

TOXIC HERITAGE

Ambiguity of the Escalette Brownfield, from industrial waste to cultural space

Florence Lalande

ARCHITETTURA, STORIA AMBIENTALE, MEMORIA SOCIALE

Sulla scoscesa costa marsigliese, la dismessa fabbrica di piombo Escalette, situata nel cuore del Parco Nazionale delle Calanques, incarna le contraddizioni del patrimonio culturale del XXI secolo. Un tempo centro nevralgico di una produzione industriale tossica, oggi rovina silenziosa avvolta dalla vegetazione e dall'inquinamento, il sito non è mai stato ufficialmente riconosciuto come patrimonio culturale. Tuttavia, dal 2016, è stato discretamente riattivato dalla Galerie 54, un operatore culturale privato che lo ha trasformato in una galleria all'aperto per l'arte contemporanea, senza cancellarne la fragilità materiale o la memoria tossica.

Questa trasformazione ambigua rivela il paradosso di un patrimonio "preservato per default": l'inquinamento ne impedisce la riqualificazione, mentre i vincoli protettivi del parco ne garantiscono la persistenza fisica. Gli interventi minimi della galleria, tra rovina poetica e inaccessibilità controllata, sollevano domande essenziali: il design può articolare un patrimonio senza istituzioni o monumenti? Come può rendere visibile ciò che l'immaginario collettivo cerca di dimenticare, il lavoro industriale, l'ingiustizia sociale, la violenza ambientale?

Attraverso una lettura interdisciplinare (architettura, storia ambientale, memoria sociale), questo caso di studio esplora come l'assenza, il silenzio e l'invisibilità possano diventare strumenti di progettazione. Attraverso una lettura interdisciplinare (architettura, storia ambientale, memoria sociale), questo caso di studio esplora come l'assenza, il silenzio e l'invisibilità possano diventare strumenti di progettazione. Lontana dall'essere un monumento statico, La Friche de l'Escalette emerge come un "patrimonio in divenire", plasmato dalla fragilità, dai contrasti e dai dubbi. Ci invita a riconsiderare come il progetto possa fungere da mediatore della memoria attraverso luoghi marginali e indesiderati, attraverso ciò che rimane e ciò che viene deliberatamente tacito.

ARCHITECTURE, ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY, SOCIAL MEMORY

On the steep Marseille coastline, the abandoned Escalette lead factory, located in the heart of the Calanques National Park, embodies the contradictions of 21st-century heritage. Once a hub of toxic productivity, now a silent ruin entangled in vegetation and pollution, the site has never been officially recognized as heritage. Yet, since 2016, it has been discreetly reactivated by Galerie 54, a private cultural operator who transforms it into an open-air gallery for contemporary art, without erasing its material fragility or toxic memory.

This ambiguous transformation reveals the paradox of a heritage "preserved by default": pollution prohibits redevelopment, while the protective constraints of the park ensure its physical persistence. The gallery's minimal interventions, between poetic ruin and controlled inaccessibility, raise essential questions: can design articulate a heritage without institution or monument? How can it make visible what the collective imaginary seeks to forget, industrial labor, social injustice, environmental violence?

Through an interdisciplinary reading (architecture, environmental history, social memory) this case study explores how absence, silence and invisibility can become design tools. Far from a fixed monument, La Friche de l'Escalette emerges as a "heritage-in-becoming," shaped by fragility, friction and doubt. It invites us to reconsider how design can mediate memory through marginal and unwanted places, through what remains, and what is deliberately left unsaid.

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On the rugged coastline of the Marseilles Calanques, a national park founded to protect exceptional biodiversity, lie the remnants of an industrial past. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, a dozen factories were established on eight major sites, including the Escalette lead factory, inaugurated in 1852 and closed in 1924.

Now a brownfield site, this place embodies a striking paradox: an abandoned space saturated with lead and arsenic, it has also become, since 2016, a contemporary art exhibition venue run by Galerie 54. This legacy, unacknowledged by institutions and yet paradoxically preserved by its own toxicity, challenges classic notions of heritage. It is an emblematic example of "toxic heritage," a concept that forces us to reconsider the value of industrial remains.

These questions, which are part of the contemporary debate on broadening the notion of heritage, form the core of the problem: can art and design act as mediators for this forgotten heritage, offering a new way of transmission between the ruins and visitors? We argue that the Escalette site is neither a simple monument to be preserved nor a ruin to be rehabilitated, but an ambivalent legacy, a place "in the making" where fragility and invisibility become project tools. This article will demonstrate how architectural design can facilitate a subtle and powerful mediation between industrial memory, environmental constraints, and contemporary creation, building a new narrative for a place that official history chose to silence.

The Escalette Factory: Between Industrial Pride and Collective Forgetting

The establishment of the Escalette lead factory in 1852 was no coincidence. Under the 1810 imperial decree, polluting industries in Marseille were required to move away from urban centers. At that time, the Calanques, perceived as an arid and sparsely populated area, appeared as the ideal location for activities deemed harmful. Specializing in the processing of argentiferous galena imported from Spain, the Escalette factory was one of several factories in the Calanques and played a significant role in making Marseille the leading center of lead production in 19th-century France, a source of economic pride for the city.

Behind this industrial showcase, however, lay a far darker social reality. About two hundred workers, mostly of Italian origin, labored under particularly harsh conditions: daily exposure to toxic fumes, low wages, and paternalistic management designed to suppress any dissent. Archival records indicate that the rare strikes were swiftly quelled, as the abundant workforce rendered collective mobilization largely ineffective.¹

The factory's closure in 1924, a consequence of the declining lead market, led to the rapid disappearance of its operations and memory. The chimneys vanished from the landscape, vegetation overgrew the walls, and, like other abandoned industrial sites in Marseille, Escalette became a *friche*: neither recognized, transmitted, nor entirely erased.

Deindustrialization left indelible traces, foremost among them soil contamination, while also fueling a negative perception of abandoned industrial sites, often associated with economic and social failure. This rejection of industrial decline was reinforced by the partial demolition of infrastructure from 1949 onward.

As Simon Edelblutte notes,² deindustrialization disrupts the socio-economic structures

1 DAUMALIN, Xavier, *Les Calanques industrielles de Marseille et leurs pollutions - une histoire au présent*, ed. Ref.2c Eds, Aix-en-Provence, 2016, 304p.

2 EDELBLUTTE, Simon. *Que reste-t-il de l'industrie après la désindustrialisation ? De la négation au patrimoine industriel. Le territoire français, la désindustrialisation et les délocalisations*, Bulletin de l'Association de Géographes Français, 2011, p.150-163

of a territory and often leads to the distancing of industrial heritage, which is perceived as a collective failure. These sites are thus reduced to ruins to facilitate forgetting. This dynamic was particularly strong in the Calanques with the rise of landscape consciousness: the natural landscapes of the Calanques, officially celebrated as exceptional and worthy of preservation, further relegated industrial ruins to the status of "burdensome waste."

The labor memory of Escalette, mostly that of foreign workers, thus became fragmented, undervalued, and struggles to find a place within the local narrative. More broadly, it reflects the longstanding neglect of industrial heritage.³

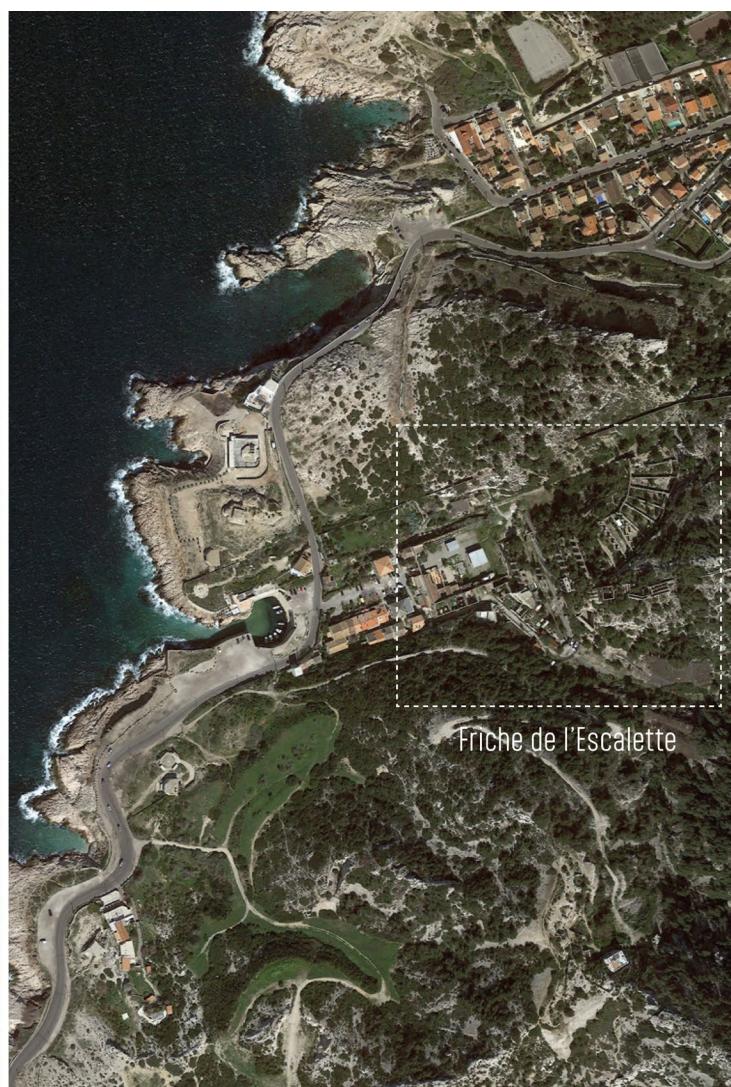
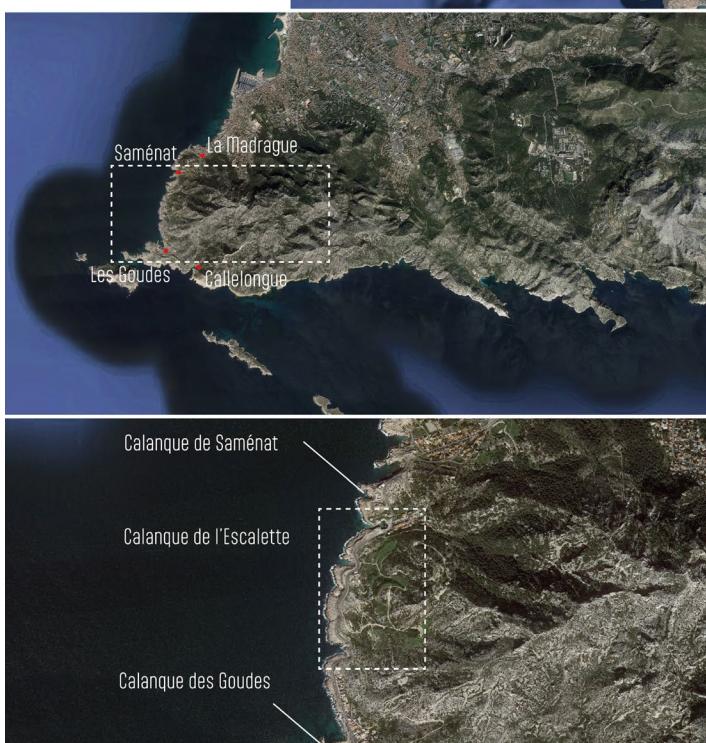
It is in this context that the concept of counter-memory, developed by Emmanuel Kattan, offers a relevant perspective. It designates the possibility of constructing an alternative narrative to dominant memory by giving voice to marginalized experiences. Applied to Escalette, it could help reintegrate the workers' history and fragmented memories into the landscape, countering the vision that reduces the site to a mere unwanted relic. This approach, however, requires acknowledging the social and conflictual depth of this past, a recognition that remains challenging to achieve today.⁴

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Location maps of the
Friche de l'Escalette,
created by the author using
Google Earth 2023



3 HALBWACHS, Maurice. *La mémoire collective*. Albin Michel, Paris, 1997

4 KATTAN, Emmanuel. *Counter-memory*. Dans The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, Elsevier, 2009.



2 *Becoming a Friche: The Paradox of Protection by Pollution*

From the 1970s onward, the rise of environmental protection movements profoundly altered the perception of the Calanques. As environmental awareness spread, these landscapes, long considered suitable for industrial development, were gradually recognized as natural heritage to be preserved. The industry that had once fueled Marseille's growth became a symbol of nuisance and environmental hazard.⁵

The creation of the Calanques National Park in 2012 and the inclusion of the site in a Natura 2000 zone cemented this transformation: heavy demolition and full-scale rehabilitation are now prohibited in order to protect natural habitats. This shift illustrates the initial contradiction between the rise of environmental consciousness and the continued pursuit of industrial activities within a fragile territory.

The industrial wasteland of Escalette was directly affected by this evolution. Soil toxicity (lead, arsenic), combined with regulatory constraints and the exorbitant costs of complete remediation, froze the site in a state of heritage inertia: neither fully destroyed nor rehabilitated, it survives as a tolerated ruin integrated into the landscape. This paradoxical inertia allowed the site to escape real estate speculation and large-scale demolition.

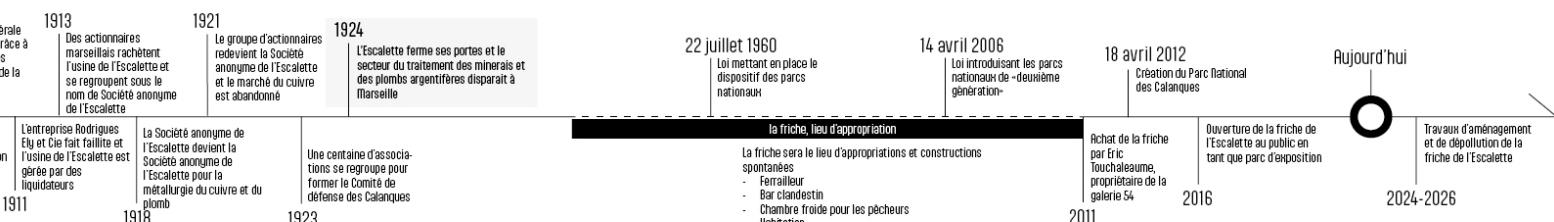
At the same time, the encroachment of vegetation reflects this tension and a tentative return to a “pre-industrial” natural state. It could appear as the ultimate opposition to past industry, as if the two worlds could not coexist. The site continues to be perceived by local institutions as a “burdensome legacy” and, in the collective imagination, as “waste.” Yet, the invasive vegetation gradually transforms the former factory into a picturesque landscape, slowly integrating it into the imagined landscape of the Calanques.

Vegetation thus performs a dual function: it signals neglect and weakens the ruins, while also stabilizing the soil, limiting erosion, and contributing to the phytoremediation of contaminated grounds.⁶ This ambivalence transforms the post-industrial landscape into a place where nature and industrial remnants coexist in complex ways.

This process, which could be called heritage-making by default, fully illustrates the

5 DAUMALIN, Xavier, op. cit., 304p

6 DAUMALIN, Xavier, op. cit., 304p





ambivalence of toxic heritage: pollution prevents the disappearance of sites, but makes any serene transmission of their memory impossible.

To understand the current role of cultural design on the site, the words of Simon Edelblutte offer valuable insight. According to him, the industrial landscape extends beyond the buildings themselves: it is embodied in the entire territory shaped by industrial activity. Escalette, now overgrown with vegetation and reshaped by time, no longer conveys more than the altered shadow of what the factory once truly was in operation. The present panorama, attractive yet misleading, renders invisible the harsh realities of labor and the long-lasting effects of pollution. In this context, the responsibility of cultural design becomes to reveal what time and vegetation have erased, on a site where contamination paradoxically opens the way to new forms of appropriation.⁷

Galerie 54's Discrete Intervention: Between Enhancement and Ambiguity

Long before the arrival of Galerie 54, the Escalette friche was already a vibrant space of interstitial multiplicity where alternative activities flourished. Submerged by a palpable inertia after its deindustrialization, it became a playground for fishermen, unauthorized party-goers, and individuals seeking refuge from formal urban constraints. In the 90s, an underground bar even became a Marseilles legend, with its dance floor installed amid the remains of the engine room. The friche also attracted many artists like Richard Baquié, who found a resource of materials and inspiration there. The profusion of graffiti on the walls of the old factory is the most obvious translation: the factory, transcended, became a canvas for alternative

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Cabanes Perchées, Marjolaine Dégremont, photographic archives by the author, August 2023

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L'Eté de la forêt, François Stahly, photographic archives by the author, August 2023

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LE STRAT, Pascal-Nicolas. "Multiplicité interstitielle". *Multitudes*, 2007, volume 4, n°31, page 115 à 121





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Photographs of the old
Escalette factory,
photographic archives by the
author, August 2023



art. The persistence of these non-programmed usages highlights how the site, through its abandonment and resistance to regulatory norms, fostered a unique realm of freedom and spontaneous action, laying the groundwork for its later cultural appropriation.

In 2016, Galerie 54 acquired the site. Rather than erasing the ruins, it chose to invest in them minimally, by offering guided tours and placing contemporary artworks in the interstices. Visitors must sign a waiver due to persistent pollution, which highlights the dimension of danger and prohibition attached to the experience. This approach created a form of "soft heritage-making," where Escalette becomes an open-air gallery, a "backdrop for contemporary art." This dialogue between the industrial ruin and contemporary creation offers a powerful visual narrative, allowing the friche to be re-inscribed in the present.

The originality of the intervention relies on a dual agency: art as a narrative content and design as a strategy for spatial mediation. The artistic approach is all the more relevant because the mediation by Galerie 54 does not rely on didactic panels or textual explanations. Instead, the choice is to trust the artwork itself to create an aesthetic distance, inviting visitors to develop a personal interpretation. By placing a contemporary sculpture amid industrial remains, the design establishes a visual dialogue that confronts the industrial past with contemporary creation. This tension highlights the site's contradictions without resorting to a moralizing discourse. Some local residents still struggle to acknowledge the site's pollution. In this context, art becomes a subtler vector of awareness, circumventing resistance by offering a sensory and contemplative experience that encourages visitors to reflect on the memory and ambiguity of the place.

The artistic intervention at the Friche de l'Escalette goes beyond a simple exhibition: it is an act of design that uses the artworks as revealers of the site's complex characteristics. Each sculpture acts as a beacon or lens, allowing visitors to perceive a particular facet of this ambivalent heritage: its labor history, its contamination, its regeneration, and its relationship with the landscape.

The intervention of Marjolaine Dégremont, particularly her *Cabanes perchées* (figure 4), offers a poetic and introspective reading of the friche. The artist provides a counterpoint to the site's brutality by introducing an aesthetic of fragility. Her installations, made of fine materials, delicately insert themselves into the ruins. By placing a white plaster sculpture in an old sorting basin where lead ore was processed, Dégremont proposes a powerful visual dialogue that confronts the violent industrial past with contemporary creation. Rather than masking the scars, she uses them as a backdrop. Her works do not seek to beautify or aesthetically idealize the ruins; instead, they create distance from a purely picturesque contemplation. The art makes the place pensive, inviting visitors to an awareness of the fragility of life and the environment, transforming this degraded space into one for reflection and care.

The installation of François Stahly's monumental sculpture, *L'Été de la Forêt* (figure 5), takes on a new and profound meaning within the Escalette industrial friche. Originally conceived as a poetic quest, the work is transformed by its contact with this landscape. In dialogue with the site's history of pollution and degradation, Stahly's sculpture ceases to be a simple individual expression to become a manifesto of environmental solidarity. Placed in the solitude of the friche, the sculpture becomes a symbolic rallying point where nature, art, and the visitor can coexist. It offers a dialogue between the past and the present, a conversation between living matter (wood) and dead matter (the ruins), between the desire to rise and the weight of history. Stahly's art transforms the site into a new experience, proving that, through art, a place where meditation, reflection, and dialogue can emerge from a landscape that, at first glance, offered only desolation.⁸

Heritage in the Making: Absence, Silence, and Design

The role of architectural and cultural design at Escalette is to transform the industrial wasteland, marked by toxicity and inertia, into a narrative and cultural resource. Its action does not take the form of traditional construction but rather the orchestration of a sensitive and safe experience. This is where the agency of design comes into full play: it lies in its capacity to structure the site's narrative, using art as a tool and the ruins as a framework.

Escalette highlights dimensions rarely addressed in conventional heritage practices: silence, absence, and invisibility (collapsed walls, contaminated soils, fragmented labor memory).⁹ Galerie 54's intervention deliberately counters classical restoration by embracing this "aesthetics of absence." The designer acts as a director, using lack and ruin to guide the visitor's gaze, creating safe pathways and framed viewpoints. The artworks function as beacons and visual frames, transforming the site's absence and fragility into narrative resources (heritage through storytelling). In doing so, the designer ensures spatial mediation while managing the risks associated with soil contamination and the strict regulations of the Calanques National Park.

The Escalette project is grounded in critical theoretical frameworks that question the very nature of heritage and memory in contemporary times. Cultural design here is not seen as mere conservation but as a deliberate act of value creation in the face of oblivion.

Located within an emblematic natural site and having lost its original function, the Escalette wasteland faces the theoretical risk of becoming a "non-place," as defined by Marc Augé.¹⁰ A non-place is characterized by its transitory nature, lack of deep historical roots, and the primacy of ephemeral individual experiences. Without actively valorizing Escalette's industrial and historical memory, the site could be reduced to a picturesque landscape for consumption, a backdrop for tourism where the romanticized imagination of the Calanques erases its toxic and labor-intensive past. In such a scenario, aesthetics would prevail over understanding.

Galerie 54's project actively counters this sanitization. By opening the site to the public as a ruin, with its contaminated soils and collapsed walls, it maintains a crucial friction between idealized landscape and visible industrial scars. This confrontation is the design's principal tool to prevent the site from slipping into the indifference of a non-place.

The Escalette approach is also a compelling example of heritage-making in action, aligning with Laurajane Smith's theories,¹¹ which state heritage is not an objective, neutral value to be discovered, but a socially constructed and conflictual process. At Escalette, the "use of heritage" is an active creation of value that resists oblivion. It acknowledges that the site's history is shaped by negotiations and tensions among various stakeholders (residents, industrial actors, environmentalists, and cultural institutions).

Cultural design at Escalette is characterized by its rejection of sterilization. Rather than concealing the site's inherent contradictions, it highlights and fully integrates them into the narrative, transforming antagonisms into drivers of meaning. These tensions manifest across several dimensions: the devalued industrial memory conflicts directly with the absolute valorization of the protected natural landscape within the Calanques National Park. Similarly, the picturesque beauty of the ruins coexists with the health hazards posed by heavy metal contamination. The design must balance visual attraction with ethical and physical alertness, refusing to romanticize real toxicity. Additionally, the contemporary aesthetics of the installations risk obscuring the workers' and social narratives. The designer's essential role is to reintegrate this socially invisible dimension (labor and working conditions) that time and nature have erased. By transforming these conflicts

9 LOWENTHAL, David. *Passage du temps sur le paysage. La fabrication d'un héritage*. Gollion: Infolio, 2001.

10 AUGE, Marc. *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Seuil, 1992.

11 SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge, 2006.

into integral elements of the site experience, Escalette asserts itself as a toxic heritage that uses its own ambiguities to generate a richer and more honest collective meaning.

The Escalette site's state of inertia also resonates with Gilles Clément's concept of the "Tiers-Paysage"¹² where new forms of coexistence between humans and non-humans emerge.

To transform this "burdensome legacy" into an inclusive collective heritage, design must go beyond aesthetic contemplation and curatorial framing to fully integrate the agency of social, labor, and environmental dimensions that shape the site's history.

Conclusion

The Escalette experience illustrates that the site's inherent toxicity and ambivalence paradoxically serve as catalysts for its experimental potential. Pollution fosters an open space for creative engagement, allowing art to function as a mediator of narratives often excluded from traditional heritage frameworks. This concept of toxic heritage invites a profound reconsideration of the relationship between place and meaning, demanding an acknowledgment of difficult histories (environmental devastation, labor exploitation) while framing the wasteland as a locus of resilience and adaptability.

However, caution is imperative: the aestheticization of toxicity must not lead to a romanticization that obscures the harsh realities of contamination or erases the socially invisible labor narratives. To transform this "burdensome legacy" into an inclusive heritage, design must go beyond aesthetic contemplation and curatorial framing. Design interventions must thoughtfully structure engagement with the site, preserving its utility while respecting its inherent vulnerability. Maintaining a delicate equilibrium is essential, which requires preserving the elements of absence and silence, integral to sustaining Escalette's unique status as an unconventional yet profoundly significant heritage landscape.

The author utilized a generative AI tool for assistance with stylistic reformulation and translation of excerpts. The entirety of the analytical content, research, and critical conclusions remains the sole responsibility of the author.

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