

Article

Overlying territories — Mapping the mining settlements in Northern France

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Abstract

Isaura, city of the thousand wells, is said to rise over a deep, subterranean lake. On all sides, wherever the inhabitants dig long vertical holes in the ground, they succeed in drawing up water, as far as the city extends, and no farther. [...] an invisible landscape conditions the visible one. (Calvino, 1974/1978, p. 20)

Being part of a PHD-research on the typology of mining settlements in Northern France, this study focuses on the formation and transformation of the territory in large scale and through different times. It addresses the question, how the society takes possession of a territory to develop its particular spatial and socio-economic structures based on the exploitation of resources, in this case water and coal.

While there is an important body of research covering both preindustrial (or rural) and mining settlements, these studies focus either on one or the other subject. By examining the territory of the Bassin Minier in different times — before, during and after the mining industry — this research attempts to fill this observed gap and to make readable the dynamic relationship going both ways between society and territory. Based on data of historic archives and contemporary technics as GIS, it traces at a territorial scale the transformation through different times and depth. In order to provide “deeper” insights, the evolution of the territory is not only described in horizontal plan, but also in vertical section.

Thus, the newly produced data presents the development of territory and settlements through history until today. It describes its characteristics for each stage and the links between the periods. It depicts the territory as an overlay and juxtaposition of fragments from different times.

Contrary to the current state of art, the development of mining settlements is described as based not only on the availability of the resource but also as depending on pre-existing structures like agricultural settlements, and infrastructures. The decision to abandon the coal-exploitation and its infrastructures, including miners settlements, has set off a series of contradictory transformations of the territory including erasure, conservation and replacement which are still in process.

As a case study, this research sheds new light on the mining territories in Northern France itself and provides the tools and data for prospective scenarios for the transformations towards a post-carbon society.

Keywords

Housing for workers; Mining Industry; Territorial transformations; Typo-chronology; Typo-morphology

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