

Industrial Heritage as a Resource

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Introduction

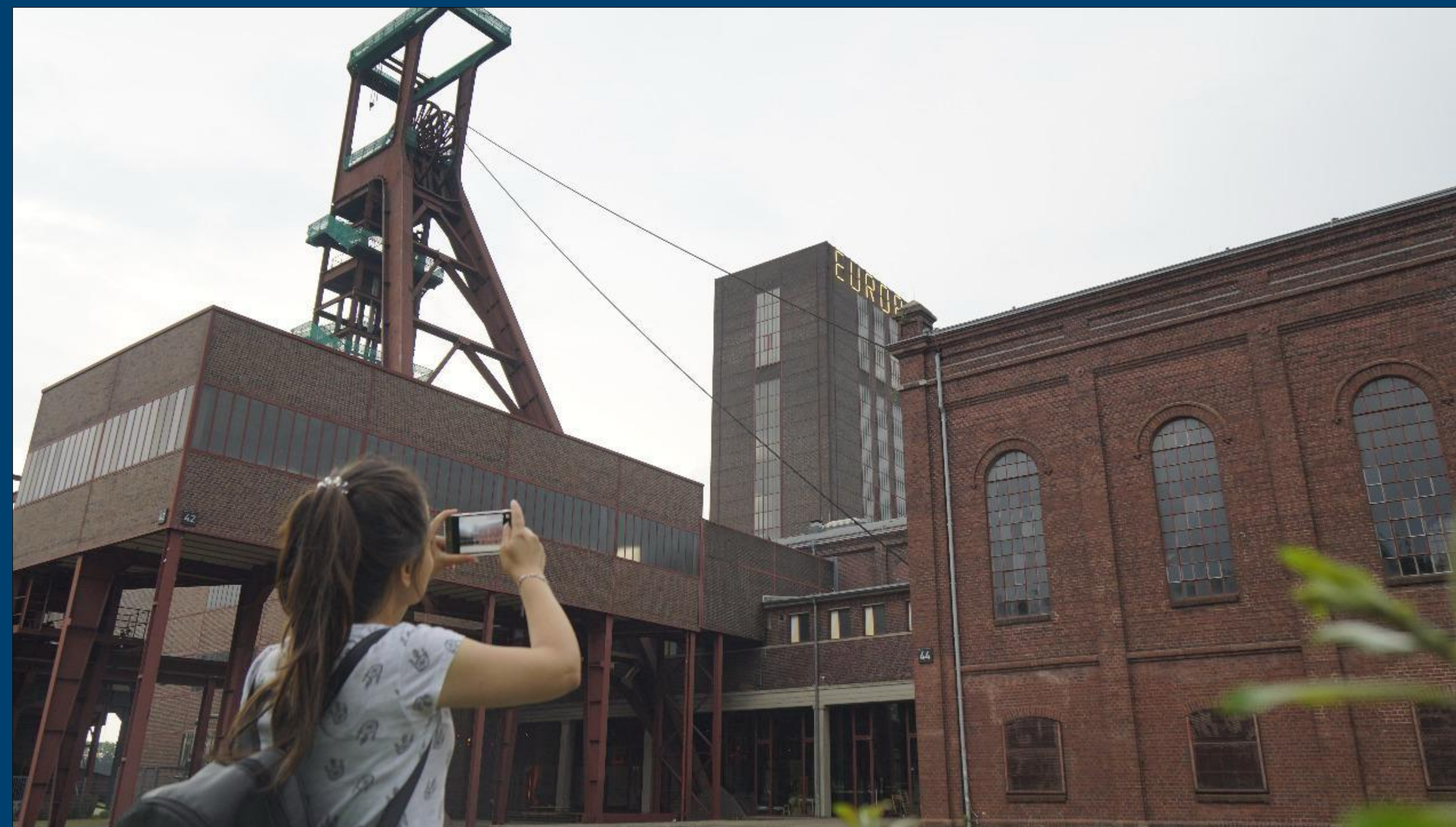
In the Ruhr region, after the coal and steel crisis, **former industrial sites** were used as **resources for building a new regional identity**. Since the 1970s, efforts have been made to commemorate industrial history and preserve industrial buildings. The International Building Exhibition Emscher Park (1989-99) established industrial heritage as a regional brand, using both buildings and industrial history to shape a collective Ruhr identity. Former industrial sites were reinterpreted - not as symbols of loss and deindustrialisation, but as valuable historical landmarks. They helped to construct a narrative of continuity, linking a significant past with a promising future for the region. This begs the question: Who identifies with industrial heritage today, and who is or feels excluded from it?



Methodology

In **oral history interviews** with a heterogeneous group of inhabitants of the Ruhr area, I analysed the reference to industrial heritage and the processing of dominant narratives.

Industrial heritage is often used to construct an image of shared regional identity. As a result in different groups of recipients, dominant narratives are taken up, counter-narratives are produced, or people feel excluded.



Results

Among **former employees** of the coal and steel industry in **German working class families**, the industrial heritage sites were partly embedded in reconciliation narratives that interpreted the industrial crisis and their own biographical break as a positive turning point and an expression of public recognition. On the other hand, counter-narratives emerged in which the transformation of former places of work into places of culture was viewed critically as an act of alienation and the former Ruhr mining industry was charged with nostalgia. The reference to the Ruhr Region played a subordinate role for this group, while the desire to remember the coal and steel industry, and particularly their own former workplace, was more pronounced.

In the interviews with **working class families of Turkish origin**, industrial heritage was neither linked to the narrative of a shared regional identity nor to the desire to preserve memories of mining history. Despite often particularly stressful work experiences and, in some cases, discrimination, the interviewees often expressed a strong emotional bound to the industrial heritage sites: The industrial heritage sites were the starting point for family stories of a difficult but successful rise in Germany.

For **interviewees who did not belong to the mining industry workforce**, the new accessibility of the former workplaces in the course of their transformation into industrial heritage sites led to a retrospective appropriation, but also to the utopian or mythological charging of the mining industry, which now represented points of reference for identification processes as personal places of longing. The adaptation of the regional 'master narrative', in which the history of the mining industry appears as a positive success story for the region, played a central role. But there were also negative references to industrial heritage: especially among people with a recent migration background, industrial heritage and the dominant self-image of the shared mining history led to experiences of exclusion because they were unable to establish any references to their own biography.



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