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# CREATIVE ENDINGS FORUM: PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

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## Deindustrialization Without End: Smokestacks as Postindustrial Monuments

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### INTRODUCTION

This photographic essay explores how obsolete smokestacks were recast as postindustrial monuments in the urban design-led “reconstruction” of Barcelona since the 1970s. Within the context of the “long goodbye” of deindustrialization, the accompanying text traces how industrial chimneys were re-signified and monumentalized. The images constitute a key element of an ongoing investigation integrating creative practice and qualitative research, in which I argue that serial photography and participatory curatorial practice can elucidate the ambivalent experiences of deindustrialization.

Barcelona is an outlier in dominant narratives surrounding deindustrialization—a process simply defined as the reduction of manufacturing within a particular economy—but bringing with it a broad range of geographically specific cultural, social, political, and economic manifestations. Unlike cities in industrial heartlands like the “rust belt” of the United States or old Lancashire mill towns, whose industry became obsolescent in the face of globalized shifts in production, Barcelona has become a hub for tourism, a magnet for real estate capital, and has reimaged itself as a cosmopolitan metropolis full of cultural and leisure amenities, driven by innovation and knowledge economies.

However, if we shift scales slightly, the area surrounding Barcelona has been the most important industrial region in the Iberian Peninsula for two centuries, remaining among the most industrialized metropolitan areas in Europe. Especially in older, traditionally working-class manufacturing districts like the Sants and Poblenou neighborhoods, neighborhood identities remain closely related to the industrial past (see [Figure 1](#)) and the lingering industrial present. Deindustrialization in Barcelona has neither a spatial nor temporal endpoint.



FIGURE 1 Members of the Badal, Brasil, and La Bordeta Neighborhood Association dressed as smokestacks for the 2020 Sants Carnival parade, adorned with political slogans. The group sees the chimneys as symbolizing their successful campaign to push the city to create the Plaça de la Olivereta, where a smokestack stands on a former factory site (in the background of [Figure 11](#)), 2020.

The following photo essay will present a body of work that emerged from a long-term project on the deindustrializing landscape of Barcelona, emerging from my initial fascination living in Poble Nou, commonly referred to as the “Catalan Manchester,” after living in Manchester, England (see [Figure 2](#)). It comes from my perspective as a resident foreigner with a background in planning, geography, and photography, who has studied deindustrializing cities in the United States and Great Britain and the urban heritage politics in Spain. The focus of the project are the approximately 69 conserved smokestacks in the city of Barcelona ([Figure 3](#))—all constructed between the 1840s and 1950s—with an emphasis on smokestacks left as monuments when remaining industrial structures were demolished: what I am calling *industrial obelisks*.

The phenomenon of restoring solitary smokestacks as monuments occurs around the world, but in its scale and breadth, is particular to Barcelona, and to Spain: hundreds stand in Catalonia alone. This practice of selective demolition and restoration has been polemicized since the 1980s among local industrial heritage and neighborhood activists. I am researching how this unorthodox practice came to be, what these chimney-monuments are intended to signify, how they are



FIGURE 2 Can Ricart, Poblenou. This view, from my rooftop while I was working as a visiting scholar at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, sparked my interest in the politics of industrial heritage in Barcelona, 2017.

perceived by those who live and work in historically industrial neighborhoods, and if this differs from how they are perceived by visitors. I ask: what can be made of the endurance of the industrial past in the contemporary urban landscape through the monumentalization of obsolete, visually dominant industrial structures, what might this tell us about deindustrialization, and how can photography help elucidate these questions?

As part of the project PICTURING (Post-Industrial Chimneys seen Through Urban Regeneration Imaginaries: toward a Networked GeoHumanities), funded by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship from the European Union, I have developed a research methodology that combines creative practice, curation, and various qualitative methods to address these questions. After providing a short history of the deindustrialization of Barcelona and the monumentalization of smokestacks, I present a series of images. The photographs, which form part of the methodological experiment, are supplemented by captions contextualizing the spatial histories of their settings. I then explain the research methods employed through the exhibition *Obeliscs Industrials* (Industrial Obelisks), on display at the Barcelona History Museum from April to July 2022, and some reflection on how we might read the city's socio-spatial transformation through creative encounters with these chimney-monuments.



**FIGURE 3** Remaining smokestacks in the city of Barcelona, drawn from the aerial photography collections of the Cartographic Institute of Catalonia, the 2000 Heritage Catalog of Barcelona, archival research, and fieldwork in 2021–2022. Since no previous inventory existed, the map is an approximation. Map designed by the Catalan Landscape Observatory, based on the author's data, 2022.



FIGURE 4 This chimney in Jardins de Sant Pau de Camp in El Raval, is one of the three remaining chimneys of the over 300 that once existed in the old, walled city. It was one of the first chimneys to be consciously protected from demolition, around 1980. Like many other parks on former industrial land, the economic viability of the park was justified by the construction of a multi-level parking lot underneath, 2021.

## DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF BARCELONA

Barcelona went through two main waves of industrialization: the first was between the 1830s and 1930s, centered around textiles, metallurgy, and chemical production. In the second half of the Francisco Franco dictatorship (1936–1975) the city and surrounding region experienced an industrial resurgence, the *Años de Desarrollo* (Development Years), stimulating a migration and construction boom peaking in 1973. The mid-1970s then signaled multiple, interrelated shifts driving deindustrialization and subsequent redevelopment in Barcelona: the emergence of powerful neighborhood organizations, the preparation of the 1976 *Pla General Metropolità* (Metropolitan Masterplan), the reestablishment of democratic local self-governance, and oil and textile sector crises. Real estate pressure was already pushing manufacturing from the city by the 1960s, and the 1976 Metropolitan Masterplan prescribed the displacement of manufacturing to sites on the edge of, or outside, the densely built city, earmarking newly available land for redevelopment. Complementing this territorial planning strategy, architect Oriol Bohigas, appointed as the city’s Head of Urban Design, developed a comprehensive design approach to the city’s “reconstruction” (Bohigas 1985). A key element of Bohigas’ strategy was the slogan:



FIGURE 5 In 1983 the chimney in the Plaça de Joan Coromines in Hostafrancs was among the first to be monumentalized. As a result of neighborhood activism against noxious emissions, the adjoining ceramics factory was forced to relocate outside the city in 1975. The result was a compromise between stakeholders: owners were permitted to construct apartment blocks on the factory site in return for ceding land for a school and plaza. In the foreground, an elderly woman peers in the window of a food bank in a squatted social center, 2021.

*higienitzar el centre i monumentalitzar la perifèria* (cleanse the center and monumentalize the periphery), entailing the creation of “new centralities” in peripheral neighborhoods, with appeals to collective memory but a distaste for industrial heritage. A key element was *esponjament* (selective demolition) to reduce density and provide over 100 new public spaces throughout the city in the 1980s. In historically industrial neighborhoods, new public spaces and facilities were created on former factory and infrastructure sites. Each of these plazas, gardens, and parks were punctuated by sculpture or public art. Barcelona won international awards for this urban design approach, a strategy to boost its profile to host the 1992 Summer Olympics, while it became locally known as the “city of the architects” (Moix 1994). One cannot overstate how central urban design has been to Barcelona’s postindustrial re-imaging.

Driven by pressure from neighborhood associations and *Bohigas*’ mandate in the early 1980s, the leftist City Hall focused on creating public spaces and facilities. While factory buildings were occasionally converted into libraries, museums, schools, and community centers (see Pont



FIGURE 6 Another of the first chimneys to be converted to monuments, alongside the conserved façade of a railway workshop at Parc del Clot, in El Clot. This was one of the so-called “architects’ parks,” completed in 1986. Like many other chimneys employed as monuments in public spaces, this structure was never catalogued as an element of built heritage, 2021.

and Llordés 2014; Pardo Abad 2016), factories have more typically been demolished than reused. Complementing the abstract sculptures in new parks and plazas, smokestacks, industrial façades, and water towers were first restored in the early 1980s (see Figures 4–7).

Over time the restoration and display of chimneys—like open-air museum pieces—became codified through their cataloging as protected monuments. By 2000, in the face of redevelopment pressure in Poblenou and demands of industrial heritage campaigners, the city adopted an approach of listing some smokestacks as “historic-artistic architectural heritage,” typically permitting factories themselves to be demolished. If “postindustrial” implies aspirations and aesthetic strategies (Lindner and Rosa 2017), rather than any identifiable condition within the deindustrialization process, these lone chimneys can rightly be considered postindustrial monuments.

Smokestacks are monumentalized through their repair, maintenance, and protection as cultural assets. In constructing public spaces and private buildings around them, they stand historically decontextualized, then recontextualized as landmarks. Retaining decontextualized, singular structures is not generally considered appropriate heritage practice by The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH), since





FIGURE 7 Children playing football next to the chimney at Plaça de la Palmera in Sant Martí, on the former site of chemical factories and a landfill. Completed in 1984, this was a showcase public space of Barcelona’s early campaigns to “monumentalize the periphery,” 2021.

they provide insufficiently legible settings to teach about the industrial past. Unlike towns elsewhere in Catalonia, very few of Barcelona’s chimneys are presented with any sort of explanatory text (though see [Figure 19](#)). Their endurance in the face of demolition suspends a present absence (Barthes 1981) of industry: they, like the city itself, have been reconstructed. As conserved objects, they are historic monuments (Riegl 1996 [1903]; Choay 2001) whose presence is exclusively symbolic.

The city of Barcelona has been deindustrializing for more than 50 years, but in a socio-cultural sense, deindustrialization does not have a defined endpoint: rather than a moment or event, it is a gradual process with a long “half-life” (Strangleman 2017). It is place-based and contingent (Watson 1991; Cowie and Heathcott 2003; High and Lewis 2007; High, MacKinnon, and Perhard 2017; Lawson 2020; Berger 2020), manifesting in Barcelona as a “long goodbye” (Tébar Hurtado 2020), spurring debates around working-class memories, heritage, and the reuse or erasure of industrial spaces (Tébar Hurtado and Gimeno Igual 2019). As visually dominant landmarks emblematic of manufacturing, smokestacks have a polysemic relationship to the industrial past, lingering anachronistically. Their monumentalization as a visual communication strategy reached full maturity in the 1990s and early 2000s as an uneasy compromise between the City Hall, property developers, public-private redevelopment managers, neighborhood



**FIGURE 8** Municipal crews remove graffiti from the smokestack of Can Batlló, a massive, partially disused 1870s textile complex in La Bordeta. Since 2011 it has been occupied by a community-run, activist social center. The city is currently converting the site into a park, school, social housing, and the municipal archives, reusing some of the existing buildings. The area around the chimney was converted from parking to a plaza with benches in 2020, 2021.

activists, and heritage campaigners. Without any official policy, the chimneys were enlisted as piecemeal elements in a social and economic restructuring process that seeks to reimagine the city and selectively celebrate its past (Boyer 2001).

Barcelona's smokestacks have tended to be treated by critical urban scholars and industrial heritage associations as symbols of Barcelona's disregard for neighborhoods' and workers' memories in the wake of property speculation, as the city took an increasingly entrepreneurial approach to redevelopment since preparations for the 1992 Summer Olympics (Duarte and Sabaté 2003; Balibrea 2004; Tatjer Mir 2004a, 2004b; Gárate Navarrete 2011). Anthropologist Manuel Delgado argues that the chimneys are key symbols of the superficial aestheticization of the past for easy consumption in the neoliberal "liar city" (Delgado 2007), serving as "empty tombs in the middle of [urban planners' and managers'] plazas ... their obelisks, their monoliths, their bombastic vertical decorations" (Delgado 2000). Monumentalized smokestacks sometimes serve as rhetorical devices, signaling the city's disregard for its industrial past (Tatjer Mir 2004a). My work is in dialogue with these scholars, but instead of focusing on the discourse of



**FIGURE 9** The smokestack of the Vapor Vell (Old Steam) in Sants, the city's oldest reused cotton mill (1839). Due to neighborhood mobilizations since the 1970s, the site was expropriated by the city (1983), which eventually converted a building to a public school and library (2000). This was among the first cases in Spain in which neighborhood mobilization led to industrial heritage conservation in the wake of redevelopment, 2021.



**FIGURE 10** In 1987, a year after Barcelona's successful bid for the 1992 Olympics, the city government swiftly enacted a tabula rasa approach to redeveloping the Icària district of Poblenou, rebranding it the Vila Olímpica (Olympic Village). Hundreds of residents and businesses were forced to relocate. The only industrial structure left standing was the Can Folch chimney, a stalwart symbol of disregard for industrial heritage by campaigners, 2021.



FIGURE 11 A swimming club located on the footprint of, and within, a former textile mill in Sants-Badal. The mill closed in 1982 and the conversion was completed from 1985 to 1987. Behind it is the chimney of an abandoned factory that was demolished to create a plaza (1994, 2020).



FIGURE 12 The Plaça del Poble Gitano in the Gràcia neighborhood, created in 1993 on the site of an 1839 cotton mill and currently under renovation. This is the only remaining chimney of what was an important industrial area of the city, located in a historic Gitano-Romani neighborhood undergoing gentrification. The chimney contains plaques: one commemorating the factory's founder, the other memorializing a local singer, 2021.



FIGURE 13 The BeCorp residential development in the La Bordeta neighborhood, completed in 2022 and currently the largest private rental housing complex in Spain, conserves a chimney in its private patio. The developers opted to retain the unlisted smokestack, suggesting it was integrated to the design as a perceived amenity, 2021.



FIGURE 14 Dog walkers aside the chimney in Jardins de Margarida Comas, the gated quasi-public space in the interior of luxury apartment complex in Poblenou, 2021.



FIGURE 15 Can Ricart, a massive 1850s textile mill complex in Poblenuu, has been abandoned since 2006, after a struggle between light industrial and artist tenants, preservationists, and the city. After most tenants were evicted, redevelopment of the site was halted mid-demolition; it has been left in ruin, awaiting reuse for public university facilities. Among the only structures that have been altered was the chimney itself: cracked and threatening collapse, it was stabilized and partially reconstructed, 2019.



FIGURE 16 The moment of monumentalization: on Carrer de Treball in Poblenou, ensconced in scaffolding, a chimney undergoes structural work. Cranes are poised for large-scale residential redevelopment on the cleared site, 2021.

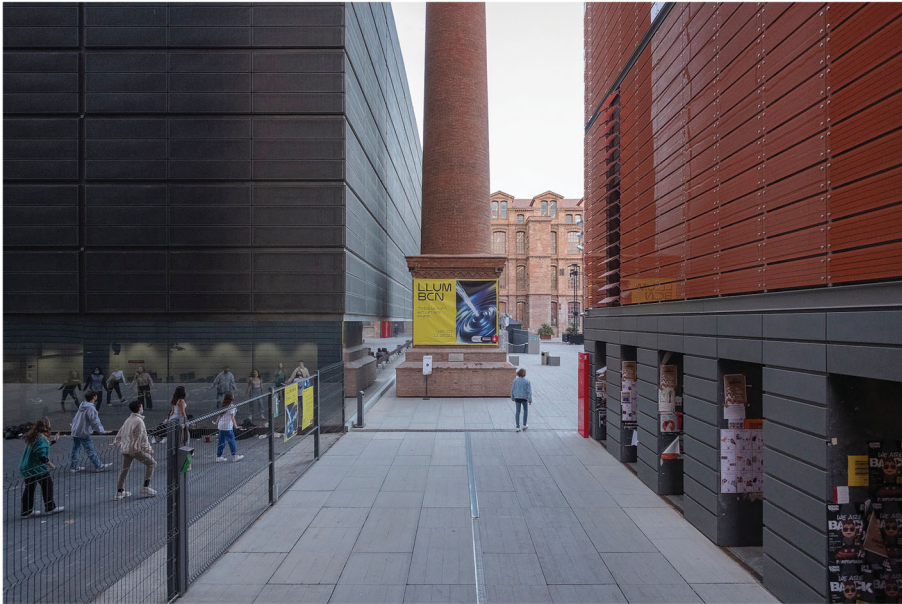


FIGURE 17 A dance rehearsal next to the interior plaza of the Poblenou campus of Pompeu Fabra University. Opened in 2009, it is located in the 22@ innovation district, earmarked for media and technology enterprises. Behind is an 1870s cotton mill, converted as the campus library, 2021.



FIGURE 18 The chimney of the Bayer pharmaceutical factory in Eixample. When the factory was closed in 2003, only the factory's façade was retained. The chimney was relocated brick-by-brick, propped by a new luxury residential building, 2021.





FIGURE 19 The site of the former MACOSA factory in Poble Nou, manufacturing trains until 1991, contains Barcelona’s tallest and most recently built smokestack (1950). It is surrounded by a luxury housing complex. In 2017, after sixteen years of campaigning, retired members of a labor union inaugurated a “memory space” around the chimney, depicting the history of the site, including labor and antifascist struggles and workplace hazards, 2021.



FIGURE 20 After decades of neighborhood activism, the Can Saladrigas textile mill (right) in Poble Nou was converted into a public school and library. The chimney from an adjoining factory was retained, while the footprint it occupied was converted into a plaza, 2021.



FIGURE 21 A demolition site in Poblenou. The building in the background, Ca l’Alier, was converted to an “urban innovation center,” a partnership between the City Hall and the technology multinational, Cisco Systems, 2019.



FIGURE 22 A smokestack attached to a 1910 flour mill, Can Gili Vell, turned into lofts, located in the interior courtyard of luxury housing and office buildings in Poblenou, 2021.



FIGURE 23 Two monumentalized chimneys: one partially reconstructed on a cleared industrial site (left), the other attached to a factory converted to art studios (right) in Poblenou. In the foreground, a newly landscaped, pedestrianized street, 2021.



FIGURE 24 A short chimney at an abandoned factory in La Marina, located behind a community garden. Neither the factory nor the chimney is cataloged, 2021.



FIGURE 25 A listed chimney located behind a factory converted to offices, housing, and a day care center in Sants. In cases like this, chimneys often remained because they were located too close to other buildings to demolish, 2021.



FIGURE 26 Site clearance for the creation of a school and park at the textile mill complex Can Batlló in La Bordeta, 2021.



FIGURE 27 A smokestack wrapped in plastic in the Poblenu neighborhood, protecting the structure as the former industrial site is converted into a large, market-rate housing complex, 2021.



FIGURE 28 Industrial building demolition in Poblenu reveals a listed chimney, 2021.



FIGURE 29 Installation of *Obeliscs Industrials* in MUHBA Oliva Artés, 2022.

academics and campaigners, I am interested to explore what Barcelona’s chimney-monuments are understood to signify by a broader portion of the public.

The interplay between deindustrialization, photography, and shifting practices of urban heritage raises questions about what constitutes conservation, and which industrial objects and landscapes are to be retained because they are assigned cultural value. Considering ambivalent attitudes toward the industrial past, what do monumentalized smokestacks convey? “There was once a factory here” seems insufficiently superficial. How are these ambivalences and ambiguities embedded in the material and symbolic incorporation (or erasure) of industrial artifacts? How are these artifacts re-signified or re-narrated over time?

What follows is a selection of images from the ongoing project, with some text contextualizing the sites depicted in the photographs, based on a loose chronology of when a chimney was incorporated into the city’s “reconstruction.” In the captions, I provide historical contextualization relating to the sites being documented (Figures 8–28).

### PICTURING Smokestacks

In the PICTURING project, Barcelona’s monumentalized smokestacks serve as an inroad to explore themes around the socio-spatial transformation from an industrial to a self-consciously



FIGURE 30 Grid of selected images projected in the exhibition, 2022.

postindustrial city, and as an opportunity for creative-led engagement with cities and the challenges of urban transformation. I see the aestheticization of the industrial past—as it relates to broader questions of urban redevelopment and public memory—as an opportune theme to bring together interdisciplinary urban studies research and creative practice. Creative encounters through photographic survey—freezing time and framing space while building a cohesive narrative—offer insight into the city’s socio-spatial transformation, while also placing the images in dialogue with photographic and curatorial practices that explore the relationship between visual representation and urban transformation. At the same time, the survey itself is a form of preservation practice: the images and maps will be donated to the collection of the Catalan Landscape Observatory.

The previous images form part of the exhibition *Obeliscs Industrials* (Industrial Obelisks), underway from April to July 2022, at the Oliva Artés exhibition space of the Barcelona History Museum (MUHBA), located in a converted factory in Poblenou (Figure 29). While intended to stand on their own as a cohesive body of creative work, the images form part of an experimental methodology incorporating elements of visual ethnography and photo-elicitation. In the in-person gallery space (and an online alternative), viewers are asked to complete a questionnaire—with the potential for a follow-up interview—upon viewing the exhibition. A variety of guided tours, community workshops, and public debates ensure additional dialogue and debate around the subject of Barcelona’s chimney-monuments. A goal is to use the exhibition itself to generate public discourse and debate around the subject matter, which can then be incorporated as data. Along these lines, the exhibition has been featured in national Spanish newspapers, as well as local Catalan radio and television broadcasts, and has been incorporated into an architecture festival.

The exhibition, which fills the large central warehouse of the former Oliva Artés machinery workshop, presents twenty  $75 \times 50$  cm mounted photographs supported by handmade wooden stands, fifteen  $1.5 \times 1$  m photographs printed on impermeable advertising canvas and suspended from cables, a dual-channel projection of 67 remaining smokestacks on 2 m-tall wooden screen supports, and three additional loops of photographs on monitors.

The projected photos (Figure 30), all in portrait format and similarly composed, function as a taxonomy, and give a typological view; they are repetitive but also unique due to their varying settings. The seriality of the images is intended to convey the seriality of the chimney-monument phenomenon.

The mounted images focus on everyday landscapes of deindustrializing districts, in which the chimneys are always present, but not necessarily the images’ subjects. The photographs printed on impermeable canvas—a material typically used on construction sites to display architectural renderings promoting new developments—focus on the activities that occur immediately around the chimneys in public spaces. Contrary to the conventions of architectural photography, and despite the challenges of completing the project during the COVID-19 pandemic, I made a special effort to include people in the images. Inevitably, the relative absence of human presence in public spaces, along with the surgical masks upon people’s faces, places a time stamp on the urban social life in the moment the project was realized.

In the exhibition, viewer-participants are asked to scan a QR code or complete a paper questionnaire, available in Catalan, Spanish, and English, in which they answer questions about their own memories of industrial labor, neighborhood transformation, their impression of the city’s approach to industrial heritage, and their understanding of what these monumentalized smokestacks signify. The questions differ depending on whether someone is from the city or visiting. Two panel discussions of scholars and artists were held, chaired by myself: one focused on photography and urban transformation in Barcelona, and the other on the contemporary state of social memory and industrial heritage in the city.

Though the data is still being collected from questionnaires, the most substantial preliminary finding is that there is widespread support for listing all remaining chimneys as protected heritage, that there is broad consensus that Barcelona has not paid sufficient respect to its industrial past in its redevelopment, and that there is nearly unanimous support for providing interpretive texts in public spaces to describe working conditions, labor conflicts, and other social histories of the city’s industrial past.



Beyond the specific subject matter, the attempt to provide a realist photographic depiction of dynamic urban spaces placed certain parameters on the creative process: while I could not escape my subjectivity and aesthetic sensibilities, I did not want to overly bias viewers' perceptions through the composition or selection of images. The exhibition text, under the advisement of the MUHBA's director Joan Roca, carefully explored the history of industrial displacement, urban redevelopment, and industrial heritage debates to offer context to the images on display.

The project contributes to dialogue with Spanish—and especially Catalan—photographic and curatorial practices that emphasize strong relation between photography and landscape transformation (Basiana, Checa-Artasu, and Orpinell 2000; Laguillo 2007; Llorens 2013; La Virreina 2016; Ribalta, Esparza, and Zelich 2021). Many of these projects—between documentary and fine art, research-based, and socially engaged photography—occupy the same interstices where I situate this project. Some of these photographers and curators advised me on this project or became participants in discussions.

*Obeliscs Industrials* also took a cue from more amateur photographic practices among industrial archaeologists, using photography as a form of documentation for sites ahead of the bulldozers, and I dedicated one monitor in the gallery to the photographs of a local heritage activist, Joan Bosch, who has done his own photographic documentation of smokestacks.

The city's industrial heritage and its erasure, whether approached from a more documentarian or abstract, creative approaches, are a key part of the cultural manifestations of the city's deindustrialization. I wonder whether, in another fifty years, these monumentalized chimneys will remain, or if these images might be unique testaments to their existence. In this sense, while attempting to use photography to analyze heritage practices, it leaves its own archive as a resource for future researchers and conservationists.

## CONCLUSION

Smokestack-monuments exist as mute witnesses, not so much to the industrial past as to contemporary deindustrialization and urban redevelopment, embodying uneasy compromises between heritage practitioners and contemporary urbanists. While the Barcelona metropolitan area remains heavily industrial, remnants of factories are retained as monuments, insisting they belong to the past while ensuring their presence in the future. These contradictions complicate established narratives of urban industrial decline.

The point of a monument is to signify, and chimneys are emblematic of the past presence of industry and urban redevelopment. What Barcelona's chimney-monuments are intended to signify about the industrial past, and how they are currently perceived, is a question I am still grappling with. What is clear is that they are polysemic, and since they are situated within massive economic and social transformation, the narration of their meanings—or a lack thereof—is inherently political. The *Obeliscs Industrials* exhibition—parallel with archival and interview-based research—has helped me to deepen my understanding, acknowledge my positionality, and decipher socially constructed meaning beyond my subjectivity.

Barcelona runs the risk of succumbing to “smokestack nostalgia” (Cowie and Heathcott 2003; Strangleman 2013) in superficially memorializing deindustrialization without dealing with its more complicated social manifestations. Despite my initial apprehension, I acknowledge that exhibiting serial photographs of a particular type of object in a museum inevitably monumentalizes them

further. As Guido Guidi has noted (Higgins 2018), “all photographs are monuments,” in the sense that they assign importance to their subjects, transcending their seeming banality. Nevertheless, I hope that, by visually presenting photographs of Barcelona’s chimney-monuments, these physical objects will be acknowledged as bearers of cultural content and meaning(s), recontextualized within the spatial practices of postindustrial redevelopment. With that in mind, it is through public dialogue that we can begin to ascertain what these meanings are, signifying or re-signifying them, in the long goodbye of deindustrialization.

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