, public domain)

JULIUS III MINE AREA

This area represents the last major surface brown coal mining site in the Most District where information can still be found about historically registered cultural monuments—or rather, several other “heritage – worthy structures” that, for historical, political, and various other reasons, mostly never received legal protection. The Julius III mine was established in the early 1880s. The Austro – Hungarian monarchy was the main investor, issuing an order in 1881 to begin construction of operational buildings and prepare for mining. Extraction began in the second half of 1884 after all preparatory work was completed. The mining area was closed after 1990 due to the depletion of accessible coal reserves [25].

Near the Julius III mine complex, three cadastral areas can still be identified on maps: Růžodol, Lipětín, and Dolní Litvínov. All three settlements were destroyed during the expansion of surface mining in the late 1950s (specifically between 1957 and 1959). While no records of registered cultural monuments or even heritage – worthy structures (from the perspective of the heritage register) exist for Lipětín and Dolní Litvínov, the cadastral area of Růžodol contains one entry: partial heritage protection of the “Julius III Mine Complex,” effective from August 14, 2001 [26]. Today, the partially protected industrial site houses the “Sub-Ore Mountain” Technical Museum, which plays a significant role in preserving the industrial heritage of the surface brown coal mining era in the region.



Fig. 8: Chapel in the village of Lipětín before demolition, year unknown, photo by Hadonos (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lip%C4%9Bt%C3%ADn_kaple%C4%8Dka.jpg, used under CC BY – SA 4.0 license)

² This decision was replaced by “document No. 18681/2009, a proposal to annul the declaration – a decision by a materially incompetent authority regarding a non – existent matter (mass submission).” [23]

³ “The dimensions of the excavator are: height 35.6 m, width 33 m, length 156.5 m. It weighs 5,500 tons and moves using a walking crawler undercarriage.” [28]

⁴ “Despite requiring demanding maintenance, only three general overhauls were carried out during its operational life. During regular maintenance work, worn – out structural parts were replaced, and the control and hydraulic systems were modernized. In 2020, safety – related work was carried out to make the machine accessible to the public.” [29]

RK5000 BUCKET – WHEEL EXCAVATOR

Unfortunately, only limited information is available about the history of the RK5000 bucket – wheel excavator, which still stands in the mining area of the ČSA open – pit mine. This monumental machine³ – designated as unit no. 2 – began assembly directly at the site in 1980. Trial operation started in 1983, and full – scale brown coal extraction began the following year. The excavator remained in operation for over 30 years until it was decommissioned in 2016 [27]. Since then, it has been preserved and awaits a final decision regarding its future, which has not yet been officially resolved. Although it was the second RK5000 excavator built (the first operated in what is now Lake Milada near Chabařovice, Ústí nad Labem, and was dismantled and scrapped after mining ended), it is now the last surviving machine of its kind in the former Czechoslovakia [28].

This rarity has sparked discussions – especially considering the winding down of surface mining at ČSA – about preserving the machine, repurposing it for tourism, and recognizing its exceptional technical value by registering it as a cultural monument. Supportive statements from the National Heritage Institute include arguments such as: “The walking bucket – wheel excavator RK5000/R10 represents a technical work of extraordinary scale and quality, demonstrating the technological sophistication of Czechoslovak engineering and production.” [29] These statements highlight the preservation of most of the original structures⁴ from the time of the machine’s construction and its significant technical heritage value.



Fig. 9: RK5000/R10 bucket – wheel excavator at its current location, photo by Mario Barra, 2023 (Source: Author’s archive)

The ongoing debate over whether the RK5000 excavator should be declared a cultural monument stems from several factors. One is its location, which lies within the area of the future restored Komořany Lake. Another is the financial and logistical challenge of relocating the massive machine – by walking it – to a new site, likely near the edge of the proposed ČSA National Natural Monument. However, a deeper question arises: Can a machine that actively contributed to the erasure of former settlements and the transformation of the cultural landscape be granted heritage protection? On the other hand, proponents argue that preserving the excavator would ensure that the industrial layer of this region’s complex history is not forgotten – especially as most of the area will be reclaimed and few traces of its pre – industrial or industrial past will remain.

CONCLUSION

Across the Most District, only a handful of legally protected cultural monuments were ever registered in the now – vanished settlements. Most of these lost their protected status within just 20–25 years and were subsequently destroyed due to expanding surface mining. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a new wave of monument registrations emerged, reflecting a growing interest in preserving the industrial heritage of the region – now viewed with historical distance from the peak of brown coal mining.

A small number of transferred monuments – mostly statues, shrines, or other small structures – were relocated by unknown individuals or institutions before the settlements were demolished. Still, many structures that would today be considered heritage – worthy have been irretrievably lost, surviving only in archival records, photographs, or film.

The older historical layers of the landscape have been nearly erased – both physically and from collective memory – by decades of intensive surface mining. Without interpretive trails, information panels, or other forms of public education, today’s visitors often cannot imagine how many settlements, with numerous heritage – worthy buildings, vanished over just 40–50 years. The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” seems particularly apt. At the same time, a new layer of heritage is slowly emerging – one that includes industrial structures and mining – related sites. These are still underrepresented in the national heritage register, often only partially protected. Whether this trend will shift in the coming decades – and whether the RK5000 excavator will become its icon – remains an open question.

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