

Europa Nostra

Summary report to the Commission for Industrial and Engineering Heritage/CIEH

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Visit of the *Parc du Haut-Fourneau U4* Uckange (Lorraine, France)



Parc du haut-fourneau U4 – Vue du ciel en 2005.
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Fig. 1 Air photo of the U4 site



Fig. 2 Information at the entrance of the Parc du haut-fourneau U4

Location and history

The traditional iron and steel region of Lorraine in eastern France has undergone a massive restructuring during the last 40 years, basically following the same pattern as similar regions in the U.K., Germany or Sweden: Increasing concentration on less and less sites, amalgamation of larger and larger companies, paralleled by a wave of shut downs.

Now, there is only one more important production site left, the former *SOLLAC*, later *Arcelor*, facility in the Fensch valley, mainly comprising the communities of Florange, Sérémange and Hayange, just west of the city of Thionville (Fig. 3). It is now owned and operated by the Indian steel corporation *Mittal*.

All other sites, still operating a generation ago, have been dismantled, most of them completely (including all former iron ore mining sites) --- there is just one exception: Some remains of the former blast furnaces complex in the small community of Uckange on the Moselle river (situated between the cities of Metz in the south and Thionville in the north)(Fig. 4).

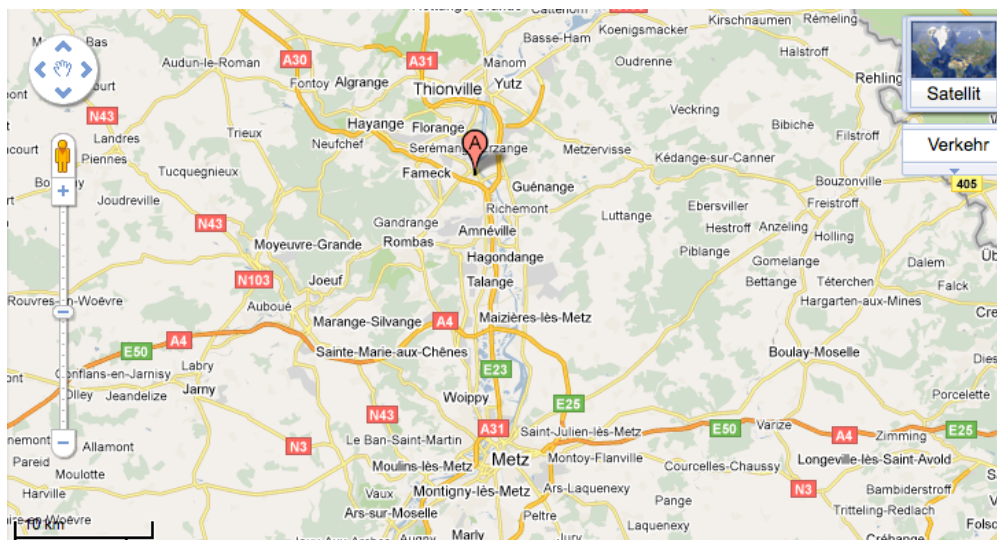


Fig. 3 The central part of the Département de Moselle, with the Moselle river in the centre, the international border to Germany close to the eastern margin of the map (A: The community of Uckange, see below Fig. 4)



Fig. 4 The former center of Lorraine iron and steel production in the triangle formed by the Fensch and the Moselle valley (A: location of Uckange)

Uckange is one of the sites documenting the extension of Saar and Ruhr steel corporations after the annexation of Lorraine/Alsace by the German Reich in 1871 (result of the *Peace of Frankfurt*). Other important iron production (and iron ore mining) sites were in the larger Thionville/Diedenhofen, Florange/Floringen, Hayange/Hayingen, Knutange/Knutingen and Algrange/Algringen area.

The blast furnaces complex at Uckange was founded in 1890 by the Saar industrialist brothers v. Stumm, the owners of the integrated steel mill at Neunkirchen/Saar and other mining and iron producing facilities. After the end of WW I, the German Uckange facility was sequestered and later became the property of a newly formed French company, the *Forges et Aciéries de Nord et Lorraine*. During WW II, from 1940 to 1945 v. Stumm annexed the facility, but lost it again after the German capitulation.

During the 1960s, the former French owner amalgamated with another company, forming the *Société des Hauts-Fourneaux Réunis de Saulnes et Uckange*. Becoming later part of the corporation Lorfond (a subsidiary of the *USINOR/Sacilor* corporation), it shut down successively, during the 1980s, all its six blast furnaces, the last one being U4 in 1991.

It took ten years of discussion and deadlocks before the *Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles de Lorraine/DRAC*, supported by the Uckange community and a grassroots group called *Mémoire et culture industrielle MECILOR*, listed the remaining parts of the Uckange site in

the *Inventaire supplémentaire des monuments historiques*. This means it became an acknowledged registration, but not yet a protected monument. The reasons for the listing are exclusively of technical nature. This listing prevented the site from being dismantled completely.

It was in 2005 only that the *Communauté de la vallée du Fensch* bought the property and started with a thorough clean-up, in particular with regard to hazardous contaminations, such as asbestos. Furthermore, a secured pedestrian circuit for guided and self-guided tours was constructed. On Oct. 1, the *Parc du Haut-Fourneau U4*/Park of the Blast Furnace U4 was opened to the public, having become not only a site of historical and technical information, but also of a variety of art and event performances (Fig. 2, 4). The site welcomed around 12,000 visitors in 2010.

The Park (Fig. 1, 2, 5 to 8)

The main remaining element of the former industrial site is the blast furnace itself and its cowpers, surrounded by some half a dozen buildings, most of them nothing more than empty shells in quite bad shape.



Fig. 5 The blast furnace no. 4: U4

Very interesting details, however, can still be detected in some of the buildings, such as a gently rounded steering balcony, revetted with marble, of the former power center with its – unfortunately heavily vandalized – gas machines. Most buildings' main structures are solid, so they can be turned in a variety of future uses. From a purely technical point of view, the site is remarkable due to its very specific charging facility, i.e. by help of vertical 'elevators'.



Fig. 6 Parc du haut-fourneau: Gas machines hall

The site of the former sintering plant has been dismantled and cleaned completely, but part of it had to be covered by kind of concrete alleys, crossing what is now called *Le jardin des traces* (Fig. 7). This part of the Park is dotted with small open art pavilions symbolising important elements of iron production, such as fire, water, earth and so on (Fig. 8).

The large empty areas surrounding U4 (cf. Fig. 1) are planned to be used in a more efficient way in the future, but the Master Plan has not yet been submitted. A mixture of residences and small businesses is one of the ideas discussed so far. Just a few meters outside the site, there is a cyclist road, already very much appreciated, along the Moselle river. Finally, it should be mentioned, that there are still original company houses (early 20th century?) in the neighbourhood, but they are not integrated into the Park.



Fig. 7 View from the Jardin des traces towards U4



Fig. 8 *Jardin des traces*: Fire

Preliminary evaluation

Based on earlier available written/published information about the site, and not least due to the way chosen by the organizers to openly address the history, the idea with my visit was to check the potentials of developing it into a authentically *European* site, i.e. mirroring important facets of the Saar-Lorraine region's very painful Franco-German history of the 19th and 20th centuries.

My brief, although still preliminary, conclusion is as follows:

The potential is quite important, not least because of the unique situation of this heritage monument in a French national and also, as alluded to above, in the European context. The Val de Fensch official website states:

„ Sauvegardé grâce à son inscription à l'Inventaire des Monuments Historiques en 2001, le haut-fourneau U4 d'Uckange, idéalement situé dans un contexte transfrontalier favorable, restera sans doute le seul haut-fourneau du XXème siècle appelé à être conservé en France.“ (see links below)

It is not clear to me if there really will not be any other iron production heritage site in France (if, one day, some of the facilities of the Fensch valley will be shut down, or all of them, there will be more interesting objects...). But it clearly is one of the few (if not the only) remaining element of a certain size and documentation value specific to the Franco-German history in this area. This wealth of *meaning* compensates, from my perspective, for the substantial losses of the physical and visual status of the original site.

What might be a more significant barrier to a more consistent future valorization of the site is, that there are signs – to put it cautiously – that exactly this Franco-German past is not yet seen, by a general public and many of the decision-makers, as an asset to build on. Rather, this seems still to be a bothering facet.

Acknowledgment

During my visit to the site on March 4, 2011, I was taken care of and guided through the Park by Mme Cendrine Juchoux (Chargée de mission, Action culturelle et patrimoniale, Val de Fensch/ Communauté d'agglomération). She also provided me with a lot of information and documents, among others the German and French version of the museum's audioguide. This help is gratefully acknowledged.