



revitalising industrial sites

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SAMOA,  
société d'aménagement de la métropole ouest atlantique

## Intelligent Conservation and Re-use of the Industrial Heritage

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This report is part of the REVIT selfguiding trail.

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## A General approach

The Ile de Nantes has played a key role in the industrial and social history of Nantes. The project is driven by a twofold objective: to **encourage the transformation** of an area and to **highlight** the site's **heritage** and the remnants of its past.

A survey of the island shows the significance and appeal of what remains, which needs to be incorporated into a project that respects the diversity of the urban landscape.

The Ile de Nantes is therefore also a **cultural project**, and an opportunity to create a substantial asset for the city's **tourist industry**.

In the past, associations have actively opposed the demolition of industrial buildings and this has highlighted the need for local authorities to seriously consider industrial heritage sites, from the oldest to the more recent 20<sup>th</sup> century structures.

There can be no question of reducing these monuments to mere memorials or museums; preserving this heritage involves breathing new life into the sites. The industrial heritage dilemma needs to be kept in mind when considering the town and its future, so that it becomes an integral part of the urban image.

While the process of upgrading the industrial heritage is based on preserving existing structures, conservation simply for the sake of conservation is out of the question. The Nantes foundries are a prime example where significant demolition of buildings has taken place, while retaining and upgrading the furnaces. Rather than turning this heritage into a museum piece, the project involves taking an innovative and educational approach. In this way, we respect our inheritance, take inspiration from it and incorporate it into the project, without blindly considering the past as sacred.

The conversion of the old regional railway station into a trade-union house, the Headquarters of Nantes Workshops and Shipbuilding<sup>1</sup> into an exhibition of "Man and Technology", and the conservation of the wharf, docks and the Titan crane at the old Dubigeon shipyard, should be seen as merely the first steps in the conservation process and the judicious use of the industrial and waterfront heritage on the Ile de Nantes.

## B Industrial and waterfront heritage: the Island's shipyards

All of the yards will be transformed into public spaces, not simply a space dedicated to a single use or function.

The **Dubigeon sheds** have symbolic significance as the last trace of the industrial spaces and shipyards, and will be converted to house a range of events. Indeed, apart from their symbolic importance for Nantes, these three sheds have vast potential, given their size and location on the Island. The sheds are one of the Island's major assets: a public space, a large shelter, or an "umbrella" under which various temporary or permanent events or activities can unfold. The manner in which such programmes can be structured is determined by the very nature of the sheds: constructions without deep foundations, "surface-mounted", needing very little in the way of major work on the existing ground. The construction technique imposes no

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<sup>1</sup> Direction des Ateliers et Chantiers de Nantes

restrictions on programme type or duration. This makes it simple and economical to make use of the volume offered by the sheds.

The same applies to the **submarine slipways**, which will be covered by a system of canvas awnings making the site more comfortable for the public during various events.

The **breakwater** will be lowered by around 70 cm to the original paved level, leading down into the Loire, thus creating a range of viewpoints from the wharf and breakwater out over the river. Upstream on the Loire, a **pontoon** will provide moorings for boats, thus enhancing the site's image as a port since, for structural reasons, the current wharfs can no longer easily accommodate vessels.

An area around the **slipways** has been set aside for shipbuilding and repair. A wide range of projects could ultimately be launched from this site. Faced with the difficulty of making these slipways comply with current regulations concerning public access, and the problems associated with restoring structures that have fallen into disuse, the decision was made to restore the slipways to their original use. Access to this area will be limited to employees, whilst making the shipyard site visible to all.

The Ile de Nantes, and particularly its shipyard sites, where so much of the town's industrial heritage is concentrated, has a unique history and location; it is therefore clearly destined to become the site of a significant cultural and tourism development project, which will simultaneously enhance its own appeal and that of the Nantes-Saint-Nazaire metropolis. Numerous projects reflecting a diversity of ideas and styles have been proposed, sometimes from very different viewpoints. These projects are currently being analysed firstly for their spatial and geographical feasibility, and secondly from a more marketing viewpoint, particularly in terms of tourism development. These projects can be classified into three main groups:

1. **Heritage based industrial and waterfront** projects
2. **Artistic-recreational** projects
3. **Cultural and artistic** projects for **tourism**

1. Two main projects come under the heading of Heritage based **industrial and waterfront** projects:

1.1. The projects supported by the Cooperative of Industrial and Waterfront Heritage Associations<sup>2</sup> associated with the CNAM (National Conservatory of Industrial Arts and Crafts): a museum complex dedicated to the **Industrial and labour history** of the waterfront aspects of Nantes (shipbuilding, related industries, etc.);

1.2. The projects from independent associations who want very much to participate in the activity of the "**Prairie au duc**" site following its renovation. (Nantes Society for the Protection of Maritime and Fluvial Heritage: restoration of historic private or association boats, and the rebuilding of the Saint-Michel II, Jules Verne's second boat, for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, 1905 – 2005).

2. An **artistic-recreational** project presented by two associations: Manaus (led by Pierre Oréface) and La Machine (François Delarozière). Members of the Royal de Luxe theatre company, these two co-designers have devised a group of spectacular and entertaining attractions that will be scattered around the Ile de Nantes, and possibly in other areas along the banks of the Loire within the city limits. In the spirit of the traveling fair, these attractions owe their originality to

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<sup>2</sup> Collectif des associations du patrimoine industriel et portuaire

their extraordinary inventiveness, rich shapes and incredibly powerful appeal, with explicit references to the fantastic world of Jules Verne and the maritime fantasy and reality of Nantes. References are also made to Nantes' rich botanical background, another inheritance of its transoceanic history.

3. An **Artistic project** proposed by Jean Blaise, director of the "Lieu Unique" (national theatre of Nantes); the organisation of a biennial contemporary arts festival along the banks of the Loire, from Nantes to St Nazaire, with the Ile de Nantes as the starting point. Internationally renowned artists will be invited to create permanent or temporary "land art" type installations (Cristo, etc.) that together will form an itinerary that can be explored either on land or by boat.

### **C Industrial heritage: the Alstom site**

The history of Alstom is a good example of this approach that respects industrial heritage and is based on a dialogue at each stage, thus avoiding a highly self-seeking model that runs counter to local interests and desires. As far as the Alstom site is concerned, conventional commercial logic would have predicted the relinquishment of industrial control over the site and its conversion into part of the city. However, when the Island team visited the site it found that within these apparently dilapidated buildings there was in fact a sophisticated working environment, in excellent condition. Discussions with Alstom representatives then addressed a new question: why shouldn't this energetic industry, with its advanced technologies and its archives, remain on a part of the site? Alstom will thus retain certain aspects of its activity on the island, alongside a biotechnologies park, which is expected to develop soon. According to Alexandre Chemetoff "*The tour gave us the chance to see not only the architectural environment and its future development prospects, but also the people who live and work there and are becoming fully involved in the future of the area*". The guidance document is therefore not a new authoritarian planning tool to freeze the site forever but an initial phase of an open-ended flexible and developing project.

Still on the Alstom site, there are plans to install television companies in former workshops 11 and 12, which are so typical of the industrial spaces on the Ile de Nantes. The uncluttered space of these workshops offers prospects for conversion with the inclusion of new programmes and new uses. With the initial changes that are currently under way, the arrival of the architectural school, the construction of apartments on the banks of the Loire and the conversion of shop 13 into an incubator for biotechnology companies, shops 11 and 12 find themselves on a rapidly-developing site right opposite the town centre.

### **D Shipbuilding heritage: the Nantes foundries**

The aim of the project is to create roughly 15,000 m<sup>2</sup> of apartments and reorganize the public spaces while highlighting these aspects of Nantes' industrial heritage. Three furnaces from the 1930s and 1950s, along with some of the steel gantries and an old travelling crane will be preserved. The project involves the showcasing of a very specific technology, which can be illustrated by means of several recovered propeller blade models and preserved archives from the past. The calls for tender under the REVIT project concern the restoration work on the old furnaces and the development of a new public space around elements of the industrial heritage.