The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Labour Heritage in Tampere

Tampere is a traditional industrial city in western Finland, which grew around Tammerkoski rapids in 19th Century. First factories in Tampere were textile and paper mills – followed by foundries, bakeries, shoe factories and workshops of all kind. Finlayson cotton mill (1820–) became the biggest factory in whole Finland until 1920s. Soon Tampere was nicknamed The Manchester of Finland.

As a result, red brick factories and wooden shacks of industrial workers dominated the cityscape. The majority of inhabitants were industrial workers with their own culture and way of living. The first labour meeting hall was opened in 1890 and ten years later it was replaced by a massive stone building – a true temple of socialism.

The labour meeting hall was a popular house for dancing, sports, library and theatre – the whole variety of labour culture. But it also witnessed the restless years of early 20th Century. Russian Bolsheviks had their secret meetings there, it was the home for local suffragists and there socialists celebrated their victory in the first elections in 1907. In the bloody civil war of 1918, the Red Guard used it as their headquarters.

In Finland, the value of industrial heritage was slowly recognised. After the Second World War, first historical books of industrial workers were written. Also the plans for the workers’ housing museum became more realistic. At the same time, old industrial city was starting to vanish with closing factories and modern housing. Fight for the preservation of old industrial buildings inspired local citizens in 1980s.

Today, industrial heritage is almost undisputed pride of Tampere. Former factories around the rapids were nominated as a national landscape and printed on a banknote in 1993. Industrial centre is chasing a nomination of world heritage. Industrial buildings and palaces of factory owners are nicely renovated as restaurants, shops, museums and offices. Former Finlayson cotton mill is branding itself as an Old Town of Tampere.

Besides this polished “good industrial heritage” there are also stories which are not so willingly acknowledged and “heritagized”. The political atmosphere has changed with deindustrialization and radical heritage does not fit city’s new identity. Deep in this “bad labour heritage” lurks the 70 year old Lenin Museum hidden in the workers’ meeting hall. The museum was founded as a memory of Lenin and Stalin who met each other for the first time in Tampere 1905. Surprisingly, it survived the collapse of Soviet Union and is reopened in June 2016 after ambitious renovation.

Tampere has a huge amount of industrial sites but they are well preserved only in the city centre. In the outskirts, variety of closed factories has found a new life in the hands of mixed entrepreneurs, artists, squatters and graffiti painters. These places belong to the industrial story just as well as major factories along the rapids. However, these “ugly” sites are facing the acute threat of demolition because of continuing city growth. In some cases, value of the industrial heritage seems to be based more on beauty than historical valuation.

In my paper, I will focus on this dilemma of selective industrial heritage. Why certain features of industrial heritage are more easily accepted than others? What features can downgrade it as bad or ugly? Labour heritage has contested the traditional definition of cultural heritage for decades but as my examples from Tampere will
show, it is not yet easily recognised and accepted. Manchester of Finland is willing to build its identity on the heritage of foreign factory owners but the history of hard work and homemade culture of workers are hard to handle.

The Finnish Labour Museum has tried to raise the awareness of labour heritage by making an exhibition and a guide book titled “Red Tampere”. It is an interesting example, how museums can diversify the understanding of local heritage. The first edition was sold out in three months. Feedback was clearly divided by those who acknowledge and those who ignore the worth of labour culture. In my presentation, I will conclude heritagisation of work and industry with critical theories in the interesting context of labour museums.

Kalle Kallio, aged 39, is one of the leading museum thinkers in Finland. He holds degrees in history and education. Since 2005, he has worked as a museum director in The Finnish Labour Museum, which is a national museum of working life and social history.

Kallio has been a chairman of Worklab (International Association of Labour Museums) since 2010. He has also been a vice-chairman of The Finnish Museums Association from 2011–2015 and a trustee in many foundations and committees, including Finnish Railway Museum and Finnish Literature Society. He is currently representative in a working group writing a new museum policy for Finland.

Kallio teaches museum studies at his hometown university in Tampere. Learning, impacts, strategies, evaluation and economy are his key interests in the field of museums. Kallio has specialized in labour history and his ongoing PhD research will focus on navvies, who built the Finnish railways.