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Volkswagen Group's vast Autostadt museum has, with the option of factory tours, presented the automobile production system to millions of visitors. Dietrich Soyez questions how much light it shines on the darker aspects of the industry's history

Opinion

Our pasts are in foreign countries and their pasts are in ours: the challenge of transnationalising industrial heritage

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Issues at stake

A contemporary point of departure for industrial heritage efforts would ideally include what could be called 'representative excerpts' from our industrial pasts. This term would comprise not only individual sites or objects, but preferably illustrative functional entities, central elements of industrial production systems/value chains and even integrative parts of industrial landscapes. Comparing current realities with this vision, it is immediately clear that there are – despite undisputable progress made during the last generation – characteristic deficits in most countries, such as

- biased selection, most often with a predominance of mining as well as iron and steel industry
- the exclusion of darker and painful facets or periods of industrialisation processes (with the exception of the recently increasing depiction of social and environmental problems)
- entrenchment in national contexts, i.e. neglecting or excluding transboundary aspects linked to the elements, sites, ensembles or processes displayed